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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**BUILDING ROADS FOR BACK TO SCHOOL FOR ORANGEBURG COUNTY**

ORANGEBURG, S.C. – Throughout the last several weeks, Orangeburg County School District principals, district staff, school board members and stakeholders have engaged in intensive planning for back to school during this unprecedented time.

Due to the continued spread of COVID-19 throughout our community and concerns shared from the more than 4,000 parents/guardians and employees who responded to our survey, the planning team believes that the safest and most reasonable road to providing high-quality education for Orangeburg’s students is to begin the 2020-21 school year virtually.

“Our decisions on back to school must be and will be grounded in safety and a concern for the health and wellbeing of our students and their families, as well as our teachers, staff members, and their families,” Superintendent Dr. Shawn Foster stated. “While virtual learning is not the optimum learning environment for every student, or the preferred teaching environment for every educator, it is what is safest right now and we will need to begin this school year virtually. However, beginning September 14, it is our plan that those who are ready to return to our classrooms for in-person learning, will have that opportunity.”

At its call meeting on Tuesday, July 21, Orangeburg’s School Board approved a virtual start for all students, through what administration has titled “Orangeburg Online.” Also approved were administration’s recommendations for the use of L.E.A.P. days, Professional Development Days for teachers and staff, and staggered start dates for K-8 and 9-12 students.

South Carolina’s General Assembly has made available funding for students and teachers in kindergarten through eighth grade to “leap” safely into next school year. Orangeburg has designated August 10-14 for L.E.A.P. days in which K-8 students and teachers will reconnect and engage in small group meetings and orientation, hands-on technical support during computer/device distribution, and family/special service meetings.

With an understanding that supporting all students in a virtual environment would be a shift from our traditional educational model, the school board also designated August 17-21 for Professional Development for all teachers and staff members for enhanced training and professional learning in Orangeburg Online.

Students in kindergarten through 8th grade will begin learning virtually the week of August 24-28. Orangeburg’s Help Desk and technical assistance from teachers will be available to students and families as they begin the school year virtually. Devices/laptops will be distributed to high school students during their orientation days also scheduled for the week of August 24-28.

High School students will join elementary and middle school students in virtual learning beginning August 31. Students in Kindergarten-12th grade will continue learning in a virtual model beyond the Labor Day holiday through September 11.

As Orangeburg County School District prepares to bring students who opt for face-to-face instruction into classrooms the week of September 14, the status of COVID-19 and its spread in our communities will continue to be monitored and a phased-in approach to face-to-face learning may be needed. This hybrid model would include groups of students alternating between face-to-face instruction and virtual.

“The School Board, Administration and Technology Department should be commended for their forward thinking in preparing the school district for the technological needs of our community by securing iPads, Chromebooks and laptops ahead of many other school districts throughout the state and nation,” Dr. Foster commented. “Doing so has positioned OCS D extremely well for a safe start to the school year virtually through Orangeburg Online.”