

Churches helping students thrive as COVID-19 delays school reopenings

ARAB, Ala. (BP) – Churches are providing options for parents as schools delay or modify reopening plans to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

In Arab, Ala., a rural community working to improve internet and computer access for its 8,300 residents, Gilliam Springs Church is among those helping students in Arab City Schools survive a two-week delay in fully onsite instruction.

“We really hope it’s just a ministry to parents who are struggling last minute to have somewhere safe for their kids to be,” Gilliam Springs Pastor Jamey Pruitt Sr. said. “We’re trying to put the Gospel on display by loving children, loving families, providing a safe place for them to be on the days out of school.”

Churches in several states are providing various programs to help students transition to school during the pandemic that has made onsite instruction difficult in much of the U.S. Programs vary from no-cost to nominal-fee options with scholarships available.

In addition to Gilliam Springs, churches providing such help include Rehoboth Church in Tucker, Ga., and Mt. Pleasant Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Others are Wilmington Church in DeMossville, Ky., Kentucky Today reported; and, according to the Biblical Recorder, several North Carolina churches, including First Church of Cornelius, Team Church in Matthews, and First Church of Hendersonville.

In Arab, Gilliam Church is assisting the school system in conducting a hybrid schedule that divides students in two

groups to attend classes either Monday – Tuesday or Thursday-Friday, with schools closed on Wednesdays for deep cleaning. Arab schools reopened Thursday (Aug. 20) on the hybrid schedule and will reopen fulltime Sept. 8.

“When the school announced you’ve got to provide childcare for your children three days a week, it created quite a bit of alarm,” Pruitt said. “We tried to mimic what the school was doing, and said we could take 120 of group A and 120 of Group B, but that we would also take Wednesday to do deep cleaning in our facility.”

Pruitt praised Gilliam Springs children’s minister Theresa Mayo for coordinating and organizing the church’s participation, which begins Aug. 24. The church will charge a weekly fee of \$50 per child, but will offer 20 percent of its seats at no cost to low-income families. Funds will pay employees to supervise small classes of eight children each, utilizing social distancing and other COVID-19 safety guidelines. The church can host up to 240 students each day, but Pruitt said less than 100 students are currently enrolled.

The church will offer instruction based on the Arab City Schools curriculum with Bible study and music added. For students without computers, the church will print copies of instructional materials for students’ use. Students will bring their own lunches, with the church providing snacks.

The Bible classes are no obstacle to governmental limitations on religion in public schools, Pruitt said, as the program is held at church and parents are not obligated to enroll their children.

“We do have a great relationship with our school system,” Pruitt said. “We do seek to serve them in ways that put on display the Gospel. We were grateful to do this.”

Rehoboth Church

As schools in Tucker, Ga., adjust for COVID -19, Rehoboth Church's Virtual Learning Academy will offer several options for parents, ranging from partial to full-day sessions.

"There's a significant need in our community for parents and caregivers who are not able to provide that virtual learning environment at home," pastor Troy Bush said. "It was a need we felt we should try to address. We've had some great partners step up with us."

The program will provide a supervised environment for students to complete course work virtually, adhering to daily schedules jointly set by the DeKalb County School District and the academy. Facilitators will inform parents of students' progress.

"What we're providing is an environment that meets all of the COVID protocols, caring supervision for the students," Bush said. "We provide Wi-Fi and the entire environment that they need to best accommodate their virtual learning."

Weekly fees range from \$35 for before-school care and \$60 for after-school care, to \$100 for a full school day and \$180 for a full day including before- and after-school care.

"Our city is participating in partnering with us to help meet those needs," Bush said. "Where we're able, we have provided scholarships ourselves."

The City of Tucker, DeKalb County Schools, PepsiCo and the Emory University School of Medicine are among partners. Bush said PepsiCo is providing backpacks with school supplies for each student enrolled, and nurses from Emory will provide free wellness checks for students.