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No cellphones in classrooms, new Chromebooks among changes at U-46 schools this fall

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy



Elgin Area School District U-46 officials this fall will distribute 12,000 personal Chromebooks to students in fifth through eighth grades. At the beginning of last school year, the district issued 14,000 such devices to students in ninth through 12th grades at the district's five high schools. *Courtesy of Elgin Area School District U-46)*

A new policy banning cellphone use in middle and high school classrooms, new Chromebooks for students in fifth through eighth grades, and a bigger staff to improve school safety are among the changes coming to Elgin Area School District U-46 schools this fall.

Officials will distribute 12,000 personal Chromebooks to students in fifth and sixth grades districtwide and at the district's eight middle schools when the school year begins -- expanding the one-to-one technology plan that brought 14,000 such devices to students in ninth through 12th grades last school year.

With the shift to personal computing devices, there's no reason for students to be on their cellphones during instructional time, U-46 CEO Tony Sanders said.

The district is purchasing cellphone holders for every secondary classroom. Students can store their cellphones in the holders or keep them out of sight and silent in their backpacks or desks during class. They will be allowed access to their phones in an emergency.

Otherwise, classroom time will focus on teacher instruction, discussion and collaboration, Sanders said.

"The phones have become a distraction in classrooms," he said, adding that no cellphone use in classrooms was the norm until 2007 and the advent of smartphones. "At first, they were not allowed. Then, the high school students were allowed to use

them in green zones, and that quickly spread and all of a sudden the entire school became a green zone."

In the past, many U-46 schools and teachers allowed cellphone use in classrooms for technology-related educational purposes.

"I want to ensure that our classrooms are places where students are learning and conversing," Sanders said.

Exceptions can be made for students with Individualized Educational Program plans who might require the use of a personal technology device or phone, he said.

The policy change caused consternation among some parents on social media who criticized Sanders. But he stands firm by the decision, saying students can have their phones during passing periods and cafeteria time. School administrators will determine guidelines for cellphone usage in school hallways and other common areas.

Also this fall, the district will add 10 assistant principals for Sycamore Trails, Channing, Laurel Hill, Illinois Park, Glenbrook, Lincoln, Heritage, Harriet Gifford, Lowrie and Oakhill elementary schools. Currently, there are 17 assistant principals across 42 elementary school sites.

Officials are filling those 10 new positions now with the goal of providing additional administrative support to address safety concerns at those schools.

Increasing school safety is among the priorities in Sanders' contract. A committee of administrators will work with the Elgin Teachers Association on the issue.

District administrators will present a plan to the school board in coming months to measure and increase the number of teachers and students feeling safe at school. It will include a timeline for the inclusion of social-emotional learning into the curriculum, Sanders said.

New curriculum incorporating social-emotional learning will be tested this fall across kindergarten through sixth-grade classrooms.

Officials also are hiring six additional instructional coaches for elementary grades -- tested at a few sites last school year -- and 54 English Language Learner and special education teachers.