

Press Clippings 12/22/2017

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U46 weighs health record policy

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO

School District U46 board members are divided over whether students should be kept out of school if they don't have their health records up to date before the first day of class.

The board voted 3-3 on Monday on a policy change that would allow children to start school as long as their immunization and physical records are filed in the first week of school.

Traci O'Neal Ellis was absent from the meeting.

Just as they did in the fall, board members discussed the three options available but could not come to a majority vote.

The options are to exclude children on the first day if their records are not up to date, which is the current policy; exclude them only if new records are not filed in the first week; or exclude them if new records are not filed by Oct. 15, which is the deadline set by state law.

Because of the tie vote, the policy was returned to committee for more discussion.

Board member Phil Costello said he prefers giving families a little leeway when it comes to getting the records submitted. However, allowing it to be delayed to Oct. 15 was too long, he said.

His position was shared by board member Veronica Noland, who said she is not "a fan of this first-day exclusion" and also preferred a weeklong grace period.

"I believe that one extra week ... would be helpful," she said. "A lot of our families don't engage with the school until the first day of school."

The third "no" vote was cast by board member Jeanette Ward, who said she preferred sticking with the state's Oct. 15 deadline.

According to district officials, 173 students out of nearly 40,000 — about 1.8 percent of the total enrollement — were turned away on the first day of class Aug. 16 because their health records had not been updated. That number dropped to about a half-percent in the first week, board member Melissa Owens said.

Owens said she believed keeping the first-day-exclusion policy made sense because it affects such a small percentage of students. It also keeps U46 policy consistent with several nearby school districts, including Algonquin-based School District 300 and St. Charles School District 303, she said.

"It's less disruptive for the students to miss the first couple of days" than it would be if they were to miss days later in the school year, Owens said.

Board member Sue Kerr said she recently changed her position on the debate. She originally favored giving families time to submit missing physicals or vaccinations but now believes it's better for students to be out of school at the beginning of the year rather than later.

"By the week after school starts, the teachers are starting to get into the guts of education," Kerr said.

According to district data, the average time a student misses when excluded for outdated or missing records is two school days.

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U46 board OKs purchase of new textbooks despite Ward's complaint

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO

New U.S. government and geography textbooks and resources for Advanced Placement classes were approved by the School District U46 board despite a board member's charge that the materials are biased on some issues.

Jeanette Ward, who has voted against several textbook purchases since being elected in 2015, cast the lone "no" vote in the 5-1 decision Monday on the \$92,000 purchase.

Ward said she considers some parts of the books, such as those dealing with the Second Amendment, female reproductive rights and LGBTQ issues, one-sided. In one example, she said the books present a "rosy" picture of life in China and the country's one-child-per-family rule.

"The text repeatedly refers to the concept of abortion rights," she said. "The truth is that abortion is not a right. There is no presentation of the right to life and liberty and the relationship of those rights to the abortion issue."

The books will "indoctrinate" students into believing there is just one position on these issues rather than exposing them to other points of view, Ward said.

District officials disputed her position. Robin Lenart, the district's K-12 social studies coordinator, said the textbooks were fully vetted to ensure there was no bias.

"We trust that our teachers understand that they are teaching our students how to think and not what to think," Lenart said. "Our goal isn't to indoctrinate our students. ... (These books are) not the only resource teachers use."

Trisha Shrode, U46 curriculum and instruction director, said the core curriculum outlines for the AP courses are a better indicator of the classes' objectives. For instance, nowhere in the AP curriculum is there an objective for students to get a more positive perspective on China's one-child policy, she said.

Casey Pearce, the board's student representative, said she has taken AP classes, including in social studies, and while they use the books, most of the classes are spent discussing the content. When it came to "controversial issues," both sides of the topics are addressed, Pearce said.

“Students who take these classes — and the teachers who teach these classes — are used to leading and participating in discussions where you don’t always agree with what’s presented in the curriculum,” Pearce said.

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Top stories of 2017 in the Fox Valley

BY LAUREN ROHR

New school programs, political battles, economic development controversies and acts of heroism were among the most memorable moments in the Fox Valley this year. Here are some of the top stories from 2017:

Elgin charter school approved for 2018

In October, a state panel sanctioned a new charter school to serve Elgin-area students, despite objections from officials at the state's second-largest school district. The Elgin Area School District U-46 school board had denied the Elgin Charter School Initiative's proposal in June, citing concerns with the plan's economic soundness, the proposed school site, how the school would serve at-risk students, and inadequate transportation. The Illinois State Charter School Commission in a 5-3 vote reversed U-46's decision granting a five-year charter. A 2014 proposal by the same charter group was denied by the U-46 board and the state charter commission. The Elgin Math and Science Academy charter school opens in August 2018 under state oversight. It would cater to roughly 200 students in kindergarten to third grade in the first year, adding grades each year through eighth grade.

U-46 to have co-op lacrosse teams

The Elgin Area School District U-46 board recently approved co-op teams making lacrosse an Illinois High School Association-sanctioned sport. Last spring, some coaches pushed for creating district-funded programs. The district has boys' club teams at South Elgin and Bartlett high schools that are self-funded, costing roughly \$30,000 per program. The independent boards running those clubs sought the district to take over the programs and provide partial funding, as well as to expand them to include girls. This spring, U-46 will have a girls' cooperative with students from all five high schools, and two

U-46 school board member threatened

Elgin Area School District U-46 board member Traci O'Neal Ellis got online threats after she stated in a Facebook post in September that the U.S. flag "means nothing more than toilet paper to me." The threats included someone writing "one bullet" on her public, school board member Facebook page.

U-46 officials underscore safety in wake of attack

Elgin-area schools' officials underscored the security of the district's buildings and measures they have undertaken to ensure students' safety over the past several years. The report came on the heels of an attack in February on a Kenyon Woods Middle School student by a classmate. Henry Sembdner, a 12-year-old seventh-grader at the South Elgin school, was hospitalized shortly after the assault. Doctors induced a coma so he could

recover from brain and skull injuries suffered when he was beaten. The 14-year-old student suspected of assaulting Henry was charged in juvenile court.

District 301 to launch veterinary science program

Burlington Central High School will become a regional hub for veterinary science education starting next school year. It's the first veterinary program in the state at the high school level, officials said. Students from Elgin Area School District U-46 and Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300 also will be able to take veterinary science classes at Central High. It marked the first collaborative effort between the districts.

U-46, ECC consider partnership

Elgin Area School District U-46 school officials might partner with Elgin Community College to offer students a chance to earn college credit for free. They would become the latest Fox Valley school district to join ECC's Accelerate College program, which debuted last fall with 38 high school students from Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300 and St. Charles Unit District 303. District 300's Accelerate College program, which allows qualifying students to take a full-year of college classes tuition free during senior year, became the model for a new state law. Now, community college districts can enter into an Accelerate College partnership with any school district within their boundaries. U-46 officials also are considering allowing students to take college credit-bearing classes at their own high school starting in the 2018-19 school year.

- Daily Herald staff writers Elena Ferrarin, James Fuller, Harry Hitzeman, Madhu Krishnamurthy and Susan Sarkauskas contributed to this report.