

Press Clippings 05-18-21

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Illinois could require schools to teach fully in person this fall but has not issued a COVID-19 vaccine mandate

By: Hannah Leone

When Tony Sanders learned the Illinois State Board of Education could mandate fully in-person classes next school year, he decided to delay a reopening presentation he'd planned for his school board Monday evening.

Sanders, superintendent of the Elgin-based School District U-46, said he made the call after seeing that an ISBE resolution set for a vote Wednesday would allow limited exceptions for remote learning. He is also encouraging other Illinois school superintendents to read and share the draft resolution in case it affects their current plans.

A draft of the resolution states that beginning in the fall, "all schools must resume fully in-person learning for all student attendance days, provided that ... remote instruction be made available for students who are not eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine and are under a quarantine order by a local public health department or the Illinois Department of Public Health." The "and," specifying that vaccine-ineligible students would also need to be under a quarantine order in order to have remote instruction provided, is in bold.

For students with documented medical needs that may prevent them from getting a COVID-19 vaccine or make them more vulnerable to the virus, Sanders said U-46 has been working on options for a distance learning program with dedicated remote teachers who would not also have in-person students.



U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders speaks with kindergartener Samantha Bermudez at Oakhill Elementary School on May 6, 2021, in Streamwood. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

Sanders, who has served on state working groups involved in creating guidance for pandemic education, said he believes ISBE has generally tried to involve school leaders and educators. But he said the position reflected in the resolution was not explained or alerted to superintendents.

"I think they've made a good effort to hear from the field. This one just surprised me," Sanders said.

When another superintendent brought the ISBE agenda to his attention, he shared the draft resolution on Twitter to make others aware, later adding some commentary.

"I do hope that in the end we have some flexibility," Sanders told the Tribune. "We have a lot of federal resources coming our way that we really could use to innovate. ... We need less rules, not more."

ISBE spokeswoman Jackie Matthews said the resolution was drafted “under the leadership of the state superintendent of education and based on feedback from the field.”

The declaration would be enforceable, Matthews said, citing state law that gives state Superintendent Carmen Ayala the authority to “declare a requirement to use remote learning days or blended remote learning days for a school district, multiple school districts, a region, or the entire State” during a gubernatorial disaster proclamation.

Students who are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine or who are not under quarantine order may meet criteria for home or hospital instruction, Matthews said.

According to the school code, “a child qualifies for home or hospital instruction if it is anticipated that, due to a medical condition, the child will be unable to attend school, and instead must be instructed at home or in the hospital, for a period of 2 or more consecutive weeks or on an ongoing intermittent basis.”

“School districts have flexibility in other parts of the law to offer remote learning to students on an individual basis if that will best meet the students’ learning needs,” Matthews said, citing Illinois legislation that allows districts to provide individual students with remote learning or blended programs.

Chicago Public Schools, the biggest school district in Illinois and third in the U.S. with 638 schools and 341,000 students, has already been planning for a mostly in-person fall. CEO Janice Jackson, who is leaving CPS in June, [said earlier in May](#) that CPS was “looking to the state ... to get us back to normal from a schooling perspective where everyone is expected to go to school in a brick-and-mortar building every single day unless there are extenuating circumstances, medical circumstances, that prevent them from coming to school.”

“We are pleased that ISBE is guiding districts to provide five days a week of in-person instruction. This is what the district has been working towards and there seems to be a consensus at all levels of government that opening schools full-time in the fall is a critical priority and our position has always been that we would be offering a remote learning option for all students who are unable to return when class resumes in the fall,” said James Gherardi, a CPS spokesman.

Since CPS started its phased-in reopening plan, the district has made in-person learning optional. CPS high schools, the last to reopen under an agreement with the Chicago Teachers Union, began offering a hybrid model in April with in-person classes capped at two days a week for many students. Only about 22% of district students attended in-person classes the week of April 19, according to CPS data.

Of Illinois’ 849 school districts, 423 are provided blended or hybrid learning, 398 are fully in person and only 28 are fully remote, according to state data last updated May 3.

The ISBE resolution to be voted on Wednesday notes the state is expected to move to phase five of the “Restore Illinois” plan on June 11, at which point businesses and public gatherings would be allowed to operate normally.

“Guidance from the Illinois Department of Public Health is forthcoming regarding updated mitigations for schools in Phase 5 of the Restore Illinois plan,” according to the resolution.

The resolution cites rapid testing programs and vaccines already received by many school employees and students 12 and older, along with ongoing trials in younger children. The resolution also references studies supporting in-person learning for more positive academic outcomes and mental health.



Gisselle Moctezuma and her classmates listen to a science lesson from their teacher at Oakhill Elementary School on May 6, 2021, in Streamwood. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

It also figures schools can afford needed supports: “Illinois schools are receiving \$7.8 billion in federal pandemic relief funds for the safe return to in-person learning and to address learning gaps caused by the pandemic through strategies, such as tutoring, summer school, and community partnerships for mental health.”

Sanders said he hoped the federal funding can also enable school districts to try new learning models to serve students with varying medical conditions and learning needs.

Unless there is a change at the state level, Sanders said U-46 doesn’t have plans to add COVID-19 shots to the list of required immunizations and wasn’t sure about asking families to disclose students’ vaccination status.

ISBE “is not currently issuing guidance mandating vaccines,” Matthews said.

The state, like many local school systems, has instead focused on vaccine education and access. In a message last week, Ayala “strongly encouraged” school districts to host vaccination events before the school year ends “to visibly support vaccination and leverage the school community to improve vaccine uptake.”

In Chicago, CPS, CTU and the city’s Department of Public Health are partnering on a series of vaccine events in school parking lots, intended to offer access to CPS families in neighborhoods with the most need for the shots but open to the public at no cost.

A study [published](#) in April by the Kaiser Family Foundation found 29% of parents planned to get their child the shot as soon as they could, while 32% said they prefer to take a wait-and-see approach, 15% said they’d only get their child the vaccine if their school required it and 19% said they would “definitely” not get their child vaccinated. Parents were more likely to embrace the vaccine as their children got older, ranging from 24% for children younger than 5 to 31% for children ages 16 and 17.

More than 32,000 vaccine doses have been given to children ages 12 to 15 in Illinois since [eligibility expanded last week](#), according to state data.

In light of its announcement last week that fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks in many settings, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has clarified that schools should still require face coverings.

Noting the mask update “raised questions for schools about how to proceed in the current school year,” the CDC recommended that schools keep using COVID-19 mitigation strategies “for at least the remainder of the 2020-2021 academic school year.”

With eligibility so recently expanded and full immunity not occurring until two weeks after the second Pfizer shot, most students who are old enough won’t be fully vaccinated by the end of the school year and many school-age children still aren’t eligible, the CDC reasoned. The CDC projected updated guidance for schools “in the coming weeks” to help with planning for the fall.

U-46 officials say state decision on remote learning this week will affect fall reopening plan

By: Mike Danahey

School District U-46's plans for the fall school year are dependent upon the Illinois State Board of Education, which is to decide Wednesday if it will mandate a complete return to in-person classes and limited remote learning, Superintendent Tony Sanders said.

"There's still a lot of ambiguity about what the next school year will look like," Sanders told the school board Monday. "And despite all of our plans, on Friday the state put out a declaration that's up this week before the State Board of Education that kind of made us have to adjust our plan suddenly."

Depending on the outcome of that meeting, the school board could hold a special meeting next week to discuss how it should proceed, he said.

Suzanne Johnson, deputy superintendent of instruction, said the district had been getting ready for a return to full in-person learning but was also "researching other options for students who may need (other) options."

"This recommended declaration ... has caused us to pause temporarily to be able to gain additional input and direction from the state. And we are hopeful that will occur this week," Johnson said.

Some parents may not want their children back in school if they haven't been vaccinated for COVID-19. As of right now, the vaccine has been approved only for those 12 and older and experts say it's unlikely it will be authorized for anyone younger before the end of the year.

About half of the students attending U46 schools are under the age of 12, Johnson said.

The resolution being presented for approval Wednesday by the State Board of Education reads, in part, "all schools must resume fully in-person learning for all student attendance days, provided that ... remote instruction be made available for students who are not eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine and are under a quarantine order by a local public health department or the Illinois Department of Public Health."

The word "and" is emphasized in bold print.

Board member Melissa Owens expressed frustration that, if approved, the state board would make the decision on behalf of all the school districts in the state.

"This takes control away from us completely," Owens said. "And at this point we have the infrastructure in place to be able to accommodate families. ... It's unconscionable to take the infrastructure that we have right now and then just throw it by the wayside on a declaration and not let school districts do what they need to do to help their families."

Board President Sue Kerr said her concern was "this will get passed this week, and then there will be pushback. They'll react in July, and we'll have to turn on a dime."

Sanders noted that other state laws may allow for more distance learning, but would require additional work by the district to implement them. He said he hopes the state board and state legislators recognize there is a place for distance learning as an education option.

"I'm hopeful they give us some flexibility and don't make us scramble," Sanders said.

According to the U-46 website, about 53% of the district's 36,000 or so students are currently doing remote learning, while the rest are now doing in-person classes on a full-time basis.

Johnson said they will be following COVID-19 guidelines for distance and mask usage through the rest of the school year and likely this summer as well.

“This is a very fluid situation,” she said. “(Returning to the classroom) is great news. We’ve been waiting for it for well over a year. But it will require us to be patient, and we will continue to monitor efforts and strategies (related to pandemic protocols).”

SPORTS

---Daily Herald---05/18/2021

Glenbard East no-hits Larkin

By: Allen Oshinski



Glenbard East's Dylan Alejandro, right, makes it safely to second before the tag of Larkin's Jeremy Reuter during Monday's baseball game in Elgin.



Larkin's Alexander Rodriguez stretches for the ball from a Glenbard East hit but comes up a bit short during Monday's baseball game.



Glenbard East's Dylan Alejandro combined with two teammates to no-hit Larkin Monday in Elgin.



Glenbard East's Sam Greetis, right, scores a run during Monday's baseball game against Larkin in Elgin.



Glenbard East's Eddie Vercruysse makes a diving catch for a Larkin out during Monday's baseball game in Elgin.



Glenbard East's Jason Cousinue, left, makes it safely to third before the tag by Larkin's Logan Leaver during Monday's baseball game in Elgin.



Larkin's Javier Cervantes waits for the throw as Glenbard East's Ben Elias slides safely into second.



Glenbard East's Joe Hamilton, right, is greeted at the plate after hitting home run against Larkin during Monday's baseball game in Elgin.

Everything was clicking for Glenbard East Monday.

Three pitchers combined on a no-hitter and the offense pounded out 14 hits as the Rams downed Larkin, 12-0, in Upstate Eight action in Elgin.

Rams starter Dan Alejandro walked Larkin leadoff man Jeremy Reuter, then retired the next 9 hitters. He gave way to Braden Branecki who struck out the side around an error. John Sebold finished it up with 3 more strikeouts.

"That's been one area that we've really been focusing on," said Glenbard East coach Joel Pelland. "It's kind of been our Achilles' heel all year is being in the strike zone, so it was nice to see the guys come out and pound the strike zone, be aggressive in the zone, let our defense make plays."

Offensively, leadoff man Ben Elias set the table with 4 hits. He scored twice and drove in two. Jason Cousinue, Jayden Hamilton and Eddie Vercruysse added 2 hits apiece for the Rams, who evened their season record at 9-9.

"I've got to let my teammates see pitches, let them see the strike zone that first time up and do anything I can to get on base," said Elias of his leadoff role. "That first at-bat of the game is always important, setting the tone for the rest of the team. If you start it out with a hit, more hits are going to follow. It's a domino effect."

The Rams led 5-0 after 3, then really broke things open with a 7-run fourth inning. Elias got it started by beating out an infield hit, his first of 2 in the inning. Joe Hamilton bashed a 3-run homer to left center, and Cousinue and Jayden Hamilton followed with doubles.

Sam Greetis's 2-run triple keyed a 3-run third inning that put the Rams in control.

Vercruysse turned in the defensive gem of the game in the first inning, laying out to snag Javier Cervantes' sinking liner in right field. He had no way of knowing he was saving a no-hitter on the Royals' first out of the game.

Alejandro was content to pitch to contact for the most part, recording just 2 strikeouts. Shortstop Joe Hamilton had assists on all 3 outs in the second inning.

Elias led off the game with a bloop to right field and scored the game's first run on Jayden Hamilton's single. Elias doubled in a run in the second before the Rams' offense exploded in the middle innings.