

Press Clippings 08/25/20

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Despite morning Zoom outages, it was back to school Monday — via computer — for U-46's 38,000 students

By: Rafael Guerrero



First-grade teacher Pedro Ricardez uses Zoom on his computer at Lowrie Elementary School in Elgin Monday to work on Spanish exercises with his dual-language students at home. Monday was the first day of class at Lowrie and the 50-plus other schools that make up District U-46. (Rafael Guerrero / The Courier-News)

Monday was the first day of class for the 370 or so students who attend Lowrie Elementary School in Elgin, but the building they'd normally be roaming was nearly empty other than for a handful of teachers and administrators.

In the school's 131-year history, it was the first time the bell rang with pupils not in their seats. Instead, they were at their kitchen tables or bedroom desks or other places as they logged into remote learning using the Zoom videoconferencing platform to ensure safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's surreal having such a quiet building on the first day of school," Principal Tiffany Robinson said.

While it may have been quiet at Lowrie, it was not an easy day for some of the 38,000 or so other students who found they were unable to get into Zoom thanks to a partial service outage the company experienced Monday morning.

Parents called schools worried they were doing something wrong, prompting the district to send out alerts on email and social media about the situation and the need to switch to the Google Meet platform.

By afternoon, Zoom services were restored for the majority of users.

"Many thanks to our resilient teachers, staff and families who remained patient and quick to find their way to Google Meet amid the widespread Zoom outage," Superintendent Tony Sanders said in a posted message. "I visited a dozen Zoom classrooms this morning and I was impressed with how well everyone handled the situation."

Most of Lowrie's teachers will work from home until in-person classes resume, possibly sometime in October, because social distancing restrictions mean only three of 18 classroom teachers can work on site, Robinson said.



First-grade teacher Pedro Ricardez works on some Spanish exercises with his dual-language class Monday morning. He was one of the few teachers working from inside Lowrie Elementary School in Elgin as District U-46 began the first day of school using remote learning. (Rafael Guerrero / The Courier-News)

“I was just excited to have a purpose to get up and get out,” third/fourth-grade teacher Michelle Vacco said of teaching from her classroom Monday. “I wanted to send a message that I’m in the classroom. (E-learning) is still school. ... I think it is important we send that message to them.”

Vacco spent her morning guiding students on where to find items using the online learning management system, Canvas.

“For the most part everyone wasn’t getting kicked out,” Vacco said of students trying to get online. All but two of her 21 students were able to check in.

Vacco had bags of learning materials ready inside her classroom for students to pick up beginning Tuesday, the first day she’ll meet her pupils in person. It will all be done outside, with students and parents picking them up curbside.

One of highlights of the day, Vacco, said, were the 10-minute virtual breaks that let her students talk and catch up with each other while she muted her computer.

“They need to talk to their friends. At least Zoom is letting them do that,” she said. “I just sat there and smiled.”

First-grade teacher Pedro Ricardez brought a lot of energy to his first day of classes as he worked on Spanish exercises with his dual-language class.

“Con que comienza ‘escalera’?” Ricardez said to his students in Spanish. “Muy bien — e, e, e!” The question he asked was what letter the word escalera, which means ladder in English, starts with in Spanish. They told him it was the letter E.

“This is still kind of strange for me,” Ricardez said of teaching virtually. “I love to be with them (in person).”



A visitor signs in Monday on the first day of school at Lowrie Elementary in Elgin, where only three teachers were in classrooms and students were doing remote learning from home or other locations as a result of the pandemic. (Rafael Guerrero / The Courier-News)

In Ricardez's case, 15 of 24 students had checked in at the start of the school day and another six reached out later to say they had login issues, he said.

Whenever in-person classes resume, U-46 students will find a number of changes to their schools' interiors, officials said. At Lowrie, signage on the walls and on the floor remind everyone to keep their distance, walk on one side of the hallway and wash hands frequently. The district has installed portable hand-washing stations in some hallways.

Plexiglas partitions now provide a barrier between visitors and staff in the main office. Security screening protocols have also been stepped up, which people being questioned on whether they are experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms or feeling feverish. Teachers must use their key fobs to come in and wear masks when they can't socially distance.

Lowrie and other U-46 schools will still provide curbside meal pickup service for students, something the district started after the pandemic emerged in March. Two million meals have been provided so far, officials said.

Robinson said teachers are doing daily check-ins with students to ask how they're feeling emotionally and mentally. Teachers also have resources available should distance learning or other facets of the pandemic take a toll on them, she added.

"Having a few teachers (in the building) at least and at least hearing a few student voices via Zoom, it lifted up my spirits knowing our students were connecting with their teachers," Robinson said of the first day of school.

---Daily Herald--- 08/25/2020

Brief Zoom glitches didn't mar start of classes, school leaders say

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy

Global partial outages of Zoom videoconferencing services caused some consternation Monday for educators and students in a few suburban districts that began the school year with remote learning.

Yet the disruptions were minimal -- from as little as 5 minutes to sporadic connectivity issues in the morning -- and teachers were able to pivot swiftly to other videoconferencing and learning platforms, many districts reported.

Zoom announced connectivity issues had been resolved and its service was fully restored by midday.

In Elgin Area School District U-46, where roughly 38,000 students had their first day of remote classes Monday, teachers toggled between Zoom and Google Meet, district spokeswoman Mary Fergus said.

Teachers and students had been warned to brace for glitches with Zoom service after widespread reports of outages and to be prepared to use other learning apps, she added.

"We are primarily relying on Zoom and Google Meet for the live, synchronous two-way instruction," Fergus said.

Students receive 2½ hours of synchronous instruction in a live class and then work on asynchronous learning on their own, including assignments that are monitored, for the remainder of the day. Teachers also keep office hours for one-on-one meetings with students and parents.

"Many thanks to our resilient teachers, staff and families who remained patient and quick to find their way to Google Meet amid the widespread Zoom outage," Superintendent Tony Sanders wrote in a message to families. "I visited a dozen Zoom classrooms this morning and I was impressed with how well everyone handled the situation. Some teachers even led their class from both Zoom and Google Meet."

Grecia Wakeford, fourth-grade dual language teacher at Harriett Gifford Elementary School in Elgin, said there was a little excitement at the start of class.

"In the beginning, everybody was all over the place," Wakeford said. "We were using both (Zoom and Google Meet) because I didn't want to lose any instructional time. I tried to avoid any stress for them and their families. We pushed through. We managed. Tomorrow will be fine."

Districts in Des Plaines, Glenview, Huntley, and Palatine were among those reporting minor technical glitches.

"Those teachers that were unable to utilize Zoom pivoted to offering their classes through the Google Meet platform, or through asynchronous activities that were posted to their Google Classroom portal. Because of our teachers ability to quickly pivot from their scheduled Zoom classes to alternative activities, all students participated in their classes," Glenbrook High School District 225 Assistant Superintendent Raoul Gravel said in a note to families.

---WBBM Newsradio--- 08/25/2020

Elgin District U-46 Begins Remote Learning Monday

Remote learning started Monday morning in Elgin area District U-46. WBBM Newsradio's Rob Hart has more.

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