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Parents to hold rally in opposition to U-46 plan

Older students would continue with remote learning until January

By: Karie Angell Luc

District U-46 students in pre-kindergarten through second grade and special needs children will return to in-person classes on a part-time basis starting Oct. 26, the district school board was told this week.

They will be followed by third to sixth graders, who will move to a similar hybrid schedule sometime later this fall. Middle and high school students won't be back in the classroom until January under the most recent version of the back-to-school plan.

That proposal is not sitting well with some parents, who plan to hold a Reopen U-46 Schools Rally from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m. Friday in front of the U-46 District central office at 355 E. Chicago St. in Elgin.

Bartlett resident Kori Duncan, mother of a U-46 third grader and a co-organizer of the rally, said the district's slow approach to bringing children back to school has been frustrating.

"We moved here April 27 for higher-ranked schools that we have yet to set foot in," Duncan said. "We gave up our home and lives in Addison during the height of this pandemic so our daughter could get a better education, and here we are."

Her rally co-organizer, Dawn Martin, is an 18-year Bartlett resident with one child in eighth grade and another who's a high school junior.

"As a parent, the past six months have been a roller coaster," said Martin, whose member-only ReOpen U46 Schools Facebook page has nearly 1,000 members.

What she and other supporters want to accomplish with the rally, she said, is "very simple. Push School District U-46 to reopen buildings for at least a hybrid education for all of its students."

Superintendent Tony Sanders, speaking at Monday night's school board meeting, said he appreciated "the feedback of parents and community members in regards to the different models that we are attempting to build."

While they "could easily get all kids back into school" on a hybrid schedule, they're opting instead for a phased-in plan to ensure the return is orderly and safe, he said.

"We're going a little bit more complex but really in a way that we believe will better suit the needs of our students," Sanders said.

And parents do not have to send their children back if they think full-time remote learning is the better choice for their family, he said. The district is asking that parents and guardians specify their preference by completing a form at district.u-46.org.

Those who select distance learning must commit for the rest of the school year and will not be able to change to hybrid learning at a later date.

Suzanne Johnson, deputy superintendent of instruction, said they decided the youngest students would be the first to return because "we can meet the safety guidelines established within the moderate community transmission range for COVID-19."

"With the increased complexities at the middle school and the high school level, we need to reach the minimal community transmission range prior to returning to in-person instruction," Johnson said.

The district must adhere to Illinois Department of Public Health guidelines for the three counties — Cook, DuPage and Kane — in which U-46 students live, she said.

“We will follow the most stringent guidelines as our school serves students from across 90 square miles,” Johnson said.

“We have crafted and continue to finalize a plan to accommodate the return of smaller groups of students as opposed to welcoming all students back at one time to best allow us to align to the safety guidelines and measures,” she said. “While I certainly understand and appreciate the interest of the community to bring all students back at one time, we want to make sure we have a successful plan.”

Bus transportation numbers have been modified for social distancing, with an estimated 24 students allowed at one time on large buses and eight on a smaller buses.

“While that many of these items may seem to be simple or basic in nature, when we start to plan for all of these pieces — along with the almost 800 students who are within our specialized students programs, almost 2,000 pre-K students and another 3,000 students in (the other) grade levels — the complexities rapidly increase within School District U-46,” Johnson said.

Students will be required to wear face masks and to practice social distancing, Sanders said.

“I would say that would be the key right now, is what can you do at home with your child to reinforce these behaviors,” he said. “I think if that happens, we will have an easier transition back in for all students.”