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U-46 students signed up for hybrid schedule to head back to classroom starting Jan. 11

By: Karie Angell Luc

Middle and high school students will begin a hybrid class schedule in the third week of January, according to a tentative timeline released at Monday's U-46 School Board meeting.

The first day of classes will be Jan. 19 for seventh- and eighth-graders, freshmen and sophomores, and DREAM Academy students. Juniors and seniors return on Jan. 25.

Pre-kindergarten to sixth-grade students, many of whom previously were back in school on a part-time basis, will return to that schedule on Jan. 11

While U-46 plans to move forward, officials acknowledged that surges in COVID-19 cases could impact the plan just as it did this month when all students returned to remote learning for the rest of the calendar year.

High school students signed up for hybrid learning will be split into two groups and attend in-person classes on an alternating basis. When not in school, they will do remote learning.

The schedule will be in place Tuesday through Friday. All students will do remote learning on Mondays.

To support the planned schedule, the board approved spending \$324,525 to buy cameras for third- through 12th-grade classroom. Cameras have already been purchased for the pre-K to second-grade rooms.

Committees have been fine-tuning hybrid instructional models for the last nine months, Superintendent Tony Sanders said.

"Our first priority in keeping with what we value, as well as what the State Board of Education has continued to promote, is introducing a model for our earliest learners and students with special needs," Sanders said.

"While we know distance learning is not ideal for many of our students, we are acutely aware that these are the learners who need prioritized instruction for in person instruction," he said.

While the bulk of discussion during Monday's meeting focused on high school students, board member Kate Thommes said, "I would just like to advocate fiercely for a moment, if I can, for our special ed population."

Every day these learners are outside of the classroom, "they're losing twice as much" Thommes said. "We really need to put our money where our mouth is."

Other school districts are facing the same challenges, Sanders said.

"We are building a system, we are building it as best we can," he said. "It's not ideal, nothing about this year is ideal, but we're trying to put together the best instructional model that we can."

Board member Melissa Owens said, "This is not easy.

"It is still disappointing to me that 10 months into the pandemic that we are still only providing roughly half of the direct instructional time that students would have gotten pre-pandemic," Owens said.

“I don’t know what the answer is to that but I’m disappointed by that and I would have thought that in a system with as many resources as we have, that we would have been able to do better with that.” she said.

“Kids need this time with their teachers,” Owens said. “They’re not going to get it back.”