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After 18 months of COVID-19 interruptions, students across suburban Chicago head back for in-person learning: 'We're in this almost normal world right now'
by Karen Ann Cullotta

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Back to school



Students at Wild Rose Elementary School in St. Charles arrive Wednesday morning for the first day of school.

As first grade teacher Isabelle Townsend greeted her students at Wild Rose Elementary School in St. Charles on the first day of classes Wednesday morning, the gloomy weather and concerns over COVID-19 were upstaged by fresh haircuts, tearful moms and a spirit of hope and resilience.

“It’s going to be an awesome new school year!” Townsend said as she welcomed the masked youngsters.

“I’m so happy that all of the kids are here in person again, because first grade is such a big year for math, reading and learning responsibility,” Townsend said.



First grade teacher Isabelle Townsend reaches out to hug a student on the first day of school at Wild Rose Elementary School in St. Charles on Aug. 11, 2021. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

After nearly 18 months of COVID-19 interruptions, many educators, parents and students had anticipated this fall would bring a return of a “normal” school year — especially since federal and state authorities have decreed schools be fully reopened for in-person learning, and the vaccine is available for students 12 and older.

But the optimism of early summer was dashed by late July, as the surge of the delta variant and escalating virus rates across the state and nation prompted Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker last week to mandate the state follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recommendation that masks be worn indoors at schools.

Now, as schools in suburban Chicago begin to open, and Chicago Public Schools plans an Aug. 30 reopening, the battles erupting at local school board meetings over COVID-19 guidance appear far from over, instead spilling into a third school year.

Earlier this week, a lawsuit was filed against Pritzker by a parent from downstate Illinois, claiming the mask mandate was government overreach. On Wednesday, [**more than 250 people gathered outside Lincoln-Way Central High School**](#) in New Lenox to protest the mandate, with some carrying signs reading “Masks are useless” and “We don’t co-parent with Pritzker.”

Some parents said they would rather home-school their children than have them wear a mask to school. “I’m just a parent who is not going to make that my kids’ school experience,” said Ruby Johnson of New Lenox.

In a letter sent Wednesday to school superintendents across the state, Illinois State Board of Education Superintendent Carmen Ayala reminded educators that the governor’s executive order mandating masks at schools “has the force of law.”

“I understand the pressure some school and district leaders may be facing from community members, and I will provide you with every support to understand, communicate, and comply with the order,” Ayala said. “However, noncompliance is not an option.”

Ayala said a school district that doesn’t comply with the mandate “not only puts students’ health and safety at risk but also opens the district to extraordinary legal liability — potentially without any insurance to cover damages.”

At **Elgin-based Unit School District 46**, where around 50% of the district’s 37,000 students were back in the classroom last spring, officials spent the summer ensuring the full return of in-person learning Aug. 16 could be done safely, and with enthusiasm.

“We’re in this ‘almost normal’ world right now, but it means so much to be able to see all of our students in person again,” District 46 spokeswoman **Mary Fergus** said.

Because of the economic hardships facing many families during the pandemic, district officials spent \$700,000 in federal COVID-10 relief funding to purchase back to school supplies for all students in kindergarten through sixth grade, Fergus said.

“Our teachers and administrators will be lined up to greet students on the first day of school with elbow bumps, cheering and clapping,” Fergus said.

Band members at Township High School District 211’s Fremd and Schaumburg high schools plan to perform a celebratory concert as students arrive on campus Thursday for the first day of classes, District 211 Superintendent Lisa Small said.

“Everyone has been preparing, and it feels like a normal school year,” Small said. The district is bringing back a full roster of extracurricular activities this fall, ranging from athletic teams and clubs, to fine arts offerings such as band, choir and theater.

While there won’t be a limit to the number of students allowed during the five-minute passing periods, the district’s five high schools will enforce social distancing guidelines, offer virus

screenings, and require students, teachers and staff to complete a daily COVID-19 symptom screener before they arrive on campus.

“People work in schools because we love kids, and we’re all looking forward to getting back to what we do best, and which is really invigorating,” Small said.

At Wilmette School District 39, Superintendent Kari Cremascoli said while parents have shared “many different viewpoints” on Pritzker’s recent mask mandate, she remains hopeful the district’s 3,600 students will enjoy the return of nearly all of its pre-pandemic offerings.

Back in St. Charles, Mike Kroha said his three children, 5-year-old twins Connor and Corbin, who are starting kindergarten, and second grader, Aubrey, were excited to meet their new teachers and friends at Wild Rose.

“For my wife and I, it’s kind of bittersweet, but the boys are super stoked, and it’s crazy how resilient they are, even about the masks,” Kroha said.

Devann Fattes, a speech pathologist at Wild Rose, said she has stocked up on clear masks for the 40 students she will work with this year, so she can see the children’s mouths as they form words.

“Last year, my students were all so resilient from day one. ... They follow the COVID rules, and never seemed to have a problem with them,” Fattes said.

Ali Naqvi and Ruby Hasan said their 6-year-old son, Hasnain Naqvi, was so excited about starting first grade at Wild Rose that he awakened at 5 a.m.

“I’m so glad he’s going to have a chance to interact with other children,” Hasan said. “These are very happy tears.”