

Press Clippings 08/17/21

---Elgin Courier-News and Chicago Tribune---08/17/2021 Students at Elgin's U-46 head back to school – at last by Mike Danahey

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Natalie Edwards gives son, Auggie Picasso, 5, some tips on wearing a mask Monday before they head to Harriet Gifford Elementary School in Elgin for his first day of kindergarten. Looking on are sons Christian Picasso, 8, who is in third grade at Gifford, and Cameron Picasso, 17, who is a senior at Larkin High School in Elgin. (Mike Danahey / The Courier-News)

Natalie Edwards and her sons, Auggie, Christian and AJ Picasso, took a short walk Monday morning to Harriet Gifford Elementary School on Elgin's west side for the first day of school. Older brother Cameron joined them, en route to the start of his senior year at Larkin High School.

Being back to a normal routine is welcome after attending class and doing work via a computer for most of the last school year, they said.

“I liked remotely learning, but I am looking forward to being with my friends,” 11-year-old AJ, a sixth-grader, said.

Third-grader Christian Picasso, who turned 8 Monday, agreed. “I hated not being in school. I like being in person and doing math in school,” he said.

Monday marked the first day almost all U-46 students were back in classrooms since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began.



Natalie Edwards takes a photo of sons, sixth-grader AJ Picasso, third-grader Christian Picasso, 8, and kindergartener Auggie Picasso, 5, before they start their first day of the school year at Harriet Gifford Elementary School on Elgin's west side. This will be the first and only school year in which the three boys attend the same school, where Edwards works as a part-time secretary. (Mike Danahey / The Courier-News)

When the virus struck and started spreading, all school districts were required to switch to remote learning. Only in January did parents have the option of switching to a hybrid schedule in which students could be in school on a part-time basis. Optional full-time classes started in April.

This year, all students are required to be back in classrooms unless there is a medical reason they cannot attend. However, with COVID numbers on the rise again, the governor has mandated that anyone inside a school building must wear a mask.

While some parents are opposed to the requirement, saying it should be their decision and not the governor's, AJ said he was fine with the idea.

"I feel more comfortable knowing everyone will be wearing masks," he said.

But it's not without drawbacks, he said. It's hard to keep his glasses from getting foggy while his mouth and nose are covered and Christian said masking up can make him feel like he can't breathe correctly.



Walking from their Elgin west side home to their respective campuses for the first day of school Monday were, clockwise from front right, mom Natalie Edwards and her sons Auggie Picasso, 8, AJ Picasso, 11, and Cameron Picasso, 17. The younger boys attend Harriet Gifford Elementary School, where Edwards works as a part-time secretary, and Cameron is a senior at Larkin High School in Elgin. (Mike Danahey / The Courier-News)

Edwards, a single mom, is a part-time secretary at Gifford. Last year, she was home overseeing her children's at-home learning schedules, she said.

“This year I’ve talked to a few parents who are concerned about kids’ safety at school, but I think we are taking all the precautions necessary to keep the kids safe,” Edwards said. “For some kids, school offers much more support and guidance than they have at home.”

She and Cameron, 17, have been vaccinated for COVID but the shots are not yet available to anyone under the age of 12.

“It was really an easy decision to trust the science and get vaccinated,” Edwards said. “I was more afraid of the virus than the vaccine.”

Parent Michael Johnson feels the same way.

“Our whole family is vaccinated,” he said. “The decision was easy to make because science is real and trustworthy.”



Twins Bailey and Charlie Nelson, 12, of Elgin, pose for a first-day-of-school photo Monday before catching the bus to Abbott Middle School in Elgin, where they are seventh-graders. (Johnson Family / The Courier-News)

Johnson’s twin stepchildren, Charlie and Bailey Nelson, 12, started 7th grade at Abbott Middle School in Elgin Monday. Johnson and his wife, Nicole, kept the kids in remote learning last school year because vaccinations for anyone 12 or older weren’t available until May.

Both took the bus to Abbott Monday and were OK with the mask policy.

“I don’t know why people think (masks) are a big deal,” Charlie Nelson said.

Bailey Nelson said, “Sometimes they can suck, but it’s the right thing to do to protect others.”

At the fully-vaccinated Blondin household, Nick, 12, took the bus to Kenyon Woods Middle School in South Elgin, while his sisters Emma, 15, and Lexi, 17, drove together to South Elgin High School to begin 10th and 12 grades.

Nancy Blondin and her husband, Tobey, both veterinarians, said they were glad to have their children back in the classroom.

“We were very lucky to not need to hire day care (last year) since our children are of an age to be independent and help each other,” Nancy Blondin said. “Having school back in session does take away the worry and guilt I have felt in leaving them, though.”



Third-grader Christian Picasso, 8, donned a birthday cake hat for the first day of classes in the 3rd grade at Harriet Gifford Elementary School in Elgin. Monday was his birthday. (Mike Danahey / The Courier-News)

The kids were relieved, too, they said.

“I found math difficult when we were remote. I am glad to be back for classes like that,” Emma said. “Wearing masks is necessary right now, but a lot of students are tired of it. I don’t think they realize the benefit of wearing them.”

Lexi, who called last year “overwhelming,” said she’s expecting there will be some students who will fight wearing the masks, even though “it’s necessary right now indoors.”

At Creekside Elementary School in Elgin, Principal Joel Pollack said there hadn’t been any problems with mask usage.

“The teachers are really happy to be in school, the students are really excited, and their parents are excited and relieved,” Pollock said.

Creekside ended last school year with about 200 students learning remotely and 300 learning in classrooms. Monday about 500 students were back in the building, he said.

---WLS-TV, ABC-7 Eyewitness News---08/16/2021

Elgin School District U-46 faces staff shortages as students return to class Monday

by Maher Kawash; aired at 9:15 p.m. Monday, Aug. 16. Note: This story was also picked up by Illinois News Live and The Chestnut Post.

<https://abc7chicago.com/back-to-school-elgin-district-u46/10954417/>

Students at **School District U46** in Elgin made a long-awaited return to the classroom Monday, but this year comes with some staffing challenges.

The school district is the second largest in Illinois. COVID safety protocols are in place, including a mask requirement as part of Governor JB Pritzker's executive order.

The district has partnered with the University of Illinois to test unvaccinated students, teachers and staff members. Parents are encouraged to get their students vaccinated as soon as they're eligible.

At Kenyon Woods Middle School, there was celebration as students return to class full time. It's a return that's been in the making for a year and a half now.

"This year, to have all 37,000 students re entering our schools, albeit with masks and social distancing, it feels like a dream come true," said U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders.

"I mean it feels good," said Ramon Hill, a senior at Elgin High School. "It's my last year so, you know I gotta enjoy it."

It's a school year with specific protocols in place to keep everyone safe, like shrinking class sizes and requiring a face mask for all students and staff.

Even with those safety measures, some parents are still uneasy about the return to class.

"I don't think they're ready for it but whatever I guess," said Erica Zapata, parent of an Elgin HS student.

Superintendent Sanders says schools are a safe place to be, but he understands the hurdles ahead.

"That does not mean we will not have COVID cases ...even when we were closed we had cases of COVID but we're gonna do our best to mitigate that," Sanders said.

The district also faces some challenges with staffing shortages, caused by a combination of retirements and COVID-19 restrictions. But Sanders said all classes are covered to start the year.

"We had to bring in sub teachers obviously, some long term subs who graciously come back," Sanders said. "Bus drivers, every bus had a bus driver today so we will make do."

The staff members that are there are just happy to teach these kids in person again.

"I feel so happy to come back again and start working with these kids," said Carmen Brienza, a special education teacher. "I really missed them last year."

Students in several other local school districts are heading back to the classroom Monday. It's the first day of school for Thornton Township, Schaumburg and Oak Park River Forest.

---WGN-TV---08/16/2021

Elgin U-46 students return to classroom Monday – with masks – for first day of school

by Meghan Dwyer; posted at 4:57 p.m. Monday, Aug. 16

<https://wgntv.com/news/elgin-u46-students-return-to-classroom-monday-with-masks-for-first-day-of-school/>

Monday was the first day of school for one of the state's largest districts.

While some kids were excited about returning to normalcy, some parents expressed anxiety over their children's health. Yet, many who spoke with WGN say they have full faith in the district's safety procedures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

While the first day of school can be full of jitters, even under normal circumstances, after months of virtual learning, students told WGN their excitement to return to the classroom was at an all-time high.

"In the morning when I first came here, I was a little nervous, but it became fun and I wasn't nervous after all," said sixth-grader Geovany Alejandre.

That doesn't mean that some parents weren't concerned, however.

"There was a little bit of worry about how she'd handle it, but she took it like a champ," parent Tom Sprindis said about his daughter.

Sprindis' wife, Sherie, worries that virus transmission is possible due to kids being unvaccinated and with social distancing inside schools all but mute. To counter such concerns, the district announced all Elgin schools must wear masks.

Geovany's mother, Nicole, said her son has asthma, so the facial covering requirement caused a bit of worry. But the middle school student told WGN he was unfazed.

"It gets hot and sweaty, but I just change my mask and it's fine," Geovany said.

The district is also partnering with the University of Illinois to test unvaccinated students, teachers and staff members.

"U46 has been really good so far," Sherie Sprindis said.

While most are happy to be back, trepidation on how long the return to the classroom lasts remains. **Elgin U46 Superintendent Tony Sanders** said logistically, student's return on Monday was a success.

"Students are all back in their classrooms learning on day one, albeit wearing their masks and doing all the protocols that we expect students to follow," Sanders said. "But it's been a wonderful day."

“Last year, at most, we had 50 percent of our kids in classrooms. So to have 37,000 students come back in today has been honestly emotional, to have them all back.”

---WBBM Newsradio---08/16/2021

Elgin District U-46 welcomes students back to classrooms

by Bernie Tafoya

<https://www.audacy.com/wbbm780/news/local/elgin-district-u-46-welcomes-students-back-to-classrooms>