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State releases guidelines for schools to reopen this fall

By: Marni Pyke and Jake Griffin

After months of working out by himself, Alec Palella is looking forward to training outdoors with teammates to get in shape for the fall football season.

Children across Illinois are expected to return to school this fall -- a welcome development for many after months of remote learning but one bringing challenges and changes in the COVID-19 era.

State officials released [guidelines](#) for school districts to follow Tuesday. The plan affects kindergarten through grade 12, plus universities and colleges.

"The benefits of in-person instruction can't be overstated," Gov. J.B. Pritzker said in a briefing.

The plan came as the one-day death toll for COVID-19 grew by 38 while the number of cases increased by 601, authorities reported.

How schools reset will be up to individual districts in consultation with state and county authorities. The new normal could initially involve a combination of in-class and remote learning, staggered schedules, and students attending different days.

"The strong emphasis is on providing in-person learning for all students," Illinois State Board of Education spokeswoman Jackie Matthews said.

Given the alternative, suburban districts were ready to work the logistics.

"We can't teach the kids from home forever," Oak Grove Elementary District 68 school board President Tony Giamis said.

The guidelines are part of the state's reopening transition that accelerates Friday with more COVID-19 restrictions lifted.

The new rules for schools include wearing masks inside, frequent hand-washing, a cap on 50-person gatherings per room and social distancing when possible. The state will also provide 2.5 million free cloth masks for students and teachers.

Intensive cleaning and health screenings with temperature checks are required.

Schools were closed in mid-March as the virus surged in Illinois and districts instituted remote learning, meaning everything from graduations to field days were conducted virtually.

"This fall will not be 'business as usual' in more ways than one," State Superintendent of Education Dr. Carmen I. Ayala said. For example, the state suggests starting school earlier so the first term can be completed in November in case another wave of the virus occurs.

What else will be different? Here's what the guidelines say.

- Hallways should be marked with one-way paths, teachers should rotate to classes rather than students, and locker use should be suspended if possible.
- Lunchtimes should follow the rule of 50 people or less and should be staggered to avoid crowding.
- Meet-the-teacher, open houses and parent-teacher conferences should occur virtually.
- On buses, no more than 50 kids will be allowed and all occupants must wear face masks.
- Face masks are required in gym and students should be 6 feet apart. Outdoor classes are preferred. Sports that require close guarding and physical contact must be avoided.
- Before- and after-school child care programs will need to adhere to IDPH protocols.
- Extracurricular clubs and activities will need to follow the 50-person limit with face masks and social distancing.
- Districts should re-evaluate grading policies and ensure all students have access to technology at home.
- Playgrounds may be used, but equipment should be cleaned often and schools should consider staggering recess and break times.
- Field trips are discouraged.
- School assemblies and gatherings in auditoriums or large spaces must follow the 50-person-or-less limit.

"I have hesitations about the size of the classroom and wearing a mask all day long," said Candice Reimholz, who has children entering the fourth and seventh grades at Gurnee-based Woodland Elementary School District 50. "I don't know how realistic that is, especially if you don't have mom there nagging them."

The governor acknowledged "there are real challenges. There's no doubt."

But Pritzker said he had faith parents, teachers and administrators will rise to the occasion. School communities "all have the same interests -- keeping these children and the people who work there safe."

At Arlington Heights Elementary District 25, "we have anticipated the release of these joint guidelines from IDPH and ISBE and are ready to put them into action," Superintendent Lori Bein said.

Many school leaders said teams of educators and parents already are crafting reopening policies and will review the guidelines to ensure conformance. That means families eager to learn the new drill might have to wait a bit.

"We anticipate sharing information with our community in early July," said Janet Buglio, spokeswoman for Indian Prairie Unit District 204 in Aurora and Naperville.

At Elmhurst Unit District 205, policymakers who began planning in May were "hamstrung due to lack of guidance from the state," Superintendent David Moyer said, adding he hopes local guidelines will be out the week of July 6.

Elgin Area School District U-46 spokeswoman Mary Fergus said, "We're eager to further develop (district) plans with the help of this new state guidance as well as input from our community."

Since the pandemic began, the number of COVID-19 cases statewide are 137,823, while total deaths stand at 6,707.

The state's average daily infection rate over the past week is at the lowest point since the outbreak began, Illinois Department of Public Health officials reported.

Health officials are reporting that just 2.4% of the tests taken over the past week resulted in a new case.

IDPH is reporting an average of fewer than 600 new cases a day over the past week, also another low.

Meanwhile, testing is at an all-time high with the state averaging 24,453 tests each day over the last seven days.

Hospitalization figures are holding steady statewide. There are 1,648 COVID-19 patients hospitalized statewide. COVID-19 admissions have hovered below 1,700 for the past four days. By comparison, there were more than 5,000 people hospitalized with the virus in late April.

Additionally, COVID-19 patients are taking up just 11% of the state's intensive care beds. IDPH is reporting 424 COVID-19 patients in ICU beds. Half of the state's ICU beds are available, according to IDPH figures.

On Monday, the Pritzker administration released guidelines for residents, business and industries to shift into Phase 4, or Revitalization, of a four-region, five-phase reopening plan. Schools reopening also fall into Phase 4.

• Daily Herald staff writers Chris Placek, Lauren Rohr, Robert Sanchez and Mick Zawislak contributed to this report.

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Black Lives Matter activists in Elgin list six demands about police

By: Elena Ferrarin

Activists in Elgin have generated a list of demands to the city related to policing, including diverting funds to mental health and other social services, and forcing the resignation of an officer who fatally shot a woman in 2018.

The group "[Elgin in Solidarity with Black Lives Matter](#)" formed in early June as protests swept the country after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

The demands, which group members have emailed to the city council, city manager and police chief, also include forming a citizens body that would oversee police internal investigations, discipline, hiring and contracts; removing police from U-46 schools; adding clear body camera procedures and strict enforcement; and allowing listening to police radio communications that currently are encrypted.

"It's about accountability," said resident Sandy Davila, who created the Facebook page for the group, now with more than 750 members, that held a protest outside city hall two weeks ago, with another planned Wednesday. "The police is a racist institution. The mistrust of the community comes from the individuals, because people have been hurt from officers, but the mistrust mainly comes from the institution."

Mayor David Kaptain and Police Chief Ana Lalley said Elgin has worked hard to build a police department that acts professionally and is responsive to the community.

Lt. Chris Jensen, who fatally shot resident Decynthia Clements in 2018, was cleared of wrongdoing, and forcing him to retire would cost "a couple of million dollars" including that for buying out his pension, Kaptain said.

"Chris Jensen will have to decide when to retire," he said.

Reallocating funds

The activists' broadest demand is to "reallocate taxpayer dollars from the police to community-based mental health services, substance abuse treatment services, affordable housing programs and education." The police department's budget is \$47.5 million, or 37% of the city's general fund.

"We understand this is an extremely complex issues," said group member Paige Roeber of Elgin. "Rewriting policy, redistributing funds and educating the community, and completely changing the way the police force operates ... we understand that takes time."

Kaptain said he agrees more money is needed in those areas, but it's up to the state and federal governments to restore that funding. The police department has a social services unit that works with the homeless and a collaborative crisis services unit that follows up with individuals who need mental health assistance, he said.

Body cameras

As for body cameras, Elgin has had them for three years -- a rarity in the suburbs -- and their use is spelled out by policies that in some cases are more stringent than required by state law, Lalley said.

Officers are subject to discipline if they don't wear their body cameras or turn them off inappropriately.

Jensen had his body camera on during the shooting and afterward turned it off twice. Lalley determined he didn't violate policy because of exceptions that mirror state law.

Lalley said she plans to give a presentation at the council meeting Wednesday about different types of civilian police oversight. The decision is ultimately up to the council, which first discussed the issue after Clements' shooting.

Listening in

The activists say that de-encrypting police communications would allow residents to keep an eye on police activity, particularly if officers discriminate against residents.

Lalley and Kaptain said that de-encrypting, particularly in the age of social media, would raise privacy issues for those involved in police calls who may be cleared later, and safety issues if crowds start showing up when there are armed and dangerous individuals.

There are other mechanisms, such as complaints, to hold officers accountable for their behavior, and the public can obtain police data at cityprotect.com and via the Freedom of Information Act, Lalley said.

Elgin Area School District U-46 contracts with police departments in Elgin, South Elgin, Bartlett and Streamwood for school resource officers at all its middle schools and high schools. The contracts for 2020-2021 have not been finalized, U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders said.

Both Sanders and Lalley said they are willing to meet with anyone who wants to discuss the demands.

City Manager Rick Kozal declined to comment on specifics. "Community engagement and reasoned discussion is necessary for making informed decisions on these matters of public concern. I welcome opportunities for providing a meaningful exchange of views on these issues," he said.

The group

The members of "Elgin in Solidarity with Black Lives Matter" said there are about 50 active individuals and about 10 "core organizers" including Davila, a part-time kindergarten through sixth-grade teacher at **U-46**, and Roeber, who used to work for the Downtown Neighborhood Association of Elgin and now works in event planning.

The group says it has reached out to the Black Lives Matter national organization to possibly become a chapter. It has created divisions for research, technology/media, education and direct action, the latter featuring Sarah Wokurka, a student at Elgin Community College. It is also building a youth division.

The group said it also wants to build trust within Elgin's Black community, many of whose members protested the police department after Clements' shooting.

It's especially important for white people to step up and actively work to break down barriers to racial justice, Roeber said. There is also work to be done within the Latino community, where

there can be racism but also fear of showing support for protesters due to police presence, Davila said.

The group plans to be actively involved in the spring 2021 election, when four city council seats will be on the ballot. "If they don't listen to our demands," Roeber said, "we are going to fight harder to get the 'no' votes out of the city council."