

## **Press Clippings 09/16/20**

**---The Courier-News --- 09/16/2020**

### **U-46 officials watching COVID-19 cases**

**Plans for in-person classes being made with October target**

**By: Rafael Guerrero**

More than 200 School District U-46 students and staff have been diagnosed with COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic in March, Superintendent Tony Sanders told the school board this week.

The case count was discussed Monday as part of pending plans to move from all remote-learning program to a hybrid model in which students will do a mix of in-person classes and e-learning, possibly starting in early October.

Initial plans call for the district's youngest students and those in special education to make the transition first.

According to district data, there have been 217 coronavirus cases among students, staff and their family members in the last six months based on information provided by the Kane, Cook and DuPage county health departments.

The case breakdown is 58 student cases, 107 staff cases and 52 involving people who live with students or staff.

Between Sept. 5 and 11, five students and 10 staff members tested positive, data shows.

Sanders said the district has been gathering the county information, including contact tracing, as they try to gauge when and how students return to the classroom.

“Wear your mask, wash your hands regularly and provide yourself that six feet of physical distancing,” he said. “That is the only way we will be able to get kids back into the schools quickly.”

The goal is to have students start returning to school in late October, administrators told the board.

As things stand this week, preschoolers, kindergarten through second-grade and students in self-contained special education programs would be the first to return, said Suzanne Johnson, U-46 deputy superintendent of instruction.

Self-contained special education students include those in transition, educational needs, instructional learning, modified learning and deaf/hard of hearing programs, she said.

The plan is for students to attend in-person classes from three to six hours a day twice a week, Johnson said.

They'd continue doing remote learning on the other three days.

“Goals will be to begin making the shift in early October and working to welcome students back to sites for hybrid, in-person instruction,” she said.

District officials have said they would like to see all elementary and middle school students moved to a hybrid instruction schedule for the second quarter, which begins in late October.

**---Daily Herald --- 09/16/2020**

## **Some elementary students are back in suburban schools, and districts are weighing what can come next.**

A delicate move to in-person learning

**By: Katlyn Smith**



Ellie Luciano adjusts her backpack while keeping a physical distance from her peers at Wiesbrook Elementary in Wheaton.



Wiesbrook Elementary student Sarah Bacheller receives in-class instruction in Wheaton.



A student wears her mask on the bus in Wheaton Warrenville Unit district 200.



Teacher Katherine Kondak welcomes students back to Wiesbrook Elementary in Wheaton.



Student Urvashi Jagatia returned to Wiesbrook Elementary for in-person learning in Wheaton Warrenville Unit district 200.

A bellwether for school reopening efforts in the pandemic, elementary classrooms in Wheaton Warrenville Unit District 200 welcomed back students two weeks ago for the first time in more than 170 days.

As of Tuesday, the district has reported at least four students and one employee have tested positive for the coronavirus. But the district hasn't identified any close contacts with those cases across the 13 elementary schools. Administrators credit physical distancing measures for helping to thwart the spread of the virus.

After months of enormous challenges preparing for an in-person start, the district still faces the complicated task of keeping the doors open in elementary schools. It's also one of the major suburban districts pushing for at least a mix of face-to-face and virtual learning for middle and high school students.

"I am very confident in the experience that we've had certainly at the elementary level, and that gives me confidence in how those protocols will carry forward," Superintendent Jeff Schuler said.

School leaders in other public systems are closely watching the district's progress and working to overcome staffing constraints, but they caution that a surge in COVID-19 cases could impede plans to switch to in-class learning after a fully remote start to the year.

Elmhurst Unit District 205 is providing another template, gradually sending students back to schools. On Monday, elementary students moved to a hybrid schedule. Sixth and ninth grades will follow suit Sept. 21. Populations of students with special needs also are now receiving on-campus instruction.

“It’s been an absolutely all-encompassing, exhausting undertaking,” Superintendent David Moyer said.

## Reopening challenges

District 200 is currently reworking plans for a phased-in approach for upper grade levels to return to schools on a hybrid schedule.

The district originally planned for a hybrid model for middle and high schools, but new state guidelines that emerged in August forced administrators to pivot those students to distance learning from home.

For the purposes of contact tracing, the state redefined a close contact as anyone within 6 feet of a confirmed case of COVID-19 for at least 15 cumulative — instead of consecutive — minutes throughout the course of a school day. New cleaning protocols also could limit the number of classrooms available if there’s a confirmed or probable case, officials said.

Limiting interaction is more manageable in the contained environment of elementary schools with small class sizes. More than 1,300 elementary students, or 27%, have enrolled in an optional virtual academy, further reducing building capacity. In-person students stay with their assigned classrooms and head home for lunch. Tents at all of the buildings allow for outdoor snack and mask breaks.

But the district is continuing to refine how older students would move in hallways during passing periods that usually run four to five minutes each.

“We’re certainly coming back into that to ensure that we can avoid that close contact interaction when possible as students are navigating,” Schuler said. “But bottom line is that some of this is going to be student behavior as well.”

## Where metrics stand

The DuPage County Health Department put out guidance for schools Aug. 28.

A county dashboard rates the current level of transmission in the community as “moderate” based on new cases per 100,000 residents every week, the weekly case count trend, youth case count trend, test positivity and regional metrics.

The percentage of tests coming back positive at the start of this week was 4.58%. Teens ages 15 to 19 now account for 1,314 cases in the county.

At the moderate level, the guidelines suggest that some students participate virtually and some participate in person, with “some-to-no mixing” of groups of students and teachers across school days.

“The concern is that we’ve got some increases here in the county, so we’re hoping we don’t go the other direction,” Moyer said. “But as long as we’re moderate, we’re going to continue to try move forward with implementing and refining our approach to hybrid learning.”

If the county reaches a “substantial” level of transmission, the health department recommends schools operate fully online. The dashboard is updated every Friday.

“If that data spikes significantly, it will complicate efforts to bring more students back into buildings,” Schuler said.

Looking to return

Administrators at the state’s second-largest school district are planning to shift students to a hybrid model involving in-person instruction two days a week and asynchronous instruction the remaining three days starting Oct. 23.

Elgin Area School District U-46’s boundaries stretch across Cook, DuPage, and Kane counties. Officials said they are following local health department guidelines.

“Right now, it’s important for the public and the board to understand that we are in orange, in the moderate transmission of COVID cases locally,” Superintendent Tony Sanders told the school board Monday night.

“The health departments are recommending that if we do any in-person sessions that we maintain at least 6 feet of physical distancing, that we all wear masks, and that we limit access to groups of no more than 50 in a pod. That is a challenge for a district that is the size of U-46 and schools that are as large as our schools.”

Sanders said if COVID-19 cases in the region drop for a significant period of time and transmission rates are at a minimal level, “that is really ideally where we want to be, which would give us more opportunities to bring in more students on a day-to-day basis.”

So far, there are 217 confirmed cases of COVID-19 within U-46’s school population, he said.

The goal is to begin making the shift to hybrid in-person instruction in early October.

Naperville Unit District 203 is on track to move to the second phase of its “Return to Learn” plan next month, offering enhanced e-learning with students invited into buildings periodically for labs, special services and performance-based instruction, Superintendent Dan Bridges said last week.

In Indian Prairie Unit District 204, the goal is to get students back in the buildings by the end of the first quarter, Oct. 30.

Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300’s school board will vote next Tuesday on the district’s learning plan for the second quarter.

District 300 originally had planned on starting the year in-person but switched to remote learning. Now the administration recommends moving elementary, middle and high schools to a hybrid schedule for the second quarter beginning Oct. 13.

Palatine Township Elementary District 15 plans a rolling re-entry, starting with kindergartners and K-8 self-contained special education programs returning next Monday.