

Press Clippings 12-04-20

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U-46 students will learn from home until at least mid-January

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy



Tony Sanders

Elgin Area School District U-46 students will stay in distance learning mode and won't return to in-person classes until at least after winter break in mid-January.

U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders said the decision to delay in-person classes was prompted by warnings from state and local health departments of a projected surge in COVID-19 cases after the Thanksgiving break.

"I prefer to err on the cautious side for the safety and well-being of our families and staff, while considering that families need time to plan (for) this change," Sanders wrote in a message to families and the staff this week.

The district halted in-person classes and switched to fully remote learning on Nov. 23 after just two weeks of hybrid learning for 4,400 students in prekindergarten through second grade.

Officials barely had started hybrid classes for select groups of middle and high school students in specialized programs, and were supposed to move to a hybrid schedule for third- through sixth-graders on Dec. 1.

Now, preschoolers through second-graders will return for hybrid in-person instruction the week of Jan. 11.

Students in third through sixth grade likely will start in-person classes around that time, as well as students in the district's transition and specialized student services programs.

The plan for middle and high school students to return to schools for in-person classes is unclear.

Sanders' announcement received mixed reactions from parents on social media.

Though a majority supported the decision to stick with remote learning, some parents urged having limited winter sports and activities and additional support for students who are struggling emotionally and academically.

The school board Monday night will review an updated hybrid plan for the second semester, which begins Jan. 19.

Officials also are finalizing plans to provide some level of support for struggling students before the first semester ends, with targeted opportunities for small group in-person instruction Jan. 4 through 15, Sanders wrote.

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Elgin council faces criticism over how public comments are handled during virtual meetings

By: Gloria Casas



Online meetings using Zoom, like this one held for Elgin Community College staff members and students, do allow people to join and make comments but there are problems that can be hard to control, Elgin Mayor Dave Kaptain said. (Rafael Guerrero / The Courier-News)

Elgin City Council's need to hold virtual meetings and restrict meeting attendance because of the coronavirus pandemic has prompted some to criticize how the city is handling public comments when they can't be made in person.

When city council meetings move to an online platform in the spring and returned to that last month because of a virus resurgence, the rule had been that comments that normally would be made at a public meeting would need to be submitted in writing.

The deadline for submission, either via email or a drop box outside city hall, is 4 p.m. the day of the meeting. All written comments are given to council members before the meeting rather than read during the meeting, according to the city's website.

Written comments also are posted on its website.

The only ones read aloud by Mayor Dave Kaptain are those that need to be on the record during a public hearing.

In-person public comments are still allowed, but must be done following COVID-19 restrictions. That means only 10 people are allowed in the council chambers and a commenter may be required to stay in an overflow area during the meeting until called to speak, the website says.

Some residents have called the entire practice into question and are urging the council to change it.

“It is a stain on the democratic process of our city,” said Sandra Davila, a teacher and activist with Elgin in Solidarity with Black Lives Matter. “They are taking the people’s voices away.”

All submitted comments should be read at the council meeting, Davila said, and made easier to find on the city website.

She submitted a comment on Nov. 18 asking for increased police accountability and raising questions about the police department’s \$50 million budget, but she was left with the feeling that her opinion wasn’t heard and didn’t matter, Davila said.

“This truncates our paths to make our voices be heard and you are making the city of Elgin look undemocratic,” she said in an email to the council. “Are there other ways that you meet with constituents in a public way?”

Others on social media have made similar complaints. Elgin in Solidarity with Black Lives Matter have started holding alternative meetings on social media to voice their opinions and comments, Davila said.

Councilman Tish Powell said she’d like to see public comments somehow included in the virtual meeting. School District U-46 has been doing Zoom meetings during which people are allowed people to make public comments, she said.

“It’s possible. I’m just asking we look into that since it looks like we will be doing this much longer than any of us anticipated,” Powell said.

Kaptain said one problem with having him read comments for the public record is people think he’s voicing his own beliefs. “There are also ways for people to take video snipes and use that,” he said. “We have no policy here on how to deal with these things.”

There’s also a concern that Zoom does not offer an adequate system for making comments, the mayor said.

“We’ve had problems with people getting on Zoom meetings and doing things while on there that are not necessarily appropriate,” he said. “Some of the language in emails and messages are not appropriate.”

He doesn’t want to censure anyone but there are issues that need to be worked through, he said. “I want to make sure people are heard. They have a right to be heard,” Kaptain said. “How we go about that now is something that’s very challenging for us. This is a learning curve for us.”