

## Press Clippings 05-19-21

---Daily Herald---05/19/2021

### State board: Full in-person learning in fall

By:Madhu Krishnamurthy and Marni Pyke



With vaccines widely available for children 12 years and older, state education officials signaled their support Wednesday for a return to a full in-person school year this fall.

The Illinois State Board of Education approved a resolution Wednesday that “all schools must resume fully in-person learning for all student attendance days.”

Schools also would be required to make remote instruction available for students not eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine and who are under a quarantine order by local or state health authorities.

Illinois law currently allows school districts to provide individual students remote learning or to create blended programs combining face-to-face and online learning.

School districts will have the flexibility to continue to provide remote learning to students on an individual basis “if that best meets their learning needs,” State Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala said.

Ayala said every school district has had a different experience with remote learning, and some students have benefited from the flexibility or change in environment.

Nearly all Illinois public school districts are offering partial or full in-person learning now. State education officials said multiple studies show that students, particularly those who struggle academically, learn better while in person. Reconnecting with teachers and peers also is essential for students’ mental health and social-emotional development, especially after the prolonged isolation of the pandemic, officials said.

“We are encouraging that our students currently 12 years and older participate in getting the vaccine,” Ayala said. “We’re still awaiting more guidance from public health. This is an evolving thing. A lot can happen between June, July and August.”

Currently, Pfizer’s two-dose vaccine is the only one allowed for people 12 and older in the U.S. Clinical trials are underway to determine if younger children can get the COVID-19 vaccine. Pfizer predicts it will in September seek federal emergency use authorization of the vaccine for children 2 to 11.

Without that, resuming in-person learning this fall for all younger students could be problematic, some ISBE board members and parents said.

“It’s been a difficult year, certainly, and I think many parents are ready to have their children back in school,” said **Tony Sanders, superintendent of Elgin Area School District U-46**, the state’s second-largest district. “With vaccines only going down to age 12, I was hoping the state would continue to recognize the need for flexibility in school systems to meet the needs of their kids.”

Sanders said losing that flexibility is especially “a challenge” for large districts.

“I know we have families who may still want a distance academy option,” he said.

Sanders said the section of state law that allows for remote learning “has a lot more hoops for families and the district to jump through” than under COVID-19 emergency rules.

Students who were learning remotely all of last school year would need to demonstrate success, and the district would have to create an individualized plan for every student who wants to continue in a distance-learning academy, he said.

ISBE board Vice Chairwoman Donna Leak said it’s crucial the agency provides support to school leaders to help them work through potential challenges, such as accommodating all students in classrooms and other spaces if 3-foot social distancing still is required this fall.

Several board members expressed concern that parents who don’t want their children vaccinated despite being eligible for the vaccine, or who might have other risk factors to consider, would be denied the option of remote learning. Such issues likely would be mitigated on a case-by-case basis at the district level.

Barring changes in public health conditions, Illinois is expected to enter Phase 5 of the Restore Illinois plan on June 11, allowing businesses to resume normal operations and public gatherings of all sizes.

“We’ve been working on our plan for return for quite some time now,” said Heather Bennett, spokeswoman for Round Lake Area Unit District 116. “This Friday, we’re releasing the full details of our in-person learning plan to our staff and families.”

Officials anticipate most of the district’s roughly 6,800 students will return to in-person learning in the fall. The district also will offer a remote learning waiver to families who secure a physician’s certification for any student considered to be at increased risk of severe illnesses, with special health needs or who lives with people with special health needs.

“We plan to make that an option for families,” Bennett said. “We will follow up with families in the next several weeks what that remote learning waiver process will look like. It will be a limited number of students who fall within that category.”