

Press Clippings 05-27-21

---WGN9---05/27/2021

Elgin school district approves virtual 'learning academy' for unvaccinated, medically exempt students

by: Gaynor Hall

ELGIN, Ill. – School districts are quickly trying to plan for the fall now that the Illinois Board of Education is calling for a return to daily in-person instruction

“I’m struggling a little bit with the narrow, narrow, narrow, focus of students that are going to be allowed in this distance learning academy, but they still have a significant need or reason to be a part of this distance learning academy,” said one U46 school board member last night.

After some discussion at a meeting last night, school board members for Elgin-based district U-46 voted to approve plans for a distance learning academy for next year. But the virtual option will only be available to unvaccinated students and have medical conditions that put them at higher risk from complications from COVID-19.

The move comes after the Illinois State Board of Education adopted a resolution requiring all schools to return to in-person learning in the fall with limited exceptions.

School District U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders says the district is moving forward with the best option that they can successfully handle.

“I hope families understanding our challenge is to build a program that we can sustain and actually manage appropriately,” he said. “There’s a lot of unknowns if we were to open it for anybody. The challenge of trying to set up individual learning plans for every student, making sure that if they were in distance learning last year that they were successful in it. There’s a lot of requirements in the state statute that make it difficult to implement beyond students that have the medical need and can’t get vaccinated.”

U-46 is the state’s second-largest school district and more than half of its more than 30,000 students are currently remote learning. The COVID-19 vaccine is currently only available for kids ages 12 and up.

“We’re not alone on this,” Sanders said. “We actually mimicked or mirrored some of the surrounding districts that have taken a similar approach to distance learning next year as an idea of at least a starting place given the lack of flexibility.”

A spokesperson for Naperville District 203 sent WGN a statement saying they’re looking forward to additional guidance regarding return to in-person learning plans.

An updated Q and A sheet just posted on the ISBE website says school districts would only be required to provide remote learning for students who are not eligible to be vaccinated and are under a quarantine order. The Q and A sheet does say there is flexibility. For example, districts could permit remote learning for unvaccinated students who live with someone who is immunocompromised.

Parents in district U-46 can apply for the distance learning academy through June 2 but not all classes will be available and students will not be able to opt-out of the remote learning in the middle of the school year.

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U-46 to set up online learning 'academy' for students who are not vaccinated and have medical conditions

By: Mike Danahey

District U-46 School Board members approved plans Monday to create an online remote learning "academy" in the fall that will be open only to unvaccinated students who have approved medical conditions.

The decision comes in the wake of an Illinois State Board of Education resolution [that calls for a complete return to in-person classes](#) in the 2021-22 school year. The only exceptions would be for those children for whom COVID-19 could be health-threatening.

According to the resolution, "all schools must resume fully in-person learning for all student attendance days, provided that ... remote instruction be made available for students who are not eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine and are under a quarantine order by a local public health department or the Illinois Department of Public Health."

U-46 board member Melissa Owens criticized the state's move at Monday night's board meeting.

"Where I'm getting a little tripped up is the fact that we still will have a sizable population coming back on Aug. 16 that most likely will not have access to the vaccine," Owens said.

"We have so many families that are multigenerational households where they have family members that may be at risk should a child come to school, especially a more-crowded condition, even though we're going to try to live by social distance guidelines as much as possible," she said.

Owens acknowledged the district's "hands are tied on this," but questioned why the state would make such an abrupt about-face when most of the current school year had students doing remote and hybrid learning because of the pandemic.

Suzanne Johnson, U-46 deputy superintendent of instruction, told the board the distance learning academy would be open only to K-12 students who are unvaccinated and have medical conditions in which serious complications could develop if they contract COVID-19. Parents must provide a signed statement from a medical professional for their child to qualify.

Students would be required to remain in the academy program for the full school year, Johnson said. Additionally, some courses may not be available.

"At the high school level, this (academy approach) is a focus on graduation requirements," she said.

Distance academy students will still need to complete assessments at a physical school site and can only do classes at their own home with "a chaperone vetted by U-46," Johnson said.

Academy applications are available online through the Infinite Campus parent portal on the U-46 website and must be submitted by 4 p.m. June 2. Notifications of acceptance/rejection will be made by the end of June.

Those in the distance academy would learn apart from students who are in physical classrooms. Teachers would be assigned or hired specifically to teach remote classes.

Further complicating matters, Johnson said, is the requirement that regular school students who are exposed to COVID-19 exposure must quarantine and do online learning while they are out of school.

"In that case ... it's very likely where we would see concurrent instruction," Johnson said.

Still to be determined is if academy teachers will report to a school building or work remotely, she said.

“We’re going to need every room and instructional space we can find,” Johnson said.

All students who are vaccinated must physically attend school.

“We really want to make sure we can commit to students who must really have the academy and make sure we do it well,” Superintendent Tony Sanders said.

The state’s edict puts more of a burden on district administration, and the academy is “what we can realistically put together at this time,” Sanders said.

Currently about 53% of the district’s 36,000 students are doing distance learning, according to the U-46 website. Vaccines are only available for those ages 12 and older.

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Elgin Township provides \$20,000 grant to Elgin PD’s Kids United summer program

By GLORIA CASAS



Among the things offered by the Elgin Police Department’s Kids United program are summer field trips. In 2016, they visited the Tall Ships at Navy Pier in Chicago. (Elgin Police Department / HANDOUT)

Elgin Township is giving the Elgin Police Department a \$20,000 grant for its Kids United summer program.

Kids United is one of the summer programs offered by the police department for the last several years, Chief Ana Lalley said in her monthly community meeting Monday.

“It’s very successful and allows our school resource officers the opportunity to keep that engagement through the summer while the kids are out of school,” she said.

The Elgin City Council is expected to accept the township grant at Wednesday’s meeting. If the council votes against it, the police would have to find alternative funding.

Elgin Township families interested in having their children in the free program need to register by May 31. For more information or to register, go to kidsunited.jumbula.com. Questions can be emailed to kidsunited@cityofelgin.org.



More than 100 area children received their evening meal in 2016 as part of Kids United, the Elgin Police Department's summer youth program operated by its school resource officers. The food is provided by Northern Illinois Food Bank. (Elgin Police Department / HANDOUT)

"We're getting people who are registering, which is good," police department spokesman Robert Tornabene said. "I think everyone is ready to get out and do things," he said.

About 600 children and teens have participated in past years, he said.

Kids United is one of the department's prevention and engagement programs, providing a safe place for fun and educational activities during the summer, according to city documents.

It started in 2007 as an open gym program run by resident police officers and the city's Parks and Recreation Department. It's evolved to include sports, arts and crafts, team building, cooking, life skills, career planning, self-care and weekly field trips, officials said. Some past field trips have been to baseball games, water parks, Medieval Times and Navy Pier.

Daily meals are provided by the Northern Illinois Food Bank.

COVID-19 safety precautions will remain in place this year, including creating groups of no more than 20 children or teens. Elgin police school resource officers, ROPE officers and police explorers will staff the program.

Ages 9 to 12 attend from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and ages 13 to 17 from 4 to 7 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays from June 14 to Aug. 4 at New Life Covenant Church, 2250 W. Highland Ave. **School District U-46** is a partner in the program.