

Press Clippings for 8/6/2022 to 8/8/2022

The Welder

Earning a high school diploma and welding certificate at the same time?

How a multi-school welding program gives high school students a shot at AWS certification

--- 8/4/2022

By Rafael Guerrero

Many high school seniors spend the last weeks of the school year stressed out enough with final exams and projects, senioritis, post-high school plans, prom, and graduation.

This past May, a few students at Elgin High School in Elgin, Ill., had another stressor on their plates: earning American Welding Society (AWS) certification.

The students who take welding at this high school are in a unique position. Not only does the school have a welding program in-house, the welding lab is an AWS accredited testing facility (ATF). Only five high schools nationally are accredited testing facilities, according to the AWS.

Welding student Will Zamecnik did not hide his thoughts on what it felt like getting tested: “It was probably the most nerve-wracking thing in my 17 years.”

The respective welding labs at **U-46's Elgin High School** and District 300's Hampshire High School provide access to gas metal arc welding (GMAW), gas tungsten arc welding (GTAW), and shielded metal arc welding (SMAW) machines, equipment, and more. From sophomore through senior year, students in these programs take Fundamentals of Welding and Welding I and II.

The objective? For students to earn credentials at the end of their high school careers.

In the regional welding program, students can earn D1.1 3G (straight-line welding in the flat, horizontal, and vertical positions) weld certification in SMAW and GMAW at their high school. Students must successfully weld together two pieces of 3/8-in. steel.

As part of the certification examination, third-party inspectors test and verify the welds. The inspectors eventually put the plates through an X-ray machine to check for flaws, cracks, slag inclusions, and other impurities. The certified welding inspectors (CWI) involved in the certification process do not know the students or the welding teachers.

“Having them watching you is kind of scary,” Zamecnik said of the CWIs during testing.

The test takes about two hours.

“It’s pretty hard, to be honest,” said student Freddie Petrona. “We had to make sure everything was right, make sure the weld was going right. It was kind of hard and time consuming; you had to make sure everything was perfect.”

“It’s excitement and being nervous. It’s like I’m taking this test,” added Luis Guerrero, one of the school’s welding instructors.

Guerrero and fellow welding instructor Aaron Styles said it takes about a month to hear back from the third-party inspectors whether the students passed or failed.

“It takes them three years to get to this point ... I wish we didn’t have to call it a test, but it literally is what it is,” Styles said of the high-stakes test.

This year, 19 students at Elgin and five at Hampshire underwent certification. In spring 2021, 10 of 16 students who tested at the two schools earned AWS certification, educators said.

Terry Stroh, the director of the multidistrict Northern Kane County Regional Vocational System, said both welding labs underwent a two-year process to become ATFs. The AWS completed a review of each school’s instructors, curriculum, and facilities. The labs also had the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) come out and inspect the facilities. Each site will undergo a reaccreditation process every three years.

According to the AWS, Elgin and Hampshire earned their accreditation in 2018.

Certification and Post-High School Future

Styles said students have used their certification or the pursuit of their certification to get welding jobs before or after graduating high school or to pursue post-high school education.

One of last year’s graduates found a job locally and is living the dream, Styles said. The student has already come out to Styles’ class to talk to students about his experiences.

“He’s 19 years old, making good money, bought a new car, and is in the process of buying a new house,” Styles said.

“There’s no lack of jobs for these kids with certification,” he added.

Vince Serritella, the welding instructor at Hampshire High, said this opportunity taps into many needs: a shortage of welders, a push for more career and technical education programs in schools, greater access to hands-on high school courses, and molding future high school welding teachers.

Stroh, meanwhile, said there was hesitation from employers over AWS-certified teens – were

they too young and inexperienced? Would companies require additional resources if they hired them?

“A couple of companies in the area, for the longest time, were very anti-high school students,” he said. “Now that they’ve seen the quality of work being done and toured the facilities, more and more they’re interested in having these students come and work for them.”

Both Zamecnik and Jose Morales had welding jobs during the 2021-22 school year. Zamecnik wants to one day build boats in the South.

“AWS certification would move me from the bottom of the list to the top of the list,” Zamecnik said.

Jose Morales will be enlisting in the military after high school but hopes to get a welding job after.

“If you’re looking at it from an employer’s point of view, who are you going to hire? The one that says he has the experience but doesn’t have any certifications, or someone who comes out of here who passed the test?” Morales said.

In 2018, Leela Edwards became the second Illinois high school student to earn AWS certification. The former Hampshire High School student described herself as a “guinea pig” of sorts for the inaugural testing process.

“People were shocked—but also proud and impressed. It was mostly good feedback,” she said of her certification.

That opportunity in high school has made Edwards’ dreams of working in motorsports more feasible and realistic. She enrolled and completed a program at the NASCAR Technical Institute in Mooresville, N.C.; enrolled at Harper College in Palatine, Ill.; and she plans to eventually get a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering. Edwards is also among the inaugural group of students in Chip Ganassi Racing and PNC Bank’s Women In Motorsports internship program, which debuted in 2022.

“This certification shows your work ethic, your innovation, and you striving to be successful. It just shows who you are as a person and what you hope to achieve,” she said.

Chicago Tribune/The Courier-News

Elgin News Digest --- 8/5/2022

By Mike Danahey

South Elgin police holding school supply and food drive

The South Elgin Police Department is hosting a school supply and nonperishable food drive now through Friday, Aug.12.

Donations should be dropped off from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday in the police department lobby, 10 N. Water St. Items will be distributed through the South Elgin Food Pantry and school districts **U-46** and 303.

For more information, call 847-741-2151.

Daily Herald

'Going to look normal': Many precautions will ease in schools even as COVID lingers --- 8/7/2022

By Madhu Krishnamurthy



First-grade teacher Maria Elisa Chaidez prepares her classroom Thursday for the return of students at **Laurel Hill Elementary School** in Hanover Park. COVID restrictions have eased with no requirements for social distancing or masking in schools. *Brian Hill | Staff Photographer*

No more having to seat students 3 feet apart. No more mandatory universal masking in schools or COVID testing.

Thousands of suburban students are heading back to classrooms starting this week as COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have eased along with mandates for social distancing and masking indoors.

Yet, health officials are concerned how school leaders will handle the full return to in-person learning amid lingering health concerns with new COVID variants and the threat of monkeypox spreading.

Updated [health guidance](#) from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Department of Public Health recommends schools continue a variety of mitigations, such as hand-washing, sanitizing, masking and testing, depending on the COVID-19 community level. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention evaluates community risk levels from low to high, taking into consideration COVID case rates, hospitalizations and use of intensive care beds.

"There is still quite a bit of COVID that's circulating," said Michael Isaacson, executive director of the Kane County Health Department. "With the high use of home tests, it makes it challenging for us to get an accurate picture of how much COVID there is. We are still looking forward to a much more 'normal' school year this fall."

The IDPH has given schools more detailed direction for evaluating symptomatic students and close contacts for exclusion, and on testing programs. School districts strongly are encouraged to follow the guidance, but the only actual requirement is that school personnel must be vaccinated or tested for COVID-19 at least weekly.

Isaacson said health officials are encouraging schools to focus on having systems in place so they can quickly move to address outbreaks.

"We are not putting as much pressure on schools to track an individual case," he said. "What we're looking at right now is a cluster of cases. That would be at least 10% of students and staff in a specific group -- classroom, bus, sports team, after-school program -- (testing positive)."

Three or more closely linked cases is the threshold that could trigger some action.

During the last two years of pandemic-affected schooling, there had been significant pushback in some suburban districts regarding masking. Yet that still is the best way of preventing the spread of the virus and provides "an additional layer of safety," Isaacson said.

A sampling of suburban schools surveyed showed most will follow IDPH guidance and continue certain pandemic-era practices.

In [Elgin Area School District U-46](#), masks will be encouraged but not required. The school district added staff for the 2021-22 school year to allow for smaller classrooms and more

social distancing, and that same staffing level has been maintained for this school year to allow social distancing to the extent possible. The state's second-largest district's 37,000 students begin classes Aug. 16.

U-46 also currently does not have any vaccine clinics scheduled but likely will offer voluntary COVID and influenza vaccine clinics as a convenience for employees in the fall, said Jeff Judge, supervisor of the U-46 Health Services department.

U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders in his weekly message to families stressed that self-certification and monitoring of symptoms will be emphasized with students and employees.

According to the CDC, studies show 16% of infected students will not show symptoms, Sanders wrote.

"Thus, our best protection against COVID-19 continues to be wearing a mask, ensuring social distance, and washing hands," he said.

Many districts still are working on what COVID-19 protocols they should continue implementing.

"Several COVID-19 mitigations will look similar to what was in place at the end of last year, while a few are proposed to be updated for the upcoming school year," said Rebecca Latham, chief communications officer for Palatine Township Elementary District 15.

District officials will provide the school board an update on the COVID protocols for the upcoming school year at its meeting Thursday. School starts with a half-day Aug. 17 for the district's more than 12,000 students.

In Round Lake Area Unit District 116, officials said situational masking, such as in hallways or music class, might take effect if certain thresholds are exceeded based on the five-day rolling average of positive cases within each building. School starts Aug. 15 for the district's 6,800 students.

"If we get to a higher threshold, we may move to universal masking throughout the building," spokeswoman Heather Bennett said. "Last year, we had a handful of times that we had universal masking, but there were some schools that never made it into situational masking. There is no required testing anymore for staff or students. So really, the masking is the one area that we're continuing with this year."

But most everything else is "going to look normal like before the pandemic," she said.

COVID-19 has moved into an endemic phase, which means communities are going to have to live with it, said Dr. LaMar Hasbrouck, chief operating officer of the Cook County Department of Public Health.

"A major concern right now is that there are highly transmissible variants (the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants of omicron)," Hasbrouck said. "We've had a very steep learning curve over the last two-plus years of all the things we need to do to reduce spread and mitigation strategies. We need to stay with it. If COVID is here to stay, then the prevention strategies need to be here to stay as well."

Chicago Tribune

Some Illinois school districts to ditch COVID-19 tests this fall: 'The demand really wasn't there' --- 8/7/2022

By Karen Ann Cullotta



Kindergarteners, a few with face masks, sing and jump during class at Iroquois Community School in Des Plaines on Aug. 5, 2022. Despite the urging of the state's health department, many Illinois school districts are pausing their weekly COVID-19 SHIELD testing for students this fall. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

Despite the urging of the state's health department to resume school-based COVID-19 testing for students this fall, officials at several Illinois districts said this week they are halting the program due to waning interest from parents and the availability of home tests.

"We've decided not to offer SHIELD testing as we start the new school year, but we're always cautious, and will be ready to pivot back to that partnership if things change," said Mary Gorr, superintendent of Mount Prospect School District 57.

The SHIELD Illinois program offers K-12 students weekly PCR saliva screenings they can opt into with the permission of a parent or guardian. Gorr said while the free testing was not a financial burden, “it disrupted learning time and was a lot for our nurses and front office staff.”

Another group who may have found the weekly screenings disruptive: parents making quick arrangements for their children to stay home from school if they tested positive on a routine screening, even if they weren’t sick.

“We feel like we’re turning a corner now, with all of the availability of testing and vaccines, and we hope our schools can return fully to institutes for learning,” Gorr said. “The demand from parents for school testing started dwindling last year, and now, it really isn’t there.”

The Illinois Department of Public Health announced in June it renewed an agreement with SHIELD offering every public school outside of Chicago as well as the state’s private schools the opportunity to use the University of Illinois’ saliva-based testing platform at no cost for the 2022-23 school year. Chicago Public Schools has a separate testing program.

School districts were asked to sign up by July 15 in order to guarantee testing on the first day of school.



DePaul University professor Marta Shcherbakova makes sure she is submitting enough saliva for a COVID-19 test through SHIELD Illinois on Jan. 20, 2022. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

Around 180 of the roughly 850 public school districts in Illinois have signed up for SHIELD testing so far, and given the program’s rolling enrollment, that number is expected to increase during the coming weeks, said Beth Heller, a spokeswoman for SHIELD Illinois.

Last year, 258 public school districts signed up for the program, with testing conducted at about 1,700 public and private school buildings, Heller said.

A spokeswoman for Gov. J.B. Pritzker said Friday, “Protecting access to in-person learning is the state’s top priority.”

“That’s why IDPH and ISBE (the Illinois State Board of Education) have worked diligently to ensure school districts have access to free resources, like tests, to control the spread of coronavirus,” spokeswoman Jordan Abudayyeh said in a statement.

In addition to SHIELD testing, “The state will also make one million rapid tests available to schools,” Abudayyeh said.

In 2021-22, through various federal funds, \$136 million from the IDPH plus roughly \$10 million from Chicago Department of Public Health was used on around 6 million tests in K-12 schools, community colleges, universities and community-based sites in Illinois, Heller said.

The cost of the program for 2022-23 “is unknown, but expected to be much less,” Heller said.



Saliva samples submitted for testing through SHIELD Illinois are seen at the DePaul University Loop campus on Jan. 20, 2022. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

The program covers the cost of testing supplies, support for collection and transportation of samples, and lab work. But schools producing fewer than 50 samples on a given day must collect and deliver the samples for analysis themselves, though they are reimbursed \$8 for each test they collect and transport, according to Heller.

“Over the past year plus, SHIELD Illinois has worked to reduce as many barriers as possible to make this manageable for schools,” Heller said. “We know how challenging their roles are and COVID is not their only concern.”

One way SHIELD is trying to make the initiative more accessible is to give schools choices on how they want to run their programs, including selecting an option for unobserved testing, where students collect their saliva samples at home.

“They do have to consider their own community and bandwidth as they decide what to do and once they select testing as a way to keep their community safe from COVID, SHIELD will help them with that process,” Heller said.

Chicago Public Schools, the largest school district in the state, does not use SHIELD testing but hired a private company through a request for proposals last year, and will be requesting reimbursement of their costs from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, CPS spokeswoman Sylvia Barragan said.

Last year, nearly 94,000 of 270,432 students, or about 35%, participated in the school-based testing program, Barragan said.

A separate testing agreement with the Chicago Department of Public Health covers testing in non-CPS schools in Chicago, including private, parochial and charter schools, IDPH officials said.

While several large suburban districts, including Naperville Community Unit School District 203 and Evanston/Skokie Community Consolidated School District 65, plan to resume their SHIELD testing programs, others are opting out.

“As of now, we are not planning on using the SHIELD saliva screening,” Arlington Heights School District 25 spokesman Adam Harris said. “Testing is now widely available throughout the community as well as with at-home test kits.”

In addition to the availability of other testing options, Barrington Community Unit School District 220 Superintendent Robert Hunt cited the impact on staff and the disruption to the school day as reasons for discontinuing the program.

Community Consolidated School District 62 in Des Plaines, which used the program last year, does not plan to conduct mass testing again in the fall but still signed its contract with SHIELD this week, Superintendent Michael Amadei said.

“We have one school that already started on July 11, and which we’ve been closely monitoring, and their COVID cases are very low,” Amadei said. “But we want to be proactive, and not lose our free testing. The idea is it’s better to be safe than sorry, and we don’t want to miss out on having testing available in case we need it.”



Second graders receive their drawing boards during class at Iroquois Community School in Des Plaines on Aug. 5, 2022. Community Consolidated School District 62 in Des Plaines, which used the SHIELD Illinois PCR saliva screening program to test for COVID-19 last year, does not plan to conduct mass testing again in the fall but still signed its contract with SHIELD this week just in case they need to use it. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

A spokeswoman for **Elgin-based School District U-46** said the district has paused their plans to participate in the SHIELD program this fall so officials have the chance “to explore all of our options.”

Wilmette Public Schools District 39 is pausing SHIELD testing so officials can see what conditions are like in the community, but has “left our lines of communication open,” said Tony DeMonte, the district’s administrator for technology and safety.

“Part of our decision to not offer testing when schools reopen is we’re hoping to present a school environment for students that is as normal as possible,” DeMonte said. “And with the availability of testing and vaccines, we’re not in the same boat we were in earlier in the pandemic.”

While it is too early to predict the impact of the virus once schools reopen, Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director of Northwestern University’s Institute for Global Health and a professor of infectious diseases at the Feinberg School of Medicine, said the easing of virus mitigation requirements statewide in recent months is already having consequences for public health.

“Nobody should be surprised when cases are up, hospitalizations are up and deaths are up,” Murphy said.

“I think everyone has COVID burnout, but COVID is not burned out,” he said. “Everyone is tired of it, but you can’t let your guard down in the middle of a pandemic.”

Officials who are resuming SHIELD testing say given the surge of the highly contagious BA.5 variant — as of Friday, all six counties covering the Chicago area reported high community levels — it is important for school districts to remain vigilant.

“The great thing about SHIELD is it catches the virus even before a student shows symptoms, which means we can immediately take them out of circulation so they don’t infect anyone else,” said Robert Machak, superintendent of Woodland School District 50 in suburban Lake County.

Last year, the district handled an average of 3,000 tests per week, collecting a total of 90,000 samples during the 2021-22 school year, Machak said. Of those, 2,000 came back positive.

Machak said the pre-K-8 school district tested more than half of its roughly 4,800 students once a week and “honored the requests of the parents who decided to opt out.”

“We found almost 2,000 cases, around 2% of the tests, and those 2,000 people did not have symptoms, so screening allowed us to find them and keep them out of school while they were in quarantine,” he said.

“SHIELD has been a game changer for us, and has helped us keep everyone healthy,” Machak said. “We’re all looking at the greater good, and it’s wonderful to see the community pulling together.”

While those who agree to have their children participate in SHIELD programs say they appreciate the convenience of free, school-based screenings, others, including Deerfield parent Michelle Hammer, say as students begin their fourth year of school during a pandemic, “it’s time to move on.”

“It will perpetuate unnecessary anxiety for students to start testing them again,” said Hammer, whose 16-year-old daughter is a junior at Deerfield High School, which is resuming SHIELD testing later this month.

Hammer said school-based COVID-19 testing is disruptive and leads to unnecessary absences.

“We’re not testing for the cold, flu or strep ... Why is this being dragged on?” she asked. “We need to go back to the days of when if your kids don’t feel good, they stay home from school. It’s just common sense.”

Still, for parents with children who are at risk of serious illness if they are infected with COVID-19, the state’s lifting of mandatory indoor masking and easing of other virus mitigation tools makes SHIELD screenings a valuable safeguard.

“I really felt like SHIELD testing was a win-win, because it’s not an extra expense for the school district, and the goal is to keep our kids healthy and in school by preventing outbreaks,” said Alexis Hammond, a mother of two children enrolled in Arlington Heights School District 25, one of whom, Carter, 8, was diagnosed with a serious medical condition.

Last year, Carter qualified for District 25’s home-based instruction, and was provided with a tutor five hours a week. But after improvements in Carter’s medical condition in recent

months, Hammond said her son is excited to meet his new classmates at Patton Elementary School later this month.

“Our family is still choosing to mask indoors, but a lot of families are not, so I hope no one bullies them,” Hammond said.

“The bottom line is, we’re not all looking at the public health guidance, which is there to protect everyone in the community, especially kids like Carter,” Hammond said.

Chicago Tribune/The Courier-News

When Elgin Academy’s Noelle Lanton first signed up to play tennis, younger sister Addison picked up a racket too. ‘The rest is history.’ --- 8/5/2022

By Paul Johnson



Noelle Lanton, left, and her sister Addison placed third in doubles at state in Class 1A last season for Elgin Academy. (Paul Johnson / The Beacon-News)

When Elgin Academy senior Noelle Lanton wanted to sign up to play tennis at age 7, her younger sister Addison insisted on signing up as well.

“Addison would come to practice when Noelle played, and she said, ‘I want to play,’” said their mother, Colette. “She was almost 5. Her personality is one where she doesn’t take no for an answer. The rest is history.”

These days, Addison is entering her sophomore season at Elgin Academy as one of the nation’s top college recruiting targets for her age group. A five-star recruit, Lanton is ranked No. 67 nationally.

“It’s really special to me,” Addison said. “I don’t really look at it a lot, but when I get the chance, I’m like, ‘Wow, I didn’t know I was that high up.’ It is unexpected.”

At age 9, Addison started playing in tournaments. By age 11, she was invited to a USTA regional training camp. The evaluations that came out of the camp suggested she needed more specialized training.

“The coach said she has something special,” Colette said. “She has the ‘it’ factor. She checks all the boxes.”

Noelle also could see her sister had the X-factor.

“Addison just has a natural talent for the game,” Noelle said. “She is a really hard worker. She’s really dedicated. She can get really focused. During matches, you can tell she’s really paying attention to what she’s doing.”

Sterling Perez, a Larkin graduate, is entering his fifth season as Elgin Academy’s coach.

When Noelle showed up to tryouts as a freshman, his mentality quickly changed. When Addison joined her, he found himself in a unique position.

“I knew this was the real deal,” Perez said. “It humbled me. I used to teach beginners. We weren’t used to this kind of level.”

When Addison reached high school, a decision was made — she and Noelle would play doubles together.

“I think it went well,” Noelle said. “We have really good chemistry. We’ve been playing together forever, so it’s kind of natural to us.”

The pairing paid immediate dividends. Last season, the sisters finished third in the state last season in Class 1A.

Noelle’s college tennis future is still up in the air. She’s focused on choosing the right school for her and then seeing how tennis fits in, according to Colette.

“I kind of have been avoiding the conversation,” Noelle said. “I know this is my last year and it’s my big dream to win state with Addison. I also do want to play tennis in college, and hopefully pursue that and stay involved in the sport.

“If I completely let go of it, I would feel like I’m missing a part of my life.”

Addison’s tennis aspirations go even higher. Despite her only playing one season of high school tennis, NCAA Division I coaches have already shown interest.

“I need to find a home that’s somewhat like Elgin, although it won’t be anything like that,” Addison said. “I have to find something I really trust. It really has to be a bond for me to go there.”

Many players of Addison's caliber wind up having to be home-schooled due to the extensive travel.

Colette said Elgin Academy, where Addison has gone since kindergarten, has worked with her to allow a typical high school path.

"I'm very thankful I get to have a normal life and still pursue what I want to do," Addison said.

Before the future arrives, however, the sisters are hoping to make more memories in their final season together.

"Knowing Noelle is going off to college next year, we have one more chance," Addison said. "We have to make it special for her and for me too."