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Orinda students return to schools

By Sora O'Doherty

Some Orinda students have already returned to the classroom, and a plan for the return of all students was adopted by the Orinda Union School District Board Oct. 29. Elementary special education students returned to school Nov. 3 while Orinda Intermediate School special ed students return Nov. 12. Transitional kindergarten and kindergarten students will return to school on Nov. 30 and third to fifth grade students will return on Dec. 7. On Jan. 4 all elementary and OIS students will return from winter break in distance learning mode, with a return to campus for all students on Jan. 7, except for those students whose families have chosen to remain in the distance learning model.

The model of education that was adopted by the board is one proposed by the OUSD principals. The principals' plan suggested moving the flex day from Monday back to Wednesdays, but that change was not accepted by the board. Although the teachers argued that it is tough to get kids started on asynchronous work on a Monday without having seen their teacher, the board wanted to keep all the schools on the same schedule for the convenience of parents who have children in different schools, and the Monday flex day was also determined to be convenient for COVID-19 testing. However, Carol Brown said that she hopes that other districts change the flex day to Wednesday.

The plan presented by the principals was not well accepted by the board, but was adopted with slight modification in an effort to at least move forward with a first step. The board did request that the principals return at the next board meeting with an improved plan. Board member Hilary Weiner voted against the plan, which was adopted by a majority, but not a unanimous vote.

The principals said the plan maintains the benefits of distance learning while providing significant time for on-site instruction and social engagement. It minimizes logistical challenges such as multiple carpools, lunch, midday transition between students, and cleaning between the different cohorts, will provide an easier transition to and from full distance learning, if needed, and allows the entire class to participate in distance learning together four days each week.

The board was disappointed with the amount of time students will be present at the school for academic work, with students in grades 1-5 only present in the school for 160 minutes in the afternoon twice a week. Academic work continues to be via Zoom in the mornings, while afternoons are devoted to in-person instruction and social and emotional learning. In addition, board member Jason Kaune voiced a number of concerns, with which other board members agreed. The principals were asked to provide a solution for children who are not being well served by distance learning; to align parents with children in multiple grades; to provide daycare options; and to explicitly build the use of cameras into this model.

Board president Cara Hoxie said she was concerned that the previous plan, which provided for an am/pm schedule of the different cohorts, would not work. "I agree," she said, "that this is not a perfect model, but just a step." Board member Liz Daoust wanted to vote to move the plan forward, but have the principals come back to the board with revisions. Board member Carol Brown said, "My heart is with Hilary: this is not what we want for our kids. We want excellence; this is just OK." However she agreed that she wanted to move forward. During the meeting the board also discussed a contract with Goodyear HVAC Sales for portable air purifiers.

COVID-19 testing was available Nov. 9 from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the district office for students, staff and parents, with results available within 48 hours. The testing uses a viral nasal swab, not uncomfortable according OUSD Superintendent Carolyn Seaton, and free for all participants. The board also unanimously accepted the draft community compact, with one minor change to specify that cloth masks are to be worn. Weiner said that she was proud of the community compact because all the neighboring districts are using it, with some minor tweaks. The compact cannot be enforced, but Daoust said that she hopes that families and staff are taking it really seriously because it is truly an integral part of "who we are as a community."

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