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## Elementary students make slow return to classrooms

By Diane Claytor



The new normal: hand sanitizer before entering the classroom on the first day back to school at Del Rey Elementary School since the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of schools. Photo Sora O'Doherty

After 11 long months, meeting after meeting, survey upon survey, plans and schedules developed and revised, guidelines given then changed, and opening dates aborted, it's finally a reality. Lamorinda schools are open for TK (transitional kindergarten) through sixth grade in-person classes.

It's been a long process with an incredible number of moving parts. And while it's certainly not a return to what school days looked like pre-COVID, it's definitely a step in the right direction.

Each school district's plans are slightly different than its neighbors, but all three have adopted an in-person hybrid model and all are welcoming students back with open arms and excitement at being together again.

Orinda schools opened TK through second grade, as well as sixth grade, on Feb. 10, while third through fifth grades returned Feb. 16; Moraga opened its schools for TK through sixth grade on Feb. 16; and Lafayette is opening TK through fifth grade on Feb. 18.

Lafayette and Moraga are following a similar hybrid model for their elementary school students while Orinda has implemented a different hybrid schedule.

In all three districts, returning students have been divided into two equal, balanced stable cohorts (groups), with none being larger than 14 students. Siblings are kept in the same cohort and every attempt was made to have an equal number of boys and girls in each.

Mornings for elementary students in Lafayette and Moraga will be the same as they have been since the beginning of the 2020-21 school year: distance learning with their full class and current teacher. The afternoons, however, will be different. In Lafayette, cohort A will attend in-person classes on Monday and Tuesday from 12:30 to 2:45 p.m. while cohort B will attend at the same time on Thursday and Friday. Moraga's cohort A attends in-person classes Monday and Tuesday from 12:15 to 3 p.m.; cohort B follows the same schedule Thursday and Friday. All students will spend Wednesdays at home distance learning.

Students attending in-person classes will, in most cases, continue with their same distance learning teacher while the cohort is not in school. Those not returning to in-person teaching will likely have a different online teacher in the afternoon.

Both of Orinda's elementary school cohorts will attend in-person classes Tuesday through Friday; Cohort A will meet from 8 to 10:50 a.m. while cohort B will be in class from 12:10 to 3 p.m. Each cohort will continue their distance learning at home when not in class and all students will participate in distance learning on Mondays.

While county guidelines allow for sixth-graders to return to in-person classes, only Moraga and Orinda are currently making this available. Again divided into two cohorts, Moraga's sixth-graders will attend three one-hour classes every day, with cohort A in person one week and cohort B coming the following week. The cohort not at school will continue distance learning at home.

Sixth-graders attending Orinda Intermediate School will also be broken into two cohorts, with cohort A attending three 1.15-hour in-person classes Tuesday and Thursday and cohort B in school Wednesday and Friday. The middle school students at home will be able to live stream the in-person classes.

Richard Whitmore, Lafayette's superintendent, reported that Stanley Middle School will reopen when Contra Costa County moves back into the red tier.

In order to open their schools, each district had to submit and commit to implementing a COVID-19 Safety Plan (CSP) and Prevention Plan (CPP). These plans spell out very detailed protocols for keeping everyone on campus safe and healthy. In addition to maintaining physical distancing of six feet, everyone on campus must wear masks at all times. Additionally, an online health screening form must be completed and submitted for each student every day. These plans conform to CDC guidelines released Feb. 12.

All three districts received funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act for

bringing their schools into compliance with the required health and safety standards. These include thoroughly cleaning each campus, professionally cleaning all HVAC systems, changing and improving air filters, purchasing personal protective equipment, hand washing stations, signage, air purifiers, and ensuring that all windows and doors can open to improve air flow. All classrooms will be cleaned and sanitized daily.

There are also very specific protocols on what to do if anyone on campus either contracts COVID or comes in contact with someone who does.

Getting everything ready for reopening "has been a real challenge," Moraga Superintendent Bruce Burns admits. "But it's all so worthwhile. I'm super excited to see the kids returning . it may not be a full reopening but it's a good start."

While the majority of Lamorinda parents are happy to be sending their kids back to school, even on the hybrid schedule, there are some who have elected to continue the distance learning through the end of the school year. At this point, approximately 85% of Moraga's students, 80% of Orinda students and 70% of Lafayette's school children will be returning to in-person classes.

There are also some teachers in each district who, for medical or family reasons, elected not to return to in-person teaching. These teachers will continue leading distance learning classes.

With only 3.5 months left in the current school year, it is certainly hoped that the reopenings will be successful and everyone will remain safe and healthy. As Lamorindans look forward to the 2021-22 school year, Whitmore is both hopeful and optimistic that students will be able to return to "something that looks more like traditional school" in August.

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