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Moraga School District phasing into hybrid learning model Nov. 16

By Jenn Freedman

The Moraga School Board Oct. 15 approved Superintendent Bruce Burns' recommendation to reopen the Moraga School District for in-person/distance hybrid learning beginning in mid-November. "We can't deliberate forever," Burns stated in his proposal. "Contra Costa County Health Services and the California Department of Public Health have stated conditions have been met to reopen schools ... and MSD has exceeded guidance to reopen."

TK through second grades will begin phasing to in-person hybrid learning on Nov. 16. Third through fifth grades will phase in beginning Dec. 7. Sixth through eighth grades are scheduled to begin in-person hybrid learning on Jan. 5.

In the proposed hybrid model, students would be broken into two cohorts, and would rotate between one week of in-person learning followed by one week of distance learning to keep the in-person class sizes to about 12-13 students. However, all families will have the option for their students to continue distance learning for the remainder of the school year if they prefer.

For elementary school, the district revised the initial schedule on Oct. 22 based on feedback from the community, school board, and teachers. While still a work in progress, the current schedule has all students distance learning in the morning together with their teacher via Zoom for core subjects of reading, writing, and math. In the afternoon, the in-person cohort would attend class with their teacher, working on various topics like science and social studies, while the distance cohort would have asynchronous work as well as art, music, PE, or library classes. The schedule has all students distance learning on Fridays, mostly asynchronously. The next step for the elementary hybrid schedule is for the district to provide specificity on full distance learners' access to teachers.

For middle school, teacher-led learning would also take place in the morning, with classes shortening to 50 minutes to enable all four periods to happen before lunch. All students would attend synchronously for the full class,

with half the class in-person and half distance on Zoom. Afternoons would be for independent student work, Organizational Academy, and teacher office hours.

The Oct. 22 meeting was the 19th public forum school board meeting since schools closed in March. The district has been working continuously to ensure all safety measures have been taken and has exceeded expectations from county guidelines. The district has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars (with the assistance of Moraga Education Foundation) to address classroom environments: for example, all classrooms have a new air purification system, fans, and will have MERV 13 filters by 11/11. Plus, an HVAC company is cleaning and checking all units for air flow. However, Burns reiterated, "The most important thing we must do as a district to prevent transmission when we reopen is to wash hands, wear a mask, physically distance, and stay home when not feeling well."

The district has produced a video to showcase what schools will look like, and has also scheduled time for parents and staff to walk through Camino Pablo School to see firsthand the implemented safety measures from 3 to 5 p.m. on Oct. 29, Nov. 2, and Nov. 12.

The district has a communication protocol for what happens if a student or staff is exposed to COVID-19. The county has also reported guidance on triggers for closures: for example, if 5% of a classroom cohort tests positive, the classroom will close. School staff will aid the county in contract tracing as needed.

The district surveyed parents and staff about reopening in early October: 85% of parents responded to the survey and were split 50/50 between returning before winter break or after, while 23% of parents said they preferred schools stay closed for the remainder of the year.

Nearly 60% of staff responded to the survey, with 78% of those who responded preferring to open after break, and 31% of those preferring to stay closed the whole year.

Parents and teachers shared their perspectives during public comment at the October meetings. The majority of parent comments were in favor of reopening quickly.

Paul Espinas, a parent, pediatrician, and volunteer on the COVID-19 MSD safety taskforce, said, "Current evidence tells us that safe schools are possible. The district has done a great job of following the science and recommendations. My wife and I would feel comfortable sending our middle schooler back to JM, if implemented well. My overall advice is to open now as the current state meets the indicators to do so. Let's learn and improve implementation before flu season starts."

Laura Fegraus, a parent, health care leader at Kaiser Permanente, and also a volunteer on the safety taskforce, reinforced, "All health care providers are aligned that it's time for kids to go back when county indicators are met."

However, teachers and staff voiced concerns for returning to school. Annette Herbert, president of the Moraga chapter of the California School Employees Association said, "Let us only move out of distance learning when the science of safety is clear, not just when the pressure for change raises its voice."

Angela Guidi, representing the Moraga Teachers Association, warned, "When it is safe, we want to return. We want to be with our kids. We all want to return to normal real school. But right now, we all need to understand how different hybrid school truly is."

The school board will meet again Oct. 28 to revisit the elementary hybrid schedule details as well as school childcare. The school board plans to hold weekly public meetings for the foreseeable future as they navigate through this transition. For the latest information on school reopening, visit www.moraga.k12.ca.us.

Lafayette School District board moves forward with reopening plans

Lafayette School District Superintendent Richard Whitmore presented reopening plans to the governing board Oct. 22, after several earlier special meetings on the subject, and hearing public comments on the proposals. At the Oct. 14 special board meeting, Whitmore explained how from June to mid-July, the district focused on creating a hybrid model, then had to pivot due to the summer surge before moving to online learning. "You don't wave a wand and have this happen," he said. "It's painstaking work."

The exhaustive reopening plan presented on Oct. 22 focused on a hybrid model in all grades, which would divide students into small "A" and "B" cohorts. During an "A" cohort's in-person instructional time, the "B" cohort would participate in distance learning. In TK through fifth grade the full classroom will receive instruction in the core curriculum through a distance learning setting, and in-person time will be scheduled after lunch by cohort. Middle school has a greater challenge to maintain stable cohorts, so the plan is to team students as much as possible to reduce exposure.

The district plans to provide full online curriculum and instructional support to families who prefer to continue distance learning. Students in Special Day Classes will be offered a phased in approach to in-class instruction on a structured schedule beginning in November, which is manageable due to small class sizes. TK and kindergarten students would have a return date of Nov. 30, with all other grades returning on Jan. 5 or 11. To view the entire plan, including safety protocols and proposed schedules, visit the LafSD website (lafsd.k12.ca.us) click on "Special Governing Board Meeting, Oct. 22" and open "Report Item" in the agenda (<https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/lafsd/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=BUDMEQ5AE5C8>).

- J. Wake

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Canyon Road Bridge to have soft opening



New concrete approach slab, poured Oct. 21. Photo provided

By Vera Kochan

Phase 1 of the new Canyon Road Bridge is on the verge of completion. Bridgeway Civil Constructors is finishing up the last of the structural backfill on the new retaining wall, installing storm drain improvements and asphalt

paving the new roadway approaches to the bridge. A soft opening of the inbound lane is scheduled from 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 10. At that time, the public is invited to walk or bike across the bridge. Please observe the county mandates by wearing a mask and staying at least six feet apart.

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