



Students, staff see next step in return to school

As District 68 students and staff returned from spring break at the beginning of April, they were set to begin a new phase of hybrid learning expected to remain in place for the balance of the school year.

As of April 19, all students in grades K-8 were scheduled to attend school full time, remotely or in person. Officials call this the “Hybrid 3” schedule.

After starting the year in full remote mode, students and staff started coming back to school earlier this year. Whether students attend remotely or in person is up to their families.



Posters coach first graders to greet their teachers and classmates safely.

Concurrent teaching under the “Hybrid 2” schedule (with students attending at the same time each day, whether online or in class) began in March. While not perfect, the return to school plan has been going well overall.

“The feedback I’ve received from families and students has been overwhelmingly positive,” said Greg Hanson, principal of Old Orchard Junior High. “The success is obviously related

to planning but the staff are the people who have taken the plan and made it a reality.”

It’s been a major adjustment for all involved, officials and teachers said. “A lot of staff were understandably nervous about returning to in-person work after having been at home for so long, but quickly adapted to the new restrictions in the workplace,” said Karen

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District brings equity concerns to forefront

District 68 leaders think equity — treating everyone fairly, equally and without bias — is so important that “Cultural Responsiveness, Equity and Inclusion” is one of the five key goals in the district’s strategic plan.

The district began efforts to foster equity in 2016. In fall 2019, Supt. James Garwood commissioned an equity

audit to assess efforts and make recommendations. The district contracted with Ivette Dubiel of Systemic Educational Equity, LLC, to conduct the audit.

According to Garwood, “The audit was a great way to gauge and validate our progress. It was reassuring that many of the recommendations that came out of it were already things we were working on or thinking about, so it left us feeling like we were on the right track.”

It took a year to conduct the audit. The district provided Dubiel with data — student and staff demographics, languages spoken at home, academic

programs, discipline issues, special services, attendance, student performance on formal assessments, etc. — broken out by race, gender and other categories. Dubiel then conducted focus group sessions with students, parents and staff members.

Dubiel made 16 recommendations, many of which are already in process.

For example, Dubiel recommends translating documents. Acknowledging the number of languages spoken in local households, District 68 has long since included a Google Translate function that can be used on information

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McGeough leaves board after 13 years

After serving on the District 68 board of education for nearly 13 years, including eight years as board president, Una McGeough is stepping down this month.

“Given the challenges we’ve experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it feels bittersweet to leave now,” McGeough said. “I would love to be part of work that was suspended, and it would be gratifying to contribute to the important planning and decisions the district will face ahead of the 2021-22 school year. But that being said, it personally feels like the right time to make space for new voices.”

A program manager in the Academic Support and Learning Advancement program at Northwestern University, McGeough was appointed to the board in 2008 when a member resigned. Her children were young students at the time, “and our family’s happiness with

our District 68 experience motivated me to volunteer as a way to give back and contribute to the community,” she recalled.

During her time on the board, McGeough pointed to significant improvements in the EL program; launching the 1:1 technology initiative; creating the position of Coordinator of Family Services and Engagement; and hiring Supt. James Garwood, who “has been an outstanding leader and collaborator in continuing the development of District 68.”

She added, “Underlying many of these activities and providing the foundation of what I am proud of in the district, is a strategic plan that prioritizes the development of the potential of the whole child, inclusivity toward our entire community, and development of all staff so that the entire district participates in a culture of continuous growth and improvement.”

Next step

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Bradley, principal of Highland School.

In a joint email, teachers Matt Tomenillie and Brandi Barnett said: “Completely changing our pedagogy was and is especially difficult because our training and formative learning experiences were and are with human beings. Using an online platform to instruct and engage students under 18 is suboptimal, but our teachers and staff, in the most authentic spirit of education, rose to the challenge.” Tomenillie teaches special education at Old Orchard, while Barnett teaches first grade at Highland. They are co-presidents of the district’s teachers association.

Students have welcomed the return to school buildings. “Every day they are coming in with upbeat attitudes,” Bradley said. “The students who have been here all year in the Hybrid 1 phase were so excited to share the routines of social distancing and mask-wearing with the Hybrid 2 in-person students.”

While students have clearly missed the social aspect of being in school together, the transition from remote to

in-person learning laid the groundwork for seamless re-integration. “Kindergarten students already knew their teachers and had friends in the class before they even got here,” Bradley said. “It was really fun to see two kindergartners who’d never met before meet on the sidewalk as they got out of their cars the first morning — ‘Hey, I know you!’ — and confidently walk into the building together.”

It’s been much the same for older students. “The students who have come back in-person have expressed a considerable amount of enjoyment relative to seeing other students and meeting their teachers,” Hanson said. “They’ve really come back and fallen into the new routines like they’ve been doing them for years.”

All involved — families, students, teachers, support staff and administrators — have worked together to maintain teaching and learning during this difficult period. Tomenillie and Barnett noted, “The entire process has been collaborative. The district has asked for and received input from the teachers association since March of 2020. Most importantly, all constituent groups’

needs were on the table.”

Hanson agreed. “The union has met weekly to discuss general concerns and out of those meetings has come a sense of investment and ownership of issues around equity, schedule, etc.”

Bradley added, “We’ve been so grateful for the partnership with parents this year. We’ve learned so much more than ever before about our students from having the opportunity to get a glimpse into their homes.”

School leaders will not forget the lessons of the pandemic. “I think the COVID-19 era of schooling has, if anything, not only called attention to physical safety but, also, psychological and social well-being,” Hanson said.

In the meantime, hope springs eternal. Tomenillie and Barnett noted, “As the pandemic begins to wane and life returns to normal, we believe that children’s natural resiliency will kick in, and they will get back into the swing of school.”

For more information regarding District 68’s response to the pandemic, visit <https://ipad.skokie68.org/scheduled/return.to.learn.cfm#top>.

Equity concerns

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posted within the district website. And the district technology department, led by chief technology officer Derek Senn, created programs that allow readers to translate email from the district into the language of their choice. Email from Garwood and other administrators already has that capability, and the goal is to make it available on all district email.

“I am so proud of the work the district has done to make email communications available in a multitude of languages,” said Diana Juarez, the former director of the Niles Township ELL Parent Center who is now coordinator of Family Services and Engagement for District 68. “I have received many emails celebrating and thanking the district for making this program available.”

“I am beyond excited about this,” Garwood said. “We are the only district I know of that’s been able to do it.”

Another recommendation is to develop and use common terms for talking about equity, diversity and inclusion. Again, the district is ahead of the game in making this happen.

By making equity a priority years ago and integrating it into professional development, “Now for the most part all of our staff members share a common language,” Garwood said. “We have developed that language internally. Now we need to make progress outside, in the community. Communication will play a big part in this.”

Karen Bradley, principal of Highland School, said one of the most important outcomes of the work so far is greater comfort in talking about issues of equity, between adults and with children. As an example, she pointed to an incident in a fourth-grade classroom. “At the end of the Pledge of Allegiance one day, a student commented to the teacher, ‘But there really isn’t liberty and justice for all,’ which led to discussion and exploration of this idea.

“Our focus on equity is helping students to see the world with a critical eye and to know they can do things to effect change,” she added.

Another recommendation is to increase diversity among teachers and other staff members, and work still needs to be done. The difficulty stems in part from racial and cultural disparities in the numbers of college students pursuing careers in education. People of color, for example, are less likely to go into teaching than their white counterparts.

Garwood said, “This is an area where we have made some modest gains, but it remains one of our biggest challenges.”

Pursuing equity is the right thing to do, but it is more than just an abstract concept. A case in point: District 68’s work over the last few years helped prepare for handling the COVID-19 pandemic.

“By the time the pandemic struck, using equity as a lens for making decisions in a systemic way had become a part of our culture,” Garwood said. “The pandemic gave us a concrete and immediate opportunity for application and in ways that we had not imagined. COVID solidified our understanding of the disparities that existed, and since the circumstances were so new, it made illustrating the issues a more concrete experience for us.”

For example, “The issue of wireless internet access has been something the district has addressed through an investment in hotspots [for families who lack internet access at home]. Offering and delivering meals has been a huge form of support for families in the community,” said Greg Hanson, principal of Old Orchard Junior High.

“I am proud to continue working on programs focused on issues we see our community of parents facing,” Juarez said. “These issues — including stress, anxiety, loss, and fear stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic — will

not soon go away. I am building on the relationships I fostered at the ELL Parent Center to bring the most valuable resources our community can offer to as many parents as possible.”

Other goals of the equity audit include developing a formal equity plan and reviewing it periodically; regularly reviewing curriculum to ensure representation and inclusion of diverse groups; developing student leadership committees by school; and creating an equity advisory committee.

“Everything from discipline to pedagogy to supervision has to be looked at closely and I think establishing equity as being the center of our moral compass allows me and staff members to point at things and say ‘that’s not what is in the best interest of kids,’” Hanson said.

Garwood said one of his biggest take-aways from the equity audit is the progress District 68 has made. “Having to summarize our journey made me very proud of how our district — board, administrators and staff — have engaged with equity and how their capacity to consider issues of equity in our decision-making has grown in scope and sophistication. All three groups own this work, so it is no longer driven by any one individual but by all of us collectively. My other big take-away is on the humbler side: We still have much work to do.”

HIGHLIGHTS is a community newsletter published three times a year by Skokie School District 68.

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month. All are invited to attend.

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HIGHLIGHTS

Skokie School District 68
Skokie, Illinois 60076
Telephone: 847-676-9000
Fax: 847-676-9232
www.Skokie68.org

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear School District 68
Community,

On Monday, April 19, 65% of our students moved from either full-time remote or part-time in-person instruction to full-time instruction back in the classroom with their teachers and many of their peers. As I toured schools on that day I was delighted to see the joy, excitement, energy, and first day jitters coming from both students and staff. The hope that we are rounding the corner on COVID, despite temporary setbacks, and that spring is here certainly add to a more positive mood. Now that we are in the final stretch of the school year, and that we can dare to dream of beginning to return to some semblance of normal, we have started to project what the fall will look like.

This is the last year of our current teacher contract and I am pleased to report that the Board of Education and the Education Association were able to collaborate throughout the year to create a teacher contract proposal for the next five years without all of the typical formality of contract negotiations. The contract was ratified overwhelmingly by teachers and approved by all board members at a special board meeting on April 21. That allows us to start the next school year focused on welcoming students back, assessing their progress, and to get back to the business of teaching and learning.

While COVID has reminded us that nothing in the future is certain, I am hoping that all students will be able to return full-time next fall, with the necessary safety measures recommended by the CDC and IDPH in place. It is still too soon to

know what those measures will need to be, however. With regards to student learning, it is not hard to assume that some or possibly many students are behind where they would have been if not for COVID and remote instruction. At the same time I have heard many anecdotal examples of students that seem to be thriving. The truth is that we still do not know the full impact this year had on student learning, so in addition to all of the usual beginning-of-the-school-year fall rituals, our administrators and teachers will be focused on assessing student learning, both social and academic, so that we can adjust our supports accordingly. To that end we are developing plans to make additional academic and social-emotional supports available for our students, and we will share those plans once they are finalized.

May is just a few days away from the time of this writing, and I am reminded that Teacher Appreciation Day (Tuesday, May 4) is just around the corner. While I know that the pandemic has affected everyone differently and has presented great challenges for most of us, the job of being a teacher was remarkably challenging this year. I for one am exceedingly proud of the dedication that our teachers have exhibited in working to keep our students connected to learning and each other. I am grateful for the grace that our teachers have demonstrated in the face of the many adjustments and changes they have had to make to support our students over the last year. They are truly deserving of our appreciation and I hope you will join the Board of Education and I in sharing that with your child's teacher.

Sincerely,
James E. Garwood, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools

Our mission is to develop children who are confident and creative learners. We provide a rigorous curriculum and a supportive school environment that promotes high achievement, encourages personal growth, and meets the unique needs of each child.