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What will local schools look like when they reopen?

By Sophie Braccini



When Acalanes Union High School District Superintendent John Nickerson at the May 6 board meeting presented what the high schools will look like this fall, he did not lay down one, two or even three possibilities; he introduced a continuum of options that the school districts have to get ready for now, while facing uncertainties. For Lamorinda school districts, getting ready for all types of situations needs to happen over the summer, while the budget for next year looks quite grim, with a potential 10% reduction in income.

Among the possibilities, Nickerson listed separating the student body, with half working mornings and the other afternoons; a two-week on, two-week off option; or four days on, 10 days off new rhythm. The superintendent noted that the district may have to resort to complete distance learning again if there is a surge of COVID-19 infections, and that the district is working on making its

online teaching capacity more robust. A task force is working on creative new ways to engage the students, reflecting also on the future of performing arts and sports. Other questions include the capability of testing everyone for the coronavirus, flow of traffic, hygiene and cleaning, and the need for more custodial staff.

AUHS parent Dr. Michelle Stevens Jones asked many questions about how the district was planning to innovate and improve distance learning. She asked about plans for incoming ninth-graders, what platforms the district would choose for online learning, how it would keep teachers accountable, how everyone would be trained, and how parents and students would be kept informed of changes.

Nickerson listed among the constraints, the need to coordinate with the local K-8 districts in order to minimize families' stress levels. All local education leaders meet once a week to coordinate their efforts.

Moraga School District Superintendent Bruce Burns reported the same level of uncertainty as Nickerson. "It feels like building a plane while it is flying," he said. He confidently reported that his district had 100% student participation in distant learning - which is not the case for the AUHS - but that engagement varies from child to child. He explained that special education and English as Second Language teachers have a goal of providing continuity and are engaging students individually. Burns acknowledged that parents' perspectives vary widely, from those who are not comfortable having their kids come back, to those who just want the return of normalcy as soon as possible.

In Lafayette, Superintendent Richard Whitmore explained that the district was waiting for guidance from the state, both the Department of Education and the statewide public health agency, and that guidance would be processed through county agencies for education and public health. "It is complicated oversight and we expect it to take a bit longer to understand what our options for operating in the fall will be. I'm hoping mid-June," he said.

In the very short term, the AUHS is finalizing plans for the summer program. With an increased number of at-risk students, it was very important for the district to offer six-week classes for credit recovery again this summer. Associate Superintendent Amy McNamara explained that the district's own teachers will teach the classes and that some effort will be made to offer in-person small group teaching for English learners and for geometry advancement for incoming ninth-graders. The district will also look into wellness programs in small groups of students to address isolation and loneliness.

Nickerson said that the district would send a survey to all its stakeholders to get their feedback. For now, the first day of school is still set for Aug. 11.

Credit/no-credit versus letter grades sparks tense discussion

A significant number of parents were infuriated by a recent AUHS board decision to evaluate students performance with credit/no credit rather than with letter grades for the spring semester. The board presented the move as the only option to avoid penalizing some students who may be less likely to succeed in a distant learning environment. A petition from Lamorinda parents claimed that the decision would significantly hurt the hard work of their children who are competing for access to colleges and scholarships, and asked that the board revert back to letter grades.

When asked about possible effect the grading decision could have on college applications, College Advisor Elizabeth LaScala, PhD, noted, that "colleges as a group have clearly stated that they will not penalize

students for what their school district decides. Colleges will place greater weight on other aspects of a student's application, like their extracurricular activities, essays and how they have managed themselves during the COVID crisis."

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