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Schools to reopen online; different hybrid models may follow

By Sophie Braccini

The recent spike of COVID-19 cases in Contra Costa County spurred many school districts to make the decision to reopen remotely, even before Gov. Gavin Newsom's July 17 mandate was given to do so. Each of the four Lamorinda school districts have developed their own hybrid models for opening if the requisite reduction in infections in the county holds for a consecutive 14 days, and other factors trend positively.

The governor gave school districts the guidance they had all been asking for: as long as a county is on the state's watch list, schools in that county won't be permitted to reopen classrooms.

The Acalanes Union High School District made the decision July 14 to start the year online, and the Lafayette School District made the same decision July 15 on a split vote. Orinda Union School District on July 13 had decided to reopen using different hybrid models for elementary and middle school students, and during its study session on July 16 the Moraga School District was leaning toward distance learning.

Numerous parents at these meetings supported the idea of a hybrid model as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics for the wellness of the children, and the federal recommendation to do so for economic reasons. Working parents stressed that they had to return to work and that finding supervision for their children would be difficult. Many also noted that most students did not learn efficiently during the spring quarter, were depressed and demotivated.

But as superintendents and the governor noted, safety for children and staff comes first. When the Moraga School District polled its teaching staff, nearly 60% said they were ready to return to teaching in a hybrid model. Others either did not want to or could not return to campus. All districts noted that the need for additional substitute teachers would be a great concern with a hybrid model.

All the districts stressed the fact that online learning this time around will not be the same as what happen in the spring when staff had to pivot within a few days. They acknowledged that the spring had been far from optimal. This time would be different, they promised.

The tasks forces that have worked during the summer have chosen new models that will guarantee, according to them, the robust educational experience the governor is asking for.

Aida Glimme, Associate Superintendent, Educational Services at the AUHSD, explained that the district will comply with Bill 98 that requires that attendance be taken by teachers every day, that procedures be set in place if students are absent for more than 60% of instruction per week, and that live interaction (synchronous education) with teachers happen daily.

All districts also offer families the option of choosing the online platform FuelEd if they want to keep their children off-site for a whole semester. That system offers a full integrated platform and teachers can personalize the content depending on their pedagogy.

The districts have worked hard at defining a hybrid model that can maximize instructional hours and minimize exposure of teachers, especially in middle and high school. At the beginning of the summer there were promises that the schedules would align among districts to make the life of families with children of different ages easier; but in the end, everyone claimed to have found the best solution for their stakeholders and they are all different from one another.

For all the high schools Monday will be a day of online learning for the students, and their teachers will have an afternoon of professional development. For the rest of the week, the periods will be shortened to one hour and 25 minutes with 15 minutes between classes to clean up and move. Students will be organized into two groups A and B - most likely alphabetically. Group A will attend class in person on Tuesday and Thursday and be online Wednesday and Friday. The opposite will be true for group B. The distance learning schedule will mirror this blended model, with shorter periods: one hour only, and Monday dedicated to asynchronous learning for students and development for teachers. The days will have six periods only and include virtual academy at the beginning of each day. One system, Canvas, will replace School Loop and be the main portal for all.

In Lafayette, the adopted hybrid model also splits the student body in two groups A and B. Wednesdays are dedicated to students' independent online learning, while their teachers collaborate, are trained, or perform targeted intervention. The instruction would stop before lunch to minimize contacts. The online version would divide the week between synchronous and asynchronous online experience, with Wednesday being the day without live interaction.

In Orinda, the board decided to separate the elementary school children in morning and afternoon groups with Wednesday being their distance learning day. For the middle school, an original schedule was created combining an AM/PM model with instruction of only two subjects at a time for a three-week session. Each of the subjects, such as English and science, would be taught for three-hour blocks to the same cohort of students, thus minimizing the number of students teachers see each day in middle school. It is also Wednesday that was chosen as the remote learning day.

Moraga School District adopted a similar AM/PM hybrid model along a quarter rhythm for the middle school. Students will take three classes per quarter and will then change classes for the next quarter. They will be separated in either morning or afternoon cohorts and will work online the rest of their day. This model is the only one that offers live instruction five days a week to every student. The model transfers to distance learning with students having three synchronous class instruction each day. The model proposed for the elementary school is one week in school, one week online five days a the week.

Many issues worry families; child care for working parents is a major concern. Schools have said that they

would support families, but capacity this year will be less than last year. Models to decide who gets child care are still being debated. Those who need most hours could have priority, or could be essential workers' children, or a lottery could be organized. Staff also noted that often child care workers are over 55 years old and probably will not be eager to come back to work.

Several task force groups have worked on solutions for Special Ed children and ESL students who are likely to be most impacted by distance learning and hybrid models. Everything has been discussed from one-on-one online sessions to special in-person options with distance learning.

Moraga and Orinda planned to revisit their decision the week of July 20, as this paper went to press. Until numbers improve in the county, however, online learning will be the mode of education transmission.

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