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Local high school district pressured to return students to the classroom

By Sophie Braccini

As Contra Costa COVID-19 metrics improved, school districts were allowed to re-open schools to students as early as Oct. 13. But, according to the Acalanes Union High School District's staff, the transition could not be immediately implemented and would require additional weeks of planning.

The district's hybrid model that invites half of the students at a time on campus, was proposed for implementation at the beginning of the second semester, starting Jan. 5, 2021. However, parents, students and some board members want to bring the kids back to school sooner. They claim that the lack of live interaction among peers and with teachers is taking an unacceptable toll on the well-being of the students.

Contra Costa health officials published COVID figures showing improvement throughout the county, and in particular in the Lamorinda/Walnut Creek area. AUHSD Superintendent John Nickerson explained at the Oct. 7 meeting that stable cohorts of 14 students are now the safe option to teach in-person on campus. He noted that creating stable cohorts of 14 students is easier for elementary schools, but more complex when students have different electives, and different levels in the core subjects.

Due to this, Aida Glimme, the AUHSD curriculum and

instruction associate superintendent, suggested to the board to phase in the return to campus, with no full implementation of the hybrid model until Jan. 5, noting that they first need to get parents' commitment on whether or not their child will return to school, and negotiate with teachers and obtain an accurate figure of who will come back, including those with medical issues who will not be able to teach in-person.

Board members Dr. Chris Severson and Preston Nibley, the student representative, made a powerful argument for a students' return to school as soon as possible. Nibley read poignant testimonies from the hundreds of comments the district received about returning to school. Nibley said that he had been shocked to realize how much his peers were distraught by the loneliness created by distance learning, how their motivation had collapsed, and by how many times he read the word depression.

Severson, who works with COVID patients, stated that the times are full of uncertainties and fears, but that with proper anticipation and preparation people can be kept safe. He asked for a return to school as early as possible. Warren Heffelfinger, an AUHSD parent, said that students were suffering and parents were outraged with the delays imposed by the district for returning to in-person teaching.

Board member Kristin Connelly suggested a strategy to come back faster that is being used in some Southern California districts where two groups of students, one in school and one online, are taught simultaneously by one teacher. Glimme said that staff had contacted such districts and that the results had been catastrophic as the teachers are not viewed properly and cannot interact normally with either group. Staff will nonetheless revisit that possibility.

Glimme acknowledged that the grades this quarter have dropped and that more students are receiving grades below C than ever before. Glimme is herself a mother of students wanting to go back to school, but she maintained that a period of planning was unavoidable. She believes that if the move to hybrid was made now, the disruption would be greater than any benefits.

In the coming weeks students will be invited to come back to campus for after-school academic and social-emotional support, Academy, and will be offered quiet learning spaces on campus with access to technology and support. Severson, and the other board members asked that more activities be offered to students on campus in the coming weeks. Parents will receive a survey asking their position on the return of their student(s) to in-person instruction. The next board meeting will be on Oct. 21.

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