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Orinda is still asking, when is it safe to return to school?

By Sora O'Doherty

As the Orinda Union School District board continues to struggle with the question of when and how to return students to campus, they heard from competing voices on Oct. 14: Sara Edwards, a physician and parent of two in Orinda schools presented an overview of the COVID-19 staff and student testing options and shared information on COVID-19 transmission data, while teachers and staff continued to have reservations.

Edwards has been working with OUSD Superintendent Carolyn Seaton, board president Cara Hoxie, and board vice president Liz Daoust to secure a viable COVID-19 testing solution for the District as one of the school site reopening steps. She is an associate professor of sports medicine and shoulder in the UCSF department of orthopaedic surgery. Edwards met with two other doctors at Stanford, Yvonne Maldonado, a specialist in pediatric infectious disease, and Christina Kong, who runs the testing lab at Stanford and advises the Los Angeles Unified School District and Burlingame. Both doctors are doing school reopening research.

According to Edwards, "Dr. Maldonado was extremely reassuring with regards to current disease transmission rates in the Bay Area and in her words 'there is no reason for schools to be closed at this point.' Although Maldonado emphasized the importance of masking, hand hygiene, and symptom screening, Edwards said, testing is not currently required and does not prevent COVID, although it is important for contact tracing.

Edwards noted how in New York City, out of 1,751 random tests of children, only one child tested positive. According to the Washington Post, in late September, Europe stays committed to in-person classes as school outbreaks remain rare. One study found that the majority of school outbreaks are staff to staff or staff to pupil, and according to CBS, Sacramento, California has seen no links between schools reopening and the spread of COVID. However the largest COVID-19 contact tracing study to date found children to be key to the spread of COVID, with evidence of superspreaders, according to the Princeton Environmental Institute. In order for children to return to school, several precautions are considered necessary, including COVID testing and a social contract, designed to ensure that family behavior outside of school, such as agreeing to keep kids home who have any symptoms, avoiding travel outside the community or, if travel does occur, quarantining after returning to the community. Other crucial elements to a return to school include masking, reduced class size, desk spacing, cleaning protocols and proactive plans for when students or staff test positive.

According to Seaton, the community compact, which is being drafted by Weiner and Daoust, is one tool in the toolbelt for returning to in-school learning. "We want something our community is willing to sign; we're not a police state," Weiner said. The draft compact will be presented at the next board meeting and Kaune suggested that the board invite community feedback on the draft compact.

The board also ratified an agreement with Frontline Education to provide OUSD with its School Health Management System with COVID-19 screening and contact tracing. In addition, the board is exploring a partnership with Agile Force, a company that is helping San Rafael and other school districts with on-site COVID-19 testing. The company is based in Los Angeles County and is reportedly helping to ensure that casinos are safe. The district plans to pilot COVID-19 testing with Agile Force next month and if all goes well, testing would probably be scheduled once every two weeks. Under the CARES act, all Americans are entitled to free weekly testing, to be covered by insurance. Agile Force will conduct the testing and will bill insurance companies, so no cost would be borne by OUSD.

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