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Local schools shelve plans for return to campus as county moves back to purple tier

By Sora O'Doherty and Sophie Braccini

All four local school districts - Orinda Union, Lafayette, Moraga and the Acalanes Union High School District - had been about to launch a limited return to school when Contra Costa County announced that the county would return to the purple tier of COVID-19 risk Nov. 17. Some schools that had already returned to the classroom, such as St. Perpetua in Lafayette, are allowed to remain open, but any schools that had not yet returned are now prohibited from doing so until the county's level of illness permits a return to the red tier designation.

AUHSD Superintendent John Nickerson drew the board's attention at its Nov. 18 meeting to the fact that Lamorinda and Walnut Creek were not immune to the new uptake in cases at this time and pleaded for the community to "do the right thing," limiting social contacts and large gatherings, and always wearing a mask. The AUHSD board decided to reopen as soon as the county returns to the red tier for two consecutive weeks, and no earlier than Jan. 5. Like his colleagues in the other Lamorinda districts, Nickerson explained to his governing board that since the county had now exceeded the thresholds of the red tier (more than 7 daily new cases per 100,000 and more than 8% positivity among people tested for COVID-19), the county health authority precluded school districts that had not yet reopened to wait until the figures got consistently better.

In the meantime, AUHSD staff continues to prepare the schools for a hybrid teaching model starting at the beginning of the second semester. The school site and classroom safety protocols and procedures are being finalized, while training will be provided to staff and students prior to the return to school. Parents are going to be asked to make a declaration, by Dec. 2, indicating if their student(s) will participate in the hybrid model alternating with on campus and at-home instruction, or will continue with remote instruction five days a week when schools reopen.

Online parents' forums will be organized by the district and each of the schools before Dec. 2 to answer questions. Staff also perfected the hybrid educational model to maximize the contacts with the teachers. For example, both cohorts of the same class, students at home or at school, will start each teaching period together. How long they remain together and how the teaching is structured will depend on the teacher and the subject matter. When teachers are immuno-compromised and have to stay away from school, they will continue to teach their classes while substitutes will assist with in-class instruction.

As cooler and rainier weather becomes more prevalent, the return to the purple tier will also restrict to "outdoors only" worship services, movie theaters, museums and exhibit spaces, as well as institutions of higher education, which may only hold lectures and student gatherings outdoors.

Despite rising numbers, Lamorinda remains at comparatively low levels. As of Nov. 23, Lafayette stood at 228 total cases, with 38 new cases in the past fortnight; Orinda had 170 total cases, with 19 new cases in the past fortnight, and Moraga had only 99 total cases and just 7 new cases in the past fortnight. This compares with much higher numbers in the county, such as Richmond with 4,149 total cases and 341 in the past fortnight, or Antioch with 3,005 total cases, and 303 cases in the past fortnight.

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