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MSD makes last-minute decision to postpone in-person learning amid county COVID surge

By Jenn Freedman



The Moraga School District governing board made an 11th hour pivot Nov. 13 to hold off on hybrid in-person learning that was set to begin the following Monday. The emergency board meeting was held in response to information from Contra Costa County Health Services that the county was expected to move from the red tier to the purple tier, which denotes widespread infection rates.

At the weekly Nov. 10 board meeting, the board indicated its inclination of closing schools if the county moved to the purple tier. This led Superintendent Bruce Burns to bring a recommendation to the board that the MSD not open on Nov. 16 given the information of the impending shift to purple. "I have concerns over educational continuity," he explained, citing how students could potentially return to school for as little as a week if the county in fact moved to purple on Nov. 24.

The move came earlier than expected, however, when Gov. Gavin Newsom announced at a Nov. 16 press conference the move of Contra Costa County to the purple tier effective Nov. 17.

"We have said at each meeting that we need to be ready to pivot at any moment, as information is constantly changing," Burns said at the Nov. 13 meeting. "Well, we're at that point now."

Further debate ensued about using the purple tier as the trigger for closing. While the county moved toward purple, Moraga's numbers continued to be among the lowest in the county. Opening while in the red tier enables the district not to be tethered to tiers, as schools can remain open in the purple tier if they were open previously (following county guidelines). However, schools cannot open for the first time while in purple, even though the district has exceeded county guidelines with regards to safety measures, and public health experts have found little evidence that the virus is spreading in schools thus far.

On the flip side, additional concerns were raised with the purple tier beyond the safety and health of students and staff. Burns anticipated staffing issues in the purple tier, as several staff members were already hesitant to return in lower tiers. He also believes some families may rethink sending their children to school in purple, which could further complicate logistics within the hybrid model. In addition, while Moraga's numbers are well below county numbers, some people who work and attend MSD schools live outside the town. Finally, COVID testing was a concern: specifically, because testing could not be offered at school sites until after Thanksgiving break, and generally, because testing cannot be mandated for children in public schools (unlike private schools).

About 20 community members, mostly parents, spoke at the meeting and expressed various perspectives. More than half of the speakers were in favor of continuing with plans to begin the hybrid model as scheduled, many of which expressed concerns for the youngest students (TK-2) both academically and social/emotionally.

Board member Jon Nickens acknowledged, "I feel like there are no easy answers . there hasn't been a day that has gone by over the past six months that I haven't contemplated this choice."

After an extensive, at times emotional, discussion, there was a consensus from the current four-person board to postpone hybrid in-person learning with the expectation that MSD will open as soon as possible once the county returns to the red tier. State guidelines say that the county must remain in red for two weeks before reopening, which realistically means January is the soonest students could begin phasing back.

For the latest information on school reopening, visit www.moraga.k12.ca.us.

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[back](#)

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