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Districts move quickly to enable schools to reopen ASAP

By Sora O'Doherty

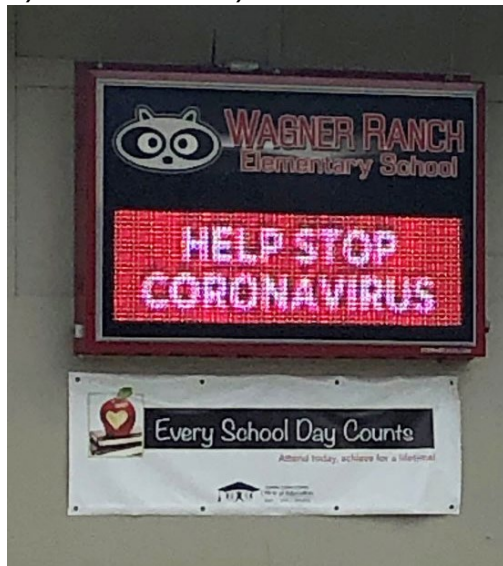


Photo Jennifer Wake

Even as it protested against new requirements imposed by the governor on schools to reopen, the Orinda Union School District moved swiftly to comply. Moraga and Lafayette school districts did the same, holding several special meetings, with superintendents completing the required COVID-19 Safety Plan (CSP) and the COVID-19 Prevention Plan (CPP) and submitting them prior to a Feb. 1 state deadline.

District boards planned special meetings on Feb. 2 (after press time) to vote on instructional schedules.

OUSD Superintendent Carolyn Seaton explained at the Jan. 28 OUSD special meeting that the first day possible for elementary schools to reopen is Feb. 9, since there is no school on Mondays. This is due to the county's requirement that there are at least five consecutive days where the adjusted case rate is 25 or fewer per 100,000 of population. On Jan. 28 the ACR in the county was 34.2 per 100,000 but was showing signs of trending downward.

At its Jan. 29 special board meeting, MSD Superintendent Bruce Burns said elementary schools

could reopen in early February, "but it's a remote possibility. Rates are continuing to decline," he said, "but not as quickly as needed."

The OUSD board of directors on Jan. 28 discussed extensively the reopening of schools in the district, approved the letter protesting the new requirements, and adopted a resolution seeking prioritization of COVID-19 vaccinations for teachers and school staff. It was announced that new memoranda of understanding have been agreed with both unions, the one that represents teachers and the one that represents classified employees.

There was a fervent determination not to miss another opportunity to reopen Orinda schools among the board members and many public speakers. Board member Carol Brown said, "We have looked back a few times, we regretted not opening during the one week we could have opened." Some teachers, however, still object to a return to the classroom with students before being vaccinated.

Orinda Intermediate School teacher Bobby Glasser said that he was prohibited from returning to the classroom if he failed a test for tuberculosis, which accounted for 542 deaths in the United States in 2018, while he is being asked to go back into the classroom without vaccination against a disease that has killed over 400,000 in the country. All speakers, board members and public, expressed the desire to have school personnel vaccinated as soon as possible.

The OUSD board also heard reports of how hard teachers and staff have been working, and how complex it will be to move from fully distance learning to the hybrid model approved by the board.

Bobby Bardenham, OUSD Director of Technology, said, "My team is exhausted; this is close to killing us." He added, "I have a lot of knowledge and most of this will fall on me." But, he said, there is a ton of support in place, they are working on how to move students between schools in a way that is manageable and correct. They have added new platforms, he explained, and are determined to do their best. The hybrid plan will require classes to be reformulated, with some students moving to other teachers, and perhaps to teachers in different schools. Teachers will have Feb. 4 and 5 to work on preparing for the transition.

Board president Liz Daoust, who had opened the meeting with words of gratitude for all the many hours of hard work being put in by the district and as well as the community, responded that "we give each other grace."

Many members of the public who commented on the possibility of school reopening were parents, and all supported the plan to reopen, while at the same time recognizing the enormous tasks ahead.

Many speakers echoed the words of parent Megan Baldwin, who said, "Whatever the teachers need, we are here for you: give us some marching orders and we will march."

Glorietta teacher Charlie Bulovic cited a recent study out of the UK showing that teachers are 2-3 times more likely to get COVID than any other group. "Starbucks won't help our families," Bulovic commented, "if we get COVID and pass away."

In addition to discussing reopening, the board passed a resolution calling for prioritizing education workers for receiving COVID-19 vaccinations, a measure vigorously supported by Charles Shannon, president of the Orinda Educators Association. The resolution was drafted by board president Daoust and board member Cara Hoxie. Daoust said that she believes that many boards of education in the county will also be using the resolution they drafted.

Also on the agenda was a matter discussed with the board by Carrie Nerheim, Director of Student Services. Nerheim talked about the possibility of bringing students back on campus in small, stable cohorts of under 16 students for non-educational purposes, such as for students with special needs, if schools don't reopen. And Weiner encouraged consideration of small cohorts for students in seventh and eighth grades, who will not be able to return as early as younger students owing to the greater resemblance of those students to adults in their response to COVID-19, as well as for students who continue in distance learning even after schools reopen.

Extensive plans to reopen have been in place for all the school districts since the fall, and at each of their meetings district board members expressed confidence in reopening safely.

Nicole Smith, speaking on behalf of a large group of Moraga parents at the Jan. 29 MSD special meeting, implored board members to "do right by our kids."

"We are ready," Burns said.

Jennifer Wake contributed to this story.

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