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High schools moving toward hybrid opening in mid-March

By Sophie Braccini

If the downward trend in the number of new cases of COVID-19 persists, high school students should experience in the coming weeks the same happy return to in-person education that local elementary and middle school students have experienced. The administrators of the Acalanes Union High School District that manage the high schools in Lafayette, Moraga, Orinda, along with Las Lomas in Walnut Creek, are ready to ring that school bell and hope for a reopening on March 16.

The California Department of Public Health requires counties to keep the secondary schools closed until their geographic area is in the Red Tier. Although data collected in Contra Costa County show satisfactory numbers for testing positivity and equity investment, the number of daily new cases per 100,000 was 12.6 on Feb. 23. This number, still consistent with a downward trend, is enough to allow for lower grade schools to reopen, but fails to reach the required 7.0 that will toggle the district into the Red Tier and high schools into reopening. The CDPH used to require that counties maintain these data for five consecutive days before reopening the high school, but new guidance now allows for immediate reopening.

At the Feb. 17 AUHSD board meeting, students who represent the different high schools channeled their peers' desire to return to on-site learning, while staff representatives asked that teachers and other high school personnel get priority vaccination.

AUHSD Superintendent John Nickerson and his team are tracking the county and local public health data and projecting accordingly. With their current projections, the AUHSD would shift to hybrid and remote schedules on March 16. Sixty-five percent of families have opted for sending their children physically back to school, while 35% prefer to stay in remote instruction until the end of the year.

The week leading up to the reopening, the district will offer one professional development day for staff, and four days of student training and in-person orientations.

Nickerson confirmed that the schools are ready to reopen. The protocol to ensure safety includes implementing physical distance, cleaning protocols, wearing a face mask, completing a daily COVID-19 self-screening prior to arriving at school, and regular asymptomatic testing. Rules are also in place to deal with suspected and confirmed infections.

Teachers who are coming to the school to teach asynchronously from their classroom are already self-screening daily with the same software application that the students will have to use to get access to school when hybrid learning starts.

The district mandates that teachers get a PCR test once a week and encourages students do get tested every other week. The AUHSD is offering community testing on Mondays, rotating high schools: March 8 at Miramonte, March 15 at Acalanes and Campolindo, March 22 at Las Lomas and Miramonte. As of Feb. 17, 1,940 tests had been performed, identifying six positive cases, a 0.3% positivity rate that is a great testament to the community's health, according to Nickerson.

When the high schools reopen for hybrid instruction, families that prefer to continue in full distance learning for the rest of the school year will be allowed to do so, supported by online instruction. At the first February board meeting Associate Superintendent, Educational Services Aida Glimme reported that the overall performance of students had remained constant this school year compared to previous years, although she noted an increase in students who are struggling receiving multiple failing grades. Glimme said that the district is targeting its intervention strategies around those students in addition to continuing what has been done in the classroom to support all students.

Parents and students alike are also eager to see access to all sports, practice and games, reopened. Some sports that are outdoors with no contact are allowed in the Purple Tier, such as swimming and diving, cross country, golf, tennis, and track and field. The Diablo Athletic League announced that football, soccer, baseball, softball, water polo, and lacrosse were able to open on Feb. 26. Regarding students practicing in two sports, the CDPH recommends playing only one. Athletic directors and principals were able to advocate for the students and moved the DAL to approve schedules reducing the overlap of seasons for those students wishing to play multiple sports.

Each district is making their own rules; AUHSD discourages students to be in more than one cohort while the district is in the Purple Tier. In Red Tier, students are allowed to play in more than one cohort, but the district discourages participation in clubs as well. The superintendent noted that his administration had no way to enforce such a rule.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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