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Lafayette elementary schools ramp up for five-day, on-campus learning

By Pippa Fisher

Lafayette elementary schools are several steps closer to opening five days a week for all students and have their eye on a mid-April goal. And to the great relief of many, such a move will also see an end to asynchronous learning.

The school board unanimously approved a motion to implement a return to full in-person learning for TK through fifth grade beginning on April 12 at a special meeting March 17 - a move welcomed by many parents and teachers. Distance learning will still be available for those who wish to remain off-campus. The decision is largely the result of studies, such as a January study in Massachusetts, that appear to show that, combined with mask-wearing, lower physical distancing policies can be adopted in school settings without negatively impacting student or staff safety.

At the time of the special meeting school leaders were sifting through obscurely worded guidance from the county regarding safe distances, and had settled on four feet for their standard going forward, which would allow whole classes to gather together, masked.

This however was followed just a few days later by an announcement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that three feet is sufficient distance for children wearing face masks within classrooms, obviously benefiting the district's plans to reopen.

The six-foot distance standard will still apply during snack time and for all outdoor activity, as well as between all adults and staff on campus, including between staff and students. Children will be dismissed to return home for lunch and to allow for continued distance learning of special subjects, such as art and music.

Stanley Middle School returned to on-campus, hybrid learning March 18. Lafayette Schools Superintendent Richard Whitmore said the plan there is to see how that goes. The middle school schedule is more complex, making the logistics somewhat more complicated.

"We also know that many of our distance learning students are now interested in returning to in-person instruction at Stanley," says Whitmore. "To that end, Principal Betsy Balmat is surveying these families to determine the extent of this interest, and our highest priority is finding a way to offer these students the opportunity to return in-person to school."

These decisions come as feelings have been running high amongst parents, whose children had not been physically in school for a year. In fact those students in TK and kindergarten had never even set foot in a classroom. And while most of the parents who called in to the meeting to give comments welcomed the move, several continued to push for a return to a full school day.

Governing School Board President Rob Sturm said that he is thrilled that students are finally able to be back on campus at the elementary schools and he is looking forward to receiving survey feedback for Stanley Middle School, particularly in light of new California Department of Public Health guidance on physical distancing between students in schools, reduced to three feet, which will create expanded onsite in-person options.

"It would be an understatement to say that this has been a challenging year for our administrators, staff, and families," says Sturm. "With that in mind, I am so grateful for the steady and thoughtful leadership of our Superintendent Richard Whitmore, his unwavering commitment to reopening schools safely, and the partnership and dedication he and his administrative team have shown as they have had to navigate ever-changing rules and regulatory requirements."

Sturm continues, "We believe we have the very best teachers and staff, and they have proven their incredible value time and time again during these unprecedented times. I also appreciate the involvement of our parents, and their input in helping to get us to the right place for our community. We can't wait to see all our students' smiling faces together on campus soon."

District staff and Stanley Middle School administrators will be presenting an update to the governing board at a special meeting on April 7, and will share more details at that time regarding Stanley's return, the new guidance, and how the shift in physical distancing requirements might impact the middle school.

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