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Schools focus on COVID and other safety issues

By Sora O'Doherty

Lamorinda schools are working with Walnut Creek schools to make sure that rapid testing is available to every student and parent every day in the greater Walamorinda area. Since the return to school for the 2021-22 academic year, there have been protocols in effect that require students to be tested if they exhibit any symptoms or are notified of an exposure incident. The test, which is required for the student to return to school, has not been easy to obtain in the recent past.

Each school appears to present the testing information in a different format on the school's website. However, as of Oct. 12, Orinda Union District School superintendent Aida Glimme says that the system has been upgraded in an effort to make rapid tests more available. Results of the rapid antigen tests are generally available within 20 minutes. The goal is to make sure that students miss as little school as possible, while making sure that everyone is protected to the greatest extent. Scheduling is being provided by the Global Virus Pass, a system being used by most school districts, according to Glimme. Nevertheless, parents are reporting on social media and in person that they are experiencing difficulties trying to get their children tested.

From the OUSD website, parents can see where rapid antigen tests or PCR tests are being offered every school day in Lamorinda and Walnut Creek. The current schedule for tests is: Monday, Stanley Middle School, and Lafayette and Moraga Community Library; Tuesday, Acalanes Union High School District; Wednesday, Tice Creek Elementary, Walnut Creek and Orinda Union School District Office; Thursday, Burton Valley Elementary, Lafayette; and Friday, Orinda Union School District Office.

All sites except Acalanes currently offer both types of tests. Acalanes does not offer rapid antigen testing, but is in the process of getting them, according to Nick Carpenter, AUHSD Director of School Services who had been assigned to COVID testing and contact tracing. Like other schools, AUHSD has a nurse who administers rapid antigen tests to students who have been exposed and are on modified quarantine. Carpenter noted that the test clinic at AUHSD is being used almost exclusively by younger children, not high school students.

There are a number of circumstances that require a student be tested before being allowed to return to school, ranging from having a stomachache to being exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID. In the latter case, the student will be tested by the school nurse and placed on a modified quarantine, which allows the student to continue attending school.

Testing is only one of the weapons being employed in the fight against the virus. According to John Nickerson, AUHSD superintendent, there have only been three cases in the past six weeks, which he says shows that mitigation efforts are working. The schools report that there have been no incidents of COVID being transmitted at school thus far. However, he pointed out the schools rely upon their HVAC systems and air filters to protect students and staff. He noted that in the event of a public safety power shutoff the schools would be forced to shut down because they would lack power to operate these systems.

Miramonte principal Ben Campopiano reported that while there have been no COVID cases at Miramonte in over six weeks, wellness center visits have ticked higher this year. OUSD's Glimme agreed that academics are going really well, but she said that the challenge is mental health. "Students are struggling to interact in person," she explained. "Some who have never been to school in person; social interaction is crucial," she continued. Glimme said that OUSD's main focus right now is the increased need for mental health support. COVID is only one of the safety issues of concern to the schools. Another issue that has been getting a lot of attention recently is the safety of students on their way to and from schools, following several traffic incidents, including the death of a school crossing guard and injury of a child outside Stanley Middle School in Lafayette and the serious injury of a child skateboarding to Las Lomas High School in Walnut Creek. This has been the subject of a number of meetings recently between mayors, city managers, and the school boards.

Orinda Mayor Amy Worth says that what is required is that the whole community slow down. "The tragedy in Lafayette reminds us that we have congestion," she said in a recent interview. "We are looking at structural things that we can do to make the roads safer, but," she says, "it has to be a community awareness campaign."

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