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Back to school in the time of Omicron

By Sora O'Doherty



Miramonte High School students head to cars and homes after regular school dismissal on the afternoon of Jan. 13. Photo Sora O'Doherty

Everybody is working hard to keep Lamorinda students in school, even as the Omicron variant of the coronavirus sends positive tests in the schools up sharply. For administrators and parents, and maybe for students, the things on their minds are primarily how to access testing and keeping track of those rising numbers of cases, hoping to see an equally sharp downturn soon.

Although illness and hospitalizations from the variant have also jumped up at both the state and county levels, Lamorinda schools, as well as Las Lomas in Walnut Creek at the high school level, are not seeing any hospitalizations to date among either students or staff, according to Acalanes Union High School District Superintendent John Nickerson. Nickerson reported that absences are currently running at 10 to 14% (higher than the normal 4%) but that campuses feel relatively normal and classes don't feel empty. Nevertheless, he said, anxiety and concern is increased in both staff and students, as they try to negotiate the highly contagious

Omicron variant COVID-19 surge.

"We believe students are home with COVID-19 symptoms (where in past years they might have come to school) and probably some parents who are holding students home as a precaution," Nickerson explained, adding that the absence rate dropped each day since peaking at all schools a week ago Thursday/Friday.

Safety protocols are in force at all local schools. These include masking, and higher protection masks are being made available to students and staff, Nickerson said. N95 masks, which can be reused, have been distributed to students and staff, and single use surgical masks are also available. Masking is encouraged, even outdoors. AUHSD has canceled field trips, limited spectators at indoor events, and required vaccinations for all volunteers. Nickerson said that there are fewer volunteers at the high school level, and they are mostly used for driving sports teams to away games. Students are eating outdoors and are encouraged to practice social distancing.

Although the high schools feel a bit normal, according to Nickerson, quite a few teachers are out, having tested positive for COVID-19. If they are asymptomatic or not very ill, there are systems in place to allow them to use the Zoom electronic meeting application to be present in their classrooms, along with an in-person substitute teacher.

Nickerson also said that school health officials hope that the new COVID surge will peak in about seven days, with hospitalizations declining a week or two later. "We hope that the decline will be fast and steep," he said. Notably, South Africa experienced such a rapid steep decline after a sharp surge of the Omicron variant, but Nickerson pointed out that not only is the population of South Africa much smaller than the United States, but it is also much younger, which might influence the rate of decline.

California has recognized that remote learning was not supportive of mental health, emotional health, and academic well-being in the way that in-person learning is, according to the Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools Lynn Mackey. In a news release on Jan. 11, county health officer Ori Tzvieli said, "We have learned a lot of hard lessons over the last two years as we have worked through this pandemic." While the Omicron variant is highly contagious, he said, it seems to cause milder symptoms than earlier strains of the virus, and children are less likely to be infected in supervised settings such as schools with masking and testing requirements.

Testing has been the subject of a great deal of community concern. Social media has been flooded with people trying to acquire at-home tests or local testing sites with appointments available. At the federal level, President Biden has promised to make more tests available to schools nationally, and the county has been distributing test kits to the public. AUHSD picked up over 5,000 take-home tests on New Year's Eve and worked with principals on Jan. 2. The tests were delivered on Jan. 3 to about 90% of the AUHSD population. Everybody who came to pick up a test received one, Nickerson said. There are also testing programs going through local schools for targeted populations, with testing available somewhere in Lamorinda every weekday and test supplies are constantly replenished. "We have people working very hard and creatively on it and we have maintained our inventory," Nickerson said.

The county has also distributed take-home test kits. Jill Ray from Supervisor Candace Andersen's office reported to the Orinda mayor's January liaison meeting that the state has been significantly expanding

testing sites, and that a shipment of 800 test kits from the federal government were given out by the county and were gone within 30 minutes on Jan. 11. On Jan. 14 the county distributed more masks, as well as expired but usable N95 masks. The county hoped to distribute more test kits through the county libraries, but Orinda library manager Michael Beller reported that the plan had been shelved owing to staffing difficulties at the libraries, which have managed to remain open by swapping staff around as needed.

Each of the local school districts is maintaining a dashboard, although each dashboard differs in what the district chooses to report. All, however, are reporting positive cases, while some include information about quarantine status of staff and students. The dashboards are updated at least weekly, and most are updated more often.

New guidance was issued Jan. 15 by Moraga School District Superintendent Julie Parks, who noted that cases seem to have stabilized over the last two weeks, and she is hopeful that they will see numbers dropping henceforth. She announced a change to home testing guidance, expanding the use of home testing in school settings. If a student who is out of school sick experiences an improvement in symptoms after 24-hours and the student tests negative with a home COVID-19 test, the student can return to school.

The new guidance means that families will be notified of an exposure in a class and given options for testing between Day 3 and Day 5. Students with negative tests will be permitted to remain in school, regardless of vaccination status, and will continue to participate in after-school activities without restriction. Moraga will be moving into a focus on communication and testing accessibility and away from the more individualized contact tracing that they have been doing.

Students who test positive for COVID-19 will still isolate for a minimum of five days and cannot return to school until they have tested negative after Day 5 or completed a 10-day isolation period.

The schools are continuing to do contact tracing, and are following state mandated quarantine protocols. The county follows the state, and protocols change rapidly, sometimes daily. Contra Costa County provides copious information on its website, including information specifically for schools.

The school district dashboards can be accessed at the following links:

<https://www.acalanes.k12.ca.us/domain/1042>

<https://www.lafsd.org/dashboard>

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VnM_oUPJMSjUBRmNTGMuKodf8w4yfEqiTu-VbpEGF78/edit

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/19J6xXrOjtYZuOL9uP6izgEOrkQa6wyqaQ5MgXImDXto/edit>

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