District 65 Presents Return-to-School Plan for 2021-22

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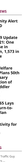

2021-2022 Return Plans
May 17, 2021

On May 17, School District 65 administrators presented their Return to In-School Plan for the 2021-22 school year to members of the School Board.

District 65 schools are scheduled to open for in-person learning for five full days a week at all locations beginning on Wednesday, Sept. 1. The 2021-22 School Calendar is scheduled to open Wednesday, Sept. 1.

The plan will be a rigorous virtual learning option for students who are unvaccinated or who prefer to continue learning prioritizing their medical conditions. It will have limited capacity.

Superintendent Devon Horton said the District's plan includes the protocols recommended by the Illinois Department of Public Health for mental health and a social/emotional transition program to provide intervention and academic supports for students not at grade level and is aligned with the recommendations and the latest guidance related to health and safety practices.

The Illinois State Board of Education adopted a Resolution on May 19 that allows school districts to resume in-person learning in the 2021-22 school year with a "reduced set of health and safety practices." The District 65 Return-to-School Plan anticipated this resolution would be adopted.

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The Transition – Welcoming Students Back

Terrance Little, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services, said the District's Return-to-School Plan includes a focus on in-person learning recognizing that some students have been learning in a remote setting for a full year and some returned in February to a hybrid model.

Mr. Little said preparing for summer each school leadership team will develop a "back-to-school" plan that will:

- Develop opportunities to hold summer building tours and orientations for students.
- Develop opportunities for student orientations and develop social-emotional ownership in the school.
- Develop and have returning students to the routines and shared practices in the building.
- Develop a "back-to-school" plan that includes intentional focus on the whole-child body with promoting school spirit and vision, and social-academic and social-emotional (SEL) goal setting as a shared priority across the school community.

Stacy Bendrick, District 65 Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, said she wanted to underscore what Mr. Little said. "We know that our students and families will have a lot to bring to our community, strong emotional learning, and that we welcome our children back to in-person learner. We need our kids in and part of differing learning communities."

Instruction and Accelerating Learning

Mr. Little said "Students will be fully engaged in all areas including core subjects and specials, so you can expect a full day of learning as we have been in the past."

"We're going to be focused on grade level learning, that focus will be on academic and SEL. We understand that right now researchers are saying that students have experienced losses with no instruction over one before, so we definitely want to make sure that we are proactive instead of reactive," Mr. Little said.

"We really are working strongly to ensure that every single child will have full access to high-quality grade-level instruction all year long," said Dr. Rwerdsky. "And part of our planning process will be to build off of some of the strong practices from this year."

"Educators have done a phenomenal job of really identifying and prioritizing the most powerful priority learning standards and focusing on that learning and making what unfinished learning we need to layer in and adjust in a timely manner. We know our students can access that grade-level learning."

Dr. Rwerdsky added, "Some of our students have really developed strong senses of self-agency and self-advocacy this year. We want to make sure that they will be able to continue to advocate for themselves and have ownership in helping to build out some of those instructional learning plans and pathways to get ourselves to grade level and beyond."

"Additionally, we will be really looking at building in small group or individual one-to-one supports and intervention and instructional support for all grade-level learning."

Dr. Horton likewise said interventions and academic supports will be provided for students not yet at grade level.

Mr. Little said, "The District has learned some things during COVID. We came up with some good technology practices and things of that nature. We want to make sure that we continue those practices in our new approach."

The District plans to continue one-on-one technology and to provide Chromebooks to 3rd to 8th grade students. In the District's 1st and 2nd grades, provide new education computers, and has spoken available to families in need of internet access, and explore what the City and ETHS have. Wifi can be expanded for families needing access.

"We also are expecting that in the fall we will have a new Director of Instructional Education Services," said Mr. Little.

The District's plan contains one section that focuses on a comprehensive approach to mental health. Mr. Little said, "We have identified identify students who may need additional support with social-emotional skills and competencies, and they will be proactively tailored to assist the student. The plan would also provide guidance counselor in the middle school grades."

The District will continue with its special education and to emergent bilingual programs.

Masks and Social Distancing

Aristotle Khaghoian, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, said the District has been looking at school buildings and grounds in an effort to maximize the use of spaces so all students who want to can be in school in a safe and healthy manner.

He said they have been paying attention to "three Not social distancing. Those guidelines are important. Masks are important. Hand hygiene is the practice when students or staff are not wearing masks, such as when eating or napping.

"Students and staff will continue to wear masks. We will continue to practice "outdoor guidelines" change, he said.

Because more students will be returning for in-person learning in the fall, Mr. Little said, "We are looking at maximizing spaces, and purchasing equipment to ensure that we're maximizing the number of students that we can fit inside of the classroom, within three feet, social distancing. We're also making sure that that furniture is something that we can clean after COVID."

He added that administrators, principals, and the buildings and grounds department are examining how to maximize space both inside and outside the buildings, and they are consulting with the District's Medical Advisory Team in this process.

Breakfast and Lunch

Raphael Charlton, Chief Financial and Operations Officer, said the District's breakfast and lunch school in the fall. the District will need to be flexible to provide eating space while maintaining the six-foot social distance guidelines.

Students will eat in classrooms, cafeterias, of gymnasiums - depending on the size of cafeteria spaces, timing of lunch periods, and the number of students at the schools. Heated, enclosed outdoor options are being considered.

"But the critical thing is that in doing this, safety is paramount. We want to make sure that those of us that deal with this," said Mr. Charlton.

He said that every child who wants to eat will be able to do so without regard to the ability to pay. Mr. Khaghoian said the District will be able to offer "anytime a child is eating, we will maintain no two social distance."

The District's plan says students will be offered breakfast in their classroom, and lunch in classrooms. Students eating a hot lunch would pick it up at the cafeteria.

Recess

"Recess will continue to be held outdoors, as long as weather permits," said Mr. Little.

"Use of playground equipment will be allowed. Face coverings are required during recess and outdoor activities, where social distancing cannot be maintained. Recess supervisors and students will be assigned to indoor spaces for recess. And those plans are developed by school leaders."

Before and After School Activities

Dr. LaKesha Green, Deputy Superintendent, said, "We're grateful to retain and enlist a few new partnerships to provide enrichment and in-person learning for our students. It's important important to know and it's that the program is expected to resume in person and adhere to all health safety guidelines."

Mr. Little said, "We will have activities before and after school starting with a safer class the most about middle schools – to keep those bodies moving. We do plan to have those before and after school activities according to all health and safety." guidelines of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Illinois Department of Public Health.

Bus Transportation

Bus transportation will continue to be provided to students in the District. Mr. Little said, "We are committed to making sure that we do it in a safe and effective way," said Mr. Charlton. "So, we have put put some mitigation measures in place to ensure that children are transported safely."

One critical thing, Mr. Charlton said, is that every one of the bus drivers and aides will be trained on safety protocols. Seating in the buses will be assigned seats on all routes to help with the contact tracing. Masks will be worn the entire time while riding the bus.

He added that bus drivers, aides, and students must wear masks, temperature and symptom checks will be required daily to ride a bus, and frequently touched surfaces will be sanitized between routes.

Field Trips

Mr. Khaghoian said, "A lot of the important things that students do in the classroom and outside happen beyond the core instructional periods. And so, one of those is field trips. We decided that local trips would be permitted."

He said it would be necessary, though, to be able to maintain the recommended guidelines around safety. As an example, he said a walking field trip to a neighboring park would be permitted. He added that a field trip that would require busing would be "more iffy at this point." He said that the point right now and what we believe that that will be a risk-benefit analysis, given the guidelines."

Other Mitigation Measures

In addition to masks and maintaining social distancing, the District will use the following mitigation measures:

- Sick students and staff must remain home.
- Households must complete a daily health screening before leaving home including a temperature check.
- Students must use designated arrival entrances at the schools.
- Non-essential visitors will not be allowed in the schools and additional volunteers is prohibited, and
- Students should wash hands often and avoid touching their face.

The District said it will provide notifications of positive COVID cases and of planned close contacts. Contact tracing will be done in conjunction with Cook County Department. The number of COVID cases and quarantines will be posted on the District's dashboard.

The District says it will follow IDPH's guidelines for quarantining students and staff.

"We were successfully able to reduce the spread of COVID in schools by utilizing the known mitigation measures," said Dr. Rwerdsky, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services. It is important to remember that our actions both in and outside of school will which will help keep schools safe and open for in-person learning.

"Very spread that occurred this year has largely occurred outside of schools," she said. "We will continue to follow IDPH guidelines and make adjustments as new guidance comes out."

Preparing the Buildings

Mr. Charlton said, "For the most part this year, we have been very successful in keeping our schools. The plan is for us to continue to do the same."

He said signs will be displayed in hallways and stairways to help maintain social distancing. Schools have been decontaminated and water bottle filling stations will be installed. Hand sanitizer will be available in classrooms.

A decision on whether to use lockers has not yet been made. "If we decide not to allow lockers to be used, we will have to make some adjustments for personal items to be put in," Mr. Charlton said.

Ventilation upgrades have been made. "We've increased the capacity of fresh air coming into the building, and we've made sure that the filters required to keep the buildings safe," Mr. Charlton said. He added that the District has upgraded air filters to allow them to be in the buildings so that they will keep almost of any dangerous pathogens in air ventilation to make the buildings safe.

The Virtual Learning Pathway

"As we began our plan for the fall of next year, we recognized that there would still be parents and students who would have a significant need for a virtual learning option," Dr. Rwerdsky said. "So it was important for us to consider what would those options be if there was no presence of a vaccine, and those children in a number of reasons may not be able to go back in person.

"And for that reason, we identified what we're calling the District 65 Virtual Learning Pathway. We've thought about really developing this as a model, where at a site, virtual site, we'll call it, we'll have a dedicated, virtual learning teacher responsible for those students, where those children would be able to participate in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, in the most robust virtual learning experience that really provides an opportunity for those students who are not able to participate in-person." Dr. Rwerdsky said the decision to create a virtual option.

Dr. Khaghoian distinguished the virtual learning pathway from learning provided from the school year "The delivery of learning in this area will be, we will have a dedicated virtual teacher who's best for those students who are learning spaces, versus this year where we really worked hard to do that in real-time, but we were really using an in-person model in a virtual space."

Dr. Khaghoian said the desire is "to make sure that there's really good a significant rate that as that matrix if we participate in-person." Dr. Khaghoian said, "We will also be focused on creating a virtual community experience where those students who are in the virtual school, the virtual school, where's a center of gravity, where students can connect with teachers and other students.

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staff, and really the fellow students in that learning experience across grade levels. We expect that there will be some limited experiences for students in terms of before or after school."

Dr. Khelghati discussed the criteria to participate in the virtual learning pathway. He said, "There is a Resolution to ensure that everybody returns to in-person learning next year at the State level. [ISBE adopted that Resolution on May 19.] And so, we know that this may impact significantly the kind of criteria we have for who can be participating in this program.

"So, we're really thinking about what are the criteria for those individuals who want to participate in this program, especially if we see that there's a higher demand for the seats in this program. We're really looking to make this a cost-neutral program. And so, for that reason, it's really important to manage the size of it.

The criteria stated in the District's plan are:

- A documented 504, IEP, or student health plan with their home school, which indicates that there is a medical condition that limits the child's ability to return to onsite learning.
- Other factors will be considered including student engagement, academic progress, and attendance during virtual learning.
- An additional limited number of seats may be available by lottery for parent/caregivers who prefer this option for their students.

The virtual pathway will receive students only on the first day of a new trimester unless the student is new to the District. A student may exit the virtual pathway at any time.

New Guidance or a New Surge in COVID

District administrators said the Return-to-School plan is based on current guidance, and they will adjust it if new guidance is issued and it is warranted.

They added that they will also be prepared to shift back to remote learning if there is a resurgence in the virus and it is warranted to protect the health and safety of students.

Board Member Comments

Members of the School Board asked many questions and made suggestions.

Donna Wang Suasked if teachers or staff would be required to be vaccinated.

Dr. Horton said, "We can't legally require them to do that."

Mr. Obafemi added, "The vaccine, as it stands right now, has a conditional approval on it. So, we can't mandate anyone to get it. Now, once that goes away, our Medical Advisory Team says that changes the game. What can then happen is we can require folks to be vaccinated."

Ms. Su also asked if there was assigned seating on buses this year. Mr. Obafemi said there was, but there were not aides on all buses, and if there was not an aide on the bus, it was not feasible to enforce the assigned seating. He said the plan was to provide aides for the buses this coming school year who could enforce the assigned seating. In response to question, he said the District was exploring an app that parents could use to track where a bus was on the route.

Board member Soo La Kim asked if vaccinations became broadly available for K-8 students, how would impact the reopening plan?

Dr. Horton said, "We'll stick with guidance from the CDC." He added that vaccinations are not mandated at this time, and there is no way to know for sure if someone is vaccinated. So, it's hard to make adjustments in that context, he said.

Board Vice President Elisabeth "Biz" Lindsay-Ryan noted that a significant amount of guidance changed last week. She asked the District to consider how it might change its plan depending on how guidance may change in the future and how the District would advise the community and how quickly it would advise the community if changes were made.

After discussion, members of the Board appeared to concur that an agenda item for each of its meetings would be to advise about any changes to the Return-to-School plan. Dr. Horton also said that in the past year he kept the community advised of changes through weekly letters, which he could do in the coming school year.

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