



District faced challenging return to school

Armed with data and a summer spent learning from the experiences of the spring, District 68 officials built a flexible plan for returning to school this fall. While conditions during the pandemic are far from ideal, many staff, students and families report that the process is working reasonably well.

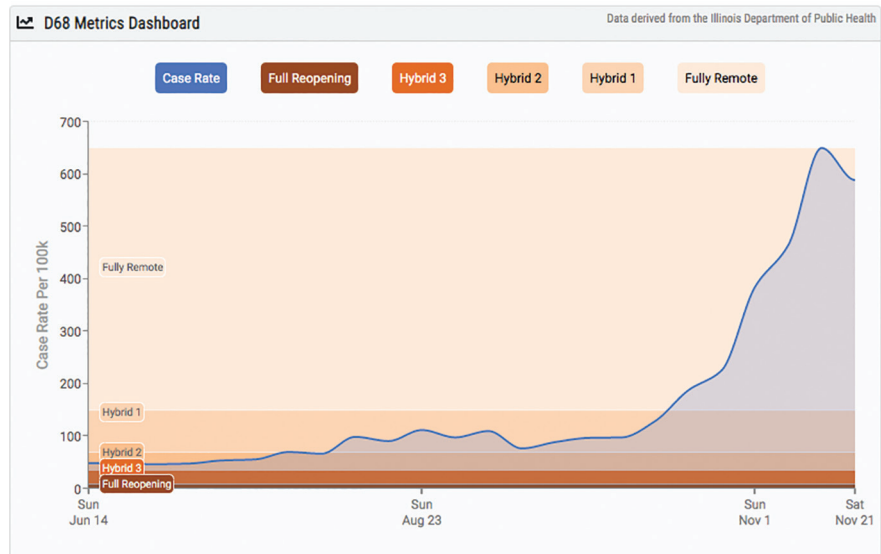
At the start of school in the fall, the district offered parents of English Learner students and students with special needs the option of learning in person or remotely. Of those 220 students, 88 chose in-person instruction.

All other students began the year remotely, and since early November, all instruction has been remote, due to a surge in coronavirus cases (see graphic, right). The district employs a set of board-approved measures to determine the status of in-person versus remote learning.

In October, officials reported results of stakeholder surveys. Among students, about 60 percent reported their remote instruction as “just right” (not too easy, not too challenging). Some 70 percent said they are getting to know teachers, and 56 percent said their teachers are getting to know them. About 40 percent said they were able to form relationships with classmates.

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This dashboard shows how local COVID-19 cases changed over the year, including the early November spike that pushed District 68 to full remote learning.

Among parents, about half said remote learning was going better or much better than expected. About 60 percent said remote instruction was “just right,” and the same proportion said their students were engaged or very engaged in both live virtual instruction and independent work.

Open-ended comments from parents reflected their thoughts on schooling and on the pandemic itself. “Most everything is working well,” one wrote. “While it is certainly not a simple thing to supervise two kids attending school remotely while working from home and trying to be productive, it has not been overly problematic.” Another wrote, “We are enjoying the extra time at home together: additional sleep, less rushing to get to school on time, less stress because of traffic and the drop-off line, less wasted time waiting, more

meals together, more time to do other activities, no worries about being in school, exposure and extra daily cleaning. It was great to see the teachers through Zoom for open house!”

“Most seemed to be of the opinion that it’s working okay, better than we expected,” said Dr. Christie Samojedny, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. “Some parents thought nothing was working well, but those responses were in the minority.”

Teachers and administrators spent the summer digesting the lessons from remote learning last spring, keeping up with fast-changing guidelines from state officials, and collaborating to form the curriculum for fall. “We were able to use the spring to help plan the asynchronous (independent) instruction. Because teachers had had prior

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—Continued from previous page experience they would know how that would look,” Dr. Samojedny said. “Our teachers have been challenged to capture students’ attention on Zoom, and then make the connection to the asynchronous learning.”

“I definitely think we’re adapting — teachers, students and parents,” said Mohammad Hussain, a sixth-grade English-Language Arts teacher in his first year in the district. “Students are generally responsive, parents are very responsive. Teachers are finding more creative ways to instruct students. A lot of hidden skills are coming out.”

Unlike Mr. Hussain, who has taught remotely all year, Highland School first-grade teacher Brandi Barnett started the year in class with six English Learners. “It was wonderful to work face-to-face with some of our neediest students. To have six at a similar level allowed me to really focus,” said Barnett, a 15-year veteran in the district. “I could see their growth and how much they’d learned in 50 days.”

She has continued to work with them remotely since the switch. “It’s definitely been an adjustment, but I feel fortunate that we were able to start out together,” she said.

In the early fall, the district empaneled a committee of stakeholders to determine what information would

STAGES	Remote	Hybrid 1	Hybrid 2	Hybrid 3	Full Reopening
DESCRIPTION	Fully remote instruction	In-person instruction offered for: • EC, K-8 th grade students with IEPs (excluding speech-only IEPs) • K-2 EL students with ACCESS Scores below 3.0 Remote instruction for all other students	Hybrid 1 in-person students continue full-time Part-time in-person instruction offered by grade levels incrementally (up to 25-50% in the building at a time) over time as follows: • Week 1 - EC, K, 1 st , and 8 th grade starts • Week 3 - 2 nd , 3 rd , and 7 th grade starts • Week 4 - 4 th , 5 th , and 6 th grade starts Remote instruction for all other students	Hybrid 3 Full-time in-person instruction option offered for all students Full-time remote instruction option offered for all students	Full Reopening Fully in-person instruction only for all students
METRICS New Cases per 100,000 in Cook County (7-day Rolling Average) as per the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH)	150+ Cases → To advance, experience two incubation cycles (a total of 28 days)	70 - 149 Cases → To advance, experience two incubation cycles (a total of 28 days)	36 - 69 Cases → To advance, experience two incubation cycles (a total of 28 days)	10 - 35 Cases	• Restore Illinois - Phase V • ISBE removes the requirement to offer remote instruction
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In addition to the metric above, local factors and experience (such as local rates, in-school infections, PPE availability, etc.) will be used at every stage of this plan to help determine the District's readiness to move forward or the necessity to move backwards Availability of rapid, accurate, and affordable on-site testing may modify the plan Federal, state, local, or health agency decisions may modify the plan To move back one incubation cycle will be a consideration (14 days total) 				
INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL	Teacher Location: Home Student Location: Home	Teacher Location: Optional Student Location: Mixed	Teacher Location: Classroom Student Location: Optional	Teacher Location: Classroom Student Location: Optional	Teacher Location: Classroom Student Location: Classroom

This graphic describes the range of instructional options for the district, along with the indicators that determine when a given option would be employed.

be used to guide decisions, said Supt. James Garwood, who led the group. The group established a plan (see graphic above) that outlines stages ranging from fully remote, to “hybrid,” to full reopening. There was no evidence of transmission in schools with the limited number of students learning in person up until early November. But given infection trends in the region, Supt. Garwood said, “Some level of remote instruction will likely be required until the end of the school year.”

Supporting the school community

While focusing on teaching and learning, school officials are not ignoring other key issues. Through the district’s RULER program, a social and emotional learning (SEL) tool, they are monitoring students’ attitudes daily. Crissy Mombela, director of special services, said the district is using a facet of RULER called the Mood Meter, which allows students to identify their emotional state in age-appropriate ways. The district’s tech team adapted the tool for use on student tablets, and it’s monitored every day.

“We’re seeing a lot of anxiety, a lot of uncertainty,” Ms. Mombela said. “It’s validating what we’re all experiencing, so to speak.” The district has developed responses based on this data, and will continue to respond after winter break.

Every school and teacher begins the school day with class meetings focused on SEL topics and community building, according to Dr. Samojedny. The elementary schools have offered after-school movement sessions for fourth- and fifth-grade students, with second and third graders to be added after winter break, she said. At the junior high, after-school clubs are expected to start up after winter break.

Teachers and support staff also are working to help individual students, Dr. Samojedny said. Those with special needs have remote learning plans to address their needs, while health plans are in place for medically high-risk students. The district provides reading and math help, teachers are available one-on-one through Zoom meetings and during lunch hours, and social workers offer drop-in appointments. Schools also are following up with families with a positive COVID-19 diagnosis.

Ms. Mombela added that the Mood Meter is being used by staff as well as students. “There’s a focus on wellness, and what we learn informs a biweekly newsletter with adult SEL tips,” she said. “We try to offer strategies, tools and resources to help.”

Those include professional development on implementing curriculum via remote learning, and monthly “Appy

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month. All are invited to attend.

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Welcome, new staff

District leaders welcomed new staff this year in a format that has become much more familiar in recent months — Zoom meetings. All involved included:

Top Row: Muhammad Aslam, bilingual Urdu resource at Highland School; Dr. Christie Samojedny, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction; Rebecca Himelstein, ESL resource at Old Orchard Junior High; Megan Looney, advanced inquiry and meaning, K-2 districtwide; David Ello, drama at Old Orchard.

2nd Row: Katie Gorz, RISE at Devonshire School; Irini Losoff, language arts at Old Orchard; Lisa Goyco, bilingual Spanish resource at Jane Stenson School; Natalie Hernandez, language arts at Old Orchard; Mohammad Hussain, language arts at Old Orchard.

3rd Row: Brian Shoul, special education resource at Old Orchard; Anna



Nelson, school social worker at the Early Childhood Center (ECC); Ami Denenberg, psychologist at the ECC and Devonshire; Matthew Ibrahim, speech and language pathologist at the ECC and Old Orchard; Sarah Cohen, special education resource at Devonshire.

4th Row: Brian Ritz, coordinator of curriculum and school improvement; Joseph McGuire, special education resource at Highland and Jane Stenson; Kaelie Seatter, art at Devonshire; Will

Loftus, math specialist at Jane Stenson; Amanda Cornelius-King, science at Old Orchard.

Bottom Row: Steven Kenmotsu, math at Old Orchard; Daniela Lucero, classroom teacher at Jane Stenson; Barbara Marler, director of English language services.

Not pictured: Angela Hembree, classroom teacher at Devonshire; Cathy Tsokas, classroom teacher at Highland; George O’Neill-Kennedy, physical education at Highland.

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Hour” sessions after school for teachers who want to learn a new tool, tip, or strategy. Dr. Samojedny’s department offers a bimonthly newsletter with timely information and tech tips, resources related to Special Education and English Learners, and Adult SEL recommendations. Building administrators focus on Adult SEL and creating community during monthly staff meetings.

The district reached out to parents as well, according to Diana Juarez, coordinator of family services and engagement. “In surveys, we expected parents to tell us they’re concerned about everything, but dealing with anxiety was most commonly mentioned,” Ms. Juarez said. “I think that reflects their own anxiety and that of their kids.”

She said the district’s social workers and school psychologists created parent education programs to address concerns expressed by parents. Dr. Barbara Marler, director of EL services, hosted Bilingual Parent Advisory Council meetings for families with students enrolled in Spanish and Urdu bilingual programs. Ms. Juarez said the district is also working with local social service agencies to try to reach as many families as possible.

The district has continued breakfast and lunch meal delivery, with about 40,000 meals provided to families so far this school year. Families in quarantine have even had meals delivered to their door, officials said.

The district has coordinated a range of assistance for families in need, including a mobile flu clinic, donations of winter coats and clothing, and

fundraising for the Niles Township Food Pantry. Schools have organized supply pick-ups, with elementary schools even organizing a library book pick-up for several grades. School teams have held support meetings via Zoom for families, surveyed families about caregiver resources, and used donated funds to buy items that families need.

“The board is really looking for the district to be connected, to be a resource,” Ms. Juarez said. “We want to let families feel part of the school community.”

For more information about schooling, visit <https://ipad.skokie68.org/scheduled/return.to.learn.cfm#top>. For more about resources available for parents and families, or to contact Diana Juarez, visit <https://www.skokie68.org/family-services-and-engagement/index>.

HIGHLIGHTS

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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear School District 68
Community,

By the time you receive this we will be saying goodbye to 2020. While we all may have a different list of grievances about the year, enduring nine months of the worst pandemic in over 100 years is the top contender.

We have made unwelcome sacrifices, and they have taken a heavy toll on us all, both individually and collectively. As superintendent, the sacrifice that has pained me the most continues to be that our children are learning remotely instead of in their classrooms with their teachers and peers.

We have all been affected in a number of ways that includes loss of income, socialization, special events and milestones, less exercise, and for some families, the loss of loved ones. The toll has been disproportionate in how it has affected us, often along the fault lines of wealth, privilege, and race. This has led to increased rates of loneliness and depression, and for some, anger at those public figures responsible for making public safety decisions. Officials have been faced with impossible choices, which have made it impossible to make everyone happy.

At the time I write this, 300,000 Americans have died, more than the total number of Americans that died in combat in World War II, and experts predict we will pass 500,000 by March. At a population of 322 million, that will mean that more than one in 700 Americans will have

passed due to COVID.

While all of the negative aspects of the last year are at the forefront of our minds, I have talked to countless individuals about their experiences over the last months. Despite the hardships everyone has faced, it continues to be humbling to witness the many examples of positivity, resilience, patience, and generosity displayed by so many of you. In the midst of all that has made us unhappy, some positive recurring themes have emerged. Parents have shared feeling an increase in closeness with family. People have gotten outdoors more and rediscovered the regenerative power of nature and neighborhood interactions. Our assumptions about many things we have taken for granted have been challenged, leading many to seek changes in our society, deeper meaning, and higher purpose.

While we still have some difficult months ahead, the approval of vaccines is a positive sign that better days are ahead, and for a school district that means opening schools for in-person instruction once again. The Board of Education and I remain hopeful that this can happen in the coming months and we will continue to monitor the course of the pandemic so that we can do so as soon as possible.

As we enter the new year, please take time to reflect on bright spots around you and share them with others. My wish for you is that the year ahead is filled with opportunities and joy for you, your family, and friends.

Sincerely,
James E. Garwood, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools

Our mission is to develop children who are confident and creative learners. We provide a rigorous curriculum and a supportive school environment that promotes high achievement, encourages personal growth, and meets the unique needs of each child.