

Chippewa Valley set to bring middle, high school students back

Officials vote 4-3 to resume in-person classes

By Nicole Tuttle For **The Macomb Daily**

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Iroquois Middle School and all of the district's middle and high schools will return to in-person learning next month.

Secondary students will be coming back to Chippewa Valley Schools classrooms on Nov. 9 after the district's school board recently approved moving these students out of a remote setting.

Monday during a virtual meeting, the Chippewa Valley Schools Board of Education approved 4-3 to transition middle and high school students from remote learning to a hybrid learning model. The motion was made by Treasurer Jill DeMuyneck Zech and seconded by Trustee Andy Patzert. DeMuyneck Zech, Patzert, Vice President Denise Aquino and Trustee George Sobah voted yes. President Frank Bednard, Secretary Laura Cardamone and Trustee Elizabeth Pyden voted no. Superintendent Ron Roberts said that it was part of the district's commitment for a safe return to school for students, but that if conditions changed a return to remote learning is possible. Students in the district's virtual academy can continue learning from home.

"We are not taking this lightly as we consider bringing kids back into our buildings. We said from the beginning that our goal is and has been to get kids back to school face-to-face," Executive Director of Secondary Education Paul Sibley said.

The move comes as October has continued see increased caseloads of COVID-19 in Michigan. So far in the month, there have been 24,696 confirmed cases, and the current seven-day average stands at 1,669 cases, the highest total since April.

Sibley illustrated that the 6-12 grade students would be divided into Group A and Group B, attending school in person on alternating days Monday through Thursday. Group A and Group B will attend in-person school on alternating Fridays. He said the goal is to minimize the number of students in any

one class, and that the district is trying to get secondary class sizes at 20 students or below. Students and staff are required to wear masks, including on busses, for all indoor activities, and for arrival and dismissal.

"We are committed to making them available for students who don't have one. Face shields are not an acceptable replacement for a facial covering or a mask, which we have talked about. So based on all of this, what we are saying is that a facial covering is a school rule. And it is required to be worn. Just like any other school rule when students are not following the rules then we would have to consider discipline for students," Sibley said.

One district school, Dakota High School, has the highest enrollment total in the state with 3,007 students while Chippewa Valley High School has the 10th largest figure with 2,347 students attending the Clinton Township school. Those figures include freshman centers on both campuses.

Sibley also discussed health and safety related signage in buildings, including hallway foot traffic labels and socially distanced seating in classes and lunchrooms. Outdoor lunch seating will also be used when appropriate. Students will have staggered arrival and release times, utilizing different building entrances. Lunch period release will also be staggered. A potential orientation day is in the works for sixth-graders also, Sibley said.

"Our buildings are committed to making sure that every student has their own desk in the classroom so they're not sitting two students per table, which is something as I mentioned we are very committed to in all of our classrooms at each level. Masks will be worn in the classrooms. As I mentioned there will be as much social distancing as possible in our classrooms and so we do feel that that the environment will be one that is safer," Sibley said.

When the hybrid students are not in the classrooms, they will be provided work allowing them to continue their education at home. Executive Director of Innovation and Learning Walter Kozlowski said schools focus on learning targets. He described a hybrid model as not reducing instructional time, but rather dividing up instructional time differently. Kozlowski said that during a standard school year, students participate in both synchronous and asynchronous learning. He termed synchronous learning as, for example, a teacher at the front of a room teaching an entire class. Asynchronous learning, according to Kozlowski is, for example, when students of the same class work on different things, with some working at computers, others reading, others writing. The hybrid model would break the asynchronous learning into the work students do at home, and the synchronous learning in class, Kozlowski added.

"The hybrid return will provide the safety measures that I had mentioned that will limit spread of the virus. It will provide such needed in person support to our kids," Sibley said.

Sibley added the Nov. 9 start date will allow the district time to address some staffing issues with support staff. Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Adam Blanchard said that the district is short staffed in many support areas, primarily with para-educators. Nov. 9 will be the start of the second quarter for students, allowing students to start new elective courses. Sibley said that although in a remote model students have access to education, many are struggling.

"I don't want it to sound at all like I am not extremely proud of what we are doing in Chippewa Valley Schools because I could not be more proud of the job that our teachers and our administrators are doing in order to provide quality education from a remote setting for our students. It is absolutely remarkable, to be honest with you," Sibley said. "But I will tell you that as we have gotten into the school year, now we start to pull data. It is data that you can't really argue. There is no doubt that the struggles that our students face are real. And they're definitely impacting our most at-risk students. The number of F grades at the secondary level are extremely high."

As the first academic quarter is drawing to a close, administrators have studied the number of secondary level Fs given compared to the same semester last year. Sibley said although some grades may improve as students turn in end of term assignments, currently statistics illustrate that about twice as many Fs could be issued at the high school level compared to last year's first semester. District middle school level students were also averaging higher F grades, with five to six times as many set to be issued. Through discussion with building administrators, Sibley said that it has been determined the higher failure rates are due to students not turning in assignments. As to whether or not this was due to tech issues, Sibley said this was hard to address and that students need to communicate with teachers if they have technology issues.

"I do think that part of it is the accountability that our students feel to their teachers when they are face-to-face," Sibley said.

The move comes after district elementary schools have moved to in-person learning earlier this month.

"The reason that we started with our elementary schools is not a shock. They are smaller schools. And so we recognize at the secondary level we are going to have more kids in our buildings on a given day," Sibley said. "So when we talk about those numbers at the middle schools we will be talking about numbers somewhere between 300 and 550 students in a building on a given day. This is a reduction from what we normally have in our buildings which is between 600 and 1,300 students at the middle school level."

At the high school level, Sibley estimated that about 850 to 950 students would be present in a district high school on any given day. He estimated that the buildings he estimated typically hold 1,900 to 2,300 students. Ninth grade centers for the two high schools will have between 250 and 350 students present on a given day, in buildings that can hold between 700 and 800 students.

The district's website at chippewavalleyschools.org/ has the district's return to school guidelines posted. The guidelines offer an in-depth description of the hybrid plan. The guidelines include information regarding PPE, masks, health screening, health department information and how sick students or staff are handled. The guidelines also outline school office procedures, arrival and dismissal procedures, hygiene, protocols for suspected COVID-19 cases, visitors, and arrangements for classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, lockers, and cubbies at all levels.