

EDUCATION

U.D. super upbeat on return to in-person learning

By Pete Bannan

pbannan@21st-centurymedia.com

The declining rate of positive COVID-19 cases and new guidance from the Chester County Department of Health has Upper Darby School District Superintendent Dr. Dan McGarry hopeful more students can soon return for in-person learning.

"Trends seem to be working in our favor," McGarry said in an interview Tuesday. "We're continuing to make adjustments based on our trending down to lower positivity rates and lower incidence in the community. That allows you to move from 6 feet of distancing to potentially three feet of distancing. Now in Upper Darby, it is still very difficult to pull off because of our spaces so we will move in a conservative direction."

Since mid-January, children in Upper Darby's K-3 grades have returned to school in the flexible/in-person cohort instructional model. Low-incidence K-12 programs also returned Jan. 19 four days a week.

"At this time, we are slowly bringing back more students at the 6 feet cohorts and then as positivity rates go down, we'll return kids at less than 6 feet," he said.

The district recently announced students in the 4th and 5th grade will be returning to buildings on March 1st and students in grades while 6th and 12th grades are set to return to buildings March 22. However, McGarry said they are working to moving that timeline up, with K-8 and then 9-12 returning sometime near March 27, which is spring break.

"Our goal will be to get K-12 back into school," said McGarry. "Our first game plan is to get kids back in K-12 at 6 feet of social distancing

and where possible looking at returning of students at less than 6 feet starting with elementary schools first."

On Friday, the Chester County Department of Health released new guidance to superintendents. They said the risk of COVID-19 transmission will continue to be defined by the 7-day incidence rate per 100,000 and the seven-day percent positivity rate within the community. The guidance has four categories - low, moderate, high and very high - over four weeks.

When community transmission levels fall below a seven-day positivity rate of 10 percent and the incidence rate is below 100 cases per 100,000 population, the guidance calls for 6-foot distancing between students to the greatest extent possible, but allows for no less than 3 feet when necessary. Six-foot distancing is required for all staff-to-staff and staff-to-student interactions.

When the seven-day positivity rate is above 10 percent and seven-day incidence rate per 100,000 is over 100, then 6-foot distancing is strongly recommended for students.

McGarry said they've been testing students and staff through the Intermediate Unit/CHOP program known as Project ACE-IT which uses 15 minute antigen rapid tests.

"Special education students, 1st grade students, second grade students working way up, and staff. We have not had any issues at all or seen any spread from student to student or student to staff," McGarry said.

Since bringing younger children back in January, the district has not seen experienced the spread of COVID in schools. Cases that have occurred have been tracked to staff members who had a close contact who is an adult that had COVID symptoms outside of school.

"Our nurses have been phenomenal with the rapid antigen testing, and compliance has been great with that," said McGarry. "The staff has been fantastic with that."

As the district moves to returning more students, they have been working with teachers - going to room to room to address their needs. They've added HEPA filters to the air systems, PPE for staff, and corridors are one-way path routes to reduce crowding.

"No doubt we have some of the older buildings in the county," he said. "Where teachers wanted Plexiglas around their desks, we put Plexiglas around their desks. We've been working hard meeting their needs."

"The key to all this is still wearing your mask," McGarry said. "The key for us will be teachers have to stay at least 6 feet away from the kids. We have everything set up so that teachers are socially distanced from students."

McGarry said one story that will come out of the pandemic is that some students improved their learning while others need to be in class.

"There are kids who are thriving learning virtually - whether it's synchronous instruction or asynchronous, and there are students who have to be in school," he said. "What the pandemic is forcing districts to have to do is a whole new set of educational requirements. Coming out of this pandemic, we're going to have kids who want to log in synchronously and work from home - for a lot of reasons, school anxiety, or they learn they can concentrate more. Coming out of the pandemic, we're going to have to provide those students those opportunities to attend in person instruction, to learn synchronously, now that we've put all this money into our build-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

K-3 students in Upper Darby headed back to school Jan. 19.



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Hybrid class at Aronimink.

ings with these CARE dollars to prepare for this."

He noted every classroom in the district now has two cameras and a microphone.

"That technology is in play - not just for the pandemic but moving forward," he said while noting the human factor is one of the most chal-

lenging.

"We've had substitute teachers that would rather substitute virtually; they are not willing to sub in-person. Ideally, it would be great to get that money for more human beings in the buildings and use that money to offset some of those added costs, but really the money has helped us with technology, with online resources. We've really put the money towards professional development for curriculum for technology, for moving 1 to 1 as a school district."

"That money has really helped survive some of these changes. Otherwise we could not have pulled it off," he added. "The community wants to see this happen. I still think staffing is going to be a big issue as we move below six feet (separation for students)."

He noted that lunches still require 6 feet of separation between students. He also believes districts will see a number of staff taking time off under the Federal Family and Medical Leave Act until they get vaccinated.

McGarry said as students return, schedules may change, resulting in students who may have had had one teacher most of the year now finding someone else is covering that class in-person.

"That's why we are going to work our way to get K-12 back at 6 feet and then work our way back when the positivity rates go down," he said. "Even at 6 feet, I anticipate a staffing issue."

Despite some negative comments from the public and on social media, McGarry said superintendents in Delaware County have been working hard to provide the best education to students and to return them to in-person learning.

"It's very complicated," he said.