



MORTON

UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

June 24, 2020

School Board debates reopening measures

“I don’t see any reason why we can’t be face to face in the fall, every day,” Superintendent Jeff Hill told Morton School Board members on June 23. “We are going to have to balance precautions with what is best for student learning.”

That position comes out of a local consensus and a conviction that face-to-face instruction is far superior to e-learning, though pragmatically, District 709 will have to prepare for a “seamless” mix over the coming school year.

The following priorities for the Fall of 2020 have been identified:

First and foremost, there must be a high-quality educational experience, whether instruction takes place in-person or remotely, and essential content must be defined. Second, safety precautions are paramount for students and staff alike. Third, the school district wants to support its community by providing a sense of normalcy through as regular and as predictable a schedule as possible, with significant consideration given to the economic and emotional impact on families.

Inside the schools themselves, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) is requiring safety measures that will include the wearing of face masks (unless a medical exemption is provided), limiting group gatherings to no more than 50, social distancing to the degree possible, self-certification of symptoms, and

regular and intense cleaning of school facilities. These guidelines could change in the coming weeks, and Morton District 709 has been lobbying state legislators for increased flexibility based on the specific community spread of COVID-19.

Cafeterias, gymnasiums and other common areas will require some creative modifications for lunch and PE classes. Bus transportation will pose problems where social distancing is concerned, as could hallway passing periods. Younger students may struggle with the masks. “Sick rooms” will have to be found where students can isolate without exposing themselves to others. School officials are trying to anticipate all of those challenges and to have answers to them to the degree possible.

The goal going into the school year is that parents have a good idea in advance “what to expect when their child walks in the door,” said Assistant Superintendent Craig Smock.

A survey soon will be going out to parents to gather input on a variety of aspects of the reopening prior to the School Board making its decision. In fact, there are many constituencies to consider, including staff and the unions that represent them. The School Board will discuss these issues again at its next meeting on Tuesday, July 7.

Meanwhile, four school calendars are under consideration by the Morton District 709 School Board as its members try to balance the needs of public health and learning entering an unpredictable 2020-21 school year.

The four alternatives differ in the start and end of classes, the length of Christmas and Easter breaks, and the number of “flexible wellness days,” or emergency days, that will be factored into the schedule to deal with the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak, Curriculum and Technology Director Troy Teater told the board.

The scenario that seems to be gaining the most traction would be a school year that starts on Aug. 11 and ends on June 2 for students, with Christmas vacation

running from Dec. 19, 2020 to Jan. 3, 2021, and Easter from March 29 to April 5, 2021. That calendar would contain 10 flex days.

Board member Kevin Austin called it “a good middle ground,” and other board members seemed to be leaning in that direction after batting around alternatives that ranged from year-round school -- half-jokingly -- to four-day school weeks, from a 5-week Christmas break to coincide with flu/COVID season to up to 21 flex days.

In other business, the board received a facilities maintenance and capital improvement overview that anticipates some \$25.2 million in spending over the next 15 years. The plan includes school roof replacements; gym, athletic field and science lab improvements at the high school; and HVAC work at the junior high, among other investments.

“Essentially, we’re just managing, doing what we have to do,” said Hill. Careful management with an eye toward long-term viability has allowed the district to balance out its capital expenditures to reasonable annual levels.

The board also got a budget report that shows Fiscal Year 2020 revenues coming in higher than anticipated across the board, primarily because of increased investment interest income. That and some other savings have reduced what already was a small projected deficit and dip into district reserves, primarily due to the MJHS addition project. Fund balances on the district’s \$40 million budget remain healthy, and well above district policy.

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