



MORTON
UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

Large percentage of Morton parents want kids back in school

An overwhelming majority of Morton parents who responded to a back-to-school survey – nearly 95 percent -- said they intend to send their children to class in August despite the lingering COVID pandemic.

Morton Schools Superintendent Jeff Hill shared the results of the survey with the School Board on Tuesday. More than three-quarters of students had parents participate in the poll, upwards of 2,400 in all out of a total school population of approximately 3,100.

Of that number, more than 64 percent of parents indicated that their children will return to school, without conditions, reported Hill. Another 30 percent plus said their kids would be present with certain stipulations.

The largest percentage of those latter respondents, more than half, said they felt strongly that students should be permitted to take a break from the mandatory wearing of masks at some point during the school day.

There were two other statistically significant camps. One group, comprising nearly 13 percent of the “attending-but” faction, said they want school officials to strictly enforce mask usage. The other, about 11 percent, demanded that social distancing be a top priority.

Meanwhile, an emphatic 5 percent communicated that their children would be staying home. The vast majority of those opposed the mask requirement, which is a state government edict. Eleven respondents said their students have pre-

existing medical conditions that do not warrant the risk of attending school with the virus still circulating.

The Morton Board and administration have been pushing for greater local flexibility and autonomy with regard to school opening decisions, especially given the relatively low rates of infection in Tazewell County and the priority educators place on in-person instruction. Reaffirming that position was recent guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics that schools are the healthiest, most productive place for young people to be.

“No one will be 100 percent happy,” said Hill, while expressing confidence that most will find the district’s back-to-school plan better than the alternatives. “We’re going to try to focus on learning over logistics ... We want to do the best we can to make sure the environment is conducive to learning. We’re trying to mitigate risk. We’re not going to be able to eliminate risk.”

Beyond that, everyone will be in a different emotional place, students and staff alike, when they return to local classrooms. Based on the survey responses, it is clear that some will be anxious, and others will have no fear at all. As such, “as a school community, I think we have to respect and love our neighbor,” to cut others some slack as they all cope with these unprecedented times, said Hill.

Board members generally agreed.

While there are always extremes on both ends of any given controversy, the high response rate and desire to be back in school “speak volumes,” said Board President Shad Beaty.

He noted that there will be a lot of variance in how central Illinois school districts deal with reopening schools. But in Morton, what he and other board members are hearing is that returning to school full-time, five days a week, gives most families a level of comfort in a world of much unpredictability. That said, those same folks must prepare themselves to be adaptable, as change is going to be a constant.

“I don’t think any of us knows what some of these guidelines are going to look like on a day-to-day basis ... human nature being what it is,” added Hill. “We’ll try to be prepared.”

The School Board will make its final recommendations for the 2020-21 school year at its meeting on July 21.

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