District, parents, students prepare for extraordinary first day of school

BY STEVE YENCICH, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

There’s a certain rhythm in the run-up to the first day of school. Principals return, teacher parking lots begin to fill, and school clothes and supplies are bought as the days shorten. Tradition holds that many parents are secretly happy to have their much-loved mess-makers sent back to school. While all these routine things will still happen, it’s different this year because the first day of school has not taken place during a worldwide pandemic for over a century. Some have fears that have not been felt by parents since the pandemic of 1918. COVID-19 has resulted in multiple mandates from Lansing for district-wide and individual school reports, decisions, and preparations that must be completed before school begins. Parents have additional COVID-related choices to make. None as significant as this past Monday’s decision to place their children on Path A (a return to school and face-to-face instruction) or Path B in which their children would take all classes from home, online, through state-approved vendors. Thus far, the parents of approximately 24% of ERHS students chose Path B. Roughly 16% of Cherryland Middle School children, 20% of Lakeland Elementary, and 12% of Millcreek students chose Plan B. All other students will return to class on the first day of school.

When asked the most vexing challenges he’s faced in the run-up to the school year, ER High School Principal, Mike Travis, said, “The bottom line is schools have responsibility for two of the things that people care about most: their children and their tax dollars.” It’s a balancing act that requires a small district with limited resources to be creative, cost-conscious, and to work beyond the call of duty. Sanitation plans, virtual learning descriptions, FAQs, and strategies for what to do when COVID19 cases appear have all been developed. Travis said that nobody worries about job descriptions or contracts when there’s work this important to be done. ERS Board members say that “can-do” attitude is something this district has displayed for years, and many in the community appear to agree.

One parent said, “I’m more worried about my children who are in their eighties.” According to the CDC, therein lies the most significant risk. As of August, data shows that of the more than 170,000 COVID deaths nationwide, just 337 children and young adults (infants through age 24) have died from COVID19. However, over 130,000 adults aged 65 to 85+ have lost their lives to the virus. Keeping older family members safe will be an ongoing concern for parents of school-aged children.

But what will that first day look like, and what was involved readying the district to open its doors? The short answer is “masks, separation, and sanitizers everywhere and every day.” There will be seating charts in all cafeterias, which will be dated and filed daily to enable contact tracing should COVID cases arise. CMS and high school students will clean desks as classes change, and custodians will sanitize all doors knobs, lights switches, surfaces, and countertops each night. Special sanitizing, infrared lighting is being considered, as well as the use of 360 electrostatic sanitization spray machines, or possibly a combination of the two. Until that equipment is received, surfaces and buildings will continue to be wiped down by custodians with sanitizing agents at the end of each day.

There are other unavoidable downsides to holding school in person or online. Travis said that “asynchronous” instruction provided, which essentially means real-time interactions between students and teachers, just as in the classroom. Eleven years ago, Elk Rapids and TCAPS became the first schools regionally to offer remote instruction. Travis says that those years of experience will make the scale-up and transition for ER Schools and students easier.

For students on Path B, they’ll awake to greet their parents, aka “teaching assistants,” at home. Students will log onto virtual classes, presented by state-approved vendors for all instruction. High school students are encouraged to be online for 6-8 hours per day. Younger students are advised to spend less time online and take frequent breaks throughout the day. If they meet all state requirements for graduation, senior students who continue on Path B for the entire school year will receive a diploma from Elk Rapids High School. In all cases, the district advises parents to be as available as possible because instruction will be “asynchronous” with no real-time communication with instructors. Instruction will be provided in recorded video presentations, including visual, audio, and graphics. Virtual students will be assigned to ERS district teachers who will serve as mentors to help guide students through the online process and any technical difficulties they might encounter.

Travis said that mental health issues for K-12 age students have increased due to the pandemic. He pointed to a study published last month by the University of Wisconsin that found 68% of K-12 athletes were anxious or depressed due to sports cancellations. There are other unanswered downsides to holding school in person or virtually during a pandemic. Regardless of which path ER student families choose, it will be vital to track their physical and emotional well-being just as closely as their academic progress. As for the general condition of staff, the impact has been felt. “Right now,” Travis said, “we’re all pretty tired, but we know when we see kids back in our buildings, we’ll catch our second wind.”