

Learning Together. That could be this year's motto for students and staff as Red Wing Public Schools reopened with major systems changes throughout the district to address the Corona Virus pandemic. As school board directors we are responsible for not only the education of our students but also their safety and well-being. We weighed the risks presented by Covid-19 vs. remote learning limitations when deciding to open our schools for in-person learning at the pre-k and elementary level and a hybrid model for grades 5-12. Here is what we found:

Good things are happening in our schools every day. Leaders in the district have shared some of what they are witnessing in the buildings, how staff and students have come together to shine during an unprecedented time of challenge.

At Colvill Family Center, our littlest ones are eager to make friends and meet their teachers. Principal Min Martin Oakes says, "On the third day of class, I heard a paraprofessional asking students as they arrived and sanitized their hands, "What do we do when we get to the classroom?" A couple students chimed in with, "Hang up our backpacks and sign in!" That says a lot about the teaching on days one and two. These kiddos crave routine and familiarity. Our teachers and paraprofessionals are establishing these norms for our youngest students.

At Sunnyside School, there is laughter in the hallways. Kids are engaged in learning. Teachers are making use of the outdoor spaces for lessons and the morning meeting, allowing students to spread out and take a mask break. Sunnyside Principal Mike Pagel asked one third grader what her favorite thing about school was this year. Her reply? "Everything!"

Dean Kim Cory, at Jefferson School said, "I can't tell you how great things are going." She loves her tremendous staff and while grades five and six have been challenging, she credits Superintendent Karsten Anderson with focusing on the big picture, challenging assumptions, and finding solutions. Dean Cory said the technology paraprofessionals have been "absolutely vital."

Principal Chris Palmatier of Twin Bluff said that setting up the building for elementary students has been a challenge but his staff, whom he's enjoying getting to know, has been very helpful. Chris also gives credit to Superintendent Anderson for the coordinated administrative effort to open the schools safely. He added that the teachers' union president, Kirby Hanson "has done a great job in working with staff and administration to keep things together."

Jen Grove, our Burnside School principal, reports teachers coming together, learning their new Wonders curriculum and finding ways to have fun in the classroom. She's extremely proud of the co-teachers; particularly those without recent elementary teaching experience. They're pairing their talents in new ways: the musical energy of one with the knowledge and experience of their classroom partner. Another team brings together instructional strength and technical expertise to benefit students. Jen also credits the paraprofessional group with helping to craft a dismissal plan that gets all students to their parents or busses within 10 minutes.

The title, "paraprofessional" covers a huge pool of employees with numerous and fluid job descriptions. These folks are the unsung heroes of successful schools. We have heard overwhelmingly positive comments on efforts they have put forth to make opening schools this year a success. Our Media and tech team, led by Charlie McLaughlin, Meg Lahammer and Mike Pagel earned acclaim, shouldering an enormous burden, getting Chromebooks back from last year's students and labeling new ones, making asset protection a priority. With distance learning, they have been "absolutely vital", with so many moving parts and "no easy button anywhere."

Buildings and Grounds Director Alan Gaylor along with Kevin Johnson and staff, have played an integral role in the safe reopening of our schools. Our ventilation systems are bringing in as much fresh air as possible and custodial staff is keeping high touch areas clean throughout the day along with the deep cleaning necessary under Covid-19. Without exception everyone we spoke to praised the reliability and dedication of our custodial staff for keeping our students and staff safe. While the ever-changing CDC and State guidelines made for a complex re-opening, with our District teamwork, Alan said, "planning couldn't have gone better."

Brent Lexvold, Food Service Director, reports that the opening of school is going well and getting better. Orders for food stuffs were placed last year before the pandemic hit. Brent and the Head Cooks have successfully adapted the new daily menus, creating 1300 meals each week, 60% of which are taken home by hybrid schedule students. Coordinated and executed with teachers and paraprofessionals, it's just another way the entire membership of ISD #256 works together for the children of our community. Brent says he "couldn't be more proud" of the work they have done.

Our Health and Safety guru, Shanda Jorgensen, in a suddenly elevated role, makes certain that our plan keeps working. "The" `what if's' are not happening" and "procedures are working well...we've had no close contacts in school". She is keeping on top of the changing requirements and guidelines and sings the familiar refrain, "Everyone is working to keep kids safe."

New District Nurse, Joni Gorman has been pleased with her staff of school nurses. As their jobs have become more high-profile, they are tackling new procedures and remaining flexible to help one another out. Former District Nurse Kris Klassen, filling in at Jefferson School this year, gave valuable guidance and assistance over the summer.

High School principal, George Nemanich acknowledges many challenges, but staff and students understand the situation and are practicing all necessary precautions. Both Student Council and SOAR class contribute to the mental well-being of the student body, holding sunrise donut breakfasts in the stadium and planning a new type of Homecoming this year. Principal Nemanich credits the "Google Team", an internal group of faculty doing peer to peer coaching with their colleagues on meeting the technology challenges in hybrid instruction and distance learning. He adds that it's a delight to hear music when he passes by the band and choir rooms as they adapt to conducting classes.

In late spring the Community Education and Recreation staff met with over 10 community organizations to create "Ready, Set, Red Wing!" This program provided online resources for families with ideas for summertime activities. Participants explored unfamiliar parts of Red Wing and learned about the many nonprofits in the city. Director Dawn Wettern says that "each and every day (employees) go over and above, providing the best services and opportunities to our Red Wing community of lifelong learners!"

Finally, tremendous credit must be given to our students and families, rising to the challenge and cooperating all across the district. Even our youngest students are managing to keep their masks on! With Covid-19 cases increasing in Goodhue County and across the State, we remain in a fluid environment, beyond our control but well within the power of reasonable, responsible adults to effectively mitigate. We are on the edge, but know that our efforts at bringing students and staff together to start the 2020-21 school year in a hybrid model was the best chance to get back in education mode, lessening the severity of any future changes that may be required.

The School Board gives thanks to everyone involved in getting school started in these demanding times. All the Board can do is work within the parameters set out by the state and make the best use of resources allocated. We are fully dependent on Administration and Staff to execute the plans that we approve. Red Wing has a superlative assembly, working together, making us proud to be a part of Red Wing Public Schools.