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BACK-TO-SCHOOL BLUEPRINT GUIDES SUCCESSFUL RETURN TO THE BUILDINGS

All four District 23 schools returned to a full in-person model of instruction for the 2021-2022 school year, with COVID-19 mitigation strategies in place to maintain safe and healthy learning environments. Superintendent Don Angelaccio, Ed.D., says the strategies are working, and there has been a smooth transition to the “new normal” in the school buildings.

“Our COVID cases have been very low, less than 2 percent of our population. This is the result of a collaborative effort, with everyone doing their part and living up to their responsibility,” he says.

Camron Nystrom, Ed.D., principal of MacArthur Middle School, agrees that staff, students and parents/guardians have been adaptable and supportive of adjustments to the school day and extracurricular activities. “There’s an energy of doing whatever it takes so we can continue to safely come together as a school community.”

The COVID-19 mitigation strategies are outlined in the District’s [Back-to-School Blueprint](#), which has a theme of “Adapt. Acknowledge. Advance.” The mitigations include masking on buses and while inside the schools, other than during lunch and outdoor recess. The schools are also maintaining three to six feet of distance, per Illinois Department of Public Health and Centers for Disease Control guidance, except for instances such as passing periods. And the District is prioritizing regular cleaning and disinfection in the schools.

In addition, District 23 has launched optional weekly COVID-19 screening for students and staff, utilizing the non-invasive SHIELD Illinois saliva-based test. The highly effective test identifies pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic staff and students. District 23 schools are among the more than 1,200 in Illinois that are utilizing SHIELD Illinois. “We believe this will reduce the spread in our schools and help us sustain in-person learning,” Angelaccio says, adding that the testing takes only a couple minutes and causes minimal disruption to the school day.

Now that students are back, District administrators see some unexpected benefits that have occurred since March 2020, such as improved technological capabilities. For example, the schools have achieved an effective balance between digital and in-person instruction, and streaming technology is being applied more frequently to communicate with and reach broader audiences (for example, School Board meetings and Parent Nights).

Angelaccio says he’s also pleased to see the resilience of the District 23 community. “These are still changing and uncertain times, but it’s gratifying to know we can rally together to support our students’ academic and social growth and keep our community safe,” he says. “I am confident we will continue to meet whatever challenges come our way.”