

Del Norte schools to remain open

December 26, 2020



While COVID-19 has caused many schools to close down, Del Norte Unified School District hopes to buck the trend.

Superintendent Jeff Harris announced last week that not only will schools remain open to in-person education when Christmas break is over, the district is working to bring high school students fully back to class.

During his weekly report to the community, Harris said ultimately whether students can learn in person is up to the community.

“All students will return to school as they currently are,” Harris said. “So, the same structure your child is in today is the same structure they will return to Jan. 4. The only major shift we’ll see after the new year involves Del Norte High School. On Dec. 10, the board of trustees adopted the Del Norte High School in person expansion plan that was proposed by Principal Allison Eckert.”

The plan, which will go into effect Jan. 25, will open Del Norte High School to all students who want to be in class. Currently, the high school is only open to in-person classes for electives such as drama, choir and band in the afternoon. Harris said while that has been good, students need to be in class more, so he is happy Eckert came up with a plan to allow that.

“I think we have to have them in school. At the last progress grading period, there were 60 percent more Ds and Fs than there was the year before. It’s taking a toll socially, emotionally and academically on kids,” Harris said. “I think we have to get kids back in person as much as we can. We’re trying to let kids come back as fully as possible and as safely as possible.”

The plan will be to open the school to all students every morning. Rather than trying to teach six classes in the shortened day, the district is working on a plan that will teach three classes every quarter.

“Imagine taking three classes off high school kids, letting them focus in depth,” Harris said. “Hopefully this will help a bunch of kids rebound.”

Del Norte Unified School District has bucked the trend of distance learning this whole year. When school opened in September, all preschool to eighth-grade students were welcomed in person in a different manner. Half the students attend Monday and Wednesday and half Tuesday and Thursday. All students then do distance learning Fridays.

Limiting the number of students allows the classrooms to be cleaned and sanitized before students return. The result has been the vast majority of students – more than 90 percent – have been in class.

In California, schools can remain open even if counties are in the Purple Tier, and Harris said the district would do everything it can to stay open.

He did warn three things could force schools to close.

1 – executive or public health order

2 – student or staff infection rate climbs too high

3 – Widespread quarantines within community so there’s not enough staff to function.

While COVID has not been a problem in the district so far, with no cases reported as spread on campus, Harris said families need to work to ensure that remains the case.

“If you’re sick stay home, if you’re positive stay home, if you’ve been in close contact or your quarantined, stay home,” he said. “I think even more than that we really want to encourage our families, if you are traveling or hosting families from outside the area, we would highly encourage you to consider placing your child on an independent study contract that covers up to two weeks of in-person learning upon your return to town or your guests’ departure. For instance, if you are hosting family over the Christmas holiday and they are leaving on Dec. 26 or Dec. 27, we would really encourage you to contact your child’s teacher and request independent study for the week of Jan. 4. Now the thought process behind that is if you’re back in town or

your guest leaves on the 26th, you have one week in there you can monitor for COVID symptoms or test for COVID. That's that first week, but the week of Jan. 4 is the week we request you ask for independent study."

Harris said ultimately, if the schools can safely be open, they will.

"Basically, it boils down to health and safety of our students and staff," he said. "I'll be honest, I know that there are many people in our community that I've had conversations with who don't agree with all the public health orders and mandates, and we have a wide variety of folks who also are fully compliant with all public health orders. My plea to you, my encouragement to you, is whether you agree with them or not, as schools we function under very specific guidance and laws. The last thing I want to have to do is close a cohort, a school or the district because we weren't able to contain the spread of COVID 19 in our schools."

Before coming up with a final plan for Del Norte High School, the district is asking parents for some input. Harris said parents can share their opinions on the school's website at www.dnUSD.org.