

Q&A: Reopening Ichabod Crane Schools

We spoke with some of our staff members about the massive efforts involved in reopening Ichabod Crane schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked questions about how reopening plans were created over the summer and how operations are going now that the schools have finally reopened. Thanks to all of them for their valuable perspectives!

Peg Warner, Co-Chair of Mental Health Reopening Sub-Committee & Director of Special Ed.

What were some of the Sub-Committee's main concerns during reopening planning?

Primarily how the students were coping with the many effects of the pandemic, like being isolated for so long at home, sick friends or family, financial hardships, worrying about household family members who are essential workers in the household and just the general overwhelming stress. In the long term, we were also concerned about the lasting effects of any trauma from this situation and how that could affect a given student's ability to emotionally develop and learn.

Now that schools have reopened, how is student and staff emotional wellness going?

Much better than we expected. All the students seem so happy and relieved to be back in school, even if it's very different. All our teachers have taken it slow in terms of throwing the students back into their academics and have reset some of the normal expectations of previous school years. They're also paying more attention to all their students' social-emotional wellness in the classroom and checking in with them individually when necessary.

The teachers themselves are of course very busy but they're in better spirits now that we've gotten into the swing of this new kind of school year. All of the many staff I speak with tell me they're happy to have the students back in person and following a consistent routine.

What are some of the mental health initiatives and methods the district is using to address student mental health during this time? Is the Sub-Committee continuing to meet?

Some of the measures in place since we reopened included increased amounts of mindfulness activities in the classrooms and district-wide Peaceful Classroom curriculum. School counselors and psychologists are visiting classrooms to check in with students, let them know they're in the buildings and what they can help them with. Members of the Sub-Committee created an information training video for parents/guardians to help them identify signs of emotional distress. We're also providing professional development opportunities that help our staff identify student trauma and how to address it in the classroom.

Even with the schools reopened the Mental Health Sub-Committee has continued meeting, as this will be an ongoing district initiative. We'll be constantly reflecting on which emotional wellness and mindfulness techniques are working and adapt them as needed. Some upcoming topics of discussion for us will be how we can safely transition our therapy dogs back into the schools and possible after school support systems for students.

Andrea Williams, *Primary School (Grades K-3) Principal*

You're in charge of the youngest ICC students. What were some of your unique reopening priorities since your students aren't yet as independent as those in the upper grades?

Safety of the students and staff was always my first priority. I needed to be sure the procedures in place would be effective in ensuring that everyone could return safely.

I also wanted to ensure we had as many activities and resources as possible to get students outdoors when the weather is agreeable. This included bringing back our Flying Deer nature program, partnering with three of our local libraries to create outdoor programming, encouraging teachers to take students on nature walks around campus and creating a rotating schedule for one class per lunch period to eat outside.

Of course a big reopening priority was younger students wearing their masks at the proper times. To address that in the planning stage we incorporated mask breaks into our reopening plan and with the help of our PTA, we purchased lanyards for each student so they could attach (and therefore not lose) their masks when it's time to put them back on after breaks.

With the district's new safety measures now in effect what's the overall learning experience looking like for the younger students?

We're in a good place at the Primary School, our early concerns for the student learning experience has been minimized over the last couple of months. The three main day to day changes for the K-3 students this year is wearing masks, social distancing and more frequent hand washing. Despite how young they are, they're resilient and we are seeing little evidence that the safety protocols are negatively affecting their ability to effectively learn or retain information.

Our kindergarten teachers are seeing their students grow consistently and at a positive pace since the year started. There's a decent amount of additional time spent doing more hand washing, but the teachers figured out how to make up that learning time because all the students now social distance and are seated independently. They're not physically transitioning

from space to space much now so that is making up for time spent on the added safety measures.

First grade is steadily progressing even though the curriculum in that grade begins to present more typical “challenges” for students, like learning to read. Those are our smallest class sizes though, with only 9-10 students per room, so the teachers are able to have a lot of individualized time with the students. This means even during these unique times they can focus in on the most needy students to help them with letter recognition and sounding out words.

In second and third Grade, the teachers are also seeing the students make progress with new parts of their curriculum like increasing text levels and reading comprehension. Writing skills are a challenge in a normal year and with students learning remotely for months last year, we’re putting a heavier focus on strengthening those skills than in the past to make up for that remote time. The teaching teams in these grades are holding writing interventions to help students when needed and they have teaching assistants who help provide more targeted instruction.

Marcella Sanchez, Co-Chair of Health & Safety Reopening Sub-Committee and HS Assistant Principal

How were the members of the Health & Safety Sub-Committee chosen?

The Reopening Sub-Committee Co-Chairs were staff members chosen by (District Superintendent) Ms. Guntlow at the initial reopening meeting in early July. We then sent a survey to district families to get an idea how comfortable they felt about schools reopening in person this fall. Part of that survey included asking for any interested volunteers for the various reopening sub-committees we were forming. We created a list from those responses and the co-chairs met to pick three volunteers who we felt had relevant knowledge/experience for each sub-committee.

With the district’s new safety measures now in effect – hybrid schedules, more remote learning & less face to face time, etc. – what have student academics been like since schools reopened?

I’ve seen the students adapt remarkably well to the new methods of both their learning and how their teachers have to teach this year.

With students in our upper grades, the best example of that adaptability is how they are becoming better resources for each other. We’ve seen them teaming up with their classmates more often on their work even on the days when they are at home doing remote learning. Without any prompting from their teachers they’ve still been collaborating remotely with their peers from their in-person classes on their assignments. In a way, the collaboration between the

students has become stronger by necessity under this hybrid learning model and seeing that happen so naturally is priceless for us staff.

Have the students in the upper grades been developing new skill sets and/or strengthening existing ones under the district's hybrid learning model?

Yes, the unique situation we all find ourselves in has come with some unexpected benefits and opportunities for student skill growth. Many students were already technologically proficient but that proficiency has increased exponentially since we've incorporated a lot more educational technology into both learning and teaching.

I've also seen students developing incredible organizational abilities, always using their personal planners and frequently updating their Google Calendars to keep up on assignments and be mindful of deadlines. Time management skills are important under the hybrid learning schedule since they're not physically in school everyday and they're showing us they can manage their time outside classroom

We're also seeing students become strong advocates for themselves. This environment makes it more important than ever for them to speak up for themselves and reach out to teachers when they need help. Those self-advocacy skills will be invaluable as these students move beyond high school.