

The Development of Hybrid

June 30, 2020

Don Austin announces distanced reopening proposal

July 3, 2020

Distanced reopening proposal approved

Sept. 29, 2020

School board votes unanimously to return to school

Nov. 10, 2020

School board approves hybrid plan

Nov. 11, 2020

Students create petition against reopening plan

Nov. 13, 2020

Open letter from Gunn teachers express concern over reopening plan

Nov. 16, 2020

Palo Alto Educators Association community forum held, where parents and teachers discussed online learning and hybrid plans

Nov. 19, 2020

Don Austin announces reopening plan put on hold due to purple tier restrictions

Despite pleas from parents, teachers and students, the Palo Alto Unified School District Board unanimously voted to adopt a hybrid reopening plan during its meeting on Nov. 10.

The plan, which allowed high school students to voluntarily return to school for English and social science classes two days a week, was according to a survey conducted by the Associated Student Body.

To maintain the cohort system outlined in the plan, all student schedules and classes would likely change, regardless of whether the student chose to return to campus. Teachers and parents also expressed concerns about COVID-19 safety.

Rising COVID-19 rates in Santa Clara County and the governor's placement of the county into the purple, most restrictive, tier of COVID-19 infection prevented the hybrid plan from going into effect, but members of the Palo Alto community say they are still reeling from the lack of communication between the board and the community about the proposed reopening.

Parents are frustrated

Many secondary parents, including Giselle Galper, the mother of a Paly junior, were opposed to the board's secondary reopening proposal, saying they feared COVID-19 infections among students and staff and worried about their student having to change teachers mid year.

"(Our child) wanted to keep as many of his peers (in his classes) as possible," Galper said. "He was also concerned about the safety of the hybrid plan, and that there was no support for students who were exposed to COVID-19 to stay home."

Galper said she was frustrated by the lack of input from the community in the board's decision.

"The board did not listen to parents, students or even the student representatives who voted against the plan," Galper said.

Jason Olinger, the parent of a Greene Middle School seventh grader and member of the Parent-Teacher Association, agreed.

"So many teachers came on during open comment, and yet there was very little teacher input in what actually happened," Olinger said.

Olinger also said the administrators didn't give enough information to the parents when they were expected to make a binding decision about whether to send their child back to school.

"There are still so many unknowns," Olinger said. "Mondays are still listed as TBD on the schedule, and yet parents are expected to make a binding decision of whether to do hybrid or distance learning."

Olinger also said he felt the district did a poor job of implementing the plan in individual schools.

"Guidelines were handed down from the district level to the site level, and at Greene, a lot of it had to be scrapped because it wasn't viable," Olinger said. "I've heard consistently that teachers have no idea what's going on, and that's a huge, inexcusable whiff."

Administration had a plan

Although only 10% of high school students said they wanted to return under the proposed hybrid proposal, board members and administrative staff continued to push it, disregarding the letters and petitions sent to them by teachers, parents, community members and students.

"This was not by any means a model plan that I loved ... I don't think anyone loved it," recently re-elected board member Jennifer DiBrienza said. "But we knew we had to do something, so it was something."

DiBrienza said while the majority of the district's high school students didn't seem to like the plan, she said it would help support students who needed extra help and more teacher and peer interaction, as well as those who lacked reliable internet and a quiet place to work.

Principal Brent Kline, in his first year at Paly, said because of this he is now shifting his focus to the drawbacks of the original plan in an effort to remedy some of them.

THE BOARD'S BUBBLE

Palo Alto community and school board split on reopening plan causing controversy and discord



a week, according to a survey

"It was a very restrictive return to campus in terms of the two courses that you were only able to select, and there was so much misinformation that it was hard to even get a handle on any of it," Kline said.

Kline said he is using PAUSD+ as a model in his planning. PAUSD+ is the district's name for a program that brings students to campus in person who don't have access to reliable WiFi or a quiet place to work or are struggling with remote learning in general.

"Possibly, we could bring groups of students back that just need to reconnect with other students, maybe into cohorts," Kline said. "We'll focus first on the students that signed up for the hybrid (plan) and see if anybody has interest."

In light of rising COVID cases and Santa Clara County's reversal into the purple tier, elementary schools will stay open, but middle schools and high schools will not re-open at the beginning of the second semester, according to DiBrienza.

Middle schools, DiBrienza said, will likely reopen in the fourth quarter as long as the county returns to the red tier and bringing students back is safe. She said the board will likely continue to refine the reopening plan to prepare for such changes.

And just like before, student input is unlikely to be part of this planning process, DiBrienza said. "Student input is important, but I think it's more valuable in certain places than others," DiBrienza said. "I'm not sure if the board having their own makes any sense, besides our two student board members."

While the board may not be as interested in direct student input, Kline said he has set up multiple committees of students that he meets with regularly, including his Principal's Advisory Committee.

"I want to move out and reach more students and create forums to be able to give an educated opinion," Kline said. "I want to meet parents and hear their opinions through PTSA. I want to acquire our communities' voices, and maybe we can open up consistent communication channels, even after we've dealt with COVID-19."

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Teachers feel ignored

On Nov. 13, a group of 34 Gunn High School social studies, history and special education teachers wrote an open letter to the board expressing their concerns regarding the secondary reopening plans. Seventy-eight Paly teachers have since signed the letter too. According to the letter, the board of education misrepresented or hid many facts about the reopening plan.

"The surveys given to students and teachers asked leading questions and were only open for very short periods of time," the teachers wrote in the letter. "Educators were not consulted; we were given a directive. We were only included after key reopening decisions had been made."

Additionally, the teachers expressed concern with such a drastic change in the learning environment midway through the year.

"One of the central premises of modern pedagogy and classroom management is that students learn best in environments with consistent routines and expectations when teachers are rigorously prepared," the teachers wrote in the letter. "Radically changing the learning environment in the middle of the year limits educational effectiveness for students in person and at home."

The reopening plan would have increased distance class sizes to a maximum of 39 students, which the Gunn High School teachers said would reduce their ability to both support and build relationships with students.

Additionally, the teachers said the reopening plan would widen the achievement gap even further.

"Students in hybrid classes will receive a radically different experience than students in distance classes, effectively punishing students who want or need to stay home," the letter read. "Regardless, students who are already struggling may now find themselves in distance classes that are significantly bigger with teachers they haven't had before and who have an even greater workload."

Teachers union is exhausted

The doors of the district's 12 elementary schools remain open, and Superintendent Don Austin said this return of students to campus has gone smoothly.

"(There were) teachers that were concerned about coming back to elementary school and then came back anyways," Austin said. "That concern faded from almost all of them after the second day, third day."

But the opposite sentiment was expressed at the Palo Alto Educators Association's community forum on Nov. 16. At the forum, Genevieve Pierre Dixon, the mental health and wellness coordinator at Gunn High School, talked about the added stress and anxiety many of the students and teachers were facing as a direct result of the pandemic, as well as the uncertainty of second semester plans.

"I am really concerned about the human cost we're dealing with here," Tom Culbertson, a fourth grade school teacher at Juana Briones Elementary said. "This all takes a huge toll on us teachers, and it affects the way we interact with our students. We are in a situation where there are limits, and this is truly unsustainable."

Jessica Oakson, a member of CSEA, a teacher aide at a district elementary school and a PAUSD mom, broke into tears when speaking about the stress of constantly cleaning up in between cohorts and trying to keep both herself and the students safe.

"The first month was extremely stressful, and it still is," Oakson said. "We didn't know what to expect, and sometimes we still don't. I've never seen so many adults on the verge of tears."

Student voices are going unheard

At a board of education meeting on Nov. 10, both Paly and Gunn's student board representatives spoke out and voted against the hybrid plan which the rest of the board approved unanimously, though their votes count only preferentially, ASB Vice President and junior Diana Narancic said the stances of Paly student board representative, who did not respond to requests for an interview, matched that of the student body as a whole.

"We put out a survey, and saw that a lot of people preferred distance learning, and were frustrated that their schedule would change," Narancic said.

Narancic said she was surprised to see the rest of the board vote unanimously in a direction that both student board representatives opposed.

"I was a little bit shocked that they were so focused on reopening the schools that they dismissed both the high school representatives' opinions," Narancic said.

Following this board meeting, students began voicing their dissatisfaction with the board's vote through a petition sent out via many platforms to students, parents, community members and staff.

Junior Kabir Bhatia, who helped organize the petition, said the district's reopening plan was rushed and had many downsides, which led him to write an email to the board that ultimately became the basis of the petition.

The district has not adequately listened to the community when they came up with this plan," Bhatia said. "If they had done their research or listened to their constituents and the people they're supposed to represent, then they would see that at least 680 people who signed the petition think that it merits reconsideration."

As of Dec. 1, the petition has garnered 689 signatures. Bhatia said he knew there was discontent among in the community about the secondary reopening plan but found the number of responses to be a pleasant surprise.

"We knew that the teachers had not been kept in the loop in regards to the hybrid plan and how the teacher-suggested plan was totally ignored," Bhatia said. "So we knew that people were against it, but we didn't know if any teachers would want to put their name above the letter that we slapped together, but I'm really glad that they chose to do that."

Other states handling things differently

Other states have been handling the reopening of schools in different ways. Jessica Baese, a chemistry teacher and president of the Dexter Education Association at the Dexter Community School District in Michigan, said she and the DEA have been heavily involved in the decision-making process behind her district's method of learning during the pandemic.

Although Dexter schools recently shut down due to an influx of coronavirus cases in Michigan, the district took a route similar to PAUSD, Baese said. Dexter started the school year in full distance learning, phasing younger students into an optional hybrid situation. However, unlike PAEA, Baese's said her union has felt properly represented in their district's reopening process.

"I sit in all of the meetings, and while our school board weighs in on some of the proposals that our superintendent is making, the proposals from the superintendent are coming from our district planning team which I am part of, and some of our data-driven decisions are coming from our data team which I'm a part of," Baese said. "I think our teachers have had really positive representation in that process."

Part of this decision making process comes with developing stringent safety protocols to prevent the spread of the virus, which Baese has doubled down on.

"If a kid won't wear a mask, they're going to be put in our home-based program, and we have a good cleaning protocol — we've replaced a lot of our filters and filtration systems on some of our facilities," Baese said. "Those are things that I've truly advocated for knowing that I can't control what the district's going to tell my teachers to do, but I want it to be as safe as possible."

Diane Schieffer, the yearbook adviser at Elkhorn High School in Nebraska, however, has felt overwhelmed by her school district's reopening.

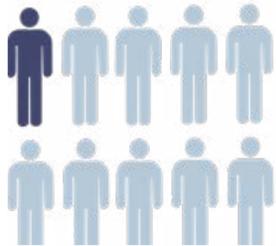
In Schieffer's district, schools are completely in-person, with some students opting to be remote-only, causing teachers to have to teach in-person and over Zoom simultaneously. Schieffer isn't completely satisfied with this reopening and the teachers' representation.

"I don't think the teachers (union) was involved as we would like, and I think if they were involved, they weren't very transparent as to what teachers were consulted," Schieffer said. "Ultimately, who has all the cards is the school board because they run the show."

And Schieffer said if she were consulted, she has a better reopening plan for schools to consider.

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1 in 10 Families chose hybrid learning

