

BOARD BRIEFS

News from the New Trier Township High School District 203

Board of Education Regular Meeting

January 19, 2021

District Considers Schedule Changes for 2021-2022 School Year

New Trier is using lessons learned from employing different daily schedules during the COVID-19 pandemic to consider a new bell schedule format for next school year, Northfield Campus Principal Paul Waechtler told the Board.

Even before the pandemic, New Trier had begun studying different schedule options as a goal in its strategic plan, *New Trier 2030*. The traditional nine-period day had been identified as playing a significant role in student stress, and teachers also were looking for ways to provide more depth of discussion and learning than possible in 40-minute periods.

Waechtler said a schoolwide committee agreed on five priorities for any schedule proposal:

1. Maintain student course selection choices
2. Provide extended learning periods for all courses while maintaining a similar amount of instructional time
3. Support the work of student services staff and their students
4. Embed time for collaborative professional development and for student supports and programming (X Block)
5. Provide solutions for potential logistical issues for staff and families

The committee looked at a variety of options, including the traditional nine-period day and a rotating Blue/Green block schedule. In all block schedule options, lunches were “embedded” in a period rather than being their own period.

The proposal that most closely aligned with the committee’s priorities was an eight-period blended block schedule. Under this schedule, students would have three days in which every class meets and a weekly “block” of two days in which half their classes meet each day for longer periods. Since lunch is embedded in a class period instead of its own period, students could still take the same number of courses as they did in a nine-period schedule except for the very few students who have no lunch period. The school is looking at options for those students.

This schedule would include a weekly late-start day on Wednesdays for staff professional development and an “X Block” at the end of the day on Thursdays for student programming and supports. It would also assure consistent teacher/case

manager contact for students with IEPs and would allow student services such as Social Work and Post-High School Counseling to operate similarly to the way they do now.

The District will survey students, parents, and staff in the coming weeks to help inform a final decision on the 2021-2022 schedule. Course selection can still take place in the meantime, since any new schedule could still accommodate student course requests.

The full Board presentation, including sample schedules for the different options considered, can be found [here](#).

Reopening Update: Grey Day Support, Grades, Campus Changes, Vaccine Planning

As New Trier moves to its 50% Hybrid Model for second semester beginning January 26, District administrators updated the Board on programs and practices to support students and to safely increase the number of students on campus.

Grey Day Support

New Trier will continue with all-remote Monday Grey Days as second semester begins, Assistant Superintendent Peter Tragos told the Board, explaining the many student supports available during these days.

The school year started with synchronous “Trevian Days,” in which every class met on Zoom during a regular 35-minute period. The school moved to “Grey Days” (one of New Trier’s three school colors along with Blue and Green) in response to student feedback about stress and Zoom fatigue during the pandemic.

Grey Days are very much school days, Tragos said, with classes moving their curriculum forward with independent, asynchronous work that students can do at their own pace. But another important purpose of the day is to offer one-on-one or small group student supports. Teachers initiate and set meetings with students and hold office hours during regularly scheduled periods, student services faculty such as social workers and post-high school counselors meet with students, and Special Education students meet with faculty and staff to receive services remotely.

In addition, students can access the many all-school resources available, such as the Northfield Campus Academic Assistance Center with free tutoring for freshmen from retired teachers, the Winnetka Campus Math Resource and Reading and Writing Centers, Zoom with a Librarian on both campuses, wellness and mental health resources, and more. Families and students can learn more about accessing these services on the [Grey Day Support web page](#). Tragos told the Board the District will continue to survey and study Grey Days to consider improvements or changes as the school’s reopening plans progress this school year.

Grading Practices

Schools across the country are facing the dilemma of double or triple the number of students receiving D and F grades during the pandemic, and New Trier is no exception, Tragos told the Board. Recognizing that in many cases these grades are a direct result of the impact of the pandemic and not reflective of student ability, New Trier decided to suspend failing grades this year. Instead, teachers and advisers have been working with students and families to ensure that every student has the opportunity to complete their courses and maintain a path to on-time graduation through targeted interventions to fill in learning gaps.

In lieu of D, F, or Incomplete grades, teachers this year will issue PASS or Credit Pending grades to allow students a highly individualized, collaborative path to stay on track and continue their learning. Students who need these options should already have been contacted by their teacher or adviser; families with questions can always reach out to the teacher or adviser.

Winnetka Campus Survey

While Northfield Campus students attended school at near 25% during the first semester 25% Hybrid Model, Winnetka Campus attendance averaged closer to 15%. As the school aims to get as close to 50% of students as possible on each campus during second semester, Winnetka Campus students took a survey on what could improve on-campus learning.

Students said they like interacting with teachers, connecting with friends, breaking away from screens, and having a routine with on-campus days. They said they were less likely to attend on-campus classes if the teacher were remote or if they had a large period of free time during the day.

Winnetka Campus Principal Denise Dubravec said the campus will make changes during second semester to make the in-school environment more appealing, including offering more lunch items, reopening vending machines, adding more seating for free/lunch periods, opening library access, and allowing students to leave and return during free/lunch periods. Families will receive more information about these changes later this week.

Saliva Screening and Vaccine Planning

Students have responded well to the shift to mandatory weekly COVID-19 saliva screening, participating at about 95% each week for the first two weeks. The school is following up with families who did not participate to increase the percentage to close to 100%.

School staff are considered essential workers in line for the next round of COVID-19 vaccinations in Illinois, and New Trier continues to work closely with Cook County to

offer the Northfield Campus as a potential vaccine distribution center. New Trier will be looking for community volunteers to help locally and in greater Cook County when the next phase of vaccination is slated to begin in February.

The entire reopening update presentation can be found [here](#).

Facilities Update: East Side Academic and Athletic Proposal

The District provided the Board with an update on financing options for a proposal to renovate and replace aging buildings on the East Side of the Winnetka Campus and create new athletic and academic spaces using existing taxpayer investments without the need for a referendum.

At its January 11 meeting, the Board saw initial drawings and cost estimates for a project that could be completed by the start of the 2023-2024 school year. The District has been studying potential options for the 1928 Gates Gymnasium and 1925 Boiler Plant - both inflexible spaces with high maintenance costs that do not adequately meet student needs - for more than a year as part of its 15-Year Facilities Planning process.

The project under consideration would replace the Gates Gymnasium with a modern, multifunctional athletic space within the existing boundaries of Essex Road and Trevian Way; create a suite of new academic classrooms; build a new, six-lane indoor track to replace the small basement track now in use; and maintain the same amount of parking and a design aesthetic consistent with the rest of the campus.

The estimated cost of the project is approximately \$75 million, which includes all direct and indirect costs as well as a 10% construction contingency. Associate Superintendent Chris Johnson explained that the majority of the project would be funded by alternate revenue bond proceeds with annual debt service payments of approximately \$3.1 million from the existing District tax levy. The District's 5-year projections show capacity for these payments; due to strong financial management, the District has historically generated annual surpluses that have gone toward capital improvements.

The District also would use \$14.5 million from bond proceeds through the debt service extension base portion of the existing tax levy and \$8-12 million from reserves. Elizabeth Hennessy, a financial advisor with Raymond James, told the Board that this funding model, which has been used at many peer schools for similar projects, would allow the District to take advantage of historically low interest rates and maintain its strong financial position.

The Board's Facilities Steering Committee and Finance Committee have overseen the development of the potential plans. Stakeholder groups including the Booster Club, neighbors of the Winnetka Campus, the New Trier Parents' Association, coaches, students, faculty, and staff have also offered input. The Board will continue to discuss the project at its February meeting. The full presentation can be found [here](#).

The New Trier Board of Education generally meets on the third Monday of each month, with the business portion of the meeting beginning at 6:30 p.m.

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