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| **Starting Anew: Wabaunsee USD 329 reopening promotes safe onsite learning but ready to pivot if necessary** |

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| The Wabaunsee USD 329 school district is situated in the Flint Hills just east of Topeka.  The rural district of about 450 students has been relatively lightly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its five schools were able to open as planned in mid-August with nearly all children attending in person. Look beyond the pastoral setting and the smiles of students on the playground, though, and you’ll find USD 329’s reopening was the result of months of intense planning by Board of Education members, administrators, teachers, and staff to respond to the continuing uncertainties presented by the pandemic while meeting students’ educational and emotional needs. “Our expectation was to be able to go totally remote on Day One if needed,” said Superintendent Brad Starnes. Local infection rates and hospital capacity have not necessitated that scenario and only four percent of district students are learning online currently but the district is prepared to pivot to additional online instruction if needed.  “We decided early on we have to have hybrid [from the beginning] because if we’re all in-person or all-remote we’re going to leave people out,” Board Vice President Tony Conrad said. “Pivot’s a word I’ve heard a lot, but I always thought of it in the basketball sense. We’ve put a stronger online platform in place [compared to last spring] and have had extensive training for teachers on technology and expectations. I think our teachers have also thought over the summer about what they’d need to adapt if they have to go online.”  https://ci5.googleusercontent.com/proxy/K5q9hKk3BlrS2ENiZkNOsX0B0hyi0uW7CrTchq7RzdK-wloXZkmarm68dDU_KSER-CM7WSSZpxJ7KJUe7Ig1Dj58OQLwotqscmgziGdKGlpNFk5F2jlYTOU5AJ5Xhy5EBH2I-06fFY0ZzIJwdiYBNhSdY8woRA=s0-d-e1-ft#https://mcusercontent.com/8a5ba7bb3b4e7431f41d12820/images/66740929-a65f-4230-b1c9-69cb4acd45c1.pngWhile USD 329 has prepared thoroughly for hybrid or fully online learning, it also has strict protocols in place to promote safe onsite learning. District leaders say that not only were most of their families and staff ready to be back to in-person school, onsite learning is critical to students’ mental health. Starnes said Wabaunsee County’s suicide rate is five times the national average and online bullying is increasing locally just as it is nationwide.  “The safest place for our kids is in school and parents need to be back at work,” Starnes said. “Over 95 percent of our families when surveyed wanted face-to-face onsite learning and athletics and activities are the best ‘at-risk’ program we have.” The district works closely with the local health department to answer questions and provide information. No positive cases have been identified in the schools since precautions began. “Everyone wears masks indoors in compliance with the Governor’s order,” Starnes said. “We have classes outside as much as possible, we have thermal imaging cameras to screen all students and staff [each day] and spectators at events, and we used SPARK money to purchase HEPA fans and sneeze guards for each room.”  https://ci6.googleusercontent.com/proxy/MUGh0dM_ph078xUDPl1L1CNFKveP-ScE-kihe5Hfa5tybmlIKRlIfc2dDMhlAd3KQXI1Vm05CkV1p8OU5ivWwdAvNDZyuV8YnCGDVJTIdO5fuumfETG7JRx8EYb5DFEW5Qj0tN0vO1BRvwcRrP_BNszgebWjpQ=s0-d-e1-ft#https://mcusercontent.com/8a5ba7bb3b4e7431f41d12820/images/040279f9-8115-44d9-9929-2b956af87983.jpgThe district also plans to install plasma air scrubbers on its HVAC units. Classrooms are disinfected each day and buses are sanitized after each route. Only students, administrators, and staff are allowed in buildings to decrease the chance of infection and allow for easier contract tracing in the event of exposure to the virus. The administration has also developed contingency plans to conduct classes at local churches and the county fairground if events warrant. Starnes and his staff say the biggest challenge in planning to reopen USD 329 schools was the unknown, but confidence increased as the district developed and publicized its plan.  “The teachers felt more comfortable once they knew we had a good plan and guidelines to follow,” said middle school principal Steve Oliver. Administrators also said the district’s participation in “The Leader In Me” curriculum, which focuses on taking personal responsibility for your own destiny, helps everyone focus on what’s possible rather than what they can’t do. “We’re all in this together,” Starnes said.  “You never feel ready, but once we got into the buildings [in July] the focus was on ‘getting it done,’” added elementary principal Galen Craghead.  Board Vice President Conrad said although it’s challenging to be a board member during this unique time, “We’ve had it easy,” compared to district employees. “I can’t stress enough how proud I am of our administrators, faculty, and staff,” he said. “They stepped up to the plate and did a phenomenal job.”  |

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