

# Elementary superintendent on first weeks of student returns

BY MATT RAWLINGS  
Of the Keizertimes

As of Wednesday, March 17, all K-5 students in Salem-Keizer Public Schools (SKPS) have made a return to in-person learning. Even though students are only attending in-person classes twice per week in their hybrid model, the district is thrilled that kids are finally back in school.

"It's been incredible. I can't think of enough ways to even describe it. I think overall for our organization it's such a sense of relief to be able to welcome students and families back," said Kraig Sproles, the assistant superintendent for elementary education for SKPS. Last week, Governor Kate Brown issued an executive order to reopen all elementary schools in the state by March 29 and all secondary schools by April 19.

Before the executive order was announced, SKPS was ahead of schedule and started bringing elementary students back to school on March 2. Sproles believes that the district's relationship with the Salem-Keizer Education Association and the Association of Salem-Keizer Support Professionals, as well as the push from teachers to come back to the classrooms, were the main reasons SKPS was able to come back to in-person learning before other big districts, such as Portland and Eugene. "We have such a strong collaborative relationship with our teachers and classified bargaining units," Sproles said. "Since last April, teachers have been clamoring to have their students back. We have been working really well with our teachers and classified staff to be able to make sure we can do it safely."

According to Sproles, SKPS began their organizational preparedness process and were reviewing safety protocol plans during the summer before other districts, so that if COVID-19 metrics changed at



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— KRAIG SPROLES  
Superintendent elementary ed., SKPS

the drop of hat, they would be ready.

While some SKPS students have entered their school buildings for the first time this month, the district has been running Limited-In-Person Instruction (LIPPI) since September, which Sproles said "gave us a chance to test and make sure we are following all the protocols, which we have proven to be successful."

Sproles admitted that there were some positive COVID cases that occurred during LIPPI but that the district's protocols and contact tracing procedures with Marion County Health helped minimize spreading.

"We did have positive COVID cases in the community that were brought into our schools. But what we saw from the protocols at school was that the kids weren't spreading COVID at school to the teachers or to each other," Sproles said. "It's impossible, especially in an asymptomatic

case, to screen that out of the school entirely. But what we can do is have systems in place for how we respond and react to that."

"We are fully expecting COVID will come into our schools, it's just how we mitigate, trace and isolate the cohort and then bring them back as soon as possible."

In-school protocols, which are featured on the district website, involve constant hand cleaning, disinfection of surfaces and small class sizes to maintain physical distance with approximately 35 square

feet per student in the classroom. Staff members are also required to fill out screening questions every day — if a staff member brings in COVID-19 into the schools, the district assumes they will be asymptomatic and have protocols in place to remove them from the building and start the contact tracing process with student cohorts.

Sproles said that while school has run smoothly these last few weeks, some of the biggest challenges have been small things that begin to pile up, such as spacing out students and providing ways they can eat and use the restroom safely.

"It's all the little things. We are very focused on hand washing and hand cleaning

protocols right now ... It's also things like access to the bathrooms. We can't just lineup the kids like we always have and send them in groups into the bathroom. We need to provide extra staffing and oversight for that," Sproles said.

However, Sproles also believes that this return to in-person instruction signals the beginning of a return to normalcy.

"I can honestly say that once kids get to the classrooms with their teachers, it feels a lot like regular school," Sproles said.

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