

How McNary is responding to COVID cases

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

After over a year of distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, McNary High School has been in their hybrid model — where students come on campus twice per week for in-person instruction — for just over a month.

“It has been as good as I could have ever dreamed. Kids are wearing their masks and they are super excited about being in the building. I talk to the staff a lot and the feedback we receive from our teachers and our instructional assistants is that they have felt valued in terms of us listening to any concerns that they have had,” McNary principal Erik Jespersen said.

With students and staff back in the building, school and district personnel were aware that the chance of COVID-19 coming into the schools was almost a guarantee. But due to the preparation from the school and the safety protocols from the district, the risk of students and staff contracting the virus inside the school is extremely low.

Since hybrid learning began on April 13, McNary has had only three positive COVID-19 cases on-site while infectious, which led to five additional students needing to quarantine for 14 days — this is out of 1,627 students currently enrolled in hybrid at McNary.

Jespersen made headlines back in November with an aggressive approach to safe, in-person learning in an effort to help the 38% of students at McNary that had at least one failing grade — that percentage fell to 17% in less than a month. Four weeks before hybrid learning began, Jespersen continued the aggressive approach as McNary was hosting 900 students appointments per week, which helped the school prepare for when more kids came back to class.

“McNary had a lot of practice with implementing the protocols because they invited so many students in for limited in-person instruction, so I think that has also led to the success,” Salem-Keizer Public Schools (SKPS) communications manager Aaron Harada said.

“I don’t think there was anyone anywhere close to that. We were bringing in a ton of kids for a solid month,” Jespersen added.

While most secondary schools in the district have had COVID cases, there haven’t been any school outbreaks in the Salem-Keizer area.

“We are not seeing schools as a place where COVID is actually being spread

within the school setting,” said Jodi Peterson, the health safety manager with SKPS. “I think students are doing an amazing job of not coming to school sick and families are really trying to not bring their kids while they are sick.”

While the district isn’t seeing students or faculty spreading the virus in a school setting, Peterson did say that when the virus does come into schools, it is because a student or staff member contracted COVID-19 from someone in the community and stepped foot on campus during their infectious period when they weren’t showing symptoms — an infectious period usually takes place in the two days before someone shows symptoms.

“We are seeing students and families that were in the community and then they come into the building during their infectious period,” Peterson said.

When a student or staff member contracts COVID-19 and was confirmed to step foot in the school and be around multiple people, the school’s nurse team jumps into action to perform contact tracing protocols.

“One way or another, someone on our nurse team will be speaking to the students’ family, going over a slew of questions about when symptoms started, if they had a known COVID exposure, what are their symptoms, when were they last on site, are they riding the bus and if they are involved in any extracurricular activities. We also ask if they carpooled with anyone,” said Megan Jackson, the school nurse at McNary. “And then it’s going and talking to the teachers of that student and finding out what they know about the students day like who they sat with and who they worked with.”

Anyone who tests positive for the virus and any students that were in close contact with the infected student — close contact equals people that were closer than six feet away from the infected person for 15 minutes or more — would have to quarantine for 14 days, and the same protocols are in place for teachers and staff. According to Peterson, the district hasn’t seen the virus spread to close contacts at the school.

When there is a COVID-19 case at McNary, Jespersen sends out an email and autodial phone call to every parent notifying them of the situation — the school only reaches out personally to close contacts. Jespersen says that the information has been received well by McNary parents.

“The first time I sent it out, there was a little bit of chatter about the email. But after the last couple times I sent out the

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— JODI PETERSON
Health safety manager, SKPS

cohort has to be quarantined for two weeks.

For the 18,000 secondary students currently in hybrid learning, 120 of them had to quarantine in the first three weeks due to protocols when an infected student rode to school via bus.

“That is one of the biggest barriers we are having,” Peterson said. “It is really affecting students being able to return to school. It is a really hard process.”

SKPS plans to return to in-person school five days per week next fall, and even though there isn’t a policy in place for next school year, Jespersen says that McNary will continue to be a safe place to attend.

“The one thing I have learned since March of last year is that things are changing all the time. We are going to do everything we can to make sure we are fully compliant with what the state is asking us to do, while providing every possible opportunity for kids to have all the educational opportunities they need to have,” Jespersen said. “Our schools are extremely safe. If parents have concerns they should contact us and we would be more than happy to have conversations with them, but this is a safe place to go to school and to work,” Jespersen said.

email and autodialers to families and staff, I had zero reaction. I think everyone pretty much knows that if we had somebody in the building that tested positive, and unless they have been specifically contacted it doesn’t really affect them,” Jespersen said. “I have had no complaints from parents. It is 2021, the most divisive time we have had in a long time, but for the vast majority of our community, they understand that we are trying to do right by kids and give them the best possible education that we can. Honestly, it is butterflies and unicorns here at McNary High School.”

“The families have been amazing. The biggest concern they have had is the bus cohort,” Peterson added.

According to guidelines from the Oregon Health Authority, if a student with COVID-19 was on a school bus for more than a total of 15 minutes, the entire bus



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