



NTDSE Empowers

A publication of Niles Township District for Special Education #807

Fall 2020

Staff, students, and families adapt to changing routines

Living with the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic has made life difficult for many who struggle to maintain their normal lives. It's no different for the staff, students, and families of the Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE) community.

This fall, they have all worked together to help students learn under these trying circumstances. As with so much else, flexibility has been the key to coping.

One main component of flexibility was offering families the choice of whether to send their children to school or keep them home for remote learning. At the opening of school in early September, approximately 70 percent of students at the Molloy Education Center were attending school in person, according to Executive Director Tarin Kendrick. 60 percent were in-person at the District's satellite classroom locations and 50 percent were in-person in the District's Early Childhood classrooms at Elizabeth Meyer School, Kendrick said.

Teaching and learning are proceeding well. "My students are excited to be back at school in person and I am thrilled that I can teach them face to face," said Katherine Pekler, who teaches in a middle-school-level Project ABLE (Academic, Behavior, Learning, Excellence) classroom at the Molloy Education Center. "We had to adjust how we do some things, such as cleaning and wearing masks, but it is going very well."

Kathi Sposato, who teaches K-2 primary-grade students in



NTDSE students adhere to safety practices such as mask wearing and social distancing in the classroom.

a satellite classroom in Lincolnwood School District 74, has a mix of in-person and remote learners. "There was a learning curve to get technology up and running and work out the kinks, but I am working with a co-teacher, and we are providing synchronous learning with remote peers at home," she said. "It has been great for both sets of students. They all feel a part of the class and will ask where the other students are if we are doing a large group activity and the remote students are not online. It is great to see the students connecting the two sides of learning and including everyone into one big classroom."

John Dextl teaches middle school students in a satellite classroom in Skokie School District 73½. All of his learners

Continued on next page

Important dates

- Dec. 21, 2020 Winter break begins
- Jan. 4, 2021 School resumes – remote instruction only
- Jan. 14, 2021 Governing Board meeting
- Jan. 19, 2021 Martin Luther King Jr. Day
- Jan. 19, 2021 NO SCHOOL – Remote Learning Plan Day
- Jan. 20, 2021 In-person instruction **begins**

Changing routines

Continued from previous page
work remotely. “Luckily for them, they got a little taste of remote learning in the spring,” he said. “They now know what Zoom is and how to get on to their meetings for classes. Due to their spring experiences, they were able to jump into their school work a lot faster. I know many of them would rather be at school in person but the look of excitement on their faces when they get to see their classmates and teachers is priceless. Each one of them has stepped up to the challenge and are putting in the work to achieve the goals we have put before them.”

School officials acknowledge the challenges that the pandemic has presented, both for them and for their students. “The time it took to prepare for reopening was an obstacle,” said Molloy Principal Christine Perry. “Delaying the student start date from Aug. 24 to Sept. 8 provided the district with the time needed to put all safety measures and procedures in place.”

Kay Pericht, a speech-language pathologist at Molloy noted, “Our students do best in settings that pro-



A Molloy student happily works on physical therapy with Mrs. DiMaria.



NTDSE Speech Therapist, Ms. Frank, teaches a lesson remotely.

vide them with consistent routines and structure. A potential obstacle for our students was returning to school with so many changes in place that are not consistent with what they experienced last year.”

But so far things are working. “Our students have shown an immense amount of flexibility during these unusual times. They’ve done a tremendous job adapting to all the new changes in place at school, such as wearing a mask or social distancing”.

To help students navigate the changes, class sizes have been trimmed. Pekler said, “All staff members are taking extra time to build relationships and rapport with our students, to teach and practice what is expected and unexpected this year, such as how to practice mask-wearing.”

“Parent response and support have been amazing,” Mrs. Perry said. “They have been following health-certification procedures, notifying the nurse if a student is exhibiting a COVID symptom, and following the recommendations provided by the health office on how to proceed.”

Parents appreciate the work that has gone into getting school up and running. “NTDSE conducted several parent town hall meetings throughout the summer which was extremely helpful and informative,” said Julie Cruz, whose

fourth grader has an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis and attends a satellite classroom in Golf School District 67. “The Return-to-School Plan outlined specific health and safety protocols, as well as clear expectations. This was the type of support that we appreciated as parents.”

Becky Klinghofer, who has a sixth grader learning in person at Molloy, agrees. “My son is so happy to be back at school. He really needs the structure that school provides and even though we had him in all kinds of virtual activities, it wasn’t the same. The Zoom sessions required me to sit with him the entire time. We could see a change in him after the first week back. He became more engaged and willing to interact with others while also becoming less stuck in some of his routines. We have been so happy with NTDSE throughout the back-to-school process.”

T.J. Moran’s four-year-old son is in preschool and learning at home. “The decision to have him in remote learning was one we made as a family,” Moran said. “Nothing is perfect but we are working on making the best of every situation that we encounter. He is lucky enough to have an amazing team around him that truly cares about him. We really appreciate all the effort and opportunities that everyone at NTDSE has offered during these crazy times.”

NTDSE, bus partner ensure safe transit for students

Making student transportation work has been a key to the start of a new school for NTDSE, school officials say. Skokie-based North Shore Transit Inc. has been an invaluable partner in that effort.

At the start of this school year, NTDSE was regularly transporting 84 students, according to Kathy Gavin, Director of Finance and Facilities. “That’s less than half of the pre-pandemic average of 200+ students per month. The change is largely due to the number of students who no longer need transportation because they have chosen remote learning or whose parents have chosen to drive them to school for in-person learning.”

Gearing up for the school year meant working out schedules and procedures to fit the times. “Challenges included providing quality bus services while keeping everybody — staff and students — safe while riding the bus. We need to have students socially distanced in the bus so students are spread out, one child to a seat, and everyone has an assigned seat,” Gavin said.

Each morning before pickup, NTDSE asks parents to certify that their children are free of COVID-19 symptoms. “Before school started in September, each child was provided with a green lanyard that had their picture on it,” Gavin said. “Parents check their child daily for symptoms and take their temperature at home. Children who are fever- and symptom-free wear the lan-

yard to indicate their parents have checked them that morning.” Once students arrive at school, their temperature is taken again by school staff.

She added, “We want to make the students’ travel time as short as possible but we do not want to transport a child who may be experiencing symptoms. By working together and providing the lanyards, the bus staff felt safe and NTDSE staff felt confident that there were procedures in place to limit the opportunity of spreading the virus while on the bus.”

Gavin also praised North Shore Transit for working with the District on scheduling to allow time for bus operators to sanitize their buses between routes. “We are very lucky to have a bus base management team who partners with us and who understands that open, two-way communication is the best way to solve any challenges that may arise.”

NTDSE and the bus company have developed their partnership over nine years, Gavin said. “Transportation is an important part of a child’s school experience. At NTDSE, we feel a child’s school day starts and ends with their time on the bus. Parents trust NTDSE and North Shore Transit with the most important person in their lives each day. I am always impressed and moved to see how genuine the bus drivers and paraprofessionals are with our families and students. They care.”

Teaching collaboration helps students with transitions

A unique collective effort has allowed Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE) students to benefit from curriculum and assessment planning and consistency throughout their elementary and middle-school schooling.

NTDSE joined the Classrooms First Collaboration (CFC) in 2019. The CFC is a partnership with Niles Township High School District 219, Golf School District 67 and Skokie-Morton Grove School District 69 also participate in CFC, which started in 2014.

CFC offers educational training, coaching, planning, and resources to teachers in language arts, math and science. At NTDSE, the collaboration has been used primarily in the Project ABLE (Academic, Behavior, Learning, Excellence) and Satellite Transition programs, according to Candice Hartranft, NTDSE Director of Special Education.

“CFC has allowed the students and teachers to implement the same level of high-quality core curriculum you would find in general education member-district classrooms,” Hartranft said.

Teachers in the Project ABLE or Transition programs teach groups of six to nine students in two or three grade levels. “The support in planning and prioritizing from CFC allows NTDSE teachers to have a partner in their thinking and share planning responsibilities as appropriate. Students are accessing the same materials as their general education peers,” she said.

The collaboration helps promote one of NTDSE’s main objectives. “Our ultimate goal in ABLE is to have students transition out of Molloy and back into district or satellite classrooms,” said Megan Hasbrouck, a Project ABLE teacher in her second year at NTDSE. “When students transition, they will be more prepared because they’ve already had exposure to the same curriculum they will have in these other classrooms.”

Hasbrouck believes the support CFC offers makes her a better teacher. “I meet with the CFC leaders in literacy and math — they are experts and are able to help me plan out my units in advance and assist me with online resources.”

Collaborative support has been par-

ticularly important during the pandemic, which has changed teaching and learning significantly. Although many families chose to send their children back to school at the start of school this fall, a number opted for remote learning. “This shift in the delivery of content means that NTDSE teachers have to be proficient in instructional strategies that involve the use of Zoom, Seesaw, or other learning management systems,” Hartranft said. “CFC has supported NTDSE teams in the use of these platforms as well as adjusting the scope and sequence of the curriculum to support these different learning models.”

Hasbrouck’s students are all remote learners, ranging from second graders to eighth graders. She said she chose to work with remote students because she is expecting a child in the spring. “I volunteered for the remote role to minimize contact/interaction with other people,” she said. “Remote teaching is drastically different from teaching in person. I wish I could be with my students every day, but I’m so thankful for the accommodations that were made for me.”

Program offers DHH students more learning time, less travel time

Now in its second year, NTDSE's program for deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students is realizing its main goal — serving students closer to home.

The district's DHH program serves 20 students this year. The DHH team, which includes four teachers with special certification along with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and sign-language paraprofessionals, works with the students in classrooms both at the Molloy Education Center and in member district schools (referred to as satellite locations). During the pandemic, some families have chosen to have their students learn remotely.

The program takes a flexible approach, according to Candice Hartranft, NTDSE Director of Special Education. "Our DHH program supports a Total Communication Approach," she said. "This means we will explicitly teach and accept communication in many forms (such as oral, ASL, picture exchange or assistive technology). The DHH team members will work with families to support and honor communication modes that will best meet the child's needs."

Before NTDSE created the DHH program, eligible students were taught elsewhere, Hartranft said. "Prior to beginning this



Teacher Lori Eslick works with a student.



NTDSE
Empowering All To Achieve

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Governing board meetings are held in the Molloy Education Center, 8701 Menard Ave., Morton Grove See <http://www.ntdse.org> for a schedule. All are invited to attend.

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program, the students were in classrooms that were outside of the township, which meant a large portion of their day was spent on transportation. Students with hearing loss are now able to participate in programming closer to their homes."

Lori Eslick is a DHH teacher who works in a satellite classroom at Todd Hall School in Lincolnwood School District 74. She works with 10 students — six in person and four remotely.

"Our program benefits the students by giving them the opportunity to attend a school in their community, integrate in general education classes, and receive a language and literacy-rich curriculum in their NTDSE classroom," Eslick said. "Since the DHH program is in the satellite schools, it allows general-education students to learn sign language and communicate with their deaf and hard-of-hearing peers. We also collaborate with the general-education teachers, provide training and sign classes, and clubs for staff and students."

There's no underestimating the benefit of keeping her students in close touch with their fellow general education students, Eslick said. "Two of my preschool students were integrated last year and many of their general-education peers learned basic signs and would sign with our students in the classroom, in the lunchroom, or on the playground at recess. Just to see the look on my student's face when her friend signed 'PLAY' to her and waved her over to the slide was just priceless."