

LOCAL

Quakertown pulls back on full-time re-opening plan for start of school



Crissa Shoemaker DeBree

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Quakertown Community School District students will no longer have the option to return to classrooms full time in September.

Instead, parents will have the option of a hybrid model or full-time virtual instruction for the first four weeks of school. The year begins Sept. 14.

The school board's 7-2 vote to delay full-time, in-person instruction came at the end of a five-hour meeting Thursday, following presentations from building principals on what classes would look like and debate among board members about what would be acceptable.

"Some of the numbers I saw from the high school were scary," said board member Brian Reimers, who supported the change. "I think maybe using the hybrid model would help us along to get through the first four weeks, and then adjust."

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About three-quarters of parents who registered requested some level of in-person instruction, either full time or hybrid, district officials said.

All choices could be accommodated in the elementary schools and the Sixth Grade Center, principals said. However, Strayer Elementary School and the high school would need to use overflow space to maintain six feet of social distancing if students returned to school full time.

Ron Jackson, who along with Steaven Klein were appointed Thursday to fill open seats on

the board, said he felt COVID was "no worse than a bad flu season," but still did not think students could return to school full time based on social distancing guidelines.

"There's no way we can get everybody back in live," he said. "It can't happen."

Jackson, Reimers and fellow board members Klein, Keith Micucci, David Ochmanowicz Jr., Jennifer Weed and Kaylyn Mitchell voted to delay the full-time schedule, while Chris Spear and Jonathan Kern voted against it.

"Hybrid works really good for the staff and for the teachers to help lower the numbers in the class," Spear said. "But the families that don't have support for those kids to learn at home when they're on their off days, it is going to be devastating for them."

Parents who registered for five days of live instruction now will have their children assigned to a hybrid model in which some students attend school on Monday and Tuesday, and others on Thursday and Friday. All students will have virtual instruction on Wednesday.

Four days of live instruction will be available for students with disabilities and English language learners.

School days will be shortened. Elementary school students will attend from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.; middle and high school students, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Superintendent Bill Harner said he supported the decision, in part because he felt it could convince teachers to stay in the district. While only a handful of Quakertown teachers are taking leaves of absences, nearly 200 could be eligible.

"We have been blessed so far with teacher support, unlike other districts," Harner said. "If we start off with the hybrid model in a K-12 configuration for the first four weeks, we get a chance to see what's going to happen. We won't have the numbers of teachers who have left the other districts on Family First CARES Act leave, and we'll be able to have our kids in school."

Board members will revisit the decision at subsequent meetings. The next meeting is Aug. 27.