

Many Ames students returned to **school** for the fall on Wednesday — the start of a third **school** year that will be touched by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other than that most students and the families dropping them off wore masks, Wednesday morning outside Fellows Elementary **School** looked like many other first days of **school** before it — the principal greeting and shepherding students, families taking selfies and waving goodbye, a student taking a leap to try to grab the rim of the playground basketball hoop.

Ames students in first through fifth grades were back in class Wednesday, with orientation scheduled that day for sixth- and ninth-graders and new students. Thursday will be the first day for seventh through 12th grades, Friday for kindergartners and Sept. 7 for preschoolers.

"I just hope they have a good year," Darice Sydnes said after dropping off her 7-year-old daughter, a second-grader at Fellows.

Sydnes also wished teachers the best.

She said she's excited for her children to be back in a routine — she also has a son in sixth grade. Both were in class as much as they could be last year, as learning models changed.

This year, by state law, schools have to continue 100% in-person learning. Schools are also barred by state law from requiring that masks be worn or that students, teachers, staff and visitors at public schools provide proof of vaccination against COVID-19.

That's all in place as infections surge, driven by the more contagious delta variant of COVID-19.

Sydnes wants her children to wear masks. Her son is old enough to be vaccinated, but he's not because he doesn't want to be.

Children under the age of 12 are not yet eligible to get vaccinated. The district is encouraging mask-wearing and vaccination.

Also outside Fellows on Wednesday, Savita Devrajani was dropping off her daughter in third grade; she also has a son in kindergarten.

Devrajani was also "kind of excited" about the start of the new **school** year. Her daughter learned remotely last year and missed her friends. "It affects a lot of social-emotional learning," Devrajani said.

She said she would have kept her daughter learning at home if she could — she was nervous about there not being a mask mandate, although she was reassured by how many people were wearing them Wednesday. She also sees the benefits of in-person learning.

Ames **school** board director Allen Bierbaum noted at the board's Monday night meeting of what he saw at Fellows that night during a supply drop-off and PTO social: "The thing that really caught me is there are a lot of excited kids, a lot of life in those buildings, a lot of people that are excited to see their teachers and that is just awesome to see compared to last year."

Families of **immunocompromised** students feel face tough choices as **school** starts

All excitement about some more semblance of normalcy returning to **school** aside, there are families in Ames who are particularly concerned about their children's potential exposure to COVID-19 at **school** — even as they see the benefits for their children of in-person learning.

Several parents spoke to the **school** board Monday night about their predicament.

Karen Stein thanked the board for a remote option — online learning is available in the district to middle and high schoolers, as well as elementary students who have or live with someone with a severe health condition — but although it helps an **immunocompromised** family member, it doesn't help her son with his 504 plan to accommodate disability and equitably meet his educational needs.

Stein said, "In order to academically lessen the learning gap, he would need to be in **school**, in-person" to receive the assistance he needs so he can be at grade-level.

Shannon Grundmeier told the board she's worried about her **immunocompromised** son, but said she feels she has no choice but to have him in-person at **school** for the sake of his education; he has an individualized education plan.

District spokesperson Eric Smidt responded to the Tribune's question of how many **immunocompromised** students are in the district: "We do not have a definition of **immunocompromised** and that information is not something that we specially keep for the **school** district."

Researchers with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2016 published in the Journal of the American Medical Association a finding that an estimated 2.7% of the adult population in the U.S. reported being immunosuppressed, based on the results of a 2013 national health study.

Causes of having a suppressed immune system include autoimmune conditions, chemotherapy, organ transplants and infection with HIV.

Megan Schroder, another parent who on Monday night addressed the **school** board in Ames, said she's cautiously optimistic about the year ahead, but was concerned that the inability to require masks leaves students vulnerable.

"I think our kids' lives are more important than a bad law," she said. "I'm worried, and I'm kind of just waiting for my kids to get COVID and hoping it's not too bad."

How **school** board members in Ames feel about the year ahead

Board president Sabrina Shields-Cook said Monday that she also has an at-risk child at home who's not vaccinated. "It's terrifying, and I share the concerns of the parents who said being remote doesn't work for their kids, because that is the same for my child as well, and it's a very difficult position to be in."

Board member Jamet Colton said the start of **school** "feels a little bittersweet this year, because there's certain groups of our students, they are vaccinated and they were able to get vaccinated and the littles are not. So, I absolutely understand why people are freaking out, because I am, too."

Colton added, "It feels awful to sit here and to know what works, to know that masks work, and not be able to mandate it, because you live in a state that there's a law that says you can't do it ... It's the duplicity that feels awful for me not to be able to mandate something that we know helps them."

Shields-Cook said, "I wish we could require masks, but we cannot. ...So, I personally will hope that it gets challenged and that there may be some possibility that that changes at some point down the road. For now, I'm crossing my fingers and hoping for the best," and asking those who can get vaccinated to do so and wear a mask. "Please help protect our kids," she said.

Board member Michelle Lenkaitis said, "Our governor's putting a lot of faith in Iowans making the right decisions, and we all know the right decision is to mask up. It protects everyone who's **immunocompromised**. It protects our little children."

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