

Back to business at Pittsburg elementary school

By Paul Burgarino
East County Times

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For the first time in more than a week, the pitter-patter of little feet and smell of breakfast filled the halls of Pittsburg's Highlands Elementary School on Wednesday.

Classes resumed at schools throughout Contra Costa County that had been shuttered by probable cases of H1N1 virus, or swine flu. Highlands Elementary was the first school closed by health officials after three probable cases of the virus were identified last week. They were confirmed this week, while a fourth probable case at the school was identified.

Early Wednesday morning, cars and buses were rolling into the Highlands parking lot, while uniformed kids stood in line in front of the school, said the "Pledge of Allegiance" along with faculty, and filed in according to grade level.

Only 75 of the 650 students, or roughly 12 percent, were absent from Highlands on Wednesday.

"It seemed like a normal day in time," Principal Steve Ahonen said.

At the outset, teachers spent time discussing any issues their students may have had — particularly trying to dispel any rumors or stories the students may be sharing, Ahonen said.

"It gave the kids a chance to work through some of those issues, talk about it and move on. But, all in all, it's been a pretty normal, smooth day," he said.

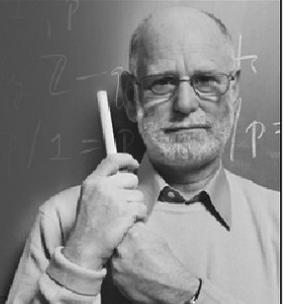
"It was almost more normal than a normal day. The kids were really focused and on task, and really excited to be back," third grade teacher Suzanne Licht said.

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One student recalled a recent story about being homesick, and said he thought he was schoolsick, she said.

It was reassuring to see the kids out in front of the school Wednesday because the anticipated reopening date had changed so much over the past week, Licht said.

Third-grader Vanessa Iniguez was among those students who were a bit apprehensive about returning, concerned primarily with whether the school had been sufficiently cleaned. However, she was excited about seeing her friends, finishing out the semester, and going back to music class.

"It's sort of scary," third-grader Tommy DePiero said inside the cafeteria.

Third-grader Noah Rawlins mentioned he's more aware of what he's touching, washing his hands and covering his mouth when he coughs.

Parents walking their children to school or dropping off their kids echoed similar concerns. To help quell parent worries, Ahonen answered questions at the school's library shortly after the start of school.

Christina McNamar said she felt more at ease after hearing that the virus can't live on surfaces for more than 24 hours, the campus had never been cleaner, and local H1N1 cases have been mild.

Carmen Palacios said she was still nervous, as her son is in the same fourth-grade class where the children diagnosed with H1N1 fell ill.

Other questions raised included whether the school year would be lengthened and the status of STAR testing. Highlands should not have to extend the school year, Ahonen said, as a state of emergency

was declared because of the swine flu and the school will still have the minimum of 175 school days.

The Pittsburg school district was given extended time to conduct STAR testing, which should start at Highlands next week.

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