

WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL 2020-2021

Welcome to what promises to be an extraordinary 2020-21 school year. Many of us have been through the process of building a new house or remodeling a house while living in it. Both projects have their challenges, but building a new house while living elsewhere is a whole lot easier.

I bring this up because the normal beginning of a school year is like building a new house. Lots of prep work gets done in the spring, then teachers, staff, and administrators have time in the summer to get things ready before the big move-in date, while no one is there.

Thanks to the pandemic, this year won't be like that. Spring was....well, most of you were there, so you know. Seemingly overnight, we transitioned to distance learning from in-person teaching. Teachers worked extra hours, days, and weeks to provide the best learning experience for their students online. It was mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting.

Getting prepared for the 2020-21 school year has looked very different from years past. Instead of getting classrooms ready to welcome our students, teachers have been focused on learning best practices for distance learning and developing their online lessons. Custodians and maintenance staff have deep cleaned classrooms, added plexiglass barriers to school offices, ordered extra handwashing stations, and prepared PPE to be ready for distribution when we are able to return to school sites. Principals have been immersed in dividing class lists into AM/PM cohorts, hiring staff, and supporting all site staff, students, and parents during a pandemic.

The technology department has had a lot more work to do than just the usual summer inventory and refresh of devices. Our tech personnel have prepared twice as many devices for check-out to families than last spring. Special Education staff have worked tirelessly to understand and implement the new expectations around distance learning as they relate to students' IEPs while balancing the concerns of parents about their students' needs being met. I know that all of you, regardless of your specific role, have gone above and beyond to be as ready as possible for school to start on Thursday.

When building or remodeling a house, you work with an architect and have a blueprint to follow. During the process, there are usually alterations required to adapt to the needs of your family. It almost always takes longer and costs more than projected. In our remodel, we have all been given new blueprints every week or two. A month ago it was a sprawling Ranch house, and then it changed to a Victorian with a basement. Now it looks like it will be a Mid-Century modern with an inlaw unit. We have all quickly learned the importance of flexibility, grace, and patience with ourselves and others. Our students will be watching how we react to the continuing and inevitable changes to our blueprints in real-time. Much about our students' perspectives about distance learning will come directly from all of us. During this pandemic, we have a unique opportunity to demonstrate our growth mindset.

Despite these shifting circumstances and continually altering blueprints, I need you to know there are some facets that are steadfast about our educational world. There are foundational elements in the Orinda Union School District that a pandemic and distance learning cannot shift

or alter. Every great blueprint, no matter the type of house, has a solid foundation and scaffolding. Here are some of the components we should look to and rely upon as we take this next step together in our collective journey as educators.

1. Great teachers and teaching are SO IMPORTANT. While curriculum resources, tools, technology, and programs are critical, teachers, by far, make the most profound impact on learning outcomes for their students. And Orinda teachers are without equal in their ability to build successful classroom communities in which students succeed and thrive as learners.
2. Hard work and resilience. Orinda Union School District is known for the work and preparation we all do to provide a world-class educational experience. We pledge to do everything we can to support you and make your increasingly complex and difficult jobs more manageable.
3. Collaboration and caring for each other are critical. We cannot take on this remodel alone! To be the best we can in our individual roles, we need to lean on colleagues for professional and personal support. We are better together! By taking care of ourselves and each other, we will get through this challenging time.
4. In the classroom, we take advantage of “teachable moments,” we coach our students to learn from failure, and we seek to see the opportunity in every situation. Let’s collectively focus on the opportunities that present themselves this school year. We are implementing new ways of performing our craft, and some of those strategies will work well when we are able to return to our new normal with all students present one day.

So welcome to the 2020-21 school year, the year when we will continue to build and remodel our educational house while we live in it. Let’s be clear that what we are about to embark upon is nothing short of one of the greatest challenges that we have ever faced in public education. And while this will seem daunting at times, let’s keep our collective focus on our big picture: meeting our students’ academic and social-emotional needs. You can stress so much over the fact that there are ladders in the kitchen and you’re stubbing your toes on paint buckets in the living room that you stop seeing things from the perspectives of students, colleagues, and parents.

Fortunately, we have the best team of architects, carpenters, engineers, electricians, and other professionals in the business. Here in Orinda, we are going to be remodeling our house while we are living in it. And we hope you all will continue to focus on our strong foundation, rather than the challenges, dilemmas, or minute details of new blueprints or missed deadlines. I am so proud of what I know you will accomplish this year, and I cannot wait to behold the marvelous house we will construct together. It will, without a doubt, be a year all of us - and our students - will remember.

Our students are more ready for school to start than at any time in our entire careers. A school in another state started last week. When a student in that school was asked by his parent, “How was your first day of school?” he joyfully responded, “Mom, don’t you know I’m smiling under my mask?” Let’s have a collective goal of providing **all** of our students with abundant reasons to smile this school year.