



CONSTANZA HEVIA H. FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)

A volunteer scans a student ID at Jane Lathrop Stanford Middle School in Palo Alto, Calif. More than 700 parents are taking on tasks in the district's 18 schools.

Parents Pitch In to Keep Schools Open

By ZUSHA ELINSON

PALO ALTO, Calif.—Fang Xue, a software engineer at Google, took an hour off from work Wednesday to wipe down outdoor lunch tables at a middle school here.

He is one of more than 700 parents in this Silicon Valley school district who volunteered to take on tasks including cleaning, food service and security to help its 18 elementary, middle and high schools stay open while some 170 teachers and staff are out sick because of the Covid-19 surge driven by the Omicron variant.

Schools across the country have been struggling to stay open this month. Nationally, more than 6,200 were closed at least one day during the second week of January because of the pandemic, the highest number this academic year, according to Burbio Inc., a data company that tracks K-12 school closures.

Districts including Chicago, Atlanta and Milwaukee temporarily shifted to online learning for several days after teachers said classrooms were unsafe.

Other communities such as Palo Alto, a wealthy city of 68,500 south of San Francisco, are turning to parents to take on any job that doesn't require a teaching certificate to keep their doors open.

"It's better for the kids so we should try whatever we can," said Mr. Xue.

Officials at the Palo Alto Unified School District, which has 10,500 students, were struggling to determine how they would keep their doors open earlier this month as about 10% of employees called in sick because they had tested positive for Covid-19 or had symptoms, said Superintendent Don Austin.

On Saturday, Jan. 8, Mr. Austin's deputy superintendent texted him with an idea. He said, "What would you think about soliciting parent volunteers to keep us



Chris Grierson, principal of Jane Lathrop Stanford Middle School, says parent volunteers are boosting morale as well as filling in for staff. He expects to need volunteers for at least the next four weeks.

Ordering Begins For Free Covid Tests

The Biden administration began taking orders for free Covid-19 tests on Tuesday, a day ahead of the planned launch of its website for ordering and distributing rapid Covid-19 tests to Americans.

The website was operating

at limited capacity ahead of the official launch, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. She called it a standard practice to address troubleshooting and ensure as smooth a launch as possible. The website was expected to officially begin operation midmorning on Wednesday.

People can go to the site, covidtests.gov, and follow a link that takes them to an order form on the U.S. Postal Service

website. Only one order for four tests can be placed per address, according to the form. People can provide an email address to receive updates on an order.

The free tests are expected to start to ship in late January, according to the USPS website, and would usually be sent out within seven to 12 days of ordering.

—Brianna Abbott

afloat?" Mr. Austin said. "It's just like a lightbulb went off."

The next evening, Mr. Austin issued a call to action to parents by video message in which he compared Palo Alto to the fictional town of Bedford Falls from the film "It's a Wonderful Life."

"George Bailey needed the help of the entire community to help him to survive—and they did, epicly," Mr. Austin said. "Well, Bedford Falls, it's that time, and we need you."

By the following Tuesday afternoon, more than 700 parents, many of whom work at tech companies in the area,

had signed up for shifts as custodians, food-service workers, substitute assistants and Covid-19 testing aides. They aren't taking on roles that require any certificates or background checks, Mr. Austin said.

"Parents are desperate," said Jen Weiner, the Parent Teacher Association president at Palo Alto's Jane Lathrop Stanford Middle School. "And I think our kids are feeling the same stress and worry when there's uncertainty about the schools being open or not."

Last Wednesday, the first day of the new program, Ms.

Weiner handed out orange vests and nametags to parent volunteers at the middle school, which has 1,000 students. Wei Lau, whose twin boys are in sixth grade, scanned student IDs in the lunch line.

"With school closed the previous year, the house got a little too busy," said Ms. Lau. "I'm just doing my share to help keep the school safe and open."

Palo Alto, which includes parts of Stanford University and boasts a median household income of \$158,000, is populated largely by profes-

sionals currently working from home on flexible schedules, which makes it easier for them to volunteer.

Lakshmi Thiagarajan, a Cisco Systems Inc. engineer, used her lunch break to monitor the playground during recess at the middle school. She made sure students didn't wander off campus and reminded them to return to their classrooms when the bell sounded.

With three children, Ms. Thiagarajan said she and her husband were eager to help schools from closing down again.

"It was a challenge to get everybody to be in class on time...with a full-time job," she said.

Principal Chris Grierson said he expects the middle school will need volunteers for at least the next four weeks to fill in for missing staff.

"It's day five, but it feels like it's been five weeks," Mr. Grierson said. "It helps not only to fill the absences, but it also helps boost morale for everybody."

Some parent volunteers reported that their own children weren't thrilled to see them on campus, but Katie Fitzhugh, a seventh-grader, said she preferred that to a return to virtual lessons from home, where it was difficult to pay attention and much less fun. "I missed all my friends," she said of last year's experience.

Mr. Xue said he liked having his two daughters at home during the first year of the pandemic except for virtual band practice, during which his daughter Ya-An, now an eighth-grader, played the oboe so loudly that he had to go to the garage to work. But he knew that it was better for them to be in school.

When he signed up to volunteer for his custodial shift, his daughter warned him about the dangers.

"She said it was going to be messy right after lunch," he said.