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K-5 students return to classroom January

Students will be back to in-person learning, but it will look different

BY JEREMY JONES
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Minnesota schools can invite K-6 students back to school starting Jan. 18, regardless of local COVID-19 data.

Gov. Tim Walz announced the decision Dec. 16, but left determinations for each school district in the hands of its admin-

istrators. Hutchinson Public Schools Superintendent Daron VanderHeiden said Thursday he anticipates students in fifth grade or younger will be allowed to return to school the week of Jan. 18. Students in sixth grade make up one grade level at Hutchinson Middle School, and so the district intends to focus on its elementary buildings.

"We're also hoping to bring secondary kids back shortly after," VanderHeiden said. "But



Daron VanderHeiden

we're going to continue to monitor local numbers here to make sure it's safe at that time."

It's uncertain if secondary students will return for full in-person learning or a hybrid model as before.

Administrators want to have more information available to parents before Christmas break and were combing through rules and guideline from the state through last week.

State mandates will not allow schools to bring elementary students back to school from distance learning before Jan. 18. When they return, they'll notice teachers are now required to wear both face coverings, such as a mask and face shield. Districts must also

have testing clinics for employees every other week. Staff members will not be mandated to attend the clinics, but they must be able to if they desire. The state has said it will provide tests.

In elementary school buildings, students will not be able to transfer to art, music and other such classrooms.

"All those specialist classes will be brought to them in their classroom," VanderHeiden said.

State rules also suggest students will have to eat lunch in their classrooms.

Students to A4 ►

School district tax levy up 2%

Falling enrollment forecasts difficult future budget decisions

BY JEREMY JONE
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Hutchinson Public Schools' portion of the 2021 property tax levy is \$9.3 million, an uptick of \$184,464, or 2%.

The levy was approved by the School Board following a Dec. 14 Truth-in-Taxation hearing. It accounts for numerous factors, such as a decline in debt service because the district received bond sales that were better than expected for projects to renovate Park Elementary and West Elementary. The sales reduced voter approved debt by \$130,680.

The district also made additions to the budget, such as \$43,116 due to unemployment expenditures caused by COVID that were higher than anticipated, and \$250,000 for health and safety projects such as asbestos abatement.

The impact of the levy on property owners will vary based on the type of property and the property value. According to Rebecca Boll, director of business and finance, the owner of a \$150,000 home in Hutchinson will see \$23 less in school district taxes compared to last year. On average, residential property values increased by 6% in McLeod County.

School levy to A4 ►

FOLLOW THE GLOW



STAFF PHOTO BY STEPHEN WIBLEMO

If you're looking for a holiday extravaganza of lights, head to 735 Spruce St. N.E., where Seth and Amy Jo Hopkins have gone all out for the holidays with everything from a lit-up narwhal to The Bumble and his Christmas star. Their efforts earned first place in the Real Life In Hutchinson Christmas Light Contest. Check out more light displays on Page A7.

BG Jewelry takes flight in downtown Hutchinson

Brian Gauger, owner of BG Jewelry, a new store in downtown Hutchinson, offers custom creations, in-house repairs and more.

STAFF PHOTO BY STEPHEN WIBLEMO



Brian Gauger went from making airplane parts to crafting custom jewelry

BY STEPHEN WIBLEMO
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Airplane exhausts and fine jewelry may not seem to have much in common, but for Brian Gauger, the similarities are as clear as diamonds.

Gauger, 31, is the owner of BG Jewelers, downtown Hutchinson's newest jewelry store at 45 Washington Ave. E. He opened in late November, and so far things are going well.

"I've been very happy with people coming in and getting a lot of feedback," the Burnsville-area native said. "People really like the store."

Gauger and his wife, Jenna, have lived in rural Buffalo Lake since 2015 but have gotten to know the Hutchinson community well over the years as Jenna coached hockey and the two joined the Jaycees.

Jewelry wasn't Gauger's first profession. He started out making airplane parts as a welder/fabricator in Eagan. After several years of that, he grew tired of "doing the same thing over and

over again" and was looking for a change. It was Jenna's father who introduced him to the world of jewelry craftsmanship.

"We were dating and her dad owns his own (jewelry) shop in New Prague, and I got interested in that because I like working with my hands and making things," Gauger said.

Under the apprenticeship of his eventual father-in-law, Gauger learned the techniques of a jeweler. He realized that much like making airplane parts, crafting quality jewelry requires precision and an eye for details.

"My fabrication skills grew immensely, and it just transferred over, obviously on a smaller scale," he said. "But it's virtually the same thing. You're sanding on this and sanding on that, filing this and filing that to make everything right and perfect."

"With airplane parts, it has to go through quality control," he added. "They can't have airplanes falling out of the sky. Quality control, that's how I like things, to make sure it's right so it lasts as long as it possibly can for every customer."

Gauger spent years working on his craft and even began a small jewelry business out of his home. But as word got out and his customer

Jewelry to A8 ►