Ready to learn

Oconee, Pickens students start classes today, Anderson 4 already back

BY GREG OLIVER
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After a two-and-a-half month summer break, students in Oconee and Pickens counties report back to their respective elementary, middle and high schools today.

Meanwhile, students in Anderson School District 4, which encompasses the Pendleton area, got a jump on their neighbors by reporting Monday.

"District 4 had a great start," spokesperson Joanne Avery said Monday afternoon. "There were no issues with bus transportation, facilities or services, and we're planning to evaluate enrollment numbers to determine if any staffing needs exist."

According to its website, Anderson School District 4 has a total student enrollment of 2,880, with



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the majority — more than 1,600 — representing elementary schools. There are six schools in the district, with four elementary schools in Pendleton Elementary, Mount Lebanon Elementary, LaFrance Elementary and Townville Elementary; Riverside Middle and Pendleton High School. The average class size is 22.2 students for kindergarten, 19.6 for primary (grades 1-3), 19.2 for elementary (grades 4-5), 20.7 for middle school and 15.4 for high school.

The district features a total of 412 employees, with 234 consisting of certified staff, including school-level administrators; and 118 classified staff.

Security improvements have been a high priority for all three school districts. Avery said District 4 students were greeted in four of its schools with new secure entrances.

"We added airlock entrances at Pendleton, LaFrance and Townville elementaries and Riverside Middle, since they did not have those previously," Avery said. "Parents noticed them and were appreciative."

Michael Thorsland, assistant superintendent for operational services for the School District of Oconee County, said security cameras were added to all elementary schools since last year and that the district will be working to have new cameras installed at all four middle schools this year. Thorsland added that a new security wall has been put into place at Walhalla Elementary "to separate visitors from gaining access to the school."

"We're constantly looking at ways to improve security," Thorsland said. "We believe we're ready to get started."

Thorsland asks motorists to be on the lookout for little ones as they board school buses or walk to school. Parents also typically take their children to school the first several days of the new school year, resulting in increased traffic congestion.

"We just ask for patience from everyone, because the first two or three days will be a little more chaotic," Thorsland said. "But we expect things to calm down afterward."

The assistant superintendent said improvements will also be noticeable at several schools. For example, a playground at Blue Ridge Elementary has been relocated while work on the walking track is continuing. At Westminster Elementary, the school's walking track was completed over the summer.

All students entering seventh grade in South Carolina will also now be required to have additional immunization for whooping cough as part of a new DHEC requirement. Those students must show proof of a Tdap shot in order to attend school and, in addition to whooping cough, the shot also protects kids and adults from tetanus and diphtheria.

School District of Pickens County officials say two schools — Pickens Middle School and Gettys Middle School — will begin classes today in new surroundings. District spokesman John Eby said the schools will both move into freshly renovated high school campuses.

"The renovations at Pickens Middle are complete, while Gettys Middle School will undergo Phase II of the renovation process during the school year," Eby said.

Superintendent Kelly Pew said staff and parents are excited about the new security enhancements taking place. The schools will be equipped with security cameras so receptionists can see the people they are about to allow into the building.

"All but four schools already have the intercoms installed to begin the school year, and the new technology has been purchased and will be installed as soon as possible at A.R. Lewis, Holly Springs, Ambler and Pickens elementaries," Pew said. "While we understand that the intercoms will be an added stop for parents visiting our schools, we appreciate their patience and understanding as we maintain the safety of our children."

Pew added that district staff and parents are excited about the new campuses.

"They are looking forward to additional space, new technology and added security features," she said.

Eby said parents are reminded to be sure to register for the SDPC ParentLink notification system.

"This year, we want as many parents as possible to be signed up at the start of the year so they can check their children's grades, assignments and attendance online and on their smartphones," Eby said. "The more parents stay connected through ParentLink, the fewer surprises they will have at report card time."

Pew also expects traffic congestion to be heavier the first few days of school.

"We ask our parents to be very cautious at and around our schools and to be patient," Pew said.

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