

More than 223,000 students on LI start school today

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As students return to class this week, educators are emphasizing programs like FIRST that focus on science and technology education. Here, Girl Power Robotics team members work on a robot at Lynbrook High School on Jan. 8, 2017. (Credit: Daniel Goodrich)

The majority of public schools on Long Island opened Tuesday with educators in Nassau and Suffolk counties predicting a strong start to the school year with a growing focus on high-tech instruction and training.

“We are planning to have a productive and exciting school year in Port Jefferson,” Superintendent Paul Casciano said. “We have some new programs and initiatives in 2017-18 that we believe will have a positive impact on our students, our staff and our community.”

More than 223,000 students started classes in 70 school districts across Long Island Tuesday — the biggest single day of reopenings in the region. That includes grades 10 through 12 in Suffolk’s William Floyd system, where the earlier grades jumped off last week.

Another 180,000 students will begin school in 44 districts on Wednesday and five systems open on Thursday. About 29,400 students commenced classes in six districts last week, with the Jericho district as the first, starting on Aug. 29.

Tuesday morning, dozens of parents dropped their children off at Frank P. Long Intermediate School in the South Country School District for the start of classes, less than a month after administrators opted to keep the Bellport school open amid concerns about environmental hazards and odors that some believed emanated from nearby Brookhaven town landfill.

The Board of Education, at its Aug. 16 meeting, announced it would not close the school after the completion of environmental testing. But the state Department of Health that week announced a review of cancer rates and disease occurrence related to the school.

School board president Cheryl Felice had said there was “no definitive reason” to close the school after an environmental consultant’s report concluded that the building was “free of elevated levels of contaminants” and that test samples were “similar to background levels compared to similar schools.”

On Tuesday morning, Amir Georges, 43, dropped off his son, Max, 9, who is entering fourth grade.

"I'm concerned about sending my kids here, but as a parent you have no say or any control over any testing, water testing . . . You trust the school," Georges said. "You kind of put your trust in the hands of the school when you're here."

He said both of his children have stomach problems sometimes and he has concerns about the water quality.

"What do you do?" Georges said. "I was kind of nervous about it. I'm definitely concerned. I don't know as a parent what you can do about it. The aftereffects are sometimes years later."

Parent Christine Arps, 36, dropped off her daughter Adriana, 11, who was starting fifth grade — her second year at the school.

"I feel a little bit concerned about it," she said. "If it's hazardous to our kids, then they shouldn't let them come here. They should switch the schools."

Dozens of school districts across Long Island spent Tuesday welcoming students and celebrating the start of another academic year.

In Baldwin, educators have launched an in-district campaign called "I Love Baldwin Public Schools."

The effort is a subset of the American Association of School Administrators' "I Love Public Education" national campaign, which was introduced this summer.

Baldwin's goal is twofold: to support the campaign highlighting the success of public schools across the country and to increase pride in Baldwin schools throughout the community, school officials said.

Throughout the school year, banners will be fixed at each of the district's eight school buildings, apparel will allow students to show their pride, and emphasis will be placed on "Baldwin Pride." The campaign will play out over social media.

"This school year we want the Baldwin community to declare its pride in our public school system," said Shari L. Camhi, superintendent of Baldwin schools.

Educators have also placed a focus on high-tech instruction as a priority — reflecting not only demands of the job market, but also the personal interests of many residents.

A public-opinion poll released last week by Phi Delta Kappa, a global network of educators, found that 82 percent of adult respondents across the Island and other metro-area suburbs regarded tech-oriented classes as "extremely" or "very" important.

Expressed support for such coursework was stronger than for extracurricular activities, at 76 percent, art and music classes, at 72 percent, and advanced academic classes, at 68 percent. Poll analysts concluded that respondents sought a greater balance in school offerings, as opposed to concentration on academics alone.



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Many of the region's 124 districts are expanding programs in subjects such as pre-engineering and robotics, with the help of national or international organizations dedicated to encouraging career studies in such areas. Funding comes from a mixture of corporations, foundations and government agencies.

One such program, Project Lead the Way, is offered by a nonprofit group based in Indianapolis, Indiana. Sixty schools on the Island currently participate in the program among more than 10,000 nationwide, project officials said.

Malverne High School this year is adding courses designed by Project Lead the Way in biomedical science, engineering design and computer science to two engineering courses introduced last year. Classes in the district began Tuesday.

Steve Gilhuley, Malverne's assistant superintendent of curriculum, instruction and educational services, said students are attracted by the hands-on nature of Project Lead the Way classwork.

"It's not like a typical classroom," Gilhuley said. "They have iPads, they have Surface Pros, they have desktops, they have robots. It really encompasses a lot of things."

Other popular programs are provided by FIRST — For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology, which is headquartered in Manchester, New Hampshire.

On the Island, one FIRST-supported operation is a regional robotics competition, which started with eight high school teams in 1999 and has since expanded to more than 50 teams, including several from Queens. This year, sponsors expect participation to grow to at least 60 teams.

The competition is managed regionally by School-Business Partnerships of Long Island Inc., a nonprofit volunteer organization that develops pairings between high schools and businesses. The group's executive director, Bertram Dittmar, a retired corporate CEO, said the contest is about more than robots.

Students "find a way outside of sports that they can cooperate as a team," Dittmar said.

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