

BACK TO SCHOOL: WILL KIDS SHOW?



Third-grade teacher Patricia Weber on Monday prepares her classroom at Disney Magnet School for opening day.

JEAN LACHAT/SUN-TIMES

CITY MAKES FINAL PUSH TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE ON OPENING DAY

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STAFF REPORTERS

Their backpacks were filled with fresh notebooks and sharpened pencils. Their uniforms already were pressed and laid out, ready for today's morning rush.

That's why Helena Perkowski was

able to spend Labor Day playing cards and getting some sun on the lakefront with her daughter, Anna, 9, and sons, Jacek, 12, and Mario, 13.

The only things remaining on Perkowski's pre-first-day-of-school to-do list Monday were to feed the kids dinner and make sure they took showers before heading to bed.

Perkowski, who works as a house-

keeper in Skokie, says normally her schedule wouldn't allow her to accompany her kids to class at Chicago's Monroe Elementary School. But today will be special.

This year, on her children's first day of school, Perkowski plans to work a later shift so she can walk them to school about a block from

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LAST-MINUTE REMINDERS

- The first day back to school today is a full day of classes.
- Try to get children to their bus pickup in the morning about 15 minutes early. And be patient: bus drivers have been instructed to drive routes "slowly and safely."
- Students entering school for the first time, and those entering kindergarten, first, fifth and ninth grades must have current medical exams and all immunizations.
- Students entering preschool must also have recent medical exams and lead screenings.
- Check with schools for dress code information, and about free or reduced-price lunches.
- Don't send children to school empty-handed. Having school supplies in hand is as important as showing up on time.

For more information, call the Chicago Public Schools' ombudsman hotline at (773) 553-1000 or visit www.cps.k12.il.us

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their home in the Logan Square neighborhood.

"Only tomorrow I will take my kids, and then they will go alone," Perkowski said.

Like thousands of other public school parents in Chicago, Perkowski got the message school officials have been sending about the importance of attending the first day of school. They heard the message on TV in public service announcements from Mayor Daley, in radio ads, during preschool parades, at pep rallies and even at a concert by supergirl pop musicians Destiny's Child.

For 10 days, the Chicago Public Schools public relations machine, under the direction of new CEO Arne Duncan, has been cranked up to maximum overdrive, all to get as many kids in their seats when the first bell rings in the first class this morning in schools across the city.

"Kids, your time is up!" teachers union President Deborah Lynch-Walsh shouted during a pep rally Monday at Navy Pier. "September 4, out the door. It's totally cool to go back to school!"

"We know that your children are your most precious resource," Lynch chirped as a crowd of teachers surrounding her clapped and an unidentified person wearing a shiny green dragon's costume nodded in support. "We take that awe-



Helena Perkowski (from left) and daughter Anna, 9, enjoy the eve of the first day of school with Brenda Beltran, 11, and Catherine Beltran, 8.

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some responsibility of educating them for their futures . . . seriously. We are ready; we want you to have them there tomorrow morning at the school bell, ready, willing and able to move forward."

For 10 days leading up to today's first day of classes, public school officials have bombarded parents, guardians, teachers and children with the rally call to get to class on time, ready to go, on the first day. It's an ambitious response to last year's disappointing first-day attendance.

Last year, when school started on

Aug. 22, a quarter of the city's 430,000 public school students were absent. Many people attributed the poor turnout to the early start date, a week before Labor Day.

Gaytan Godwin, a computer teacher at Nia School, 2040 W. Adams, said she is optimistic about a high turnout.

"First of all, we had a nice long summer," said Godwin, who also is the 2001 Ms. Tall Chicago. "I think the parents are more ready to send the kids back. In former years, a lot of kids were down South, out of town. We really couldn't start school until after Labor Day anyway. . . . The first week and a half was just kicked to the curb."

This year, she said, "it would be



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Teachers union president Deborah Lynch-Walsh speaks at a rally to promote the first day of school.

really hard not to know when school starts."

When kids don't show up for the first day or two of school, it can set a whole classroom behind, Lynch said.

"Every day we miss, every hour we miss of instruction, our children lose, and that's unacceptable," Duncan told reporters.

Last year, the top 30 elementary schools in Chicago, as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, had a first-day attendance rate of 93 percent, compared with 70 percent for the bottom 30 schools. At the high school level, the top 10 percent achievers on the Test of Academic Proficiency had an average first-day attendance of 95 percent, compared with 65 percent for the bottom 10 percent, school records show.

"We'll learn from what we've done this year. Each year we're going to try and improve. Last year was the base line," Duncan said. "I'm fairly confident we're going to do pretty darn well."

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