

Back to school: concerns remain over learning model, start of sports season

July 23, 2020



As times remain uncertain during the COVID-19 pandemic just weeks before school is to start in Aug. 24, a group of educators from Del Norte and Humboldt counties penned an open letter July 21 to the community expressing their concerns.

One of the signatories, Del Norte Teachers Association President Marshal Jones, summarized the letter's message.

"The key take away is we need to ensure if in fact students and staff are coming back to the classroom, above all, safety needs to be the most important thing to decide," Jones told The Triplicate.

Among the health and safety measures the letter demands be in place to restart in-person schooling include:

- Reduced student class size cohorts
- Social/physical distancing at all times and limited interactions of people at school sites
- Hand washing stations
- Essential protective equipment
- COVID-19 testing available for students and educators

The letter's authors called for continued discussions including educators, administrators and parents to develop an optimal learning environment.

"Providing a one-size-fits all plan will not ensure equitable access but will only serve to leave some students further behind," the letter states. "We call for plans to have multiple options that allow academic and social-

emotional growth for all students.”

Del Norte Unified School District Superintendent Jeff Harris said he was aware of the letter, acknowledging it contained a lot of concerns expressed and the administration fully understands those concerns.

“At this point, what we’re really trying to do is look at each phase we may be in as far as reopening in August, depending on what health and safety precautions need to be in place to implement those phases,” Harris told The Triplicate.

He said DNUSD currently has about 16 or 17 workgroups looking at specifically full distance learning versus blended learning options, gathering information, health and safety options, while addressing the emotional and physical wellness of students and staff.

Harris added the biggest problem for his administration is the ever -changing situation.

“There’s a lot of mandates out there. Just last week, the governor mandated teachers cannot be within 6 feet of student,” Harris said. “If the state continues to hold that mandate, that will change how teachers handle learning in the classroom.”

Both Harris and Jones agree such a mandate would be difficult with an emphasis on face-to-face instruction.

“I don’t think it would be physically possible,” Jones said. “In kindergarten, they’re reading face to face, the child sees words formulated, getting direct instruction to learn to read. Without that, it’s tragic.”

Harris said he completely supports bargaining units bringing up concerns and in the few weeks they still have before school starts plan to see if the administration can address those concerns. He added a frustration the administration faces is the possibility of implementing a safety guideline, then have it change.

Sports seasons

In other developments, Harris addressed the announcement of a fall and spring sports season. On July 20, the California Interscholastic Foundation announced that fall sports will be moved to winter and all high school sports in the state will have compressed schedules in the coming school year because of concerns related to the pandemic.

Harris said that means DNUSD will not be able to start the first day of practice for fall sports until Dec 14 according to the North Coast Section, which includes Del Norte High School.

The County Public Health Officer Dr. Warren Rehwaldt had approved small cohort conditioning and training sessions for student athletes since June 18. Harris said that will continue until July 31.

After that, all conditioning and training will be discontinued to give students three full weeks of no student to student contact, as per district purview, Harris said.

He added no guidance has been given yet for after Aug. 24, whether conditioning programs will be allowed to continue or if students will have to wait until practices officially start Dec. 14.

