

DNUSD closes facilities for remainder of term; distance learning will be done at home

April 16, 2020



To remove an element of the unknown, the Del Norte Unified School District trustees voted April 9 to close all district facilities through the end of the school year.

Superintendent Jeff Harris said the move would give teachers and families more certainty when planning for the long-term, the eight weeks after spring break.

He added surrounding counties are taking similar measures, including Humboldt County, which also recommended full closure until the end of the year. A lot of other counties and school districts got together and also decided to just close schools for the rest of the year, Harris told the board members.

“This is what we were thinking about, just closing until a certain point and then revisiting it again. In a lot of our conversations, this makes it difficult to plan distance learning, plan for implementation, plan for training,” Harris explained. “So, if the board takes action right now to close schools from now to end of the year, but then if the stay at home order is lifted, or social distancing lifted, and the recommendation is to go back to school, then we can restart schools. That’s the easiest thing to do instead of keeping people on a two-week cycle of I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“We need to really emphasize,” Trustee Angela Greenough added, “this is not ending the school year. This is closing the facilities while education is still happening.”

Trustees also voted to close Castle Rock Charter School and Del Norte Community School as part of their additional duties as the Del Norte County Board of Education.

The two facilities had been closed since March 16 along with the rest of the DNUSD campuses. However, since no official action had been taken to close the two county facilities, Harris asked them Thursday to “memorialize” their closure as of March 16.

Board President Frank Magarino asked what it would take to even have a soft opening.

“If the stay at home order was lifted and we were able to go back to having small groups of students come in then they could be socially isolated, that six-foot distance, that kind of becomes your soft opening,” Harris said.

Harris then speculated how that would work, such as classes twice a week, or every other day, where half the class came in and sat a desk apart and one in front of you.

“We would have to work really closely with the health department because the one thing we don’t want to do is start something then have (County Health Public Health Officer Warren Reywaldt) step in and have to say, ‘I’m shutting you down because you guys aren’t following guidelines,’” Harris said.

He added graduation ceremonies are still on the table.

“We can do that if conditions are right. I want us to plan on doing graduation as if we’re actually having a graduation,” he said. “Because if it gets to the point where they say, ‘Sure, we’ll let you come to school the last two weeks in June,’ I want us to come back to school the last two weeks of June with a graduation.”

In their presentations, neither Harris nor Tom Kissinger, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, were ready to layout a distance-learning, short-term grading policy. Rather, the school district will spend the week after spring break making sure students and parents know what to expect through the end for the last two months of the academic year, Harris said.

“As of the 20th, school is compulsory. Work will be due and work completion is going to be how we take attendance and how credits and grades are issued,” Harris said.

Kissinger promised the board a full, written report at its April 23 meeting, dubbing the week after spring break, April 20-24, as “bridge to learning week.”

“Staff will ensure everyone is connected to a device and the Internet,” Kissinger said.

Kissinger outlined the steps teachers have taken to keep the learning process going, including ensuring students receive work packets and access to teachers digitally and working with administrators and support staff to enhance their ability to use digital platforms such as Zoom, Canvass, Google Classroom and SeeSaw.

Kissinger made an apt analogy of how the pandemic has practically forced staff to make it up as they go.

“It’s like learning how to ride a bicycle while you’re building the bicycle and drinking from a fire hose at the same time,” he said, adding district staff will ensure they also make paper packets to compliment the digital learning and address students without easy access to the Internet.

“Our kids are going to get high-quality learning opportunities (and) feedback,” Kissinger said. “There’s been a whole conversation going on around grading, around evaluation and making sure no students get hurt by what this whole process has been.”

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond released a statement April 1 that the California Department of Education and California State Board of Education issued new guidelines on graduation requirements and grading for high school seniors.

Thurmond’s announcement outlined how many colleges, including the community college system and private and nonprofit universities, agreed to accept “credit-no-credit grading” for college prep courses where local districts see fit. The state is also being more flexible with testing requirements, transcripts and financial aid considerations.

Harris told trustees April 9 that it’s important for staff to see and weigh in on the district learning grading policy to ensure it meets the needs of all students.

“Parents also need to know how to help students access their online courses, so the week after spring break will be spent walking them through Google Classroom, SeeSaw and other digital platforms,” Harris said.

Trustees Greenough and Charlaime Mazzei both wanted assurances that special education students would not get left out when getting their needs met through a distance-learning format.

Mazzei, whose son has special needs, said he has been losing out on valuable one-on-one facetime with a staff member in a class, which helps him stay focused on the lesson and to get needed tutoring.

“We have a hard time doing that at home. I think there are going to be those challenges of folks who are going to have to have more assistance to access the learning for their child rather than just having it available on a computer screen,” Mazzei said.

However, she added she’s not returning her son to school without ironclad assurances.

“Until we know how we can tell for sure, that the kid sitting next to my kid in class hasn’t been exposed, I’m not sending my kid back to school,” Mazzei said. “As a parent, I would rather have that certainty that my child is going to be home the rest of the school year, than have this to be revisited every two weeks.”