

COVID-19 frustrations boil over school board meeting; Trustees direct superintendent to seek additional state help

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Frustrated with the consequences students are facing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, board members directed the superintendent to reach out to state officials expressing Del Norte County has reached a boiling point.

At their Oct. 22 meeting, the Del Norte Unified School District Board of Trustees directed Superintendent Jeff Harris to concentrate the message toward better testing, rather than a petition for fully reopening.

“I cannot in good conscious support a letter that says let us open our schools,” said Trustee Charlaine Mazzei. “I can support a letter that says if you want us to open our schools, this is what we need and this is how much it’s going to cost. That kind of a letter would be helpful and would be something that we can let the state know, ‘hey, us rural communities need testing too.’”

The trustees asked Harris to create a resolution and a letter outlining the need for a more robust testing protocol in rural communities, including statistics to illustrate Del Norte County’s challenges that predate the COVID-19 pandemic — mental health, child abuse and domestic violence.

“This is not a criticism of teachers, not a criticism of parents, it’s the lack of that comprehensive education that our kids are experiencing at this point simply because of where we are with the virus and the restrictions,” Harris explained. “It really is kind of an exhortation to give us what we need as we move ahead — not to hold us back and not to have us be second fiddle as they provide resources and support to other areas and leave us to fend for ourselves.”

Trustees shared parents’ frustration levels in messages they’ve received.

Jamie Forkner said some are still struggling to wrap their heads around digital applications students need to get through their lessons while others worry about burdensome level of homework they have to assist their child with after a long day at work.

Angela Greenough spoke of attendance concerns, as parents have told her they have to fight with their child just to contact their teacher. But the check-in time, which can take up to 10 minutes, isn't worth the effort of logging onto Zoom, Greenough said.

Frank Magarino said he's heard of apps that freeze, students getting kicked out of their lessons and even from parents who want to scrap the entire 2020-21 school year and come back in September 2021.

"That's a whole year of lost education that we have a responsibility to give. It's our duty to do that," Magarino said. "How we go about it, we're not figuring that out. We've got to figure that out really fast because there's just too much things that are percolating that are far more damaging than what's going on with these other things."

Harris shared tales he's also heard from staff and around the county.

Harris said he's heard from teachers and principals that disciplinary problems have decreased when students are at school their two-days a week. He said some students are learning more because they're in smaller groups, while others don't want to leave campus when the day is over.

"They are seeing the ability to come to school as a privilege and something they're truly valuing and missing massively," Harris explained. "Almost every teacher I've talked to has talked about the importance of those relationships and how difficult those relationships are in distance learning."

Harris added that because of social distancing and isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, depression and anxiety locally has increased.

"Over the past three weeks, we've worked with three different families who have either had students attempt suicide or had suicidal thoughts or ideation," he said. "And these are kids between kindergarten and 12th grade. So, really providing supports and understanding where we are is part and parcel of where we're finding ourselves in this whole mix."

Harris added he's heard Del Norte County Child Welfare Services is reporting the number of referrals has decreased by about 60 percent. He chalks this up to children having limited interaction with nurses, teachers, psychologists and other caregivers who would make those referrals.

Harris said for the resolution and letter to the state, he'll get input from the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors, the Crescent City Council, tribal leaders and other community partners to express the county's needs.