

## **(Not) Safe to Enter?**

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 21 August 2020 05:06

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### **Constant changes lead to confusion, setbacks with school re-entry**

With school set to start for McKinley County students, not everyone will be counted present — possibly including teachers.

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Welcome to the new world of education thanks to COVID-19, the highly contagious and sometimes deadly scourge.

This academic year comes rife with challenges for Gallup-McKinley County Schools.

The district is in the midst of preparing students for a combination of limited in-person learning at their respective schools and learning remotely at home through loaned equipment and software.

Superintendent Mike Hyatt said teachers were set to be trained early this week so they could use this equipment properly to effectively teach from home or a closed classroom.

However, this transition has not been as smooth as parents and teachers would like it to be. This mood was apparent during the GMCS Board of Education's Aug. 11 meeting.

The board discussed the newest modified re-entry plan for the district's students. Hyatt opened by talking about the adjustments the district has made and the frustration that has resulted.

"Things are changing too much with the [New Mexico] Public Education Department," Hyatt said. "Days later or sometimes even sooner, they are coming forward and saying 'We made a mistake and certain things in the reopening aren't allowed.' These changes this late in the game have created a lot of burden across the state."

The last statement from the PED was in a July 24 meeting, where Hyatt said the Public Education Department realized how devastating it is to students who are "at-risk" to not have the opportunity to go to in-person instruction if they choose.

A student is defined as "at-risk" if they are at a disadvantage of learning below the standard

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rate. Factors that determine if a student is at-risk include not having a stable internet connection where they live, having learning disabilities, or being economically disadvantaged.

Hyatt said prior to last week, the PED said students without access to a stable connection at home would be able to come into school for in-person learning, as would students who are not able to learn online. The number of occupants in a given building would be capped at a ratio of 5-1, with five students for every teacher.

“However, within days of their announcement, the PED secretary said they didn’t have authority to implement this and pulled it all back,” Hyatt said. “Now we are in a difficult situation because now students and parents could have had the child come back in for at least part of the week, but the PED took away the parents’ choice [of having their child come in], a week before school started.”

During the meeting, Hyatt said the PED suddenly determined state districts can have the 5-1 ratio for in-person learning for pre-K to third grade students and students with disabilities. However, this would include the at-risk students, which Hyatt said includes up to 94% of GMCS students.

While the safety of teachers was also brought up by the board, Hyatt also spoke about how there has to be a system of accountability in place for teachers, regardless of where they are teaching.

“We want our teachers to be monitored to make sure taxpayer dollars are being put to good use,” Hyatt said, citing how the teachers would have to deal with problems that arise with remote learning. “We think about connection issues and how it (sic) can damage a student’s learning.”

Hyatt said the vast majority of district teachers want to teach their students the best way they can. In some cases that can mean teaching from the schools even if they are closed to students, since the schools often provide them with a more reliable internet connection than they can get at home.

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Dist. 3 Board Member Priscilla Manuelito wanted to stress to parents, grandparents, and guardians of students that this situation is as difficult for the board as it is for them and their children.

“It’s confusing to come into every meeting we have and find out something else has changed,” Manuelito said. “We’re trying to update parents and comprehend the new changes PED is making [at the meetings]. It is confusing to the board, and it’s even worse for parents.”

Manuelito said the abrupt changes and directives are upsetting, and she has received numerous phone calls from her constituents about the re-entry plan.

“It is our responsibility to figure the plan out for our students, but there are other entities making these changes without consulting anyone else. No one is listening to the parents or children,” she said.

Manuelito continued by saying the PED secretary has not come to GMCS and does not seem to understand how remote the living conditions are for most students.

She said she was also upset because the exclusion of at-risk children from in-person learning means the district has difficulty serving the students who want to come to school.

“We have to let the parents know this is a mandate where the PED is forgetting about our children,” Manuelito said. “We have to let our staff know, too, because we could be losing them if this [treatment] continues.”

Dist. 1 Board Member Kevin Mitchell asked about any other staff who had been allowed in the buildings since the pandemic began, and how their safety is being monitored.

He also brought up the point of whether the teachers were adjusting to these abrupt changes.

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“Are our teachers ready for virtual learning? Because it didn’t sound like it to me,” Mitchell said. “I’ve been disturbed by PED taking away local empowerment and overriding the board in this way.”

Hyatt said staff has been in the school buildings throughout the pandemic, explaining that the district served about 15,000 meals a day for students.

“We are trying to get schools prepared and it’s difficult to let staff and parents know as the state flip flops on their decisions,” he said.

While Hyatt expressed his gratitude for the essential workers who have provided these services, he questions why teachers are not part of this group, and why there is not an accountability system in place for the people making these decisions.

“Students need an in-person learning structure as much as possible and they’re being denied that opportunity,” Hyatt said. “It is all being done by outside sources and governments.”

Manuelito said these decisions by the PED are an injustice similar to the Yazzie v. Martinez lawsuit, and the PED does not see how it is going to harm students.

The Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit challenged the State of New Mexico’s failure to provide students - especially low-income, Native American, English language learners, and students with disabilities - the necessary programs and services for them to learn and thrive, and challenged the state’s failure to sufficiently fund these programs and services.

“What my family’s worried about is the students are not at the level where they’re supposed to be because the last year was cut short,” Manuelito said. “Now we’re having the same issues beginning a new year. These [rulings] are going to impact them again.”

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Hyatt agreed the students are the group who could be affected the most by the PED's rulings, particularly with significant learning losses.

"It's time we get past what adults want and focus on what the kids need," he said. "We're going to do our best, but it's going to be a bumpy road. We need everyone to have patience to get [our teachers] up to speed."

Manuelito closed her comments by bringing up how many students living in remote areas have other obstacles on top of remote learning challenges that students in urban areas do not have. She mentioned they have to tend to their own basic needs like shelter and supplies, whereas urban students typically do not have to worry about these matters.

"Virtual learning will solve everything in the city, but not in the rural homes," she said.

After the comments had concluded, the board voted to approve the modified re-entry plan for GMCS by a count of 4-0.

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