

GMCS superintendent under fire for COVID response

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
Thursday, 26 November 2020 10:02



Allegations of case count cover-ups, improper cleaning

Concerns about the dangers of COVID-19 and Gallup McKinley County school classrooms have led to numerous allegations that the school district is hiding the number of COVID cases and school classrooms are not being properly cleaned.

Those concerns were broadcast by an Albuquerque television station Nov. 17 using unnamed sources.

One source who contacted the *Gallup Sun* and did not wish to be named, said GMCS Superintendent Michael Hyatt is covering up the number of confirmed COVID cases in Gallup public schools.

WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

The New Mexico Environment Department Rapid Response COVID-19 Watchlist shows 222 positive employees in GMCS schools on Nov. 17.

Hyatt says the numbers are “completely inaccurate.”

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“On that day out of our approximately 1900 employees, there were two new employee cases at GMCS.”

“We’re in damage control for something that’s not true,” Hyatt said.

In a follow-up response to the *Sun* Nov. 19, Hyatt said, “GMCS is working with the State of New Mexico to correct their error that caused the false report. GMCS is reviewing all NMDOH confirmed cases and compiling all cases in GMCS this school year and will report the accurate daily case rates results before Thanksgiving break.”

Judy Robinson, former deputy director of communications with the governor’s office, and just this week named the deputy director of communications at the Public Education Department, told the *Sun*, Nov. 19 that she is aware of some kind of issue with the data.

“We don’t think it’s accurate. We’re trying to sort that out right now,” she said.

But it’s not just the potential of data issues. Robinson said there’s something else happening in relation to the Gallup numbers.

“We are aware of a separate protocol and reporting issue in Gallup,” she said, “and we’re working to follow up with our own and our sister agency [the Environment Department].”

IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT THE NUMBERS

One concerned citizen who did not wish to be identified by name, told the *Sun* Nov. 17 that there is a gag order on principals, and that teachers and staff members who file complaints face retaliation.

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This person went on to say classrooms are not being cleaned or disinfected — instead, the rooms are closed for three days and then the children and a substitute teacher are allowed back into the room.

They added that there is no contact tracking and tracing going on in the GMCS District.

The *Sun* spoke with Hyatt about these claims. He answered each, in turn.

“All of the allegations are false,” Hyatt began.

On the subject of cleaning classrooms, Hyatt stressed, “We have actually been cleaning above and beyond what the guidelines are, and have put hundreds of thousands of dollars toward supplies and equipment to ensure that buildings are sanitized properly, and have been very transparent about that effort. Our custodians are doing a tremendous job.”

A parent who has three children studying remotely at GMCS schools, told the *Sun* Nov. 19 that she was concerned about the lack of ventilation in classrooms and that she believed each school was being left to figure out its response to COVID-19 individually.

Hyatt responded that GMCS posted all the information about how to respond to COVID-19 on the district website. He said it follows all state and health guidelines.

“The claim that there is spread happening in all of our schools is false,” Hyatt said. “There is only one case at that [Indian Hills] school.”

Hyatt emphasized that not one person has provided an official complaint. No one has been disciplined, and no one has ever been fired because they expressed a concern. “We welcome people’s concerns to find out if they’re true and address them if they are.”

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Hyatt said there is no gag order. No one is being retaliated against.

“I think that what’s happened is parents and teachers want to know who in the school has had it [COVID], he said.”

He pointed out that after the governor reasserted lockdown protocols, it created fear and anxiety about the virus.

“Some people’s reaction to that is to place blame on others, like the school district,” he said. “I think schools are some of the safest places in our community. The spread is typically happening at home.

“We can’t let everybody know who is COVID-positive,” Hyatt explained. “We have (a) tracking and tracing for every case of COVID.”

The superintendent also responded to a claim that GMCS has a private investigator talking to anyone believed to be speaking to the media about COVID cases and how they are handled in GMCS schools.

He said the investigator who was mentioned was someone hired to look into what has been happening at Indian Hills.

A concern shared with the *Sun* that school nurses who had been given the job of keeping track of COVID cases, had that responsibility taken away and reassigned, was also answered by Hyatt, who said, the change came about because someone doing that job had to quarantine. At that time, the responsibilities were shifted to someone else.

Hyatt added that, as of Nov. 18, GMCS has already heard from one of the people who spoke

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about students being infected. He said she now says she was wrong and made her comments based on rumors she heard.

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