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GMCS' Mike Hyatt says the classrooms are ready for students

The governor's recent announcement to allow all levels of public school to offer hybrid instruction beginning Feb. 8, highlights the divide in Gallup between local district administrators who vouch for in-person learning and parents who say they're not ready to send their children back to the classroom.

In an interview with *The Gallup Sun*, Gallup-McKinley County Schools District Superintendent Mike Hyatt said the transition would not be all that significant, given elementary schools have been engaged in hybrid instruction since the start of the year.

He said CARES Act money was used to buy equipment needed for hybrid learning, including things to keep buildings safe. GMCS schools also passed safety inspections.

Meanwhile, JayLyn Ellis, mother to three children who attend GMCS schools — one of them a middle schooler — said she was "taken aback" by the governor's decision, questioning how it was made. She has also been critical of Hyatt and the local school board's actions throughout the pandemic.

The superintendent and Ellis are far apart when it comes to the decision to send students back to school.

“At some point, we need to resume back to some level of normalcy for our school system,” Hyatt said, citing studies on the benefits of in-person education. “I just hate to see students struggling from home.”

Ellis is not confident students can be sent back safely, even as the 7-day rolling average of cases has declined.

“If we got just 5 [cases] today with zero deaths, I would still not send my children back to in-person school until they were vaccinated,” Ellis said, noting her colleagues at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital agree.

There is no coronavirus vaccine authorized for children under the age of 16 and teachers are not eligible to get any coronavirus shots under the state’s current plan. However, in some cases faculty members could receive the vaccine, agency spokesman Matt Bieber explained.

Hyatt said portions of his district include staff members who have already received the vaccine or signed up to get it.

On Feb. 9, (GMCS’ hybrid-learning start date) schools will only be at 50 percent capacity. The schedule for GMCS calls for students to go to school Monday through Thursday. Friday is a half-day, with students learning remotely in the mornings before coming into the building during the afternoon.

According to the state’s reopening guidance, the district must provide meals to students regardless of the learning mode. For remote instruction, buses are used to deliver meals — once a week at designated places. With hybrid students, food can be served in a cafeteria, with social distancing measures in place, or in classrooms.

“We’re excited for it because we know many parents want this opportunity,” Hyatt said. “We know, as they do, they’re going to see that their children — most of them — will likely be more successful in school when they have that in-person instruction.”

Ellis doesn’t buy Hyatt’s claims.

“I understand it’s not ideal to have kids learning online, [but] it’s not ideal to have them living through a pandemic, either,” she said. “This [pandemic] is probably going to be the only one in their lives and a year out of school is not hurting them, especially when they’re doing online school in the first place.”

Ellis believes the Gallup-McKinley County School Board has not told them it’s a choice to send their kids back to school.

Board Member Kevin Mitchell disagreed, saying he and other board members have emphasized parental choice to their constituents and were confused when the governor’s office rescinded hybrid learning for most schools at the beginning of the school year.

“When we went all remote, we were saying, ‘well, where’s the parent choice, here?’ That’s what we always said from the beginning,” he said, before noting the board didn’t want to challenge the state’s new position and risk a lawsuit.

Even with hybrid learning, Hyatt said, “parents have the choice to keep their children home and we’ll still do our best to educate them virtually.”

The district has surveyed parents multiple times to give officials a “heads up” about how many students will rejoin the classroom, Hyatt said. It’s estimated that around 1,100 students will come back to school once hybrid learning starts, and he expects that figure to increase.

“We’ve already proven that people can stay safe,” he said.

Mitchell said he’s spoken to parents about their fears of in-person learning.

“Yes, I understand you’re scared for your child, but if that’s the way you feel, you really need to keep them home and continue doing what you’ve been doing,” he pointed out.

Ellis has seen the benefits of remote learning having her three kids, ages 7, 10 and 14, getting their instruction at home.

“I was really concerned with them going into online schooling because neither of them can sit still for very long,” she said. “They are able to get their wiggles out, get their homework done. Neither of them are ever behind because they have the time to complete.”

The GMCS parent also praised teachers, who “have really gone above and beyond to make it as accessible and user-friendly and educational as possible, while not stressing the kids out.”

Hyatt wants to see a return to in-person instruction full-time, eventually.

“We need to continue to prove that our schools are safe and help build that confidence in our parents that our kids are safe in school,” he said. “We’ve been committed to that since the beginning of the year.”

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