

SPARRING OVER SCHOOLS

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
Friday, 19 February 2021 04:03



Is AFT hitting GMCS below the belt?

Hybrid instruction for the Gallup-McKinley County School District went ahead as scheduled Feb. 9 although the American Federation of Teachers New Mexico made an eleventh hour call to stop it by questioning the district's readiness.

Ryan Stewart, secretary of New Mexico's Public Education Department, said PED will investigate the reports made by the AFT-NM.

"It is up to individual school districts to decide when they want to expand in-person learning options, but the Public Education Department takes seriously the enforcement of safety protocols we have in place to protect the health and safety of students, educators and communities," he said. "Districts that fail to meet those protocols will not be allowed to reopen or to remain open. We're continuing to investigate these reports."

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Stephanie Ly, AFT New Mexico president, believes Stewart made “the right response.”

The inquiry stems from a statement AFT New Mexico released on Feb. 8 calling on Stewart to prevent in-person learning from beginning after the group “received dozens of reports from multiple school sites” that there was a lack of cleaning supplies; not enough personal protective equipment and a need for air filtration systems to fight against the virus, among other things.

“We sincerely believe delaying re-entry for the Gallup-McKinley County School District is not only what is safest for students, staff, and the community, but it is a moral imperative,” the statement read, in part. “A little extra time to ensure the district is complying to the fullest extent of the re-entry guidelines ... is the absolute minimum district leaders can do.”

New Mexico’s governor announced in a virtual State of the State address that in-person learning for all public schools statewide could resume Feb. 8. Conferences were scheduled that day for the local school district, so the governor’s order kicked in the following day.

PED had previously released a 24-page re-entry guide, which tells school districts throughout the state the guidelines they must meet to be able to reopen as well as ways to conduct remote, hybrid and full in-person learning safely.

It says PPE must be worn at all times — unless there’s a rare health exemption — facilities should receive a deep clean on weekends and during breaks, use air filtration systems, maintain ventilation systems and increase circulation of outdoor air.

In addition, schools must “mark spaced lines to enter the building and designate entrance and exit flow paths” in addition to teachers making sure they are “cohorting or podding” students — something pre-K and elementary schools are already doing.

GMCS Supt. Mike Hyatt said the education department didn’t need to stop school since “we followed their guidance and even exceeded it.”

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Hyatt later released a statement saying reintegrated GMCS schools have followed all safety guidelines, adding that state inspectors have visited all of its schools “and verified that they’re safe.”

“These inspectors found that GMCS was in compliance and were ready to have more students in the building. They even verified that the ventilation systems were compliant despite the AFT’s proclaimed expertise,” Hyatt said. “The AFT appears to think that hearsay and rumors are more important to follow than licensed state inspectors. Secy. Stewart should know that the gaslighting efforts of the AFT are based on no evidence, since he has access to the inspection information.”

School board member Charles Long released a statement responding to the AFT, noting the district has spent \$12 million on COVID-19 prevention.

“The AFT seems to only concern itself with looking at and bringing out negative issues within our schools,” he wrote. “Many of the deficiencies that [were] brought out seem to rely on reports that are not shared with the school district administrators.”

In response to Hyatt’s earlier remark about exceeding reopening guidelines, Ly said the superintendent had no plans to follow them and in fact sued the state on its ability to limit in-person learning.

Ly continued, “Supt. Hyatt doesn’t like it that we’re exposing his failed leadership and his failed philosophy that he doesn’t want to keep educators and students safe.”

AFT New Mexico continues to “monitor the situation,” Ly said. She added she is hopeful that the district will work to improve guidelines. If not, AFT New Mexico may consider taking GMCS to court.

“Let me be clear: we believe it is extremely important that when the community spread is low

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and when you have all the safety measures in place, we need to get students back into the schools,” she said. “We don’t want to be in a position where we have to have schools shut down. So, this really all relies on ... if the superintendent does what he needs to do to keep the schools safe and the community safe.”

It is not clear how long the PED’s investigation is expected to last.

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