

Some Marion teachers seek delay of Aug. 10 campus opening

By Joe Callahan

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Some older and other at-risk teachers are uncomfortable returning to the classroom, especially now that Marion County's COVID-19 cases are spiking

Some Marion County teachers want school leaders to press pause on a plan to open all school campuses on Aug. 10.

And they have the ear of one Marion County School Board member: Chairman Eric Cummings.

Cummings said Friday that he believes Marion County Public Schools should offer only distance learning classes for the first three weeks, beginning on Aug. 10, and then launch in-person school on Aug. 31.

State Education Commissioner Richard Corocran issued an executive order that mandates all school districts to open five days per week in August.

Cummings said he will pitch his idea to the rest of the school board when it meets again on July 16. And then he will need to convince two others to join him.

"It's just me, but I think we should alter our start date a little bit," said. "We need to make sure we have everything, safety protocols, in place."

Mark Avery, president of the local teachers' union, supports Cummings, who says he will discuss the idea with Superintendent of Schools Diane Gullett.

"We have to go distance learning to begin with because the teachers can't go a month without a paycheck," Avery noted. "I am all for that plan."

Teachers work nine months but most get paid over 12 months. If schools did not start back until Aug. 31, teachers would not be paid for three weeks.

Avery said there are many contract bargaining issues that must be resolved, from how they will be paid if forced to quarantined to whether an employee must use sick time.

Avery noted that teachers are considered essential personnel and must report if the state orders it.

“But you have to balance the health side, too,” Avery said.

Cummings said there are teachers, those who are older with underlying conditions, and others with medical conditions, who are fearful of COVID-19.

Cummings has heard from many teachers by phone and email. Several appeared at Tuesday’s board meeting, including Vickie Treulieb, a Forest High School teacher.

At that meeting, the school district released a 73-page reopening plan.

Treulieb said Friday that she will return to class. However, she wants to speak for all the teachers who are concerned about surviving COVID-19.

“Right now, with COVID-19 cases surging, is it the right time to throw everyone into the mix and hope that it works?” Treulieb asked.

Marion County, which had registered 250 COVID cases on June 1, has since had 1,057 in just 40 days. There were 145 new cases on Friday alone.

Treulieb said everyone assumes that all teachers will be there, but many are now considering a new profession.

“These are decisions they are having to weigh,” Treulieb said. “One teacher told me a poignant quote: ‘I hope my last year teaching is not my last year on Earth.’ They are young teachers who are researching living wills.”

Robin Koper, a veteran Belleview Middle School teacher, spoke to the board on Tuesday. She had brain surgery last year and now experiences seizures.

Koper said Thursday that a fever could trigger a seizure. She hopes that the district will allow her to teach virtual classes from home.

Though she purchased a 6-foot shield to put around her desk, she doubts she will return to the classroom, unless it is to teach distance learning.

In a text early this week, Koper noted that “our school board members are social distancing during their public school board meetings because their health and safety is important.”

“What about the safety and health of teachers?” Koper asked. “Will I be able to social distance in my classroom? In the hallways? During car and bus duty? Will I have the PPE equipment that some teacher unions in this country deem absolutely necessary?”

Koper said “due to the seizure risk involved, I received a letter today from my neurologist, asking that I be given the opportunity to work from home.”

But “there is no guarantee” she will be allowed to teach from home, Koper noted.

Cummings said there are “so many unknowns” about COVID-19, like how it spreads. At one event it may spread like wildfire, and at another not so much.

For example, Cummings is concerned about how to keep COVID-19 from spreading in a high school hallway during class changes.

He said mobs of students would be in an enclosed hallway. Though the district is planning to provide masks and face shields, will that be enough?

“I don’t think we will really know some of these things until we get into school,” Cummings said.

He added that “we have to do everything we can to accommodate” teachers and students.

“I don’t know if we can accommodate everyone, but we have to do something,” Cummings said.

He said the district's employee relations team will look into each individual case. Cummings said he heard from several principals who are reporting that some teachers may retire early because they fear contracting COVID-19.

"When the median age of our teachers is over 40, we are not dealing with all (younger teachers)," he noted. "We are dealing with many seasoned teachers that may have these underlying conditions."

Cummings also noted that many of the older teachers are taking care of older parents, too.

"These are legitimate concerns," said Cummings, who has received many emails and phone calls from teachers who are very concerned to return to the classroom.

A Marion County Public Schools survey of 22,000 parents revealed that 70.9% said they would send their child to their school campus, though some preferred an after-Labor Day start due to COVID-19 concerns.

The survey found that 15.9% of parents hoped to send their child back to school for in-person classes in January and 13.9% said they don't expect to send their child to in-person school at all this year.

The district also surveyed the district's nearly 3,000 teachers; 86% said they would teach online classes from their classroom and 82% said they would be willing to teach both in person and online.

Gullett said in a email response that "most (teachers) have expressed a strong desire to come back."

"The overwhelming majority (82%) are even willing to teach using more than one method," Gullett said. "So for those with safety concerns, teaching online could be a consideration."

Avery said that there are many unanswered questions, like the protocol if a student tests positive in class. Do you quarantine the entire class or entire school?

The district will have a dry run of sorts for three weeks, beginning Monday. The district will bus some students to schools to help those who struggled late last year.

“We just don’t know the answers to a lot of questions,” said Avery, adding that it is concerning that many issues will be addressed as they happen. “We are all concerned.”

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