



Marion teacher union rep applauds later start date

By Joe Callahan

Posted at 4:31 PM

President Mark Avery says he is still concerned about how teachers will be paid if they are quarantined multiple times during pandemic.

A local teacher union representative said Monday he is pleased that the Marion County School Board delayed the start of school to Aug. 24 so that employees will get adequate training during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But what worries Mark Avery, president of the Marion Education Association, the most is that there are so many unknowns. He is especially concerned about teachers if they are forced off the job to quarantine many times when a student or coworker tests positive for COVID-19.

He said there are provisions in the federal Family Medical Leave Act for teachers, though for only 10 days. And with cases spiking, Avery is concerned about the prospect of the number of times that teachers and students will be forced to quarantine during the year.

“We just don’t have all the answers worked out just yet,” Avery said.

From March 21 through June 30, Marion County had 672 positive COVID cases, or 6.7 cases per day. Since July 1, there have been 2,909 positive cases in Marion County, an average of nearly 108 people per day.

Avery said that about 20 students per week have been sent home for the first two weeks of the three-week Liftoff 2020, the district’s summer program that launched July 13.

He noted that only 1,000 students are attending.

“If you multiply that out, that would be 800 students out of 40,000 students being sent home every week,” Avery said. “I think it could get a lot worse.”

And that is also what has board member Nancy Thrower worried. She hopes that people are now taking COVID-19 more seriously and that the community will have a decline in cases before school opens next month.

“It is going to be my worst nightmare to have this to continue to accelerate as we are getting ready to open traditional school,” Thrower said. “That is not going to make me confident. I am glad we have been given the gift of time. That will give it time to fizzle out now that more people are taking this seriously.”

The Marion County School Board held a special meeting last week and decided to postpone the launch of the school year by two weeks, from Aug. 10 to Aug. 24.

The board had considered having two weeks of online classes, beginning Aug. 10, before in-person classes.

The board decided against two weeks of distance learning because it wants teachers to be trained for three weeks about COVID-19 protocols and about the new-and-improved plan for distance learning.

Officials said about 70% of the district’s 43,000 students, or about 30,000, will be attending in-person classes.

Parents of about 13,000 students want their children to be taught online for at least the first nine weeks. The new plan will give school district officials some ample training days.

Unlike the last nine weeks of the 2019-20 year, where students did not have to be in front of teacher all day, students engaged in distance learning will be in front of teacher all day, just like if they were at school.

Avery said the online training will especially be beneficial if school campuses are closed again by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Avery said soldiers who join the military know there is a possibility they could be deployed to war. Teachers signed up to teach, never knowing that they could be risking their lives.

“We continually say we want to be back in front of students, we know that is the best to be,” Avery said. “But it needs to be safe. You shouldn’t have to pick between your health and your job.”

The district was able to move the start time to Aug. 24 without adding extra expense to the budget. They shaved off 10 school days to keep from negatively affecting teacher planning days. State law dictates that students must get 900 hours of instruction.

Students will still get the 900 hours in 170 days in 2020-21, instead of attending school for 180 days that makes up a traditional school year. The last day of school will be June 3.

To maintain 900 hours of instruction, the district converted eight early release days during the school year to full days.

Teachers report to school next Monday, Aug. 3. Thrower said she wishes the community would take the challenge to social distance, wear masks when they can’t social distance and other protocols to get COVID-19 under control by the time school starts.

“We must be prepared as we possibly can be before we open,” Thrower said. “The district’s goal is mitigate as much risk as possible. This (later start date) allows us to get the training in.”

Contact *Joe Callahan* at 867-4113 or at joe.callahan@starbanner.com. Follow him on Twitter [@JoeOcalaNews](https://twitter.com/JoeOcalaNews).