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Lack of consensus on school reopening causes angst for OUSD Board

By Sora O'Doherty

Teachers expressed their concerns at the first of two Orinda Union School District board meetings on Oct. 5 to consider returning to physical in-school teaching. The first meeting was designed to review results of a survey asking parents for commitment to either have their children return to school or to continue distance learning, with a second meeting scheduled for Oct. 14 slated to review the results of a teacher and staff survey. Although the results of the parents' survey indicated a strong desire for a return to school, the teachers have considerable doubt and concern, while school board members expressed their anxiety at having to make such a difficult decision.

Parents and guardians were sent a survey Sept. 29 asking them to commit to one of three options: to continue with a current teacher regardless of the model of instruction; to return to school for in-person instruction in the hybrid model; or to continue distance learning for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year. For the return to in-person schooling, there was a choice between as soon as possible, or after Winter Break. The survey was modified on Oct. 1 to add another return date option, March 2021, following flu season.

The survey results were broken down into elementary and middle school parent/guardians, with 1,467 elementary respondents, and 596 middle school respondents. Over 50% of elementary respondents favored returning to school with a hybrid model and nearly 80% of those preferred an immediate return to school. Over 80% of OIS parent respondents preferred the hybrid model, with nearly 18% favoring continued distance learning.

During public comments, several commenters complained about the survey methodology and interpretation. Januna Rudani said that, in fact, 75% of parents at each school wanted students to return to full-time in-school education. Rudani said that distance learning is not working, and that it is possible to safely bring children back to school and urged the board to do so by mid-October. Speakers varied over the spectrum of opinions, some urging that safety be the first priority, others arguing that children need to be back in school and can be, safely.

Teacher Terry Schrittwieser, Glorietta teacher of the year for 2019, said that she was very concerned to see so many who want to return to school as soon as possible. She said that it will be a lot of work for teachers, like starting the school year all over again. She also questioned what would happen in the event of an exposure.

Board president Cara Hoxie suggested that it should be easier to transition between hybrid and distance learning for when students need to be quarantined. Susheel Daswani suggested a conduct pledge, where parents would pledge to take all precautions to assure that their children are not infected, such as agreeing not to eat at restaurants.

Three Del Rey kindergarten teachers, Kathy Simon, Scott Adams and Kelly Hones, wrote to the board with four requests: that the return date to school be postponed until Jan. 18, allowing students to return from the Thanksgiving and winter holidays and isolate for two weeks before coming into school; that temperature checks be administered by teachers before the start of class; that poorly ventilated classrooms be equipped with industrial grade air purifiers; and that safe and realistic systems for student interactions outside the classroom during drop-off, pickup, playtime and snack time, be established. Kristan Torres, Megan Cooperman, DeEtte Baise and Kendra Valentine, also Del Rey teachers, urged that a mid-January return to school be considered to allow teachers to prepare for the return to classrooms and provide time to complete November report cards.

Belinda Adams-Walker wrote to the board on behalf of 30 teachers and staff of Del Rey, Glorietta, and the teachers on special assignment and specialists. She began by saying that they wrote with heaviness in their hearts and tremendous anxiety, being extremely concerned about the decision to return to in-person learning. Return to school is not a matter for a vote of preference, they said, but rather a health emergency. "Our entire community must face the fact that COVID is still widespread and that returning to school at this time simply is not safe for the community, students, staff, or for family members of students and staff."

Board member Carol Brown wondered if there should be another track to bring special education children back into special day classes, adding that she worries a lot about those children. Carrie Nerheim, Director of Student Services, responded that they have identified students to bring back first, and are working on all the pieces, such as PPE, sanitizing, and room configuration. "They won't start with a full day," she said. "We don't want to overwhelm them." She proposed starting with a 3.5- to 4-hour schedule.

Board member Liz Daoust spoke at length about the tremendous difficulty of facing the decision of returning children to school. "I can't really think of a time in my life when I have been so constantly conflicted by something; I feel sometimes I spend my whole world thinking about this and how we should move forward, and talking to people, reading research, talking to doctors. I wish that the path were more defined, but it's not and we have to accept that."

Although she believes that everyone is working hard to make choices that are safe, smart and responsive, she said, "It's really, really hard, it's scary, and we're all in it together."

Daoust spoke of her desperate wish to get kids back in school, including her three daughters, but concluded that she definitely has reservations and that the process feels rushed.

Carol Brown described this as "an extraordinarily painful and extraordinarily chaotic time." She noted, "We have to decide, and we cannot please everybody. We just need to move forward with thought and gratitude

and compassion because what we are tasked with is safety, wellbeing and learning of our children." She said she very much appreciated the tone of emails to the board expressing thankfulness and understanding. The Moraga School District board meeting regarding school reopening was scheduled for Oct. 13, after press time. The Lafayette School District governing board is scheduled to meet on Oct. 14.

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