

HRCSD board talks contract negotiations, return to in-person instruction

By Trisha Walker
Columbia Gorge News

Hood River County School Board members and administrators celebrated the return of all students to in-person classes at their April 14 board meeting, held at May Street Elementary as well as broadcast live via Google Meet.

"It's been a seriously long haul," said Superintendent Rich Polkinghorn. "A million and one plans have been made and a million plans changed. We finally have all of our students back into the classroom, and it's a great feeling. But it's not all good news."

He said a fifth student had tested positive and encouraged the community at large to be cautious to ensure students can remain in classrooms. He also said students ages 16-17 will be eligible for vaccination beginning April 19, and clinics will be held at the Hood River Valley High School Health Center in late April and early May.

Polkinghorn said, for every positive case, individual schools are notified, as well as those in the infected person's cohort, who are then advised to quarantine until

hearing from the Hood River County Health Department. Those with questions should call the health department.

He noted that some of the families on the contact tracing log list haven't been answering the health department's phone calls. "Answer your phones — they need help doing those screenings," he said. Because some staff are using their cell phones, "health department" won't necessarily come up on caller ID, he noted.

While there has been an uptick in cases, he noted that the county is below the threshold of 60 cases per week that would send Hood River County back into a higher risk level; Hood River County is currently at Lower Risk.

HRVHS Student Envoy Dora Plascencia-Macias, a senior, updated the board on the first days of classes, saying, "I think you can tell people are excited to see people walking around the halls," but that students are wondering if they'll be able to finish the year on site. "We're excited to be back but with a little bit of fear," she said. Plascencia-Macias also reported student government looking into

holding a belated spirit week, including the annual air guitar, in a COVID-safe way.

Contract negotiations

Polkinghorn reported the district negotiations team, comprised of district personnel and two board members, entered into mediated bargaining in March. In mediation, five of the outstanding articles have been agreed on, with six articles and appendices outstanding. Polkinghorn then reviewed the budget process — revenues and expenditures — and the board's goal of an 8 percent Ending Fund Balance each year, with unspent funds used to offset the next year's expenses.

Kelvin Calkins, Hood River Education Association president, spoke during the public comment period — as did a number of HRCSD staff — and said members continue to be concerned over the district's reluctance to settle the contract.

He said members are perplexed why the board is amassing budget funds while "ignoring employees."

"... We believe the district has the resources to fund our proposals," he said.

"The bargaining team looks forward to resolving the remaining issues."

In a follow up email, Calkins said the remaining articles include "cost of living adjustments and health insurance; workload, which includes increased preparation time and fewer meetings; and safety, including language that helps ensure the safety of students as well as our members. The district has expressed interest in extending the school year. We want to be sure that we don't have just more days but also better days, and have given them a proposal that includes an increase in contract days."

Polkinghorn said in a follow up email that HREA submitted a proposal to the district on April 6, and the district is reviewing the proposal and preparing a counter proposal.

The next negotiation mediation session is scheduled for April 21.

WS student request to play HR lacrosse denied

The board heard a public complaint brought forth by a student from White Salmon wishing to overturn

a decision that prohibits them to play lacrosse on the HRVHS team. Director of Human Resources Catherine Dalbey said the issue was complicated by the lack of precedent for students crossing state lines to participate in an activity.

HRVHS is governed by the Oregon School Activities Association, and students who attend Columbia High in White Salmon are therefore not covered. Transfer policy, including non-residency, covers students who wish to transfer to the district from within the state — but not for crossing state lines. Dalbey reached out to Oregon High School Lacrosse Association and additionally looked into a cooperative sponsorship application, meaning Columbia High and HRVHS would enter into a two-year agreement to combine teams while Columbia began its own program, but there were no cross-state precedents there either.

Ultimately, she recommended that the families wishing to play in Hood River pursue existing pathways to transfer into the district.

"We do have tuitions spots available," she said; spots

are automatically granted to those who live in the county.

The board unanimously voted to uphold the denial.

"I feel for this athlete who wants to play this sport and is not able to play," said Board Member Brandi Sheppard. "It's a tough spot for everybody."

Dalbey agreed. "It has personal impacts on the complainant and family ... We want all kids healthy and happy and to participate in everything and anything they want. But we need to be sure we're operating within our policy, statewide policy and the law."

Upcoming meetings

The board will hold a spring work session on April 28; the next public board meeting is scheduled for May 12 at the Nathaniel Coe Administration Center, 1011 Eugene, Hood River, beginning at 6:30 p.m.

To attend the meeting online — as well as recordings of previous meetings — visit www.hoodriver.k12.or.us/boardmeetings.



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