

SKPS board splits on standardized testing

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

In a 4-3 decision, the Salem-Keizer School Board — at the recommendation of the district — elected for schools to skip standardized public testing for the 2020-21 school year at a meeting on Tuesday, April 13.

Board chair Satya Chandragiri, as well as Marty Heyen and Paul Kylo provided the dissenting votes.

Salem-Keizer Public Schools (SKPS) staff will still use diagnostic assessment to monitor student learning. The district's current plan is to administer the state-required Smarter Balance (SBAC) assessments during the 2021-22 school year if students are back to five days a week of in-person instruction — SKPS plans to have full-day, in-person classes, five days a week for all students by Fall 2021.

Before the vote occurred, assistant superintendent Kraig Sproles explained to the board the benefits of not having SBAC testing for this school year.

"We only have our students for the next six or seven weeks, and we would be devoting a chunk of that time to giving this test ... We have heard from lots of teachers and parents in the last week or so that are concerned about giving the test and devoting that precious time we have without students," Sproles said. "Getting ready for it, setting up the testing environment for it, getting kids in

for that time, it will be a focus that takes away from the care and connection and the academic recovery we would like to focus on."

Sproles did, however, say that he personally would support the assessments — even though he informed the board that the SBAC data would not be able to be used as a comparison to years past.

Jesse Lippold Peone and Kathy Goss were two of the board members that spoke out in approval of the district skipping the standardized testing.

"I believe that students need every hour that we can possibly give in the few weeks that we have this year," Lippold Peone said. "I have never been a big fan of the SBAC. I think that it promotes the culture of putting unique shapes into a cookie cutter."

"I see no use for SBAC this particular year," Goss added.

Kylo, however, had the strongest dissent against not doing standardized testing, due to it not being in compliance with the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and the state's standards for public schools — the district would then report to ODE as required that it was out of compliance and would create an action plan to meet the requirement.

"I am not prepared to violate the oath I took three-and-a-half years ago and four years before that. I don't believe that any administrator in this room would say publicly that it's okay to violate the law.

We are supposed to be setting an example for students. And what is the example we are setting? That it's ok to violate the law when it's convenient? That is not a message I want to be a part of," Kylo said.

Paul Dakopolos, the attorney for SKPS, explained to the board that, while he couldn't in good faith tell them to violate the law, he also said the consequence of not doing SBAC testing may be extremely minimal.

"If all you have to do is write a letter that says 'yeah we didn't do that this year we'll do it next year' and if ODE checks the box and says that's an acceptable plan, you're home free," Dakopolos said.

While the board was split on the decision, they unanimously voted in favor of the Teacher Appreciation Week proclamation and the Child Abuse Prevention Month proclamation. The board also voted to approve the Optimum Learning Environments Charter School contract, with Kylo representing the only dissenting vote — Optimum Learning Environments is located at Forest Ridge Elementary.

Earlier in the week, board leadership created some controversy after initially making the decision to delay recognition for student reporter Eddy Binford-Ross from South Salem High School in the Spotlight on Success portion of the meeting.

Binford-Ross has won several national

awards for her work over the last year. But after writing an article about how several members of the school board had their campaigns financed by Oregon Right to Life and affiliated political action committees, Chandragiri wanted to delay honoring Binford-Ross until the school board elections had taken place after her article was shared by the Salem chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America.

However, after hearing community feedback, Chandragiri reversed course and decided that the board shouldn't wait to honor Binford-Ross for her work. Chandragiri also emailed an apology to Binford-Ross.

"I want to personally apologize to you about my decision to move your spotlight recognition to after the May elections. I want to sincerely assure you that I have profound respect for all your amazing work and deserving accomplishments in the field of journalism, racial justice, advocacy in the field of mental health and suicide prevention. I want you to know that I am proud of your work for our community," Chandragiri wrote to Binford-Ross. "While we truly wanted to keep the board meeting proceedings and school district to be entirely focused on our students, student safety, health, learning and closing the achievement gaps and keep any semblance of politics out of the board meeting, unfortunately it did not come across in that manner. For that I ask for your forgiveness."

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