

Salem-Keizer cancels classes on Jan. 14 due to staffing shortage

BY RACHEL ALEXANDER
Of Salem Reporter

Oregon's second-largest school district canceled all classes Friday, Jan. 14 because of staffing shortages.

Christy Perry, superintendent of the Salem-Keizer School District, announced the decision in a Tuesday afternoon email to district employees and families.

"We have reached a critical point where we need to shift operations," Perry wrote in an email to district employees.

With the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday Monday, that means a four-day weekend for students.

Perry told *Salem Reporter* she acted in hopes a longer weekend would give school employees and students a chance to recover from widespread illness that has pushed the number of people absent from school higher over the past week.

"It's just knowing how long you can hang on," she said of the decision. "It just creates maybe a little breather for kids and staff who are sick and trying then to be well-prepared into next week."

Perry said she didn't see another option given the high rates of illness and said she expects the choice won't be popular with some parents.

"I'm sure they will be frustrated and I can't blame them. I don't know how to make the decisions any quicker or any different," she said.

The decision comes as schools across the U.S. and in Oregon have increasingly struggled to keep enough teachers, classroom aides and bus drivers on the job to maintain school operations.

A severe shortage of substitute teachers which has challenged school districts all year is now being compounded by higher rates of illness among employees as the omicron variant has pushed COVID infections in Oregon to record levels.

In Salem-Keizer, 236 teachers and licensed employees - more than 10% of the district total - were out on Jan. 7, primarily due to illness, according to district data.

Just over half of their absences were covered by available substitutes, leaving other teaching jobs to be covered by school counselors, principals and other



McNary students prepare for the first day of in-person school in September.

Photo by MATT RAWLINGS of Keizertimes

administrators.

On Monday, Perry was in a west Salem first grade classroom, teaching math for two hours so the school's counselor, who was substituting for an absent teacher, could take a break and return to his normal duties.

Perry said she considered closing just a few schools that have seen higher rates of absences. McKay High School, for example, had just 65% of students attend class Monday, she said.

But she ultimately decided the impacts of employee absences on the school system were too widespread.

"Every time there's an unfilled position, that means somebody else, whoever that somebody else is, is doing that job on top of their own job," she said.

The district is also working on a new bus schedule to consolidate routes because of a shortage of available drivers.

Perry said she expects those routes to be in place for about four weeks and decided to consolidate so families can have a consistent bus schedule rather than notifying families individually that their bus will be late because of a driver shortage.

School athletics can continue Friday, Perry said, though many games and

practices have been canceled because of illness as well - McNary's boys' basketball team plays West Salem at 7:30 p.m. while the girls' teams hosts the Titans during the same time.

"We're just trying to keep some level of activities for kids going in the safest way possible wherever we can because we do know our kids' mental health is suffering," she said.

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Where and how do you volunteer?

"Looking back I have enjoyed volunteering most of my life which has allowed me to volunteer with many Salem-Keizer School District projects and as an active parent with Gubser, Whiteaker and McNary. I also served in leadership roles with the Keizer Merchants Association, which later became the Keizer Chamber of Commerce, the Keizer Iris Festival, the Distinguished Young Woman Scholarship Program, the Oregon Community Foundation, the Oregon State Alumni Board and the Keizer Community Foundation."

Why do you volunteer?

"My father was a man of faith, a great leader and a family man and above all he believed that "you should not find fault unless you are willing to be involved in the solution" so...I suppose you could say I was born into volunteering and had some exceptional role models in my father and brothers. When others would say "why do you volunteer?" I would usually say "why don't you?" I never knew it was an option"

What does volunteering do for you?

"The people I have met and the lessons learned through my years of volunteering have truly shaped my life both personally and professionally. Volunteering has given me the ability to teach my children (who are now adults) the importance of taking accountability for yourself and your community and given me lifelong friends.

How would you get others to volunteer in their community?

"Instead of thinking you don't have time, remember we all have the same 24 hours in a day so it starts with making it a priority. Simply start small with something that interests you with a group of people you enjoy spending time with. To make volunteering a priority we have to feel it is important and I know for sure that one person really can make a difference."

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