

SLSD from A7

“But this year, the staff, the students, the parents and the community members, as a whole, are looking to this administration led by the superintendent for leadership past the pandemic and I’m afraid they are going to have to keep looking unless you the board of directors intervene and do what is truly best for kids and right this wrong,” she ended.

Following the vote for dismissal, Board President Dustin Bengtson spoke.

“I want to thank everybody for their time and testimony today,” he said. “I know that this is one of the hardest days for us as a board and for the staff members that are affected. We appreciate everything

and the work that it’s taken to get us here and it is a sad day.”

**Superintendent Response**

In an interview with *The Sentinel* after the board meeting, Superintendent Curtis expressed disappointment with the final result. However, she said she felt the process of creating the document of expectations for unvaccinated staff had been conducted openly and shouldn’t have been a surprise.

Changes were made along the way as some raised concerns about the phrasing or requests in the document, “But each time I [changed] it, I sent the new draft to everyone and told them they would all be held to the most current version,” she

said. “And then before we were done, I invited them all to sign the most current version, which everyone did except [the five who were dismissed].”

Curtis added that most responses were positive during the process, but that a handful of staff felt the changes diminished trust.

Curtis did acknowledge Shipley’s criticism regarding an “outing” with a bulk email, though.

In September, the district sent a survey out to all staff asking if they were completely vaccinated, planning to get vaccinated, or planning to apply for a medical or religious exemption. For those applying for exceptions, another survey was sent.

In this second survey, Curtis mistakenly added the

emails to the “CC” box of the email instead of “BCC,” she said.

“So, they all got to see who had indicated they were going to file for an exception,” said Curtis. “So that was my goof. I saw it immediately. I apologize to them. But never was their exception request shown to anybody else.”

Not all accepted the apology, however.

On the requirement for weekly testing, the superintendent did not feel it was as ineffective as described in the testimonies because asymptomatic people can spread the virus. She also did not feel it was imposed heavy-handedly since she’s employing an honor system.

“I thought it was being gracious by saying, ‘You don’t even have to show me evidence that you registered. I’m going to trust you,’” she said.

In response to the concern that a certain cancer-causing chemical is used in one of the testing methods, Curtis said the district looked into it.

“They asked me to find out about the chemical that was on there and so I consulted our nurse who was the one working with Lane County Health and he said the chemical they’re talking about is something that’s used in anything that’s sanitized, including Band Aids,” she said. “So, if people have used Band Aids, they’ve been exposed to that chemical.”

Following this, though, the district also looked into an alternative method of testing through the University of Oregon which used saliva. However, some still took issue with this method as it required them to submit personal information and the saliva could be used by the university for other research purposes.

Additionally, the district explored using its on-site testing product BinaxNOW for the unvaccinated staff tests, but the county indicated that it did not fit suitable testing criteria. Because this seemed to be promised as an alternative for the unvaccinated staff and was subsequently removed, further

distrust in the superintendent was sown.

Curtis pointed out that there was pressure from the other side of the debate as well.

“There’s a lot of staff members who had become vaccinated whether they wanted to or not because of the mandate, and they don’t think it’s fair that I’m even accepting exceptions,” she said.

In developing the additional expectation document, Curtis said the district had to take into consideration others’ perceived safety in the workplace.

Oregon Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority has told superintendents that, if allowing exceptions, then it’s up to the district to make sure it’s protecting the employees and others from contracting COVID and should require extra safety measures.

From meetings with the agencies, SLSD chose some measures which the district had already implemented and others from OHA recommendations such as N95 masking and periodic testing.

The district chose KN95 masks, which it is required to hand out for free.

“So, we do have other people in the schools that are wearing them now that we’re providing them because they wanted more protection,” said Curtis.

Overall, Curtis said she was disappointed that the district could not keep everybody.

“It saddens me that we made every effort we could to try to ensure that every staff member could meet the mandate and stay with us — and to balance the need to have all of the other staff members who did get vaccinated feel like we were keeping them safe when we were allowing unvaccinated people to be in the building,” she said. “And I’m disappointed that at the very end, after five weeks of trying everything we could, that there wasn’t a way to come up with a way that would work.”

In all, the district has

lost seven employees out of around 455 to the vaccine mandate.

The additional safety precautions for unvaccinated staff included in the district’s expectations document are as follows:

1. Wear a KN95 mask, completely covering nose and mouth, at all times in all locations. (Employees may elect to wear a fitted N95 mask at the employee’s expense.)

2. Enroll in either of these two weekly screening programs: COVID-19 Testing in Oregon’s K-12 Schools: Staff Screening program or University of Oregon Saliva Test.

3. Do not remove masks for eating and drinking in public areas of South Lane schools or in other people’s spaces. To further clarify: eating and drinking should occur when alone in a room, or outdoors with 6 feet distance from others. Staff who must remain with children for extended period of time across the day (ex: teachers) are permitted to remove masks briefly to drink water.

4. Maintain at least 3 feet distance to the extent possible with students, staff, parents and visitors.

5. To the extent possible, disinfect high-touch surfaces after use, especially in public areas and other people’s spaces.

6. In cases where an employee’s position requires very close proximity with students (ex: life skills programs) and at least 3 feet distance is unable to be maintained when possible, other PPE equipment might be required, such as face shields and gowns. (This requirement will be implemented on a case-by-case basis dependent on the employee’s assignment.)

7. In the event that the district determines additional measures are necessary, a meeting will be held first with you to discuss the situation.

8. In the event that the pandemic circumstances improve, and provided we are allowed by the law and local and state health authorities, some of these measures may be lifted.

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