

## 'I want to problem solve'

By Michelle Wagner | Outer Banks Voice on November 19, 2021

### Supt. John Farrelly on education in the pandemic era

The Outer Banks Voice sat down with Dare County Schools Superintendent Dr. John Farrelly on Nov. 18 to discuss some of the most pressing issues facing the district now, more than a year and a half after the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly changed the way schools operate.

Farrelly, who took the helm of Dare County Schools in 2017, offered insight into topics ranging from the learning loss that resulted from virtual learning and how federal emergency relief funds are being spent to teacher morale and the volatility of recent local school board meetings.

Some of the superintendent's answers have been edited for length.

**Q: How significant is the learning loss associated with the pandemic and how is Dare County tackling it?**

**A:** I think it's very safe to say that in every school district in the state and across the country, unfortunately one of the outcomes of the pandemic is certainly a lot of significant learning loss. And the reality is that students have only been in face-to-face instruction for really six months out of the last fourteen, and there's no substitute for face-to-face instruction. The key for us is measuring where we stack up versus other school districts.

What we really tried to emphasize for the first three to four weeks, particularly in K-5, was revisiting standards from the previous grade level to try to assess where kids are coming in. And so part of our work, not only on a day-to-day basis but over the next year and a half, is to get kids back in a position where they're above grade level. We've provided opportunities to double down on the amount of literacy and math opportunities for kids. [All the schools] have intervention plans that are in place to try to identify where kids may be struggling in certain standards, and then we strategize on how to get them up to where they're at least at grade level, if not above grade level.



Dare County Schools Superintendent Dr. John Farrelly. (File photo: Dare County Schools)

The ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funding has been a significant amount of money [\$7.5 million], and the primary function of that funding is to impact learning loss. What we decided up front is if we're truly going to impact learning loss, then our investment is going to be in teachers, so of that \$7.5 million, we took 75 percent of it and put it in people. So we have 24 positions we are using that ESSER funding for. We went to our principals, the principals met with each leadership team, and had them do an analysis. Almost every school came back with wanting a reading interventionist and a math interventionist. Those positions are dedicated towards working with kids in that double dose of literacy and reading.

One of the misnomers in some of the conspiracy theories around interventionists is that they are social emotional learning-based positions, and that's not true. The interventionists that we have in schools, they are teaching reading and math, What's been interesting locally, across the state across the country, is some individuals, organizations or groups who have believed that the ESSER funding has been tied to a mask mandate.

**Q: Could you explain that?**

**A:** The State of North Carolina had to submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education and the districts had to submit an application of how they would use these funds to the state. There is no mention, in either the state plan or the county schools plan, about having to have some mandating of masks.

**Q: As a result of COVID, has anything permanently changed as far as the way instruction is delivered?**

**A:** I wouldn't say that there's been permanent change. What I would say, there is a resonating mindset now that it will take us some time to get through some of the learning gaps that we might not necessarily have had prior to COVID. But I don't see, at this point, a permanent change in instructional delivery.

**Q: Mental health is a big issue, with some school districts in North Carolina giving the week of Thanksgiving off as a mental health break. How is Dare County addressing mental health needs and are you seeing a significant increase in those needs in light of the pandemic?**

**A:** Let's start with staff and then the reference to mental health, more around teacher mental health. I kind of have a hard time with opening up a bunch of mental health days and defending that to parents when their kids have only had face-to-face [instruction] six out of the last eighteen months. What we're trying to do is an analysis of the meeting structures that we have in schools. Teachers have all kinds of responsibility, responsibilities outside of their teaching - that may be a school improvement team, it may be a literacy task force, a safety team. So right now, we're doing an analysis on the number of meetings that we have and we're trying to problem solve and look at how we could cut back on some of the other commitments for teachers so that they have time to breathe, keep their planning time and not feel so overwhelmed.

A big teacher concern is we are in dire need of substitute teachers. Our substitute teacher pool has shrunk by 50 percent since COVID began, and it's becoming very taxing in trying to provide enough highly qualified and available substitute teachers in our schools. So what we're trying to do from our level is an analysis of how we can increase the pool and one of the things that we've considered is raising substitute teacher pay.

The other thing, in reflecting on feedback from teachers, is my concern about overall morale. I see the strains on my administrative team. I see the strains when I sit with principals, and now I'm seeing the strains meeting face-to-face with employees across the district. I think one of the highly negative outcomes of the pandemic has been the impacts on the teaching profession. There's a national teacher shortage, teachers are traditionally underpaid. And I also know from hearing face-to-face from teachers their concerns about public meetings and the volatility that is surfacing. There are impacts from those public meetings filtering down into our system. I've sat across from teachers who have told me that they're concerned about the local impacts of how hostile and volatile some of the public meetings are.

I know that there are several highly emotional issues that are before boards of education and people are passionate about their beliefs, and I respect that. But I would love to see us continue to focus on how we can problem solve, and how we can get to a position where we're having productive healthy conversations in trying to problem solve and address topics versus volatility. I want to problem solve, I want to listen. We have a lot of talent in our senior leadership teams who are willing to let folks present concerns to us. That's what we're here for, but we also have to do it in a civil productive way.

**Q: How about the mental health needs of kids? Have you seen those increase?**

**A:** We've had an ad hoc committee that's met four or five times in the last six months talking about mental health in Dare County. The committee is made up of the public health director, representatives of the Outer Banks Hospital, Department of Social Services, some members of the Dare County Board of Commissioners, and some members of my staff and the Board of Education. The hospital has presented some data from [approximately] June 1 to September 1 where they saw a significant uptick in the number of situations where students were presenting mental health challenges in the hospital. To this point, I don't think we could report a significant rise in mental health concerns in schools. We have highly effective counselors who are working with families. One of the best moves that we've made is to bring social workers into the school district.

**Q: What has surprised you the most about either the community or the schools since becoming superintendent in 2017?**

**A:** I think my biggest surprise in coming to Dare County Schools, which still warms my heart, is how much people care about their kids and their education, how much they love their teachers. That was a surprise when I came here in 2017 and I still believe that, despite the challenges we have before us. The way the world is turning, the impacts of the pandemic, I'm not surprised by a lot of the politically charged issues that are out there. I've been in communities where not everyone was so connected to schools. I've been in communities where kids struggled to get a high-quality education.

**Q: If you had one wish to improve Dare County Schools, what would it be?**

**A:** One would be to get every kid above grade level and two, find a path as a community we can rally, and problem solve and address our challenges together and we will be better for it.