

# The Linking Loop: School Reopening Discussed at Board Meeting

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by Anne Scheck

## ***School Board Meeting 1/4***

### **PARENTS PLEAD FOR SCHOOL REOPENING**

Citing mental health concerns for youth across the school district, several parents asked the school board last week to reopen schools as soon as possible. "My plea is that now that metrics are not mandatory that we do all we can to get students back in the classroom," stated Janica Duncan, a mother of five who formed an advocacy group this fall calling for a return to in-person learning.

Distance learning has led to serious learning losses in some, she said, noting that she's a certified substitute teacher in the district. Certain students appear to be battling depressive symptoms, Duncan added – one girl said the situation made her feel like "giving up."

Duncan was joined by several other parents who told board members that they feel the same way, citing problems that range from a lack of internet access for some kids to difficulty being able to learn remotely, even for those who have full connectivity. "It is like we are trading one generation for another," said one mother, an apparent reference to the fact that most serious illness caused by COVID-19 is occurring in elderly populations.

Board Chair Steve Love thanked the parents for their comments, observing that "it was all well said" and assuring them "I think we were listening intently."

### **SUPERINTENDENT REPORT BOARD CHAIR'S RESPONSE**

The road ahead for a return to school will take a "phased in" approach that starts small – perhaps with only a few hours – and then expands as time goes on, Superintendent Jennifer Kubista EdD said at the board meeting of School District 13J last week. Any resumption of in-person schooling will involve meetings with the community, staff, teachers and public health, she acknowledged.

"We are educators. I am thankful for having the public health department," she said. "They help to guide us, but they don't tell (us) what to do," she pointed out. The superintendent suggested January 19 as an evening in which a "professional learning community" meeting could be held, so that further board discussion can take place.

Summing up, Board Chair Steve Love said: "We are going to have to figure this out." He said he believed that "having a hybrid model probably has to be part of the solution." Board member Donn Wahl concurred, but added that now that other districts seem to be resuming in-person instruction, at least partially, the possibility of a safe return seems more likely "from a black box perspective."

### **COVID UPDATE**

Polk County reported a 10.1% positivity rate today, according to Jacqui Umstead RN, public health administrator for the county. She shared the new data at the Polk County Board of Commissioners,

which met this morning.

For the week of Dec 27th – the period with the latest available data with breakdowns by zip code – Independence has 13 more cases and Monmouth recorded 22 – so the numbers are continuing to rise in both communities, according to state tracking.

However, outbreaks generally are occurring in long-term care facilities and group homes, Umstead said. Teachers who were in the top tier of priority for vaccination now have been placed at level 1b instead of 1a, she reported.