

LINKING LOOP: School District Plans for Distance Learning / School Property Purchase / Help for Stress Episodes

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by Anne Scheck

SCHOOL DISTRICT READIES FOR “DISTANCE LEARNING”

Central School District 13J is gearing up for online “distance learning” that would send class lessons out to parents, put Chromebooks in the hands of students and seek more WIFI availability for rural areas, Superintendent Jennifer Kubista EdD said Monday night.

Though there’s a likely possibility that school closure will continue past the end of April, perhaps without reopening during the current academic year, “the governor hasn’t said that,” Dr. Kubista stressed. “So, I’m asking everyone to be patient,” she said, adding that “I cannot say thank you enough.” Many of the board members attended the meeting remotely by internet link-up.

“I am thinking of the mom who is a nurse and might leave for the shift at 7 pm,” she said – then faces helping to home-school children after she returns. “I am thinking of the dad who has just been laid off,” she added, noting that the challenge of helping with in-home teaching is tough on parents under circumstances that are “unprecedented.”

Chromebooks, a user-friendly screen-plus-keypad, is a tool being distributed by the district this week, as are “learning packets.” A unit on social-emotional subject matter was sent out the first week in April; the second one includes more academic topics, such as math and reading. A distance-learning draft plan is slated for completion by the end of this week, Dr. Kubista said.

Central High School (CHS) is the focus of initial, intense efforts – students at CHS need to accrue credits to move toward graduation, she pointed out. “We are hoping that the guidance for high school comes this week,” Dr. Kubista said, an apparent reference to the need for information from the Oregon Department of Education.

Computer accessibility, including deployment of Chromebooks, is a pressing priority for everyone, Dr. Kubista stated. Since many families have access to their own laptops and tablets, “I think we will have enough” Chromebooks for all who lack the technology, she said. A simple, step-by-step guide for using the Chromebooks will be attached to each, she added.

For students who live in rural residences where internet is “spotty” or non-existent, the district has compiled a “tech savvy team” who will try to address that problem, among others, she said.

The online education will be a combination of teacher-led learning and family involvement, she said. Dr. Kubista praised everyone – from the custodians who are responsible for sanitizing buildings to the union leaders who have shown both “leadership and flexibility.” The effort has “just been amazing” and it’s coming from everyone, she said, emphasizing that staff members, teachers, teacher’s aides and administrators worked tirelessly over the past few weeks.

Board Chair Steve Love said Dr. Kubista should be commended, as well. "I'd like to thank the superintendent for leading us in uncharted water and keeping our kids a priority," Mr. Love said.

OTHER ACTIONS:

District to buy property at 16th Street and Hoffman Road. School board members approved the purchase of 2.6 acres across the street from Ash Creek Elementary School, with an eye toward future growth. The money was taken from an existing fund. The current building at the site has a full kitchen and other amenities. Asked by two board members why another facility is needed when Henry Hill Elementary School was converted to office space several years ago, Board Chair Steve Love said: "I think we can continue to look at Henry Hill," if school populations continue to swell.

Grab-and-go meals increase for those across district. In mid-March, the school district provided breakfast-lunch meal packs for 541 students. By week three, that number had grown to 816. The meals are being given out at different school locations.

Chemeketa partnership likely – and pending. A planned partnership agreement between Chemeketa Community College and the school district is likely, but it's apparently on hold due to the coronavirus crisis. "We will continue those conversations," said Dr. Kubista.

FOR THE FAMILIES FEELING STRAIN...

As calls to law enforcement increase for incidents that seem to be caused by emotional stress – up by 20% or more, according to one official estimate – parents and others can find help at Polk County Behavioral Health services, said Kristty Polanco MPH, public health administrator at Polk County Health Services. Anyone feeling overwhelmed and in need of counseling can call 503-623-9289, she said. The link to the webpage for related information is <https://www.co.polk.or.us/bh>.

And, as the weeks of shelter-in-place drag on, there appears to be "light at the end of the tunnel," observed Craig Pope, a member of the Polk County Board of Commissioners. He and Mike Ainsworth, who chairs the commission, agreed that people's adherence to social distancing and other control measures seem to be paying off – a view echoed by Rep. Paul Evans. "Based on current modeling, Oregon is staying below our hospital, ICU and ventilator capacity," according to a news release issued today by Rep. Evans. The information "brings hope" that the stay-home-and-save-lives order is working, he stated