



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Date: Jan. 8, 2021**

**Attachment: File photo**

**Caption:** Peterson Elementary School students sit at desks that are spaced six-feet apart and allow for 35 square feet per student in their classroom during the first week of the 2020-21 school year. K-3 students and students at small schools in the Klamath County School District attended school in hybrid, in-person models earlier this year until rising COVID-19 metrics forced all schools to transition to distance learning. The district will reopen schools to hybrid and in-person instruction on Monday.

**Link to Jan. 7 press release (includes background):** [http://www.kcsd.k12.or.us/files/PR\\_KCSD\\_emergency\\_board\\_meeting.pdf](http://www.kcsd.k12.or.us/files/PR_KCSD_emergency_board_meeting.pdf)

## **School boards uphold plans to start in-person learning on Jan. 11**

*Districts call emergency board meetings after new information put liability protections at risk*

Students at both county and city schools will return to in-person and hybrid instruction models as planned next week following a last-minute emergency meeting Thursday asking district board members to weigh in on reopening plans.

During a Zoom meeting attended by 500 people, the boards of Klamath County School District and Klamath Falls City Schools listened to three hours of presentations and testimony before voting unanimously to reopen schools starting Monday, Jan. 11. The meeting was called after the districts were informed Thursday morning that reopening when the county's COVID-19 case rates are higher than the state's advisory metrics may put them at legal risk.

Board members acknowledged the liability issue and the concerns of some parents and teachers who want to see the county's metrics decrease before reopening, but ultimately decided that the need for students to return to in-person instruction was the best path forward. Both districts continue to offer homeschool and 100% online options for families who do not want their students to physically return to school buildings.

Before voting, Steve Lowell, chair of the KCSD board, shared statistics from one of the district's larger high schools, citing failure rates that increased from 8 percent in the fall of 2019 to 35 percent in the last grading period. Because of state COVID-19 mandates, students at the school have been mostly out of classrooms and distance learning since March.

"That to me is not an education," he said. "Students are in trouble. Students need to be safe. They need to be with their school community. ... I also know that when we opened up our schools, we were successful. I have to keep thinking over and over, it's what's best for kids."

KCSD board member Denise Kandra agreed.

"Our kids are suffering. They're not learning," she said. "We have been a leader in the state in getting students back to school. We have a principal in Lost River who drives his own bus route. It can be done. I have reservations about delaying reopening for two weeks and waiting for the numbers to go down. What if that doesn't happen?"

Mychal Amos, chair of the city school board, called the decision a tough one. "I don't think we're going to be right on this one. There's going to be a group of people who are going to be disappointed."

Glen Szymoniak, superintendent of the Klamath County School District, said he is confident in the recommendations of the county's public health experts and in the district's safety and health protocols.

"Our local public health is part of a network including Oregon Health Authority, Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization," he said. "Klamath County Public Health is the only organization with the expertise and authority to reliably direct our decisions in this pandemic."

Paul Hillyer, superintendent of Klamath Falls City Schools, also supported returning students to classrooms.

"The families and students feel like ping pong balls being bounced back and forth. It is wearying," he said. "I really do believe that we are ready to have our students return in person. The work has been done."

The public was invited to the meeting via a Zoom link. Between 450 and 500 remained in the meeting throughout the three hours of presentations and board discussions.

More than 250 written comments from the public were submitted via email for board review. Of the 238 comments received by the county district, 215 supported reopening as soon as possible; 23 expressed concern and wanted to see reopening delayed. The city board received 27 comments, both for and against reopening. All comments will be a part of the board record.

During the meeting, the boards heard from Jessica Dale, assistant director of Klamath County Public Health; Jim Green, executive director of the Oregon School Boards Association; representatives of the districts' unions; and district nurses.

Green, who is an attorney, told the boards that a new COVID-19 liability protection law passed Dec. 23 does not apply to school districts unless they follow all state guidance, including the now-advisory Oregon Department of Education metrics. As of today, the county's COVID-19 case metrics remain higher than the state's advisory metrics for reopening schools.

ODE is expected to update their metric guidelines on Jan. 19 to better align with the governor's push to reopen schools by mid-February. OSBA has requested the update eliminate the metrics altogether or raise them so districts can reopen with liability protection.

"I'm hopeful the changes will give districts the liability protection we thought we were getting with HB 4402," Green said. "You are going to assume some risk. Even if you have liability protection, you may get sued."

Klamath County Public Health's Jessica Dale told the boards that public health continues to recommend returning to in-person learning, citing community health implications of continued closures, confidence in working with schools to quickly respond to cases, and the lack of spread in school settings because of strict adherence to safety and health protocols.

"The decisions we make today will impact children and their long-term health for years to come," she said. "There are very comprehensive structures of mitigation strategies within our schools. There are quarantine procedures in place. Our districts have done a phenomenal job. ... The sooner we get kids back into buildings, the better it is for those kids."

Dale also told the board that teachers are next in line for vaccinations, but she does not know when those will be available. Klamath County School District is nearing completion of a comprehensive vaccination plan for staff and will be ready to roll it out.

Union representatives shared concerns of some of their teachers about returning to the classroom. In a survey, 38 percent of KCS D teachers indicated they did not feel safe returning; another 47 percent said they did feel safe.

“We want the students back, but we also want to make sure we are safe,” said Mark Nevala, president of the Klamath County Education Association. “We are professionals, and we are going to do what needs to be done.

Both districts have extended COVID-19 leave benefits for staff and will work with teachers about their concerns.

“We want to keep our teachers safe, and we are advocating a quick vaccination of teachers,” said Steve Lowell, the KCS D board chair. “The best thing we can do is be prepared. When the vaccines arrive, we are ready.”

Schools have implemented strict protocols that follow all state Ready Schools, Safe Learners guidance. These include sanitation procedures and a quick response, including contact tracing, to any positive case within a cohort. When students return, they will be grouped into small, stable cohorts, and required to wear face coverings, wash their hands, and maintain physical distancing.

KCS D lead nurse Laura Limb said schools are ready, but families also need to do their part by not sending their students to school if they are ill, wearing face coverings during drop off and pick up, and limiting social gatherings outside of school.

“Our cases have occurred outside the school setting,” she said. “We are ready, but we need the community to get behind us and our desire to get students back to school.”