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Quakertown to offer full-time, in-class learning for K-5

Bryan Hay
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QUAKERTOWN, Pa. - Determined to return children to the classroom, the Quakertown Community School Board on Thursday night voted to offer in-school learning for K-5 students, while still allowing the option for virtual learning.

The vote to offer live instruction beginning Oct. 12 for students in kindergarten through fifth grade was 8-1, with board member Brian Reimers dissenting.

In addition, the board directed the administration to report back at its Oct. 8 meeting on a plan to also offer live, five-day-a-week instruction for secondary school students in the district.

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The board also voted 6-3 to amend the district's health and safety plan to allow for social distancing in secondary schools as close to 6 feet as possible but no less than 3 feet. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend the 6-foot distance.

A motion made by board member Chris Spear to follow Bucks County guidance for modified quarantining, a measure that would have nullified the district's adherence to state and federal guidelines, failed by a 5-4 vote.

Joining Spear in support of his motion were board President Kaylyn Mitchell and David Ochmanowicz and Jonathan Kern; opposing it were Jennifer Weed, Steaven Klein, Keith Micucci, Reimers and Ronald Jackson.

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The majority of the board members who support a return to the classroom made impassioned remarks in support of their positions, while Superintendent William Harner, who promised the board his team would do its best to meet the board's wishes,

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predicted that the district would lose more veteran teachers to retirement as fears of COVID-19 exposure mount.

In seeking a vote to provide the option for five-day-a-week live learning for K-5 students, Mitchell said that parents “want a light at the end of the tunnel” and the majority of them want their kids back in school.

She said that society may be living with the novel coronavirus indefinitely and noted that at some point school, districts will be forced to address the emergency of kids not learning and the compounding stress in households.

Klein said that there’s no consistency in what’s recommended to fight COVID-19 other than wearing a mask and social distancing.

“Everyone has an opinion, but that’s it,” he said, adding that the majority of the community supports returning kids to school.

“At some point, we have to get back to normalcy,” Klein said.

At one point during the majority’s pro-live learning discussion, Weed shot back: “When did we become a society that distrusts science?”

Jackson said that staggering the return to school, starting with elementary school, will give the administration the time to plan for secondary schools and adjust the health and safety plan, receive teacher input and modify busing schedules.

As discussions turned to following Bucks County guidance on social distancing, Mitchell invited [Bucks County Health Department](#) Director Dr. David Damsker to summarize the county’s guidelines.

Damsker said that modified quarantining, which involves wearing a mask and monitoring if exposed to coronavirus, instead of the state-recommended 14-day quarantine, “allows people to work and be productive members of society.”

Modified quarantining has worked “very well,” he said.

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“COVID is not going anywhere in the near future, and we need to learn to live with it,” Damsker said.

Modified quarantining would allow kids to stay in school safely, especially in coordination with the district’s health and safety plan, Damsker said.

Mitchell supported the doctor’s assessment and agreed that modified quarantining works.

“We’re going to do the best we can,” she said.

Harner urged against making any changes to the district’s health and safety protocols, which follow state and CDC guidelines.

He also warned of pushback from teachers who wanted a virtual schedule and said he expects to start seeing retirement requests from elementary school teachers as he did with teachers in the middle and high schools.

“I lost great teachers to retirement before the school year started,” he said.

School opened on Sept. 14 with virtual and hybrid learning plans for students.

After a marathon meeting last month, the board dropped the full-time, in-school option for students for the first month of classes.

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