

Highland school students, staff are sick, stressed

BY TAMMY MINNIGH • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Highland County Public Schools has been dealing with more than just COVID-19 since classes resumed last week.

Superintendent Dr. Thomas Schott said students and staff have COVID, stomach flu, colds, sinus infections, and more. “We’re just about the full spectrum of viruses and illnesses here,” Schott said, adding they have seen all the typical childhood illnesses except chickenpox.

“We have 52 kids out today,” Schott said Tuesday.

Not all are sick themselves; some are quarantined due to family members who have tested positive for COVID. He also said three teachers, one aide, and a custodian were absent and added that he only knew one had COVID.

Schott is having trouble finding enough substitutes and relies on the four additional aides hired this year to cover classes. Schott said the teachers are all dealing with exhaustion and stress even when they aren’t ill.

“They’re stressed with what’s going on with COVID and what’s going to happen,” Schott said. “My concern is Tuesday when the new governor has said he’s going to make masks go away,” Schott said.

Governor-elect Glenn Youngkin will be sworn into office Saturday.

Since Monday is a federal holiday, Schott said he expected to hear of changes to school mask mandates as early as Tuesday. “All you hear is hearsay right now,” Schott said. “I think even if he leaves it to the schools that masks will become optional.

“I don’t know how they’re reinterpreting the senate bills,” Schott said, but he expects changes. However, Highland County Public Schools’ COVID mitigation policy, which requires masks, will remain in place until the school board votes to change it.

If that happens, Schott said he expects to quarantine a lot more students if one tests positive for COVID. He said he cannot create six feet of space between students at all times, and thus more students will be required to quarantine if masks are not worn.

Schott said he expects students and staff will be allowed to choose to wear a mask even if the mask mandate is removed. “I’ll be wearing a mask, and a lot of teachers will be wearing masks,” Schott said.

While vaccination rates of students remain low, 93 percent of teachers and staff are vaccinated, he said.

Highland superintendent resigns

BY TAMMY MINNIGH • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Two months after the death of Highland Elementary School principal Teresa Blum, Highland County Public Schools now also faces the loss of superintendent Dr. Thomas Schott, who steps down on Feb. 18.

Schott announced his resignation at a meeting with his teachers and staff last Wednesday afternoon.

“There’s no easy way for me to say this,” Schott said. Schott said he wanted to be as professional as possible and thus would not discuss why he was leaving. “It’s time for me to go,” Schott said. “That’s all I’m going to say.”

He thanked the staff for all their hard work. “You’re an amazing staff,” he said. “The last eight years have been great. I love the people I work with. I love the community. It’s just time to go.”

Highland High School principal Tim Good said he did not know who would be in charge of the schools upon Schott’s departure — that would be a question for the school board, he said. “He’s been a great superintendent and a pleasure to work with,” Good said of Schott. “We’ll just go on the best we can.”

Schott informed the school board members of his resignation the week before last but wanted to tell the staff in person — a meeting which was delayed by snow days last week. Schott said he and his wife, Jennifer, have a home in Virginia Beach and will move there. They will keep their home in Highland for a time and decide later whether to sell it.

Several teachers thanked Schott for his time and efforts on their behalf after the brief meeting, but all respected his request not to discuss his reasons for his decision.

“Dr. Schott’s resignation came unexpectedly,” said school board chair Kenny Hodges last Friday. “No, we did not ask him to leave ... He’s actually giving up some vacation time that he chose to do because he wants to leave Feb. 18.”

Schott’s contract ran through June 2024 and he will earn his salary through Feb. 18.

“I hate to hear that he’s leaving,” said school board member Joe Neil. “This current board has put him through the meat grinder the past two years.” Neil said board members have been “hateful, spiteful, and down-right mean.

“I assume he just had enough,” Neil continued. “Lesser men would probably have left sooner.”

While Neil said Schott did not give reasons for his decision to resign, Neil believes the current school board’s actions had a lot to do with it. Neil said the board has spent the last two years not

taking Schott's recommendations, not showing trust in the superintendent, and always asking Schott for more.

"We were lucky to keep him for eight years," Neil said. "He wanted to finish his career here and retire here, and it's a shame that we drove him away."

Filling the voids

Hodges said the Virginia Department of Education maintains a list of people who are qualified as a superintendent and willing to fill in as interim superintendents, plus a list of those qualified for permanent superintendent positions.

Hodges said he would be contacting the VDOE Friday, Jan. 21, to begin the process. "It puts those people on notice that we need somebody, and applicants will start calling us," Hodges said.

"I'm assuming that with the interim list, that we'll have somebody here by the 18th," Hodges said.

However, if the board does not find an interim superintendent, Hodges said the job responsibilities would fall back to Highland High School principal Tim Good. "What other option do we have if we don't have anybody?" he said.

When asked if the school board members would step in to help out at the school, Hodges said, "I don't think that will happen. The board wouldn't be qualified ... I'm positive that we will find an interim only because most of these people are dedicated and want to help out."

Neil said the Virginia School Boards Association, of which the Highland board is a member, is a resource that could help select a new superintendent. Neil noted the VSBA has teams to screen candidates and handle legal questions. "They did it the last time we needed a superintendent," Neil said. "They will review all the applicants and give recommendations."

He added, "There are qualified people in our community who could do this in the interim," but he didn't think any of them would take the position permanently.

While Neil said he would look to the VSBA for information, the decision to use the association to help find a new superintendent would be made by the board as a whole.

"Both of these positions are very important for us to fill correctly," Hodges said. "We do have to be mindful that we follow state laws."

Neil said the board needs to fill both positions as soon as possible, adding that finding a superintendent would probably take longer. "There's quite a list usually that apply," Neil said. "But the longer we wait, the smaller the field gets."

According to the Code of Virginia, the school board must appoint a new superintendent within 180 days unless an extension is granted.

Options for HES

Of the vacancy at the elementary school, Hodges said, “I imagine we are going to hire someone to fill in until the end of the year,” Hodges said. “If you are going to hire a new principal, it would be nice if the new superintendent was involved in the decision.” Hodges said that would let the new superintendent select staff for compatibility.

Hodges said he has spoken with administrators in several other school systems, including Galax and Craig, the smallest district after Highland. Hodges said he is gathering information on what elementary principals do in different communities and how many pupils they serve.

Hodges said he had spent 20 or more hours researching the elementary principal options. The board’s choices are to hire a part-time principal; a full-time principal; or consolidate into a single school and retain Good as the sole principal.

Hodges said the board would discuss those options at the work session tonight, Jan. 27.

“It’s obvious that having a full-time principal is the best option,” Neil said. “I haven’t changed my mind on that.”

Neil said the school tried having a part-time principal in the past with bad results.

Neil said he didn’t know why his fellow board members were still considering other options and that when he asked them why they gave no response.

Budget questions

Hodges said he is waiting for Schott to supply a spreadsheet detailing how much each current employee would receive if the school gave them a three percent raise of their current salary, rather than the three percent of the average Highland County teacher’s salary, which Schott proposed.

Hodges said he would like to give the teachers raises that reflected more money to those with a more extended work history in the county if the school budget will allow. “These people have dedicated their life here,” Hodges said.

When asked about the budget status, Hodges said Schott “basically told me the other day that he has the budget ready except for salaries and stipends.”

Schott said he could not finish the budget before his last day. “I know I won’t,” Schott said, adding, “The base part will be done.”

Schott said he has been waiting on the board to approve a salary scale and stipend scale, which accounts for the largest portion of the budget.

He is also waiting on cost figures from the school's insurance company, another large portion of the budget. Schott said the insurance company told him it might not have the new insurance rates until the middle of March.

The school board must submit an approved budget to the Highland County Board of Supervisors by April 1.

Schott said if the school board approves a salary scale, he can leave the base scale information for whomever the board hires to take over creating the budget. Schott said the school board is not supposed to create the budget, merely approve it.

School climate

Jan. 19, Hodges met with the Highland County Education Association after Schott announced his resignation.

"We discussed needs," Hodges said. "I wanted to know what their needs and wants are." Hodges said the word he would use to describe teachers' mood after his meeting is "optimistic."

Neil and Sullenberger each planned to also meet individually with the HCEA.

HCEA president Mike Warf said meetings with HCEA members were scheduled before Schott's resignation was announced, with the main goal of improving communication between the faculty and the school board.

"Personally, I would like to thank the board members for their service," Warf said. "This has not been an easy time to serve. And I feel as if the meetings were very productive as far as opening up lines of communication." Warf said they plan to hold reoccurring meetings and have invited school board members to attend parent-teacher days.

Schott said he had a longer speech planned for when he told the teachers he resigned, but couldn't finish. "I had to cut it short because I was starting to choke up," he said. "It was one of the hardest things I've done in my life ... It's hard to leave some place you love."

Schott recounted a few of the school's successes during his tenure, such as improving the facilities, good relationships with the staff, and success educating the students.

"It was very difficult for me to resign," Schott said.

Down the road

Hodges is looking to the future and plans to ask the state for more financial aid. "My intention is to go down when we have all new people in the state department," Hodges said. "Maybe we can get something done with the state, either with the composite index or extra money, because of our size, because we're struggling."

Hodges said he would highlight Highland's small size and unique nature when asking officials for more aid. "What can we do?" Hodges asked. "You can't compare us to Fairfax. You can't even compare us to Craig County."

Hodges said he would meet with delegates Chris Runion and John Avoli after the current legislative session.

Board member Sherry Sullenberger said she had no comment on the leadership vacancies and the board's next moves.

The school board hired Schott as superintendent in April 2014, and he was on the job effective July 1 that year. He succeeded Dr. William Crawford, who had retired after three years as superintendent in Highland. Schott had been director of assessment and accountability for Louisa County Schools at the time, with 16 years of experience in education.

Schott is a native of St. Louis, Mo. He graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of North Florida and got a job as a life science teacher at Carver Middle School in Chesterfield County. He earned his master's degree at Virginia Commonwealth University and was hired as assistant principal of Louisa Middle School. After three years, he was promoted and served as principal for more than six years. He then was hired as director of assessment in Louisa, where he worked six years. He earned his doctoral degree at Virginia Tech.

Mask mandate eliminated for students

Meanwhile last week, Schott spent several days considering whether to eliminate the mask mandate following the order by Gov. Glenn Youngkin that schools should leave a decision on facemasks up to parents.

Without any clear legal resolution in place, Schott eliminated mandatory mask-wearing for students, and announced that to families on Sunday afternoon.

The governor's order went into effect Monday. Other schools in this area — Covington, and Bath — lifted their mask mandates effective Monday as well. Alleghany County schools continues to make masks mandatory.

By Monday this week, the school boards of Alexandria City, Arlington County, City of Richmond, Fairfax County, Falls Church City, Hampton City and Prince William County had joined forces to file a lawsuit against the governor's order. Last week, a group of parents from Chesapeake also filed suit.

Youngkin, while running for office, said he would consider all available options to ensure schools allow parents to choose whether their children wear masks, and Hodges said he feared that could include withholding school funding. Hodges said the board left the mask decision to Schott.

“We’ve got two conflicting states laws,” Hodges added, referring to Senate Bill 1303, passed last spring, which said schools must follow CDC guidelines on COVID-19 policies, and Section 1-240.1 from the Code of Virginia, which state “a parent has a fundamental right to make decisions concerning the upbringing, education, and care of the parent’s child.”

Neil said, “It’s up to the administration right now since we (the school board) haven’t had a meeting.” He said he hopes to discuss masks at tonight’s Jan. 27 work session. “I can see complete chaos,” Neil said. “We seem to try to create as much chaos as we can.” By making masks optional, he said, “We definitely could lose more staff.”

Preschool students and preschool teachers will still have to wear masks, as will anyone riding in school buses or other school vehicles will have to wear masks as those policies are mandated federally, Schott said.

Schott said students would be the ones to decide if they wear a mask. Parents do not need to send in a note, and teachers will not be monitoring mask-wearing.

“The school still recommends masks,” Schott said, and he expects most teachers and staff would continue to wear masks. “The staff, they want it to continue as it is because it’s been successful,” Schott said.

Schott expects to quarantine more students since the school cannot keep students six feet apart to help prevent viral transmission.

“We could have to close the school due to COVID exposures,” Schott said. “We’ll try to just do that class by class.”

On Jan. 17, Sullenberger said she did not know if the board would discuss masks at tonight’s work session. “I feel like we have enough on our agenda,” Sullenberger said. “I think that we have to consider the safety and concern that all of our staff members have.”

This week, she said, “This variant is real, this variant is contagious, this variant is serious, and the hospitals are full. I want our children to be safe,” she said. Hodges added, “I know that teachers and staff will continue to mask.”

Schott’s new policy states that all adults and staff in the schools must wear masks, while it’s optional for students, but is highly recommended.

Tonight’s meeting

Despite discussions to move several tabled actions to the meeting scheduled for tonight, Thursday, Jan. 27, the agenda as proposed on Monday only includes:

- 2022-23 stipend list;
- Hiring an elementary school principal; and

- 2022-23 proposed payscale.

There is no agenda item to discuss replacing the superintendent.

HES principal's job advertised following confusing meetings

BY TAMMY MINNIGH • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — The Highland County School Board did not take action on hiring an elementary principal during its February meeting, despite pleas from parents, staff, and board member Joe Neil.

The Highland Elementary School principal position has been vacant since the November death of longtime principal Teresa Blum.

However, at roughly 10 a.m. Friday morning, the schools posted the opening for the job on their website.

Recently, the board hired Dr. Carol Armstrong as an interim principal to work two days a week at HES — Mondays and Tuesdays through April. But teachers said when she is not working, a vacuum of leadership leaves them confused about certain decisions.

The board ended its Feb. 10 meeting abruptly, and it's unclear whether they properly adjourned or continued the meeting. They moved to a different location to discuss teachers' concerns, but it's also unclear whether they followed the state laws on properly closing meetings. Board members disagree on whether the board took a vote to adjourn the open meeting, as members rose to move elsewhere for further discussion in a closed session.

Chairman Kenny Hodges said Friday morning that the board took a vote and cited the appropriate code section for a closed session related to personnel. But Neil said the board did not do that, as required by law.

On Friday, Neil said he called school board clerk Tabitha Ulmer to confirm any board action at the end of the open meeting. "She said we didn't take a vote to close the meeting or to go into closed session," Neil said.

At the end of the open meeting, board members said they were going back into a closed meeting to discuss concerns raised by first-grade teacher Mariam Foster.

Foster had asked who would be in charge at HES when Armstrong is not in the building.

Hodges had called for a motion to adjourn at this point, but board member Sherry Sullenberger said they were not adjourning but going back into a closed meeting.

“That’s right. We’ll go back to the library,” Hodges said.

A person in the audience called out to ask if the board would come back afterward into an open meeting.

“No, we’ll continue it over to the next meeting,” Hodges said. A person called out, “So we won’t know for a month?”

“No, I don’t think that will be the case,” Sullenberger replied.

Teachers concerned

Per the board’s agenda, members were to discuss and take action on hiring a permanent elementary principal. The board skipped that topic in the discussion of old business.

When the board reached the portion of the meeting to take action on hiring a principal, Hodges said he preferred to wait.

“I would love to have a permanent superintendent on board to make that decision since they’re going to have to work with them,” Hodges said.

Superintendent Dr. Thomas Schott has resigned; his last day on the job is Friday, Feb. 18.

Neil had made a motion to advertise for a full-time principal but received no second.

At this point, Foster, who said she spoke on behalf of many of her teacher peers and parents, told the board that teachers do not know who to turn to when Armstrong is not working. “There are days we do not have any leader,” Foster said. She said teachers are crossing in the hall, discussing something that just happened, and asking each other, “What do we do now?”

“We do need to know clearly who is in charge every single day in order to handle things,” Foster said.

Foster said teachers have been handling issues as they arise, but not always well. “It’s not necessarily a healthy balance for us,” she said.

Several people in attendance applauded after she expressed her concerns.

Sullenberger said the board needed to discuss her concerns. “Who’s responsible for the days that Dr. Armstrong is not here?” she asked. “Who can be a leader on those days? It’s an immediate problem that requires an immediate decision.”

“This is something we need to discuss immediately,” Hodges agreed.

He then held a short conversation with Schott that those attending could not hear. Hodges then explained Schott advised him the board could carry over its closed session.

Schott then asked whether the board was tabling action on hiring a principal, but the board did not make any motions on the issue or vote to table it. Instead, the board moved on to hiring spring coaches.

As Hodges started gathering papers, Neil said he wanted to make a statement before the board adjourned.

“We’ve been dragging our feet for three months on the elementary principal,” Neil said. “It’s not affecting us; it’s affecting the teachers and school. We need to say if we’re hiring a principal or not,” Neil said.

It was at this point that Hodges called for a motion to adjourn, but Sullenberger said they were not adjourning but going back into a closed meeting.

As board members stood and prepared to leave the room, Wendi True, who was watching the meeting online, asked, “Can the folks online speak since those in person are being able to speak?”

Right after her question, the virtual session was ended by the school.

Closed meeting discussion

Friday morning, Hodges explained what happened after the virtual feed was cut off.

“We went back to the library and went back into executive session,” he said. Hodges said the board voted lawfully and cited the code section regarding personnel issues to discuss Foster’s concerns about who was in charge when Armstrong was not working.

Hodges said the three board members were joined by high school principal Tim Good and five teachers for two hours in that closed meeting.

Schott did not attend. Hodges said Schott did not participate in the closed meeting held before the open meeting either. “We don’t know why, but he didn’t,” Hodges said. “I’m assuming it’s because he’s really a lame duck.”

Hodges said he couldn’t discuss anything else about the closed meeting other than to say, “Nothing will be done until March. It’ll be announced at the next meeting if we make a decision or not,” Hodges said.

Hodges said the only other thing the board might do before its March meeting is conduct interviews with interim superintendent candidates, which he said would be closed sessions with proper notice to the public.

Neil disagreed about how the meetings were conducted. “We didn’t close the meeting,” Neil said Friday morning, referring to Thursday’s open meeting. Neil said the board also did not vote to go into the closed meeting, or come out of the closed meeting. “More or less, we continued to the next executive session,” Neil said. “Whether all this procedure is proper or not, I don’t know.”

Asked by The Recorder for her perspective on the matter, and presented with the news report to review since she was not in attendance, county attorney Melissa Dowd said the board might need a refresher on the Freedom of Information Act.

“I do not believe the failure to adjourn the meeting is a problem,” Dowd said, referring to the way the open meeting ended.

However, she added, “I am not confident the purpose of the closed discussion fits within one of the permitted exceptions to an open meeting,” she said.

“In my opinion, from what I read in the story, the board did violate FOIA; however, it is not clear that the members intentionally violated FOIA. It sounds more to me like they need a refresher course on how to run a public meeting,” Dowd said, noting she would be glad to get a copy of the act to the board this week.

Dowd also explained the board could choose to limit public comment to specific times during the meeting. “Public meetings are the public’s right to listen to their government at work. It is not necessarily a right to speak to the public body. The board chair can limit speech,” she said.

“It sounds like the board continued its closed session under personnel so they can interview candidates in the future. I do believe interviewing job candidates is proper for closed sessions.”

Dowd’s email clarified the rules around closed meetings: “There must be a vote, citing the specific code section, which motion and vote must be in the board’s minutes. Then, no voting is permitted in closed sessions. To end a closed session, there must be a certification by roll call vote that nothing was discussed in the closed session other than what was identified in the initial motion to go into closed session. A board can continue a closed meeting from time to time. If that is what the board did, then the certification doesn’t need to be until the closed session is over.”

Friday, Ulmer confirmed the board did not vote to go into the second closed meeting. “They stated that they wanted to go into executive session,” Ulmer said. “There was no motion; there was no vote. There was no adjournment of their regular meeting.”

Advertising the job

While the board members said in the open meeting that they were going into the closed meeting to discuss Foster’s concerns, Neil noted that during the two-hour closed meeting, the board also decided to advertise for an elementary principal. Neil said that decision did not require a board vote. “We just had to agree to advertise,” Neil said. “A vote was never necessary on that ... I think we finally made a little progress toward getting a principal,” Neil added.

Dowd said, "If anyone asked me, I would have said that a decision to advertise for the principal's job should have been by a recorded vote, particularly in light of the board's failure to do anything about the absence since Teresa's death," Dowd said. "But I was not asked, and I don't think the failure to vote violates any particular statute."

In the closed session, Neil said the board discussed Foster's concerns. "We sort of remedied that, and we sort of agreed on a long-term decision to advertise for a principal," Neil said. "It was a little confusing, but I think between the teachers in the meeting and the principal (Good), they agreed to work out a plan."

Information on the principal position can be found at: [www.highland.k12.va.us/ live-feed#2179840](http://www.highland.k12.va.us/live-feed#2179840).

It does not list a starting salary, nor whether the position is full- or part-time. Ulmer said she was instructed only to post that the school was hiring an elementary principal and that the board has not yet decided if it will be full-time or part-time or what the starting salary will be.

Citizens' concerns

The need to hire a new principal was on the minds of several people who spoke during Thursday's open meeting.

Kim Wolfe read aloud a letter she sent to school board members the previous week, outlining several priorities raised at a January meeting of about 30 concerned parents and neighbors. Their priorities included asking the board to immediately advertise for a full-time elementary principal with clearly defined duties; advertise and recruit a full-time superintendent with clearly defined duties; approve salary scales; that the board schedule monthly work sessions the week before its monthly meeting; that school board members spend time in the schools during school hours to learn the needs of teachers, staff, and students; and to adopt a school budget in March that meets the needs of students and staff and gives priority to those needs over concerns to save taxpayers' money.

Wolfe wrote the list of priorities based on most comments at the parents' meeting, though some participants cautioned the board to take its time making decisions.

"We have a real opportunity here to craft a school system for the 200-plus students and make it a place people want to come," said parent Claire Sax. "You have a fresh, clean slate, plan for the future."

"Hiring an elementary school principal is super important to our school system," said parent Jennifer Cox. "We need to work with the models that we know and now is not the time to try what-ifs."

Some parents said they were glad to see the job listing on the school's webpage Friday but disappointed at the lack of details.

“While I’m somewhat pleased to see that they are starting to interview for an interim superintendent, it seems as though there should be postings and advertising and connection with the Virginia Department of Education about the new long term superintendent position, and there is no evidence of that,” Wolfe said over the weekend.

Wolfe expressed concerns over the qualifications of the candidates, wondering how they have been vetted. “Considering the lack of postings or advertising for the superintendent job, where did these applicants come from and how did they hear about the position? Were they contacted by school board members directly, or are they known to any of them personally? If so, does this create a conflict of interest? Considering the lack of a job description and list of necessary skills and experience, how will the school board members know who is qualified? There are many questions to be answered,” she said.

“Given how frequently a temporary or interim suddenly becomes permanent, I fear they are short-cutting the selection process, and we will wind up with a long-term superintendent who has not been properly vetted,” Wolfe said.

Wolfe and Sax sent a joint statement to The Recorder, writing, “At this point, it is still unclear whether this advertisement is for a full-time or part-time elementary school principal. There is no job description, no information about full-time/part-time status, no pay information, nor can we find that it is posted anywhere other than on Facebook and the HCPS webpage. We did not see this job listing on the Virginia Department of Education but did count ten other principal positions available in Virginia. Knowing that educators/administrators are already in short supply, we think it is imperative to list our position as soon as possible. We are doubtful that qualified educators are looking for positions via Facebook.”

So far, HCPS has responded to two public Facebook comments that asked for more details on the principal job listing and replied, “That detail is still to be determined by our school board.”