

SPORTS

Kitsap school districts notify employees of furloughs ahead of a remote start to school year

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Published 6:30 a.m. PT Aug. 25, 2020 | Updated 1:04 p.m. PT Sep. 3, 2020

With just over one week until the first day of school, Central Kitsap School District trimmed a sizable number of positions as a result of shifting to a fully remote learning model.

On Monday, 118 employees learned that on Sept. 15, they would join the ranks of people seeking unemployment, yet another casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those affected include transportation employees — including bus drivers — meal preparation staff and the district's three high school athletic directors.

On Tuesday, South Kitsap School District announced 235 non-teaching positions would be impacted by full or partial furloughs from Sept. 1 through Oct. 31. The list (including some employees assigned to multiple positions) includes 84 full-time bus drivers plus other transportation positions, office assistants, lunchroom and playground supervisors, custodians and other support staff.

CKSD was the first school district in Kitsap County to announce the decision to place employees on "standby," a status that maintains them as employees with the district but without a paycheck. The district will cover employee health benefits through the end of October.

District spokesman David Beil said the hope is for the affected employees to eventually return when in-person learning resumes. CKSD plans to reassess its remote-learning model nine weeks after the start of school.

Monday's news came as a shock to Central Kitsap High School athletic director Bill Baxter, who has worked for the district for 33 years.

"A slap in the face and a punch to the gut," Baxter said.

Baxter and Olympic High School Athletic Director Nate Andrews said budget cost savings were the reason for the cuts, though a letter sent to staff by Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Jeanne Beckon indicated there were other factors.

"The current health pandemic has changed our district in many ways — most notably our shift to a fully remote learning model," Beckon wrote.

"While we operate inside this new model, our need for a variety of services related to in-person learning will decrease."

Baxter and Andrews are the two longest-serving high school athletic directors in West Sound. Baxter became AD at Central Kitsap in 2006 and Andrews took over at Olympic in 2008. Both formerly taught and coached baseball at their respective schools.

The district's third AD, Lauren McDaniel, joined Klahowya Secondary School in 2019.

As planning for the 2020-21 sports schedule became a moving target, athletic directors prepared to shift from their traditional duties. Recently, Baxter and Andrews joined school staff in preparing Chromebooks for student distribution.

The athletic directors said they had no warning about the potential for staff cuts from district administrators prior to Monday's news.

"You don't treat people like that," Baxter said.

Beckon acknowledged the district's "very challenging decision" in her letter.

"I know this news is hard to hear. It comes after many tough conversations, and I can assure you that it is not an easy decision. There are no easy decisions right now as a result of this global health crisis."

South Kitsap's decision

In South Kitsap, employees will continue to get benefits but will remain responsible for their portion of insurance coverage.

Superintendent Tim Winter during the budget approval process earlier this month said furloughs were possible. That was before the district had approved a remote start to instruction. Winter told the school board the goal would be to maintain a workforce ready to come back whenever conditions allowed for in-person education.

"We have a terrific team of professional bus drivers, office assistants, lunchroom and playground supervisors, etc., for whom there is little or no meaningful work during a remote start of school," district spokeswoman Amy Miller said Tuesday. "The pandemic presents challenges not seen in a lifetime of education, and we are focused on supporting our key educational mission."

Miller said the district wants to be good stewards of taxpayers' money by furloughing positions that can't perform at their usual capacity. The district will monitor pandemic conditions and adjust staffing accordingly.

"We will continue to explore options to bring people back in support of student learning that may be outside of their regular job duties," Miller said.

"I was informed very late in the process," said Troy Grubb, president of the Local SEIU, representing bus drivers, custodians and some IT positions. "My expectation is the district would have come to the table and had a conversation with us about what this was going to look like and get some input from the union."

That said, Grubb acknowledges the "tumultuous time" in which the district finds itself and the school board's decision Aug. 10 to reverse course and join other districts that were starting remotely. Grubb says in general, the district seems to be acting in good faith.

The district and union have initiated talks on staffing to need during the pandemic but have not reached any agreement, according to Grubb.

He disagrees with the move to eliminate custodial positions. Although schools will be largely empty, teachers will be coming and going, Grubb said. In the event of an outbreak, the custodial staff should be maintained full force and ready to go.

Other districts standing by

Bainbridge Island School District does not anticipate furloughs at this time, but it is closely monitoring staffing levels, said spokeswoman Erin Bischoff.

Jenn Markaryan, spokeswoman for North Kitsap School District, said, "We are still ascertaining enrollment and budget numbers. The decisions have not been finalized at this point. We are still working through the details in partnership with our associations."

Classified staff in Bremerton School District received their work assignment letters about a week ago. The district's classified staffing is consistent with levels for the 2019-20 school year, said spokeswoman Karen Bevers. "The district will reassess sustainability of these staffing levels based on enrollment in the beginning of October."