

This column is overdue but I was intentional about waiting for the October 1st student counts. That is the magic date when every school district in Oklahoma has their number of enrolled students tabulated by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. That number plays a highly significant role in the amount of funding each district will receive for THIS school year. Last year, many families chose other options for their children's learning. Of the largest school districts in Oklahoma, we experienced the highest percentage loss of students. Presumably, the enrollment drop was due to uncertainty regarding how school would look in a COVID world. From the 2019-20 year to the 2020-21 year on the October 1st count, Guthrie had 872 fewer students enrolled. Many of those students enrolled with virtual online options other than our Bluejay Academy. Some never enrolled anywhere and were homeschooled while others that we attempted to reach did not enroll at another district and we could not make contact with their parents. A healthy number of students returned to us last spring or at other times throughout the year. I'm happy to say that our enrollment has recovered almost to the count of 2019-20 as we have 767 more this year than we had on October 1, 2020.

Experts said as we began last year it would take two years to recover from the loss of learning we experienced during the closure of schools in March, 2020. We are seeing many learning gaps in students who chose other learning platforms last year and have returned to us this year. Despite these challenges, we have pledged to meet every student where they are and grow them with the resources afforded to us. Progress is being made daily and we are on the road to recovery.

We have made significant investments in tools to assist our students as they recover their learning. With the use of federal funds provided to assist schools through COVID, we have hired contact tracers to notify parents if their child has been exposed to COVID. Through a grant from the Department of Human Services, we now have three school based specialists. Their role is to assist students and families who may be in need of resources they are unaware are available. We have also partnered with a learning company called Waterford to assist families of our elementary students recover their learning loss. They are experts at reaching out to families to assist in improving literacy and math comprehension. With the use of these federal funds, we have also created a position to assist the students and families of our English Language Learner students. This demographic is our fastest growing population and many of our students in this category live in homes where English is not the predominate language spoken.

I've heard from several parents who would like to see on a daily basis the number of COVID cases in our district. The school districts who have chosen this approach are larger than Guthrie. We have chosen to not publish this information on a daily basis to protect the identity of those who have tested positive. As of October 3rd, we currently have 12 positive student cases out of 3391 students (or 0.3% of our students). Our high case count was 71 and recently our average has been around 20 cases. Our current staff count of positive cases is 2 out of approximately 460 total staff members (or 0.4% of our staff members). Our school board and leadership team get an update of these numbers on a weekly basis as we use this data to guide us in decision making about what is best for our students and staff. I hope sharing this with everyone helps alleviate some of the inevitable concerns about sending your child to school.

All decisions we have made during this pandemic have been aimed at serving our students. There is no textbook or class we have taken to address the mighty challenges faced over the past 19 months. Rest assured we are using our resources wisely to serve our students and provide for a safe learning environment. This hasn't been easy for our students, parents or staff. We have taken the approach that regardless of whatever challenge is placed in front of us, we will figure out a way to educate our students in a safe manner. Better days are ahead for our Bluejays!