



Op Ed Submission – The UNION
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Crisis. React. Pivot. Adjust – Getting Ready for the New School Year

The last school year was the most unusual in the history of the Nevada Joint Union High School District. In the fall, classes were disrupted by Public Safety Power Shutoffs and the loss of six instructional days. Then in the spring came the sudden onset of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. All Nevada County schools abruptly closed in March and we initiated emergency distance learning with little notice and almost no preparation.

This was the first time in the district’s history that our basic operational model, one that had been in place for decades, suddenly halted. On the dime, a new model of delivering instruction had to be designed and launched in shotgun fashion.

It was a heart-wrenching decision. We know firsthand that in normal circumstances, students are better off in classes with in-person instruction. However, these are far from normal circumstances.

On July 22, the district’s Board of Trustees voted to begin the 2020-2021 school year with distance education with the goal of reopening high school campuses after the fall break (October 19-

23). The board will discuss the development of criteria and planning steps necessary to safely reopen our schools at its August 12 public meeting (please visit www.njuhsd.com for information on how to view and comment at the meeting).

This was another very difficult decision for the board. We could hear the sighs echoing across our community moments after the board's action that evening.

Sighs of disbelief, disappointment, and even anger.

Sighs of relief and support.

Stakeholder input leading up to the meeting was a mix between those wanting our campuses to open, and those arguing that our high schools should remain closed. Some expressed strong concerns that in-person instruction is the best and safest option for students given the fact that Nevada County was not on the state's COVID-19 watch list. Others argued that we should not gamble when it comes to the health, safety, and even lives of our students, families, and school staff.

There was, however, one common denominator between these two opposing sides. Both camps expressed fear that this fall's distance learning would resemble the model erratically launched last spring when the pandemic first shook our state and nation.

Let me assure you: when we resume classes on August 17, distance education will not look or feel like what we implemented on a moment's notice last March.

We have learned a lot and spent considerable time and effort over the summer designing comprehensive training modules for effective distance learning and student engagement. We had hoped to offer a hybrid system of both in-class and online

learning, but we always knew distance education would comprise an important component of this fall semester. Therefore, we focused the bulk of our attention and energy on mastering that.

District leaders and teachers worked diligently, many while on their summer breaks, to provide the most robust distance education models possible. School site and district facility staff are also busy installing safety measures and designing on-campus safety protocols when in-person classes resume.

NJUHSD's "Distance Education Version 2.0" will feature high-quality instruction plus caring and compassionate services.

- Teachers are receiving focused and expanded training in distance learning to improve their instructional practices.
- Students will receive targeted training, enabling them to become better distance learners.
- Online support for parents will be expanded and enhanced.
- Traditional letter grades will resume and applied to both assignments and report cards for the entire instructional year.

We are also excited to announce that all teachers and students are being trained on the effective use of our common learning management system – *Schoology*. One positive aspect from this crisis is that all district schools will finally use one common learning management system.

We heard concerns expressed by parents and students, and have worked hard to address frustrations regarding communication and interfacing with teachers online. During last spring's distance learning, some teachers used various online systems more effectively than others did. With all teachers and schools now using Schoology, communication between students, teachers,

and parents can be more consistent and complete. Course syllabi, assignments, educational materials, instructional notes, and completed work with grades and evaluations will be easier to access and understand.

The effects of the pandemic continue to have impacts on students' emotional well-being and mental health. In response, we will offer enhanced interfacing with our counselors and intervention specialists. Our comprehensive system of supports will include improved social and emotional assistance.

The resumption of competitive sports – tentatively slated by the California Interscholastic Federation for early 2021 – will depend on state and local public health guidelines. In the meantime, I am happy to announce that state public health officials finally revised their directives regarding training and conditioning for youth sports. As a result, we are immediately resuming training and conditioning for our student athletes under strict safety guidelines.

The 2020-21 school year officially begins on Monday, August 17. In normal years, the first week of school is dedicated to our Week of Welcome, with campus orientation activities, rallies, assemblies, and other school culture-building activities. This year the first week will be similar but in an online manner. During the first week of school, students will engage in online school orientation meetings via Zoom and/or telephone. They will receive instruction surrounding how to engage with the Schoology system, managing online norms and digital citizenship, communication and access to supports from a distance, and how best to manage their time in a distance education setting. During this time, teachers will be developing their remote teaching skills and building their classroom presence on Schoology. Full distance education classwork and instruction will commence the second week of school.

NJUHSD high schools remain the best places for students to receive the paramount academic instruction they need to be successful in higher education settings as well as career endeavors. Even in the midst of this crisis, I will still take the “Pepsi Challenge” against any other high school institution in the county and region. We will continue to offer the widest and most robust array of academics, athletics, visual and performing arts, social-emotional support, and extra-curricular experiences for our community’s high school and adult education students.

We recognize it is optimal for students to be on campus and enjoy the school related functions / activities, real-time resources and feedback, and social interactions. Nevertheless, I pledge that we are going to provide top-quality education and engagement within a distance education model.

Please contact my office at 530-273-3351 to share your ideas and concerns. You may also visit the district’s website at www.njuhsd.com to learn the latest about how we are confronting obstacles presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

District leaders – and I personally – thank you for your continued support for NJUHSD’s high schools, and Nevada County’s public schools as a whole. It remains an honor to serve this community.

Brett McFadden is the Superintendent of the Nevada Joint Union High School District. He has more than 29 years of education leadership and policy experience statewide. Freelance writer Lorraine Jewett contributed to this column.