

ACUSD Board of Trustees Meeting

June 24, 2020

Transcript: Dr. Kerr, Amador County Public Health Officer/Speaker to the Board

Dr. Kerr:

Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Rita Kerr, Chairman Ross, Board Of Amador County Unified School District. I'm coming to you as the health officer to talk about planning for Amador County schools reopening come the fall. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, it certainly challenges all of us.

We recognize school is very important, not only for educational, but also emotional and developmental needs of our children. I have been asked by several people, including parents and educators, to provide an opinion about whether schools can resume, reopen, and just go about business as usual without putting public health guidance measures in place following summer break. The answer to that is no.

The purpose of the guidance that has been developed is to put measures in place to make schools safer by minimizing the risk of transmission of Covid-19. There are a wide variety of opinions ranging from great concern about the risk of Covid, to no concern. It is vitally important our children receive as many services and as much support as possible from our schools.

That said, like other aspects of our lives that got shut down in March to slow the spread of novel coronavirus, changes need to be put in place as we resume activities to minimize the risk of further transmission. Some have asked if the guidance must be followed. The guidance documents are written to provide enough flexibility to be customized for a wide variety of school settings for varying sizes but that flexibility does not allow schools to reopen without implementing any of the safety protocols.

Schools are tasked with developing their own plans to resume education applying the guidelines to the unique needs of each school setting including high risk students and staff and the limitations of the physical aspect of classrooms, and transportation, and buildings. Multiple guidance documents have been published from public health like CDC and the California department of public health non-health entities and others.

As a public health official my job is to review the plan that our local schools develop relative to the guidance, and provide consultation about where flexibility is reasonable. For example, the amount of spacing that needs to happen between desks given a classroom configuration, or where face shields may be substituted and used instead of face coverings.

I would welcome questions from the board.

Kandi Thompson:

I'm not used to talking with a mask on. Are you requiring a vaccine to be available before releasing our students to be able to go to school?

Dr. Kerr:

A vaccine for Covid? No, I am not. A vaccine is not available and the timeline is uncertain. We need to work to get our children back into school before that happens.

Kandi Thompson:

Thank God. And then with regard to masks at school I know that's probably been...of course desk spacing is essential just to be able to get the kids in the classroom, but as far as masks are concerned, there is so much controversy, as far as the U.S. Surgeon General says they're not necessary, but then there is the CDC that says that they are. So, is that going to be something that would be recommended for school to come back on but not required?

Dr. Kerr:

At this point, physical distancing is the number one. Masks at a layer, the closer the physical distancing is by necessity of limitation of classroom size, the more important masks would be, or in a crowded school bus, the more important masks would be. The guidelines both say recommendation for students -- recommendations for younger students. For staff and older students, masks are really a necessity and for those who can't wear masks, a face shield might be able to be substituted.

The Governor's masking guidance, which the state considers a mandate, that came down last week, definitely has the exclusion of any child under 2 should never be wearing a mask. Children between the ages of approximately 2 and 12 is an area that is still grey in my mind and myself and other health officers have asked the state for clarification of interpretation of that portion of that guidance, and the state has promised to make their masking guidance consistent with their school guidance. I believe those documents should marry up better in the coming weeks.

Susan Ross:

I have a question or a few of them. Are we still in an emergency crisis situation?

Dr. Kerr:

We are. As a state, and even at a local level, our case rate has been climbing. We confirmed three new laboratory confirmed positive cases today and have several more persons who are contacts and test results are pending. So we are seeing increasing spread in our own community and all of our neighboring communities.

The Central Valley has been a hot spot and the hospitalization numbers in the state are setting new records on a daily basis for the past several days.

Susan Ross:

So in your opinion, do you think it's possible to open schools fully on August 12th, and if so, what safety guidelines with you, would you be expecting to see?

Dr. Kerr:

When you say fully, what is the definition of fully?

Susan Ross:

I'm saying 100% staff, 100% students on campus.

Dr. Kerr:

That would be a stretch. I believe that you're going to need to take both the CDC and the California Department of Public Health, the California department of Public Education guidelines, which were really kind of developed together and go through those, section by section, talk about your increased cleaning, your screening for illness before students come on campus and whether that's done at home, before they come for the day, or whether you have to get a no-toucher thermometer and scan kids on the way in. You definitely should have a no-touch thermometer in case someone develops midday, then you need a plan to isolate them and a plan to handle that. Modifications need to be made in accordance to this guidance.

Susan Ross:

Board have any other questions?

Deborah Pulskamp:

I do.

Susan Ross:

Yes, Deborah.

Deborah Pulskamp:

So if we're doing a hybrid model where we have half the students essentially on campus, what would happen – well would there ever be a directive that we had to go to pure distance learning, like is there some trigger for that?

Dr. Kerr:

The trigger I would foresee--it's immediate trigger might be an outbreak in a single classroom where that single classroom would have to be shut down and the type of campuses where students change from group to group over the course of a day, that presents a more challenging situation because obviously they're in contact with many more people and so there possibly could be more close contact solicited. All of those students are considered close contacts and those staff are considered close contacts

would have to be quarantined for 14 days after exposure, which by necessity, they can't be there, learning has to be done where they are in quarantine.

Deborah Pulskamp:

To follow -- great-- not great, but that's information I was concerned about. And secondly, is there a level of cases in the community that would trigger that, or is it just school based? Or do you know?

Dr. Kerr:

I don't have that data, as far as the threshold level for that at is at my disposal at this time. I know the CDC guidance, that was published early on in this situation talks about substantial community transmission and the possibility of closing down schools prospectively for that. We are in the minimal to moderate community transmission category at this point

Deborah Pulskamp:

Thank you.

Susan Ross:

So Dr. Kerr, in your opinion, how do you see reopening happening with considering all the factors?

Dr. Kerr:

I understand that you have students and staff who it's high risk for them to come back and options will need to be provided for that group at a minimum. Beyond that what makes sense for your student body, your staff, and your physical plan needs to be worked out by your group and your stakeholders including parents, maybe involving some of the students. I know you have student representatives on the school board and some of them may have meaningful opinions to bring to the table, as well. And of course your staff at large

Susan Ross:

Thank you. Any other questions from the board?

James Marzano:

Before I left to come to the meeting, I glanced at the TV and State of California cases are 191,544 and deaths of 6,029, in the State of California. Speaking only for -- in the county that we can deal with, which is Amador County, we have how many current as of right now-- positives?

Dr. Kerr:

We have 19 total cases to date, nine of which are active, ten of which are recovered.

James Marzano:

Nobody's in the hospital right now, and we have not had any deaths to date.

Dr. Kerr:

All fully recovered? Just ten. Meaning they're not at risk or contagious to others.

James Marzano:

And I had followed the press releases and I'm asking just to educate myself. Are these cases, because of the vamping of the testing, or are they just, oh, my gosh, I feel sick, I've got to go to the doctor.

Dr. Kerr:

They are all people who have been sick. The newly launched community surveillance, we haven't had any positives from that group.

James Marzano:

Okay. So that means we don't have a lot of background happening here.

Dr. Kerr:

We also don't have a lot of immunity, so our community is still very vulnerable to transmission when it comes in, which is someone who travels out of the area, brings back with them and shares within the community, which is what this outbreak cluster we're working on now is the result of.

James Marzano:

As a parent board member, a parent of students and a board member and a community member, I first, before I ask other questions, I want to ask you, what questions would you want me to ask you, or if I was you -- do you know what I mean?

Dr. Kerr:

I have a student who just graduated from Amador, so I have children who are trying to navigate the college experience. And making changes on that basis. I would want to ask what measures are you putting in place to keep my child safe. What are your plans if, you know, somebody gets sick, how Willie be notified about -- how will I be notified of that? How can I plan around my kids' schedule? That's what I would want to know.

James Marzano:

Okay. There are some questions regarding PPE and what PPE will Amador County health require. Is that something that you would require?

Dr. Kerr:

I would be following the state guidance, at this point I have no reason to be any more restrictive than the state guidance. I cannot be less restrictive than the state guidance.

James Marzano:

Which is masks and/or shields for all staff and for the older students.

Dr. Kerr:

As I said, the younger group of students, kind of the primary, elementary age, we asking for clarification on that recommendation. Again, if those children are in close proximity to one another, masking definitely helps transmission between them. If we can manage the numbers, the spacing is reasonable, there may be some flexibility in that masking for that group.

James Marzano:

Okay. Also, I've been trying to stay on top of the board of supervisors meetings and the live streams in which they provide primarily because I like to watch you speak. With that being said --

Susan Ross:

You have a fan club.

James Marzano:

It's like my -- it's like my weekly soap opera.

Dr. Kerr:

I feel the same way.

James Marzano:

With that being said, I've heard you talk about the phases that we're in. I also heard you recently state what would cause us to go back a phase. I don't remember if you spoke about if we are able to or what will allow us to go up.

Dr. Kerr:

You mean forward?

James Marzano:

Forward, more?

Dr. Kerr:

Correct.

James Marzano:

At the phases is – I can't remember if they call it phases or stages.

Dr. Kerr:

Those two words get interchanged a lot, much like quarantine and isolation because there are a lot of similarity, however the state has created a roadmap for reopening with a lot of focus on the economy, but other activities, as well, come along with that, and we are into -- I guess they're calling it stages -- stage three. Stage four is quite a ways off, and that's the community in stage four, large gathers that bring people to multiple geographic areas, think of a trade show at a convention center, something like that, we're not even all the way through stage three yet. We're partially into stage three, but there are stage three activities that have been allowed for in counties like Amador, that had been relatively less affected and are able to show that State we have a plan in place to respond as cases increase, we're enacting those plans as we speak.

At this point, I would first see a halt to progressing further into stage three and allowing more mixing of people, that sort of thing. We are not allowed to move any faster than the state, through the stages, and the state provides us with expert consultation and guidance to do the work and to give schools and businesses and faith-based communities and all the other things that have been told you can resume with precautions in place, the tools that they need to try and make it as safe as possible.

James Marzano:

So you do not have the power to advance us forward at all?

Dr. Kerr:

Not faster than the states. I can go slower than the state if I think that's warranted but I may not advance any faster than the state.

James Marzano:

And I remember you provided somewhat of a number, if you will, what would require or make you go back a phase.

Dr. Kerr:

I think it was 38 cases that would put us on the watch list with the state.

James Marzano:

Okay. 38 cases over 14. So what would make us take a step back?

Dr. Kerr:

I think our hospital capacity being overwhelmed may be one of those triggers. I'm trying to remember what I put in the initial document over two -- in the beginning of May back

to the state. And we had a series of thresholds that would make us say halt because of the socially distant layout because a lot of us have homes on a fairly good sized acreage or lot, we have some apartment complexes but that's not the majority, we don't have a lot of high-use public transit like a Bart rail or something like that, I wouldn't see Amador County sliding back faster than the rest of the state. We may have to put a pause on things, but I don't see us having to step back and reinstitute the kind of closure that we had put back in March.

James Marzano:

Because we're not as comparable to the highly populated counties in the big cities? Yes?

Dr. Kerr:

That's true. Rural counties have our own issue, part of it is we have our hospital infrastructure, compared to the Bay area.

James Marzano:

For sure.

Dr. Kerr:

We have a regional referral system from Amador to the valley and we utilize that as we need it.

James Marzano:

And I'm asking this because my time on the board thus far, I've noticed that the district folk have to predict the future and plan ahead in everything they do. And because the district has to plan ahead, should we anticipate following today's safety protocols and the phase and the stage that we're in? Can we predict moving forward just to help in understanding how to move forward?

Dr. Kerr:

That's a very good question and I think it's reasonable to plan with what we have today, because where we are in the in the middle of stage three, schools are solidly there.

Schools are done in the latter of stage three, so even if some businesses have to move to stage two, within reason, as long as the activity in a specific school site isn't increasing, schools could continue to function.

James Marzano:

Uh-huh.

Dr. Kerr:

As a whole.

James Marzano:

Okay. I know you're not like legal counsel or anything.

Dr. Kerr:

I am not. No JD behind my name, only an MD.

James Marzano:

The topic has been -- it's been just mentioned and discussed all over. People may sue if their student gets Covid, but --and I just recently kind of -- we talked about this. History doesn't show that with flu or viruses, that people have sued. Does that make sense?

Dr. Kerr:

I can't explain that behavior.

Susan Ross:

Jared, did you want to add on to that?

Jared Critchfield:

I spent 45 minutes on the phone with Superintendent Russell and Norma Wallace and you're right, there is a particular bill in the works that potentially would not hold districts liable for the transmission of Covid, but there is this underlying caveat that we not be held liable as long as we're following the guidelines. It's the concept of ignoring guidelines and people getting Covid that is still unclear to us and at this point in time, we are being told we'll be held liable if we're not following guidelines and Covid's contracted.

James Marzano:

So is it fair to say we should never, ever talk like going back to school as back to school was pre-Covid? We should always discuss it as there is -- I hate to say it, but the new normal, will be going back to school?

Dr. Kerr:

I don't like that term new normal either.

James Marzano:

Yeah, for sure.

Dr. Kerr:

Because I don't think it's going to feel normal for a very long time. We're going to have to resume with changes.

James Marzano:

Okay.

Dr. Kerr:

With modifications.

James Marzano:

For sure. I have so many questions. I don't know if I'm way out of line.

Dr. Kerr:

I have to get back to the office.

Susan Ross:

I bet Dr. Kerr would talk to you if you want to give her a ring or e-mail or something.

James Marzano:

Okay.

Susan Ross:

We're really tight on time. We have to be out of here by 5:00 and we're supposed to get through the zoom meeting and we may have to resume at home.

Dr. Kerr:

I would look forward to seeing a plan and look forward to collaborating with you on a plan and making sure it's a plan that is keeping with the spirit of the guidelines and the details we can decide what looks reasonable and doable for this school district. And

Susan Ross:

Dr. Kerr, I want to thank you for waiting for us and thank you for your flexibility and I want to thank you very much for being in this position at this time. I did watch the Governor today and he apologized to so many health officers that are getting death threats and being criticized in a way they don't deserve, and -- did you see it today?

Dr. Kerr:

I did not. I was in the middle of contact tracing.

Susan Ross:

He asked all public servants to step up and be accountable and takes care of the health and well-being of our citizens and it was a real call to the masses. He was very, very firm about it, so I want to thank you very much and thank you for being here today.

Dr. Kerr:

I appreciate those comments and I appreciate your support. I don't envy your work either.

Kandi Thompson:

Neither do we.

Susan Ross:

All right. Thank you very much.