

## BOE defies Governor's order, votes for in-person graduations

Enquirer-Journal, The (Monroe, NC) - May 29, 2020

• Author/Byline: Holly Morgan hollymorgan@theej.com

• Section: News

UNION COUNTY — The Union County Board of Education voted 5-4 to host in-person, traditional high school graduations using all safety measures and social distancing with an amendment for rain dates during their emergency meeting held on Thursday. This directly goes against Governor Roy Cooper's second phase of reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limits gatherings to a maximum of 10 people indoors and 25 outdoors.

Melissa Merrell, chairwoman of the Board of Education (BOE), reported the results of a survey sent out to graduating seniors and their parents on what they preferred for graduation. She said staff and the BOE have been working on the surveys for the past three weeks.

The number one choice out of 1,800 responses was to avoid having virtual ceremonies, but to have in-person ceremonies later in the summer or fall if need be or possible. The second most popular choice was to host in-person and socially-distanced graduations at stadiums.

The decision was brought forth in a motion by board member Gary Sides and seconded by Travis Kiker.

"Everyone needs to be aware that what we are voting on does violate this order," Kiker said.

The decision was not voted on by Superintendent Dr. Andrew Houlihan. He is prohibited from voting on motions made in BOE meetings.

Merrell and board member Kathy Heintel explained that the order was revised later by the Governor's office and that the changes were not properly announced.

On May 22, the executive order was revised with pages added, and educational institutions are exempt from the mass gathering limits; however, the limits still apply to auditoriums, stadiums and arenas.

Merrell said it would have been an "understatement" to say the Union County BOE was "shocked" to learn the governor's order on mass gatherings was still very restrictive in phase two. UCPS staff and BOE were hoping the order would allow gatherings of about 150 people.

According to Merrell, on May 1, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction advised local boards to adhere to safety guidelines when planning graduations and suggested multiple styles of graduations that schools could host, but ultimately, it was up to local schools on how they wanted to plan graduations. She said the department also advised schools to work with their local public health departments to receive further guidance on how to host graduations.

Assistant Superintendent Jarrod McCraw has discussed the matter with Union County Public Health Director Dennis Joyner.

Joyner said he "could not support" having in-person graduations because it went against the governor's order, according to McCraw.

The BOE has several working plans for graduation. The first being in-person graduations at UCPS high school stadiums.

The BOE has a plan that calls for seniors to walk across the stage in groups of 10 while other groups wait for their turn in classrooms. Families would have to watch the graduations from their cars in their designated parking spots. After the last senior walks across the stage, all seniors would stand in front of their families' cars and school staff would drive their cars in a parade in front of the seniors. This information is subject to change as UCPS staff and BOE continue to discuss graduations.

A third option is to rent space in South Carolina, perhaps in Fort Mill or Rock Hill.

How the Board voted

District 1 — Candice Sturdivant: No

District 2 — Matt Helms: Yes

District 3 — Gary Sides: Yes

District 4 — Melissa Merrell: Yes

District 5 — Joe Morreale: No

District 6 — Kathy Heintel: No

At-large

Christina Helms: No

Travis Kiker: Yes

Todd Price: Yes

- *Record:* e5d24d5aae588f7f99e45f64e5c3a88fd4768d1
- *Copyright:* Copyright 2020 The Enquirer-Journal, All Rights Reserved.