

## Statement

Ladies and gentlemen of the Board,

My name is Brian Parker and I am reading this statement per my capacity as the sole KEA representative for Trigg County employees. This statement is not meant to represent my view or opinion, but is strictly that of those for whom I read this statement for. The statement proceeds as follows:

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board,

We write this statement to you today as a representation of not every district employee but of many. We would like to publicly declare and address several concerns of current employees in the district.

As you know, we find ourselves in a situation that no educator has been in before. Teaching in a pandemic is challenging, stressful, and unpredictable. That we know you understand; however, Trigg County employees also find themselves not only facing a pandemic educationally but also experiencing new challenges in terms of leadership where our opinions have largely gone unsought and unheard by our superintendent. Our fear is that the failure to consider and consult all school stakeholders in the form of open, two-way conversations in the decision-making process is eroding the positive school culture our district has worked collectively and diligently to establish over many years.

Without any viable two-way open forums or online meetings offered to express concerns or seek the opinions of school faculty and staff, several educators took it upon themselves to reach out directly and express their concerns to Mr. Thorpe in-person and via email regarding the topic of returning to traditional, in-person instruction and regarding the topic of his failure to consult staff or evaluate their attitudes, concerns, and the district climate in his decision making. These concerns have been expressed through a variety of conversations and emails. In these instances, Mr. Thorpe has suggested his willingness to listen to those who seek him out through proper channels; however, he remains largely unwilling to include stakeholders in the decision-making process or to engage in any form of two-way conversation with staff to create a shared plan that all can buy into, support, and feel safe implementing.

Instead of creating a safe environment and positive school culture where faculty and staff can share their opinions and views without fear and play a role in the shared decision making process, Mr. Thorpe has taken a road of exclusivity and taken on a tone of hostility with anyone who disagrees with his decision making in his responses to those who seek professional, respectful communication with him. Communications on the part of faculty have been shared in a professional, respectful manner. Mr. Thorpe nor the school have been admonished or negatively targeted. As important stakeholders in the education of our students, faculty and staff seek open communication and a seat at the table as decisions are being made about their safe return to school with students. Please understand that attempts to stifle faculty and staff in

sharing their opinions leads to a poor school climate, negative school culture, and creates a toxic work environment that negatively impacts the education of our students and professional growth of our employees. Our district has worked very hard for many years to establish a positive school culture and a healthy climate that is based on strong relationships and open lines of communication.

Mr. Thorpe stated that it is not possible to ask opinions of all staff due to the number of employees. This is a small district with the technological capacity to reach every employee. The groundwork to do so was established long before his tenure. A superintendent who does not seek district faculty and staff input beyond his administrative team cannot ever formulate an effective plan to resolve issues.

Mr. Thorpe has taken issue with those who disagree or challenge his decision making. In fact, he hasn't opened the door and allowed for many disagreements or challenges to his ideas when it comes to the district he serves and instead has failed to collaborate with district employees in a positive way. The climate of intimidation and the stifling of opinions and voices is becoming increasingly as concerning as the physical health of our faculty and staff who are being asked to return to work among a full population of students before receiving an opportunity to receive a vaccination and before the county's numbers dip out of the "red" category.

Mr. Thorpe has further shown a lack of concern for safety of staff in his inability to ensure CDC contact tracing guidelines are followed thoroughly and transparently. Mr. Thorpe called upon staff members to return to school before the state's and health department's recommended timeline and despite his staff not having an opportunity to receive vaccinations due to Trigg County's failure to distribute vaccinations to teachers in the recommended order. Failures at some levels to provide the full list of names of staff who have been in contact with others while contagious can equally be noted.

He has cited the formula of "within six feet, for 15 minutes, without a mask" as means of determining a close contact. However, CDC guidelines and the local health department do not take masks into account at all when determining close contact. In their formula, which is attached, a close contact is defined as "within six feet, for a cumulative of 15 minutes" regardless of mask at all. Going by this logic, a classroom teacher who tests positive should result in the entire class being quarantined. While this is done in other districts, this has not been implemented to date in Trigg County Public Schools. There have been instances in which teachers in our district have tested positive and other teachers and parents of children in the classroom or in close proximity have not been contacted. This does not create an environment of transparency and safety among faculty and staff working in close contact with students without vaccinations as a safety net while the county's numbers continue to remain in the "red" level.

Mr. Thorpe cited that there have been no confirmed cases of covid transmission at school. While there will never be a way to confirm the exact location and time of each covid transmission, proper and full investigations of transmission at school have not always occurred.

When staff or students test positive, the questioning and investigation have been lackluster at best. Oftentimes the investigation simply involves having teachers present seating charts with no followup questions.

Several specific incidents and examples can be shared. However, these employees did not feel safe to speak for fear of backlash or being unfairly targeted or for fear of their building administrators being unfairly targeted. The fact alone that the concerned employees do not feel safe enough to speak out publicly speaks volumes about the district's current culture and climate.

Mr. Thorpe,

Your district's employees understand that you, too, are facing many unknowns as you lead in a pandemic. They sympathize with your role and want to work together to get back to work with students in a traditional fashion, but you owe it to your staff to provide a safe environment that is healthy and positive. Your employees seek transparency and inclusion in the decision-making process. Please allow said employees to be part of the conversation when it comes to creating a plan that is best for students and faculty. Listen to their comments, feedback, and hear them without targeting individuals for speaking out or holding opposing views. Provide professional, healthy, and open two-way means of communication to allow for productive conversation and to discourage any need to take to improper channels to be heard. Take all stakeholders into consideration. Explain your reasoning for your decisions. Leave personal chastisement out of that discourse.

You have mentioned in communications that "There are provisions in place with the state guidance for an employee with certain underlying health issues, the district will make accommodations for the employee. However, fear is not on the list." Perhaps it will help if you substitute the word fear with safety. Your employees are asking that you begin to consider their safety as well as the safety of students and their caregivers. A staff member has died. Others have tested positive and are struggling to recover. In the face of that, you have asked older staff, staff who may be overweight, and staff with underlying health conditions and all others to play Russian roulette with their lives to come back into the classroom with groups of students before vaccines have been fully distributed and before the numbers decline in the county to provide some measure of comfort. You have mentioned a plan in place for employees who are deemed "at risk" but you have failed to provide details on the plan. The lack of proper, honest, transparent, and thorough contact tracing and the lack of inclusivity in the decision-making process adds to that level of discomfort and trust.

Board members,

We ask that you demand a seat at the table in these discussions, as well, and we ask you to demand your voices be heard and stand up for those you represent. Please re-consider the current model of in-person instruction. Previously, returning to school in person was delayed

due to insufficient training of new technology. If our school can make the decision to remain virtual because of that issue, we can certainly consider making a move to a virtual or hybrid model of instruction that includes safely bringing in small groups of targeted students for instructional supports until school employees are fully vaccinated and the county's numbers according to the state's guidelines statistically no longer fall in the "red" category.

Trigg is currently designated as a red county. Covid numbers remain high. Our county continues to see daily two-digit positive cases recorded. Please consider following the governor's recommendation to return to school using a hybrid or virtual model at this time for the safety of all involved. Teachers' lives are not to be gambled. Not one more life lost is acceptable. Please seek out and engage in conversations with staff regularly and specifically regarding this issue. Push your superintendent to do the same. Request to see the results. Please work toward accountability for school leaders as well as teachers. Work to encourage the creation of an open environment where all employees feel valued and safe to share their beliefs.

We respect your constant dedication to advocate for us and for our students. We know that you would agree that students' health, safety, and education are always on the forefront of each educator's mind. Not one single teacher in our district isn't ready to work directly with students in an in-person, traditional setting. We know you are dedicated to doing what is best for students and the faculty who instruct them. In this particular case, what is best for students is for them to return to school with their teachers healthy, safe, valued, and alive. Please do what you can to ensure this happens.

Understand that no decision made is ever final. We are educators and at the root of our job is flexibility. With the arrival of vaccines and a decline in positive cases will come a new hope.

Sincerely,

Trigg County School Employees