

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the current issues we are facing, as the Yancey County Board of Education, as well as those I deal with as Board Chair. Currently, we have 26 positive cases of Covid-19 and 23 in quarantine consisting of enrolled students and staff. We are monitoring the numbers daily, while working with school nurses, local health department personnel, and Toe River health director Diane Creek. As long as I have been a board member, we have been represented by a legal council in all matters necessary. At the onset of Covid-19, we received the Strong Schools North Carolina public health toolkit. This kit is exhaustive and reaches into areas of legalities that require legal counsel. We currently work daily with our local board attorney, Mr. Donny Laws, and also seek counsel from the firm of Campbell and Shatley of Asheville. Campbell and Shatley specialize in school law and represent many school systems throughout the state. Through proven effective and proficient legal counsel, we are doing everything possible to meet the requirements of the Strong Schools North Carolina public health toolkit. We seek to ensure the safe, efficient, operation of Yancey County schools for all students, staff, and families represented.

I can assure each of you that this decision was not made lightly. Some may think it is a clear choice. The confusion and chaos that has surrounded this pandemic of our century is unprecedented. As a result, we as a board are in a no-win situation with our decision. The side that did not get their desire is upset with our decision and with the individual board members who voted against their wishes. Regardless of what you may believe or think, each of the board members are greatly concerned with the safety and well-being of all students, teachers and staff members. We desire to have safe, secure and successful schools in Yancey county. The divide that has been created over the issue of mask or no mask has divided those of us in the community. No one in our community has desired this, and I am certain that each of us pray this pandemic will end immediately. We must work together in order to overcome this challenge. The issue that has been created over the requiring of masks or making them optional has divided those of us among the community. At most, we have students and staff 40 hours a week. For the remaining 120 hours per week, we have no control over travel, vacation, athletic activities outside of school, or personal choices. I want you to know that no matter what side of this issue you are on, we will continue to work together for the good of Yancey County schools regardless of the noise all around. We must work together in order to overcome this challenge.

Upon receiving a personal letter from governor Roy Cooper, I have chosen to publicly share the intimidating and coercive nature of his letter towards us for the decision that we unanimously made. Rather than sending intimidating and coercive letters to a local board chair in an attempt to speak on behalf of your constituents, I implore you governor Roy Cooper, Dr. Mandy Cohen, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, and Dr. Betsey Tilson, State health director, step up and fulfill the duties of your positions. You direct the path of this state 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, at this point in time. Yet governor Cooper, because of the negativity you experienced by mandating masks state wide, closing public schools, ceasing all athletic activities, and financially destroying local businesses, you are neglecting your duties and placing them on the shoulders of local school boards. I will not attempt to intimidate or coerce board members to abandon their convictions. We were elected to represent the people of Yancey county, solely. For these reasons, Mr. Cooper, I will not attempt to assume your elected duties. You, sir, were elected to represent the entire state of North

Carolina. If you believe strongly enough to ask us to require masks, do you not believe strongly enough to mandate masks yourself?

While you may not agree with our decision, I do ask for this one thing. Please continue to pray for Yancey County schools.

Respectfully, Edwin Fortner