

## Educators discuss COVID challenges

BLAKE OVARD NEWS-SUN  
August 26, 2020



HOBBS SCHOOLS PHOTO Hobbs High School football players were allowed to start lifting weights/conditioning on Monday, the first day it has been allowed by the state. HMS superintendent TJ Parks, along with presidents of NMJC, Kelvin Sharp, and USW, Quint Thurman, discussed what each institution is doing in a year marked by COVID-19 restrictions.

COVID-19 has caused everyone to alter their daily routines, but area education entities have been uniquely affected by changing requirements and the overwhelming need to keep both students and staff members as safe as possible during the pandemic.

The leaders of the main three educational entities came together, virtually, for the Hobbs Chamber of Commerce Roundtable Tuesday to shed some light on the way each has handled challenges associated with operating various school campuses. University of the Southwest President Quint Thurman, New Mexico Junior College President Kelvin Sharp, and Hobbs Municipal Schools Superintendent TJ Parks each shared steps their respective institutions have taken, and shared projected futures for each of their organizations.

“In the past seven months it’s been unprecedented in terms of the types of things we’ve had to deal with,” Thurman said. “Things happened we never guessed we would ever see in our lifetime.”

“It was kind of a double whammy in our area because of the impact on the local economy, as well as what it did to our operations here on campus,” Sharp agreed.

***'From March 15 through the end of May, we were trying to build the airplane as it was flying.'***

**TJ Parks**

*Hobbs Superintendent*

"From March 15 through the end of May, we were trying to build the airplane as it was flying," Parks said, talking about school abruptly being closed by the state, and the district trying to switch over to all remote instruction. "The biggest issue was getting kids graduated, that was our No. 1 priority."

All three also shared information about how enrollment is going for each organization.

"We're going to be down in the range of 10-15% probably. It's hard to tell because we have our second eighth week of classes that begins, and we're still trying to get in some dual credit enrollment," Sharp said. "The students we feel like we're missing are the students (where) the parents have them home, because the parents are not able to send them to school or commit to a class. We are where we are, we're just trying to do the best we can, keeping everything going."

"We're down about 500 students," Parks said. "Even with the drop in enrollment, we expect some of those kids to come back whenever we have some normalcy."

Parks also served on a statewide committee to help steer New Mexico schools toward opening.

"I served on a statewide committee of other superintendents. I think there were 65 people on that committee — and, just a heads up, never have a committee of 65 people," Parks joked.

While both NJC and HMS have seen a decline in enrollment, USW has actually seen an increase, Thurman said.

"It's pretty much the same as it always is," Thurman said about USW enrollment numbers. "It's a little higher on the online. We kind of thought that we might because online is graduate, and those are non-traditional students, and when the economy is bad, they go back to school. Because they can get money to do that, and so that's about the only thing they can get money out of. So, we're up quite a bit on the online. The face-to face is about ... we usually shoot for about 385 and we've got 370, so we're pretty close."

Thurman also said USW is in a better position this year, opposed to the years prior, regarding the tuition of student enrolled from the Lea County Detention Center.

**"THE PRISONERS WE HAVE** in the Lea County Correctional facility, those actually are eligible for second chance Pell Grants this year for the first time ever so they're actually going to be funded as opposed to us just giving their tuition away. We picked up 30 students that way," Thurman said. "That's the first time in four years they've ever gotten funding, so we hope that's something going forward that we can count on. We had a donor pay for their instructional cost,

but we had to wave the tuition every year and that was about three quarters of a million dollars and we just waved that four years in a row.”

Each of the education institutions have had their own challenges, not just at the end of the last year around May, but with the start of a new school year in early- and mid-August. All learned more about virtual and distance learning possibilities.

Parks said the intent originally was to offer a choice to parents between a hybrid schedule, and a newly formed Hobbs Online Academy, but with restrictions handed down from the governor’s office, all classes are via remote learning until at least Sept. 8.

“Our plan at the time was to be a hybrid model,” Parks said. “The first week of August, the bombshell got dropped that we would start remotely. We had to completely revamp our thought process and change over what we we’re going to do.”

In order to put into place the requirements for a district the size of Hobbs to have both the HOLA and hybrid model for remote learning and face-to-face learning two days per week, meant the district spent about \$6.5 million to be ready for the first day of school. Coupled with a \$4.5 million shortfall from the state presented it’s own challenges.

“We’ve been trying to create an online academy in Hobbs for four or five years,” Parks said. “We spent about \$6.5 million this summer. About \$5.5 million of that has been on technology – purchasing products. About \$1 million has been on sanitizing our facilities. We did get \$2.3 million from the federal government, from the CARES Act, but the state Legislature ... took credit for 40% of that. We really took a pretty big hit. The budget we had originally planned in March, we had a reduction of \$4.5 million whenever we got the new budget. ... Money has been interesting.”

But Parks said while belts need to be tightened, if the district focuses on what students need, everything else will work itself out.

“We in public education have to remember we work on the taxpayers’ dollars, and you always have enough to do what’s most important. You just have to prioritize what needs to be done,” Parks said. “The reality is you’ve got enough to do what you need to do. You’ve just got to prioritize what you need to do and set your goals, and make sure that every dollar you spend is going for the benefits of the children.”

While NMJC faced some challenges with an online semester finishing off the last school year, Sharp said he is proud there was a completion rate of classes close to what is normally achieved.

“We did the grade distributions on our class outcome and we were within two percent of where we were the year before,” he said.

For the fall semester NMJC, some of the classes have been moved to larger venues allowing those classes to take place in person instead of just online, because there are some socio-economic gaps that are hurdles to still overcome, Sharp said.

**“ABOUT 38% OF OUR** classes are online,” Sharp said. “We were able to take some of our larger classes, and move them to the museum and auditorium and Watson Hall, and that allowed us to cascade our room assignments ... We felt comfortable in terms of offering some face-to-face classes. (Students) are happy to be on campus. We’ve had a lot positive phone calls from families thanking us.” Sharp said.

Thurman said the pandemic let the university transition more to their “hi-flex classes.” He explained it’s a type of hybrid model “where students can, even if they’re on campus, choose not to come to class, and instead just log in whenever they want to, and not fall behind in their work.”

All of the institutions have protocols in place for students on campus.

“As long as we don’t have a major outbreak, if it’s just incident by incident, we’ll be able to make it through,” Sharp said. “We’ve put a lot of protocols in place ... Our faculty really took the lead. Our faculty has been terrific. They understand there’s a group of students that really need that person-to person interaction, and they are doing their best to offer that to students.”

“We don’t have students on campus in the summer. They did come back on time and in person for the fall,” Thurman said about students on campus. “Precautions are in place, including ‘a modified bubble.’ They come to campus, we monitor them to see if they appear to be safe and not have any symptoms ... We started with one person per room mandates (in the dorms), so if someone gets sick they can stay in their room and self quarantine.”

With the hi-flex model, students will be able to start attending classes in person next week, Thurman said.

“Although they are here (on campus), they can’t go to class (yet),” Thurman said. “Next week we’ll start the option of hi-flex where they can choose to go to class, by basically making a reservation with their faculty ... but we don’t expect more than a third of students who are eligible to go to class to show up at any one time.”

Like USW, NMJC also has an only one student per dorm room mandate in place.

“We limited our housing occupancy. We’re at about 50% occupancy,” Sharp said. “We’re at one student per room.”

Masks and social distancing are mandatory across all campuses, and all three administrators said students have complied so far without incident.

Neither of the college campuses have cafeterias or indoor dining available, though box lunches can be taken to student's dorm rooms or eaten outside.

Parks said additional plans for the district include having pods of five students returning to the classroom for Kindergarten through grade 3 students starting Aug 31, and the rest of the district hopefully starting back on Sept. 8 with a hybrid model, subject to the governor allowing the district to open, Parks said. Sports was also an issue. While the colleges have given all the same options to athletes as other students, including scholarships, Hobbs students have had all athletics except volleyball, cross country and golf pushed back to the spring — though they are now allowed to workout in small groups with social distancing in place.

“Those kids are actually working now in a five-to-one ratio, five students to one coach,” Parks said. “That will continue whenever we go into the hybrid model.”

The Holiday Tournament has been cancelled and championships have all been moved, including tennis, track, and baseball which will happen at the end of June after school has been out for a while, Parks said.

“We tried to do everything we could possibly think of to make the campus experience safer or as safe as the students would be if they stayed home,” Thurman said. “We’re optimistic that we’ll have a good semester.”

“Right now, we’re just having school in Hobbs. It’s the most unique start of the year that I’ve had in my 40 years in public education.”

**Blake Ovard** may be reached at [managingeditor@hobbsnews.com](mailto:managingeditor@hobbsnews.com).