

# Forming Connections in Isolation: The New Frontier of Virtual Togetherness

## An Interview with Debra Kubin of Ukiah Unified School District

Debra Kubin has served as the Superintendent of Ukiah Unified School District (UUSD) for the past eight years, providing leadership and consistency to a high-poverty community across eleven schools. UUSD is located in the largest city in Mendocino County, California, and for the last four years, has had a 1:1 Chromebook program for students in Grades 6-12. UUSD's last day of on-site classes was March 16, 2020, and California has since moved all schools to distance learning for the remainder of the academic year.

Hanover Research sat down with Debra Kubin in mid-April to discuss the district's approach to distance learning and supports.

District Overview	
Number of Schools	11
Grades Served	PK-12
Number of Classroom Teachers	308
Total Budget	\$14,384 per student
Student Snapshot	
Enrollment	6,022
Percent Regularly Attending School	83%
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian/Alaskan Native - 6% Asian - 1% Pacific Islander - <1% Black - 1% Hispanic - 54% White - 39% Multi-racial - 3%
Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals	80.6%
English Language Learners	25%
Percent Meeting Reading Standards	36.9%
Percent Meeting Math Standards	24.4%
Percent Graduating in Four Years	87.7%

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## Fast, But Not Perfect

**Hanover:** How was UUSD's transition to distance learning?

**Ms. Kubin:** I've been in Ukiah for eight years. And for the past eight years, we had a goal of getting a Chromebook into the hands of every 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade student. We met that goal about four years ago, so when schools moved to remote learning, I felt really good about where our kids are in terms of their technology knowledge. Our students are very adept at Google Classroom, and most of our teachers had embraced technology years ago, so when we needed to transition to remote learning, we had one teacher workday and then started online instruction the day after that.

**Hanover:** That sounds like a pretty smooth transition.

**Ms. Kubin:** It was fast, but it has not been perfect. For example, our middle school kids quickly learned that they could mute their teacher and kick them out of the class. Thankfully, Google has fixed that.

**Hanover:** Thankfully, indeed. Is Google Classroom the main platform you're using for distance learning?

**Ms. Kubin:** Yes, but we also purchased 320 Zoom licenses because we want our teachers to have choices in what they're using with their kids. For students in K-5, we are still using packets, but after spring break, we sent Chromebooks home with students in grades 3 through 5. Our elementary teachers really wanted to check in on how things were going, answer questions, and provide support virtually as well. The kids really love seeing their teachers' faces. The social emotional side of it, more than anything, is the most important thing on my mind lately.

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**Hanover:** Have you been able to successfully connect with all of your students during school closures?

**Ms. Kubin:** While we've done a lot to improve access, I know there are some kids who live way, way out that we probably won't be able to reach. For those kids, our library is open, and they can come into the library by appointment to drop off and pick up work. About 80 percent of our kids qualify for free and reduced lunch, but even with a high poverty rate, I'm reassured that we've been able to put systems in place to reach our students. I'm concerned about the effectiveness of that work, though, and I know our kids are going to have serious gaps that we'll need to close next year.

**Hanover:** How have you leveraged this technology to also support students' social-emotional wellbeing?

**Ms. Kubin:** We have a lot of kids who've experienced trauma in our area, and so we've really invested heavily in counselors. Our counselors are still working, and they're seeing kids using Zoom, Google Meet, phone calls. Some of them still have counseling groups going on, too.

**Hanover:** What happens if you're unable to get in touch with a student or family?

**Ms. Kubin:** We've put safeguards in place. For example, if a teacher is struggling to reach a student, they escalate it to their principal, and we're using Google Sheets to keep track. At our high school with 1,600 students, there's a team of 40 people—counselors, family/community liaisons, principals,

assistant principals, support staff—who are reaching out to those students. They're asking, "How are we going to get the student back on track? What does he or she need?" From there, we have district level support through our student services director and his team.

**Hanover:** It sounds like you and your team are really focused on making this time feel personal.

**Ms. Kubin:** We really are. One of our elementary school counselors runs the Cubs Corner, and she now has a YouTube channel on which she reads books to students and talks to them. I'm also reading a book to our students every week. Last Sunday, I dressed up as a unicorn. On Easter, I read *Honey Bunny Funnybunny*. In fact, one of the kids at meal pick-up recognized me from that video and said, "Oh my gosh, you're the one who read *Honey Bunny Funnybunny*."

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## Managing Expectations

**Hanover:** You and your staff are doing a lot for your community. How do you extend support to one another?

**Ms. Kubin:** I recently paired an employee assistance program flyer with a personal message about how hard things are. I know they're hard for me, and I have a great support system. Teachers, in particular, want things to be perfect, and things simply cannot be perfect right now. I'm the same way, and I've really had to check myself on that. I think a lot about our expectations, and truthfully, we are balancing our expectations with the needs of our families. For example, I was talking to one of our science teachers who, during the first two weeks of remote learning, kept the same level of assignments, expectations, homework—everything that she would normally ask of students in her classroom. She quickly learned, though, that kids can't handle as much at home on their own.

**Hanover:** Do you think you'll be able to quickly return to those expectations when everyone returns to school?

**Ms. Kubin:** We haven't really talked about what it's going to be like when people come back. It'll be interesting to see what our state decides, but I can't imagine what it would look like to socially distance a high school of 1,600 students. We have 960 square foot classrooms, and we probably couldn't have more than 10 kids in a classroom at a time. When you typically have 32 kids in a room, how do you schedule that? We're going to start talking about it soon though. We know, for sure, we we'll need to offer high school credit recovery, and in the summer, we might save the money we might normally spend on summer school for more robust after-school support next year.

**Hanover:** Is there anything you're implementing now that you might continue to implement even when things return to "normal?"

**Ms. Kubin:** We're rolling out a tutoring support system this week. We've identified a certain number of teachers per school site that can provide tutoring support for kids. Parents are doing their best at home, but it's not like having a trained teacher in the classroom teaching your kiddo how to read or do math. Even still, when students come back, we're

*"Can we do something with distance tutoring after we go back to onsite learning?"*

going to have a lot of catch up to do, and we have a lot of kids during the normal school year who can't go to tutoring because they have other commitments. I've been wondering, "Can we do something with distance tutoring after we go back to onsite learning? Can we have teachers on deck from 6 to 8 o'clock at night where kids can get on to Zoom or a Google Meet and get some help with some math

or whatever they might be struggling with?” We're keeping track of these ideas and these little pieces of learning.

**Hanover:** That sounds very innovative.

**Ms. Kubin:** The challenge is that we're expecting to have a massive budget problem in California due to COVID-19, and so our state has been talking about budget reduction measures. I think reducing the school year would be a bad idea. It would save a lot of money, but it's not good for our kids. Even though we're doing the best that we can with remote learning, they're not getting what they would get in a regular classroom with in-person support.

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## Seeing the Positive

**Hanover:** Speaking of support, how are you taking care of yourself so that you can effectively make these decisions and lead your district?

**Ms. Kubin:** That's such a hard question. I'm super resilient, but this has been probably the hardest crisis that we've dealt with because it's going on for so long. Yesterday, I was just going to pop in and check on our food service meal distribution, but it didn't look like they had enough workers, so I ended up staying for four hours. I was so glad that I did, though, because being around the people who are doing the work—it fills me up. One of our teachers at an elementary school posted a video of himself singing a song out in the woods, and I can't wait to listen to it and then share it with our community. In fact, I'm doing a Zoom call this week with our PTO president and our Boosters Club parents because I want to surprise our teachers with a little bit of joy and love.

*“Being around the people who are doing the work—it fills me up.”*

**Hanover:** How do you celebrate each other when you also have to be socially distant?

**Ms. Kubin:** Well, we're doing our student of the month ceremony for March next week virtually. It's the new frontier. And then I also asked our teachers to send me pictures from the year, and I'm going to put a little slideshow together that we can post for families. I then got an email from a teacher who's retiring this year, and she was talking about how she was flipping through her pictures, and it made her cry because she and her students have had such great times together. Helping others see the positive helps me stay positive.

## ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

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## ABOUT Ms. Debra Kubin

Debra Kubin has served as Superintendent for the Ukiah Unified School District since July 2012. She previously served as Superintendent for another Mendocino County school district, held the position of teacher, Assistant Principal, and Principal at middle and high school levels. In total, Debra has over twenty-eight years in education, having taught in and led schools in San Diego, Marin, and Mendocino Counties.

Debra has served as the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) Mendocino County Chapter President, is currently serving as the Region 4 representative to the ACSA Superintendent's Council, and has served on various state education committees. She has been honored as a California League of Middle Schools Teacher of the Year finalist, Marin County ACSA Secondary Principal of the Year, and Region 4 ACSA Superintendent of the Year.



Debra was raised in Mendocino County and attended the Willits schools, where she graduated at the top of her class. She taught middle school Language Arts and High School Leadership prior to moving into administration, and she is passionate about ensuring that students have a well-rounded education focused on quality instruction, inclusion, and high standards. Debra values open communication and collaboration with all stakeholders.

Debra earned her bachelor's degree at the University of California, Davis and earned her two credentials and Master's Degree from San Diego State University. She is the proud mother of three school-aged children.