

Principals to Retire...from Page 1A



Retiring principals Owenby and Stafford are joined here by the Union County Schools Leadership Team, including other principals and Board Office staff. The team makes districtwide decisions in close consultation with all team members.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

"I've been blessed to work with these two people," Hill said. "The School District would not be what it is without Millie Owenby and Gwen Stafford, I promise you that. These are two of the finest people, and it's a huge loss to our district, to all the children.

"On behalf of the School District and personally, I can't thank them enough for their service to us and this School District. Words don't really express the gratitude I feel to these two ladies. They're just wonderful people."

Owenby said her favorite part of the job has been interacting with and caring for the children of the community over the years, "because that's pretty much why I went into education."

"The more we can pour into our kids and the more positive experiences they can have in education and in their school career, the better they're going to be when they go out on their own," Owenby said. "Next, it would have to be my staff, and definitely our admin staff."

"We have all gotten to be very close in the last few years, and we work very well together. I appreciate Mr. Hill's leadership in that he has really brought us together to work as a team, and that has been great. We definitely can say that we are 'Union United.'"

Stafford concurs, saying that the feeling of being "a family" has made her decision to leave that much harder. She, too, said her favorite part about her long career has been fostering student potential, and that seeing everybody day to day will be what she misses the most.

"That's why you go into education, is for those kids, watching them grow, watching them come back now having their children in the building,

and teaching them," Stafford said. "It's wonderful to see the kids that you taught become productive citizens."

"Also, mentoring the young teachers and even the older teachers, being there for them and helping them to grow – we're looking for 'Success for All.' We all work together so that everyone will be successful."

Such close-knit relationships among faculty and staff have been instrumental to the system's ongoing success, especially during COVID-19, which has been the most challenging time in both principals' careers, though the district has kept schools safely open even as others have closed.

"But it would have been even more challenging if our leadership unit had not been in place, because that has brought us right through," Owenby said, referring to the district's administrative staff, including all other school principals and the Board Office.

"It really has," Stafford said. "Leadership has, and the teachers and staff that we have – they pick up and will go with whatever is asked. So, we really are 'Union United'; when it comes to our students and what we need to do for them, we're going to do what has to be done."

Owenby and Stafford broke the news of their impending departures to their respective staff members that Tuesday. It was an emotional time for the educators, both of whom have grown and helped others to grow in a school system that cultivates collective positivity.

"The culture is always the most important thing in any institution or organization," Hill said. "Everybody's ability to truly work together and arrive at collaborative decisions

has been the reason that we've been successful."

"During COVID, we've spent so much time together, whether it's been in person or via Zoom, discussing every type of problem or challenge that we have, and hearing these ladies and everyone else's feedback during those times has been very important."

For their part, Owenby and Stafford have loved every minute of their careers in education, and in retirement, they'll certainly miss every moment from Open House to the last day of school.

"I've been blessed to have this job and the people I've worked with," Owenby said. "We have a great community, and I just thank them for allowing me to have a part of their life."

As for Superintendent Hill, he reiterated just how fortunate the school system has been to have such longstanding public servants in its employ.

"Veteran leadership experience is invaluable, so whoever ends up being finalists for these positions, they're going to have very big shoes to fill and high expectations, because these two ladies have definitely set the bar high for these respective schools," Hill said.

In advance of the 2021-22 school year, the Board Office will be looking internally to promote people already working in the district to the Primary and Middle School principal positions.

Additionally in the March 2 called meeting, school board members accepted the retirements of Annette Ross-Smith and Sheila Collins, two other longtime local educators who are also leaving the school system better than they found it, and whose presence Hill said will be missed greatly.

New Vaccine...from Page 1A

departments.

"The effectiveness of Moderna and Pfizer is very similar and is very high. The Pfizer vaccine has been used mostly in Hall and Forsyth, and for mass vaccination events in some of the other counties by Public Health.

"All of the vaccines – Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson – are safe and effective. Public Health encourages all residents to get vaccinated when their time comes."

All three EUA-approved vaccines effectively do the same thing, triggering an immune response to SARS-CoV-2 without introducing the virus to people. The vaccines do this by getting the body's own cells to produce a part of the virus that causes COVID-19, giving the immune system something to safely make antibodies against.

Johnson & Johnson vaccines use a different technology from the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines, relying on DNA delivered via adenovirus instead of messenger RNA enveloped in lipid nanoparticles.

Adenoviruses can cause the common cold in human beings, though the one in the COVID vaccine has been modified to not make people sick. Adenovirus-based vaccine research has been ongoing for decades, with the FDA only recently approving the first one for use against Ebola.

According to the FDA, "Overall, the vaccine was approximately 67% effective in preventing moderate to severe/critical COVID-19 occurring at least 14 days after vaccination and 66% effective in preventing moderate to severe/critical COVID-19 occurring at least 28 days after vaccination."

Additionally, the vaccine was "approximately 77% effective in preventing severe/critical COVID-19 occurring at least 14 days after vaccination and 85% effective in preventing severe/critical COVID-19 occurring at least 28 days after vaccination."

By comparison, according to initial study data,

the Moderna vaccine delivered in two doses 28 days apart provides upwards of 94% protection against symptomatic COVID-19.

Presently, all vaccine supplies remain limited, though more and more options for getting vaccinated are coming online, which is a good thing, because the governor has been working to expand eligibility, e.g. allowing teachers and others access to vaccines starting March 8.

"Due to the limited initial quantity of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine that we will receive, the first doses will be offered to educators and school staff," District 2's Palmer said. "This will include teachers and school staff at public and private schools, Pre-K through 12th grade."

"Our health departments have arranged clinics with school administrators to vaccinate school employees. If teachers and school staff choose to get the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, it will be available for them at our public health vaccination sites."

"As we get more of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, it will be offered to others along with the Moderna and Pfizer."

Tentatively, Union County Schools will be holding a Johnson & Johnson vaccine clinic on March 12 pending vaccine availability, with about 60% of staff indicating interest in vaccination.

Similarly, Towns County Schools will host a Johnson & Johnson vaccine clinic on March 18, with about 55% of staff indicating interest in vaccination.

Other vaccine avenues include Walgreens Pharmacy, which has started local vaccinations, and soon, Walmart Pharmacy. These pharmacies are joining Ingles Pharmacy, which has been providing vaccines for more than two months now. Check each pharmacy's respective website for instructions on how to sign up.

As for District 2 Public Health, all vaccine-eligible individuals can attempt to sign

up for an appointment at www.phdistrict2.org or call 1-888-426-5073.

Gov. Brian Kemp said his office will be looking later this month at the possibility of further expanding vaccination criteria "to include more Georgians with severe underlying health conditions who are not currently eligible."

Eligibility criteria are expanding as more supply comes online, and individuals can find their eligibility status by visiting <https://dph.georgia.gov>.

People may also register for the governor's vaccination effort at myvaccinegeorgia.com, or for local vaccination via Synergy Health of Hiwassee at the ngvax.com portal, with both sites accepting sign-ups by people who are not yet eligible in anticipation of expanded eligibility.

Synergy Health and the COVID-19 Vaccine Team continue to host mass clinics, last week vaccinating about 450 people at Foster Park, and Dr. Samuel "Le" Church asks people who have already been vaccinated to remove themselves from other wait lists if they signed up elsewhere.

COVID-19 numbers continue to decline in the area, state and nation, including local hospitalizations, deaths and testing rates. Health officials believe those numbers will continue to decline as increasingly more vulnerable people receive vaccination.



Union County Head Start

is now registering students for the 2021-2022 program year. Please call (706) 745-4200. For information on completing an application, Head Start also services children with disabilities. No transportation provided.