

# PT school board honors COVID heroes

**Board becomes the first elected group to meet again in person in JeffCo**



**For the first time in more than a year, a live audience gathered for a meeting of the Port Townsend School District Board of Directors.**  
LEADER PHOTO BY NICK TWIETMEYER

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In what seemed a sure sign of Port Townsend's reemergence from the COVID-19 pandemic — and the coming return to some semblance of normalcy — the Port Townsend School District Board of Directors held its first in-person meeting in over a year last week.

Under normal circumstances, a typical school board meeting might not be the first event that comes to mind when one ponders gatherings that would draw a crowd.

But the Thursday meeting saw a line formed at the entrance of the Blue Heron Middle School, with people waiting to get inside. Beside the door was a desk at which audience members were asked to take their temperature and sign in. Masks were required for those in attendance at the meeting.

The board meeting was the first in-person meeting for an elected body in Jefferson County since the pandemic forced government organizations into Zoom rooms and similar video-conferencing gatherings.

Appropriately, the Port Townsend meeting prominently featured recognition for those who had worked to ensure the wheels stayed on for the school district throughout the pandemic.

“Tonight is very meaningful to me. In these last 18 months through COVID, we could not have done what we did through our schools without our community partners,” said Superintendent Sandy Gessner-Crabtree.

“So many people dug deep to make things happen for our students that we couldn’t do alone,” she said.

“Tonight we want to salute and celebrate those warriors and those heroes in our eyes.”

The first to be recognized were the organizers of the Connected Students Initiative, which helped Port Townsend students remain in contact with their educators shortly after in-person classes were suspended due to the pandemic.

According to the superintendent, the initiative met with huge success, well before any clear path forward had been developed by the state’s public instruction authority.

“It took over 12 months for the Washington State [Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction] to figure out how to get kids connected,” Gessner-Crabtree said. “It took our community two weeks. We’re so grateful for that, without that connectivity a lot more learning might not have been recovered.”

For their work on the initiative, the board recognized Candace Mangold, Nicole O’Hara, Holly Petta, Michael Napolitano, Gina Johnston, Jen Kingfisher, Sarah Rubenstein, Samantha Massie, Jess Winsheimer, Debi Munro, and Ben Bauermeister.

For their work with the YMCA childcare program at Salish Coast Elementary, the board recognized Wendy Bart, Genevieve Barlow, and Rowen Matkins.

For working on the Port Townsend Kiwanis’ Friday Food Backpacks program, the school board recognized Liz Quayle, Steve Taylor, Donna Eldridge, and Nadine Jonientz.

After calling all of the honorees up to the front of the gymnasium, the school board members took turns to thank them.

In another sign of COVID times, they exchanged elbow bumps in lieu of handshakes.

Following the awards, Napolitano, who serves as the vice president of the Port Townsend Education Foundation, invited those in attendance to participate in its upcoming inaugural Port Townsend Education Foundation Challenge.

“I wanted to use the time here to personally invite each of you ... to please join us,” Napolitano said. “This has been a challenging year. While we overcame a lot, we’ve also suffered through a lot of disconnection, a lot of isolation.”

Napolitano pointed to the challenge’s flexibility for people who are ready to move past the pandemic, as well as those still cautious.

“We created this event to overcome that,” he explained. “To really bring together a chance for everyone to participate at whatever level they’re comfortable with; whether it be mask-free, running around, or wanting not to leave the house still.”

For more information on the PTEF Challenge, visit <https://www.pteducationfoundation.org/PTEFChallenge>.