

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL WOODBRIDGE BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING

Wednesday, July 15, 2020

Via WebEx Meeting Number (access code): 146 992 1595

Meeting password: R2FwGAUkZ62 (53698582 from phones and video systems)

CALL TO ORDER: Ms. Piascyk, Vice Chair called the meeting to order (7:03 PM).

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Ms. Lynn Piascyk, Vice Chair; Mr. Dan Cowan, Ms. Maegan Genovese, Secretary; Mr. Jeff Hughes, Dr. David Ross, Ms. Joyce Shavers, Dr. Michael Strambler and Dr. Jeffrey Townsend.

STAFF: Mr. Robert Gilbert, Superintendent; Cheryl Mammen, Special Services Director; Al Pullo, Director of Business Operations/Services; Analisa Sherman, Principal; Doreen Merrill, Assistant Principal; and Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board.

MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: Beth Heller, First Selectman; Sandy Stein, BOS; Joi Prud'homme, PTO; BeeJ Ahern, Arianne Buzzard, Nicole Chick, Larissa Crocco, Kristin DeManche, Jeanne Dempsey, Maria DePalma, Carson Echeverry, Carrie Fanelli, Kim Franklin, Stephanie Goldberg, Beth Greene, Kris Hart-Rooney, Kristen Horvath, Emily Jacober, Elena Lavigne, Bill Letsch, Kathleen Marlor, Aimee Meacham, Jean Molot, Leigh Mulligan, Visa Ngov, Jason Nolan, Lori Patrick, Christine Renzoni, Nicole Rizzo, Elisa Rosner, Tim Rourke, Meghan Saunders, Jacquie Scalia, Michelle Shepard, Susan Simoniello, Nancy Smerekanicz, Mary Vincitorio, Michelle Waldron, Sarah Wislocki, and Cathy Zdrowski, Teachers; Jennifer Cooper, Janet Criscuolo, Kit Dunbar, Shari Foldy, Wendy Glynn, Suzanne Sugarmann, CSEA; Judy Mays, Ellen Tolliver, CILU, Vito Esparro, Facilities Manager, Beth Cohen, BOWA Transportation Coordinator; Brett Pickering CEA; Jennifer Acker, Marsha Ackerman, Patrice Alonso, Erin Angelucci, Chrissy Anton, Emily Banach, Jen Bayer, Lauren Betlinski, Sharon Brostrom, Sebastian Buisine, Christine Campbell, AJ Cappiello, Steve Chang, Angela Chen, Kristina Conroh, Zachary Corbin, Jill D'Amico, Nell D'Andrea, Jay Dahya, Rebecca Dalrymple, Darren David, Joy Drakonakis, Kris Edwards, Ryan Errico, Dan Franco, Pua Ford, Susan Freudson, Monica Fressina, Allison Gavaletz, Jennifer Gelbrand, Michele Goglia, McKenzie Grenada, Joan Grogan, Alyssa Guirguis, Michael Haas, Jessica Halprin, Rebecca Holcombe, Mike Holland, Brooke Hopkins, Dr. Michael Hunt, Angela Incassanti, Ruchi Jain, Jung Kim, Jared Kinsley, Steven Lawrence, Kristy Laydon, Diane Lenskold, Qing Liu, Alexis Loss, Tamara Lyhne, Christa and Greg Mann, Dr. Shannon Martinello, Maria Messina, Aisling McGudion, Heidi McNally, Lauren Miller, Erin Oleskey, Bethany Park, Justin Parker, Dr. Mohini Ranganathan, Kyle Rehm, Stacie Rivard-Pedigo, Cara Rosner, Jane Roddy, Allison Schaefer, David Schroeder, Maria Shevelkina, Steve Sholtis, Dr. Shari Storeyguard, Bettina Thiel, Kristen and James Turkosz, Amanda Tyma, Jenn Wellman, Meghan Woolf, Marlys Youngberg, community.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Kim Franklin spoke about the recent survey the WEA conducted with its membership. Concerns exist for in-person teaching and the preference of staff is to conduct distance learning. The WEA believes that the CDC guidelines will not be met and that those guidelines are impossible to manage to ensure the safety of both staff and students. The WEA believes decisions are being rushed and without sufficient input from staff.

Kristen Turkosz expressed concerns for requiring students to wear masks and the potential for discrimination / bullying to occur with those students who do not comply, even for medical reasons. Children with special needs are not receiving the education they deserve and urged that decisions be inclusive and based on the social and emotional well-being of all students.

Dr. Shari Storeyguard hoped that consideration would be given to holding classes outdoors as much as possible, even in inclement weather. If tents and/or additional supplies are necessary, the parent community should be engaged as volunteers as well as gathering and donating materials. If indoor learning is absolutely necessary, it should occur in small group formats and with masks to protect everyone. She hoped parents would provide their own transportation and avoid busing. There are many ways to have drop-off/pick-up of many cars work. We need to consider alternate options and let go of preconceived ideas for the usual way of learning.

Daryn David indicated that the spring distance learning did not provide sufficient contact for student / teacher interaction. There needs to be a constructive plan in place to provide appropriate learning. Synchronous learning should be an option.

Cathy Zdrowski stated that educator concerns were ignored and left out of the reopening plan primarily because this is an economic decision. Teachers should not have to sacrifice their health nor the health of their family to provide an education to students. Without proper staffing, educational demands will not be met. Teachers care about children deeply. In person

learning could be offered remotely and would protect staff and their families as well as students and the community. The focus should be on developing a more robust distance learning model for the health and well-being of staff, students and the BRS community.

Christa and Gregg Mann expressed concerns regarding medical waivers and students who are unable to wear mask throughout school day. What conditions are acceptable to constitute a medical waiver, what is the outlined process for what is and is not acceptable, what are the qualifications of those reviewing the request and who is ultimately responsible for making that decision. There will be additional risk for everyone involved if students are able to attend without wearing a mask. As this type of pandemic has not occurred before, there is limited statistical data regarding the success and/or failure regarding the wearing of masks by children.

Jessica Halpren noted that we need to be successful when we return to distance learning. The value of a good public education system provides a basic academic education and a sense of community/socialization. While Beecher Road School is fortunate to have the resources to continue distance learning, it must be different than it was in the spring. Children were struggling with basic academia assignments, teachers were not readily accessible, students were unable to contact teachers, there were no set hours for instruction and/or communication, there was a lack of community and the overall experience was void of human interaction/socialization. Woodbridge should be a leader and look at the resources already in place and work together to achieve a better outcome. Librarians could be sending out reading recommendations with video reviews, nurses and PE staff could lead group activities, develop tutorials in hand-washing, special services could crate videos to provide parents with step-by-step guidance on lesson instruction, etc. There are many opportunities to make student / teacher connections and provide a different sense of community. These services have been developed, are active and successful in other districts. In Woodbridge, hildren are suffering and struggling. Teachers need to be more accessible and have set hours every day. We need to be better and our children deserve better.

Aimee Meacham there is no easy answer and distance learning is not ideal. Teachers should not have to risk their life nor that of their families by returning to school in unsafe conditions. Returning to school is not safe for students nor staff. She implored everyone to read the letters from teachers. Parents need to support the need for teachers to be safe.

McKenzie Granada wished this conversation had occurred earlier and that more details of the plan were known. It was an emotional spring for children, parents and teachers. Emotions are highly charged and everyone is anxious about the unknowns. Let's focus on the issues and solve the big problems first. Most important is the need to ensure that everyone is safe and stays well and then we can address the educational and emotional needs of those involved. We have to make distance learning better and need to work together to make smart decisions so everyone is safe and remains safe. We cannot afford to make decisions that put other people at risk.

Nicole Chick has concerns regarding in-person instruction and the health and well-being of staff, students and families. There are many unknowns and information changes daily. This is an airborne virus and delivering instruction indoors in a building with known HVAC issues should not be encouraged. Kindergarten should be a warm and welcoming environment for students. Some are entering school for the first time in a new environment and require nurturing and understanding. While academics are rigorous, children at this stage learn best through play. Small group work, songs, movement gatherings as well as peer-to-peer inactions/socialization will be impossible. The most sensible option is a robust distance learning plan to ensure we have a thoughtful and calm start to the new school year.

Joy Drakonakis was very anxious to hear the plan and that planning for a host of different possibilities / scenarios is a waste of time. In following current data / trends it is inevitable that at some point we will return to distance learning and the school will be closed. This disruption is not necessary and the safest option is not to return to in person instruction. Make distance learning as meaningful as possible and are able to gather materials, manipulatives and resources. Teachers have the time to survey their students to determine their best option, hybrid or home. While there is no doubt that magic happens in school, the safest option is for home instruction. We can do better if given the time to plan.

Amanda Tyma noted it was a very difficult spring and IEP's were not necessarily followed. Students with special needs require planning to address their individual needs. Parents are not receiving enough guidance from teachers and/or school. Parents are frustrated because these children are being overlooked as the focus is on the "typical" child. We need a distance learning plan that will handle their needs and provide support for them individually.

Steven Lawrence noted that while it is not his decision to determine whether school will be back in session with in-school or remote instruction, it is prudent that we identify the bare minimum and essentials that will children will need to learn. Parents

and students are very frustrated with the process. We need to rethink our expectations for distance learning, create reasonable goals and keep the focus on learning.

Joi Prud'homme felt is not an ideal situation, teachers have spoken clearly. It is totally possible that we can do amazing things with distance learning. MAG was cited as an example for their activities and creativity in lessons. Virtual assemblies are possible as are special creative events. Even though it is daunting, we need to concentrate on how we can be a leader in distance learning and focus on exactly that. Covid is not going away, so we either figure out to embrace it or we risk losing some amazing teachers. Being forced to choose between family, health or life is a no brainer. The Board was urged to do the right thing for teachers and children.

Nellie Shelvelkina expressed concern for parents having to work and be a teacher to their child at the same time. On line learning has to be structured and what was done in the spring was not manageable. How is the school going to adhere to CDC guidelines and teach children to wear masks and social distance. How can parents work from home and be expected to be the teacher at the same time.

Diane Lenskold stated that there are child care providers that have found a way to stay open. Strict guidelines exist for how many students can be serviced, in how many rooms and in a very limited capacity. To reduce risk, there should be no sharing of materials and learning should be in a controlled environment. Students should be grouped with siblings together, placed in rooms with limited capacity and have as many activities as possible outside. Proposed a hybrid model could offer in school instruction, with one teacher per group, controlled space and still conduct distance learning. If there is in-person instruction, it should be held outside as much as possible.

Rebecca Dalrymple noted that it is impossible to work and try to teach your child. There should be instruction for at least half the day. Children are getting lost in the mix and deserve a better education than they are receiving. Distance learning has to be drastically different than it was in the spring. There needs to be a more structured model with face-to-face instruction that encompasses more hours of actual learning and student/teacher interaction. Families need a different model than what was presented in the spring.

Jen Bayer felt that while Woodbridge has done a great job in keeping the virus numbers low, it is inevitable that if we open schools spreading will occur and the numbers will rise. Given that testing results are not readily available and are currently taking 11-14 days, teachers, staff and families would be at great risk for the inevitable spread. While the community should listen to the teachers and keep them safe, something has to be done to meet parent needs. At the very least, there has to be daily lesson plans.

Alexis Loss – While understanding the concerns of teachers, working full-time and having the only education option as distance learning is extremely challenging. There should be something more than a list of activities to be done. With no live instruction her child did not have much learning occur. There also needs to be a plan in place for those children wearing masks as well as those who are not and the potential mitigation and spread of the virus. The district needs to provide specific, actual details for how distance learning and/or instruction is going to improve.

Sebastian Buisine – there is fear in the unknown and we know people are scared. We need to look at other countries and how other countries have reopened. There is a lot of experience to be gained from the European countries and the faculty should look at how things were handled there.

Qing Liu indicated there appears to be division among the expectations of the school year - some want to put safety first, some want children back in school for various reasons and others are concerned about the social emotional needs. Perhaps it may be possible to probe to see what the consensus is. MAG did a fantastic job in the spring. There are different teaching/ learning styles and it may be possible that distance learning does have potential. Could it be possible to have a distance learning program that also provides for social / emotional needs as well as an outdoor learning model with one or two days a week in class.

REOPENING PLAN PRESENTATION

Superintendent Gilbert presented an overview of the plan. The CSDE mandates that each district allow for three options: In-Person Learning, Hybrid and Distance Learning. Presently, the direction from the Governor and Commission of Education is that school districts will be back for In-Person instruction beginning in the fall as well as an offer of distance learning at the same time to those students medically challenged.

These are unprecedented times. While local voices are important these messages need to be heard in Hartford as that is where the decision by the Governor will be made.

Administration is aware of the wide variance of feelings that exists among faculty and families. This plan adheres to the state mandates and attempts to balance the priorities of safety, social emotional well-being and academic growth. There are many challenges and obstacles ahead and there is no easy nor simple solution. It is key that quality learning in each aspect of the plan is delineated. It remains unknown what the distance learning and hybrid components will look like nor has the level of staff coordination been determined. This plan allows all students to return full-time, safeguards the health and safe of students and staff and provides access and support should school cancelation become necessary. It remains unclear whether the CSDE will require districts to run In-Person Instruction and Distance Learning congruently and/or with the similar levels of staffing, thereby compromising the quality of each program.

The CSDE has asked that to the greatest extent possible districts maximize the cohorting of students in transportation, classroom environments and general interactions throughout the school day. In accordance with state mandates, all staff and students will be required to wear masks unless there is medical documentation of a medical condition that prohibits a mask. Mask breaks will be built into the schedule. Enhanced cleaning protocols will be implemented to further limit transmissions. New health protocols are being developed for students, staff and visitors. Aides will be assigned to buses for the first week to assist students with masks, seating and the new safety protocols.

There are numerous implications and challenges regarding implementation of these models inclusive of budget, union contracts, classroom structure, technology and overall working conditions that will require negotiation of Memorandums of Understandings with each union. The CDC, QVHD and DPH numbers will be guiding the state as well as local communities in switching between each of the depicted models should Covid cases surge and/or containment becomes necessary.

In accordance with the recently released state guidelines, the 2020/21 calendar will be adjusted. Three (3) additional professional development days would be incorporated into the start of the year. Since student instruction days have been reduced from 180 to 177, the student start date will change from August 26 to August 31. August 31 – September 4 will also become minimum days. On August 31 half the student population would return to the building for In-Person Instruction. On Tuesday, the other half would return, with the first half remaining home. All students would return on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. There was general consensus to modify the calendar as outlined.

Discussion ensued for not supporting the Governor's directive for In-Person Instruction. Questions were raised for what the consequence could be if Woodbridge chose to not have students and/or staff return to In-Person Instruction. While the district bears the responsibility to educate all children, parents still have the right not to send their child to school. Do families have the option to opt out of the plan. What happens if there are no teachers willing to return to the building for In-Person Instruction. Is there flexibility within the plan to assign teachers who do not want to return to In-Person Instruction to the distance learning model. Has the plan been discussed with the BOWA districts and is there synchronicity among the BOWA districts. It is clear that Woodbridge has to have a more robust distance learning component and strengthening that is crucial. Where are the specific details for building and supporting that learning model. The focus should be on differentiation and creativity to provide the best education possible. Bringing everyone back into the building should not be the only edict. It is imperative that parents be informed of their options and have access to resources that are centrally located. It was noted that the CSDE recently unveiled a resource distance learning hub for parents with a wide array of resources.

It was suggested that it might be helpful to hear perspectives from community experts Dr. Shannon Martinello, School Medical Advisor and Dr. Alison Galvani, Yale Infectious Disease on which plan is best. Since we have the ability to increase the capacity of outside air within the building to minimize recirculated air, it was suggested that a representative from Van Zelm, the HVAC company, be invited as well. The Board also requested to hear from the WEA on how many teachers would be willing to return to school. There was general agreement that while Distance Learning was the more preferred option, parents need to be able to return to work and students deserve to have the best education possible. Sentiment also existed that it is imperative that we identify and solidify which plan we will use in the fall.

MOTION TO ADJOURN: (10:12 PM)
Dr. Ross
Second by Ms. Genovese
UNANIMOUS

Recorded by Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board