

# MINUTES OF THE REMOTE SPECIAL WOODBRIDGE BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING

Wednesday, February 23, 2022

Via WebEx

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Meeting Number: 2498 680 7010

Meeting Password: DcEVPxF73J4

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

**BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:** Ms. Lynn Piascyk, Chair; Dr. Jay Dahya; Ms. Sarah Del Prete, Secretary; Ms. Brooke Hopkins; Mr. Jeff Hughes; Dr. Maria Madonick, Vice Chair; Dr. Michael Strambler; and Ms. Erin Williamson.

**STAFF:** Dr. Jonathan Budd, Superintendent; Cheryl Kiesel, Special Services Director; Analisa Sherman, Principal; James Sapia, Assistant Principal; and Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board.

A sincere thank-you was extended to all staff, administrators, and bus drivers for their amazing efforts during the unprecedented times. The sole purpose of the meeting is to review Board policies on masking for students and staff. As part of this process, staff and parents were asked to participate in a survey and public comment was added specifically to this agenda to allow the Board to receive public participation from all interested stakeholders.

**GUESTS:** Grant McInnes, Michael Haas, Jeffrey Luck, Prasanna Ananth, Tom Waldron, Kristen Turkosz, Josh Gelder, Michelle Brown, Robin Gerber, Jackie Cappiello, James Turkosz, Daniel Del Prete, Daniel Furman, Patricia Santagata.

**CORRESPONDENCE** – It was noted the Board had received numerous correspondence regarding the topic of masks, all of which were available to the public in Board Book.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

Grant McInnes – cited European statistics related to masking requirements and transmission rates among adults and children in and out of schools. He remains hopeful things would return to normal soon and without the wearing of masks.

Michael Haas – BRS safety protocols have been tremendously successful, and should continue to be successful for the remainder of the school year. The opinions of the educators should carry far more weight than parents.

Jeffrey Luck – noted that masks should never have been a government choice and should be a parent choice. He recently attended the Amity Board of Education meeting on the same topic, where no one spoke in favor of maintaining masks and the meeting was conducted in person. The vast majority of schools have made masks optional. The wearing of masks in schools is not preventing the spread of Covid, masks are a detriment to children and can cause other illnesses in both children and adults.

Prasanna Ananth – indicated it may be premature to discontinue mask requirements at the elementary level. Masks are a relatively simple and effective mitigation strategy that children are accustomed to. There is still no approved vaccine for children under 5. There are many compromised immune patients and others who do not respond well to vaccination and remain susceptible to illness. If mask mandates are removed in our community, the decision should be based on local data and science. We should maintain a low threshold to resume mandates should Covid spike in our communities. Anyone should be able to wear a mask without fear of a stigma or bullying.

Tom Waldron – there are many opinions as to whether masks work or not. Children are interacting with each other in surrounding districts and we need to be consistent in our decisions. We are all different from each other and what is right for one may not be right for someone else. He hoped masks would be made optional.

Kristen Turkosz – mitigation strategies that have been in place for the last year and a half are causing more harm than good. Lockdown policies have had little to no public effect; they have imposed enormous economic and social costs where they have been adopted. The issue of masking has created “bullying” in our schools. Students are falling behind in reading as well as speaking. Woodbridge claims to be following the science when it comes to mitigation strategies. Parents know what is best for their child; and urged the Board to vote for mask choice.

Josh Gelder – Masking should be a parental choice only. There is no evidence to support the level of effectiveness of masks. Where is the data that was used to require children to wear masks? He shared 80 studies on masks with the Board as well as the School Medical Advisor. We should always be making informed decisions with data to back-up the decisions. These are our children and parents should have the sole right to choose whether their children wear masks or not, mandates or no mandates.

Michelle Brown – we need to focus on the mental health of our children. Mask-induced fatigue is being diagnosed in children, and two years of wearing masks is too long when the transmission for children is very low. There is no reason to keep them in masks in school when everything around us is mask optional.

Robin Gerber – supports optional masks and is an advocate for mental health awareness. There has been a drastic decline in our children’s ability to connect with others. Masks have had a detrimental effect on students building relationships, social / emotional learning, authentic problem solving, building relationships, and actively engaging in class discussions and activities. Society has trusted data and science. What metrics need to be seen or heard in order to resume our dynamic and progressive education at Beecher? It is a disservice to BRS children if we do not lift the mask mandate.

Jackie Capiello – has lived in this town for 10 years and the time has come for masks to become optional starting Monday, February 28. Woodbridge is the only district in our DRG not to make masks optional. Parents have the choice to choose if they want their child to wear a mask in school starting Monday. Both North Haven and Amity, who fall under our same health department (QVHD), have given parents the choice to choose. Kids need to see faces to learn appropriate social emotions such as anger, happiness, and sadness. Kids will not be able to learn these soft skills if they are required to wear a mask. We are creating a population of students who will not be able to hold conversations. The BOWA community is in an odd predicament with four different sets of rules if mandates continue. Allow families to decide what is best for them.

James Turkosz – disputed the AZ study cited earlier. Many states did not have mask mandates and still stayed open the entire time. What are the mitigation strategies moving forward when there are arbitrary rules based on individual classrooms and/or teachers? Dozens of schools have gone mask choice already. It is time to get our kids back to normal.

Dan Del Prete – has seven children and shared 160 research articles with the Board on the inefficiencies of masks. Children have lost a tremendous amount of interaction. Masks should be a choice parents are allowed to make, not dictated nor mandated. Hospitals are back open for business, and non-Covid transport is off. Free choice should be here as well.

Daniel Furman – globally, the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms during Covid has doubled when compared to pre-pandemic numbers as a result of loss of peer interaction, social isolation, mask wearing, and reduced contact with others. Our children are being affected and we need to take this into consideration.

Patricia Santagata – expressed concerns regarding the mental health aspects of children, not wanting to go school, being afraid of getting ill, not able to have interactions with other children, feeling isolated, and not being invited to birthday parties as a result of vaccination status etc. At this point, masks should be optional and parents should be the only ones to decide if their child needs to wear a mask.

#### **REVIEW POLICIES 4118.237 FACE MASKS/COVERINGS (STAFF) AND 5141.8 FACE MASKS (STUDENTS)**

Superintendent Budd and Kris Hart-Rooney, MAG teacher, presented an overview on mask mandates.

Throughout this process, our community has remained civil and respectful of the various viewpoints that have been shared. The wearing of masks is a complex issue and going forward it is likely that people may disagree on whatever path is chosen. Both QVHD and School Medical Advisor, Dr. Shannon Martinello, provided written statements for guidance to the Board.

1. The Statewide mask mandate for public schools will end as of February 28, 2022, leaving the decision up to local discretion.
2. The Town mask mandate as applied to Beecher Road School will end as of March 1, 2022.
3. WSD has two identical policies related to masks: 4118.237/4218.237 & 5141.8.
4. The BOE may suspend the mask policies based on a particular date, or may do nothing (in which case the current mask policies continue).
5. CSDE/DPH have advised Superintendents:

- a. The decision about whether masks should be optional is more than a public health decision. Essentially, it is a decision about local risk tolerance: weighing the risks of unmasking against the benefits.
- b. Since universal masking has been one of several in a suite of mitigation strategies employed against COVID-19, mask choice should be viewed in the context of that same suite.
- c. Specific metrics have not been developed and will not be developed.

Approximately 99% of our staff are fully vaccinated against Covid-19. Of our K-6 students, 68% are fully vaccinated, and an additional 2% are partially vaccinated. (By comparison, the state-wide vaccination rates for children ages 5-11 are 37.6% fully vaccinated, and an additional 7.9% partially vaccinated.) Of our 22 PreK students, 9% are fully vaccinated. Most of the others are not yet eligible, as they have not yet turned age 5.

Universal masking can be seen as one of several mitigation strategies that can be relaxed this spring. If Covid-19 positivity rates begin to rise again, universal masking and/or other mitigation strategies can be re-implemented. *Note: Masks on school buses will be required until at least March 18, a date set federally. Masks will also be required in certain circumstances such as on days 6-10 when individuals return from quarantine due to an out-of-school close contact.* Prior to the first day of mask choice, each student & staff member will be provided two test kits. One test should be performed at home prior to leaving for school on the first day mask choice is implemented.

It was noted that all choices require respect and a plurality of respondents appear to favor mask choice. Everyone experienced the pandemic differently and has their own perspective and opinion. Woodbridge is not unique; over 100 school districts statewide have already voted for mask choice as well as our immediate surrounding BOWA districts. As all students and staff will be asked to self-test, March 7 has been determined as the optimal date to ensure adequate time for test distribution since tests will not be received until March 1.

#### **MOTION #1 – IMPLEMENT MASKS OPTIONAL MARCH 1, 2022**

Move that we make masks optional for March 1 and eliminate Policies 4118.237/4218.237 and 5141.8 effective March 1, 2022.

**IN FAVOR:**

**AGAINST:**

Ms. Hopkins

Second by Ms. Del Prete

Ms. Del Prete, Ms. Hopkins and Mr. Hughes

Dr. Dahya, Dr. Madonick, Ms. Piascyk, Dr. Strambler and Ms. Williamson

***MOTION FAILS 3-5-0***

It was noted that administration has made a clear case for requiring additional time to implement strategies that will limit negative interactions among children, allow for increased communication in classrooms, and collaborate with staff on development of mitigation strategies regardless of the direction chosen. It was also suggested that a metric be in place that could trigger a return to masking should circumstances change and that decisions be based on data.

#### **MOTION #2 – IMPLEMENT MASKING CHOICE AND METRICS**

Move that we suspend Policies 4118.237/4218.237 and 5141.8 effective March 18, 2022, at the latest with the stipulation that we take time to both (1) devise a data-based metric to implement masking choice and also to provide metrics and thresholds of risk to reinstate masking should we face a future surge, a metric that would replace our suspended policies and (2) give the administration and teachers time to implement these changes and support our students in an age-and developmentally-appropriate way.

Dr. Madonick

Second by Dr. Dahya

Discussion ensued for the type of metrics that would be used, development / implementation of those metrics, and identification of the specific thresholds. It was also questioned whether this was a legal motion. The Board took a brief recess to allow Superintendent Budd to conduct research on the proposed motion.

Chair Piascyk called a brief recess (9:17 PM). The meeting was called back to order (9:29 PM).

It was confirmed this is a legal binding motion and the motion was clarified to reflect slightly adjusted language.

**MOTION #2A – IMPLEMENT MASKING CHOICE AND METRICS**

*Move that we suspend Policies 4118.237/4218.237 and 5141.8 effective March 18, 2022, with the stipulation that the administration both (1) devise a data-based metric to implement mask choice appropriately and provide thresholds of risk to reinstate masks should the district face a future surge; and (2) develop plans to successfully implement mask choice.*

*Dr. Madonick*

*Second by Dr. Dahya*

Concern was expressed for delaying implementation until March 18 while being one of the last towns in the State to render a decision and for identifying specifics that could potentially force a return to masking given the many unknowns that exist in a pandemic. It is important the focus remains on education and not on metrics.

**IN FAVOR:** Dr. Dahya, Dr. Madonick, Dr. Strambler and Ms. Williamson

**AGAINST:** Ms. Del Prete, Ms. Hopkins, Mr. Hughes and Ms. Piascyk

***MOTION TIES 4-4-0***

**MOTION #3 – POLICY SUSPENSION MARCH 7, 2022**

Move that we suspend Policies 4118.237/4218.237 and 5141.8 effective March 7, 2022 respecting the request of administration.

Ms. Piascyk

Second by Mr. Hughes / Ms. Del Prete

While there was agreement on suspending the policies, there should be some type of defined fallback for the future as the CSDE has delegated the decision to the local Board. Ultimately, the Board is responsible for every child who attends BRS and it is important that the “when and if” is also specified.

**IN FAVOR:** Ms. Del Prete, Ms. Hopkins, Mr. Hughes and Ms. Piascyk

**AGAINST:** Dr. Dahya, Dr. Madonick, Dr. Strambler and Ms. Williamson

***MOTION TIES 4-4-0***

It was noted that, if a motion is not passed, masks will remain in place. A compromise was proposed utilizing an effective date of March 7 as well as development of metrics.

**MOTION #4 – POLICY SUSPENSION MARCH 7, 2022 AND MASK CHOICE IMPLEMENTATION**

Move that we suspend Policies 4118.237/4218.237 and 5141.8 effective March 7, 2022, with the stipulation that the administration both (1) devise a data-based metric to implement mask choice appropriately and provide thresholds of risk to reinstate masks should the district face a future surge; and (2) develop plans to successfully implement mask choice.

Ms. Williamson

Second by Dr. Dahya

It was noted that development of the metrics/data points and implementation of the mask choice process/procedures would not require further Board approval. Should local cases increase dramatically, that would be the trigger for the Board to meet and discuss mitigation strategies. It was suggested that “to reinstate masks should the district face a future surge” be eliminated and replaced with “to convene a meeting of the Woodbridge Board of Education to discuss potential reinstatement of the policies.”

**MOTION #4A – POLICY SUSPENSION MARCH 7, 2022 AND MASK CHOICE IMPLEMENTATION**

*Move that we suspend Policies 4118.237/4218.237 and 5141.8 effective March 7, 2022 with the stipulation that the administration both (1) devise a data-based metric to provide thresholds of risk to convene a meeting of the Woodbridge Board of Education to discuss potential reinstatement of the policies and (2) develop plans to successfully implement mask choice.*

*Ms. Williamson*

*Second by Dr. Dahya*

**UNANIMOUS**

**MOTION TO ADJOURN (10:08 PM) Dr. Dahya**

Second by Ms. Hopkins

**UNANIMOUS**

Recorded by Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board