

Minutes of the Regular School Board Meeting

Of the School Board of Independent School District No. 709 held at Historic Old Central High School, 215 North First Avenue East, Duluth, Minnesota 55802, on

Tuesday, September 15, 2020

Members Present:

Kelly Durick Eder
David Kirby
Rosie Loeffler-Kemp
Jill Lofald
Alanna Oswald
Paul Sandholm

Others Present:

John Magas, Superintendent
Cathy Erickson, CFO
Melinda Thibault, Secretary

Student Representatives:

Nabiha Imtiaz (East)
Phoenix Ocean (Denfeld)

Members Absent:

Sally Trnka

- Chair Lofald called the Regular School Board meeting September 15, 2020 to order at 6:42 p.m.

M-Loeffler-Kemp, S-Durick Eder, to approve the agenda.

M-Lofald, S-Oswald, to pull Item 1.B.1.a) – Resolution HR-9-20-3755 from the consent agenda. Upon a vote, the same was approved 6-0.

Upon a vote on the agenda as amended, the same was approved – 6-0.

School and Community Recognition

September 2020

Happy New Year This month we celebrate the start of a new school year.

We are learning and creating new and different ways of teaching, feeding, transporting and caring for children. We are managing our own hopes and fears. We are realizing success and identifying places where we can and will do better.

This month, we recognize the diligent work Duluth Public Schools staff are doing and will do throughout the coming weeks to support education and the well-being of children.

Principals, Teachers, Curriculum, Special Services, Early Childhood, Technology and all those moving education from the classroom to online learning. It's a Herculean task.

Those reaching out to families and students - Integration Specialists, American Indian Home School Liaisons, Community Schools personnel, homeless support staff.

Facilities staff, prepping buildings with cleaning, COVID prevention signs, hundreds of hand sanitizing stations, installing social distance markers on floors and hallways.

Bus Drivers and Transportation, preparing to get children safely to and from school.

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Clerical and Administrative Assistants, organizing offices and schools, meeting the needs of families and students.

School Nurses and Health Services, with advice and training on the best ways to prevent illness.

Human Resources, navigating complex changes and how they impact employees.

Business Services, ensuring the critical systems and activities of the school district continue.

Child Nutrition, preparing free, nutritious breakfast and lunches for distribution.

Paraprofessionals, assisting with emergency childcare for essential workers.

We also recognize the strength and resilience of our families and students and extend our appreciation to the Duluth community for their support of education.

As a parent, retired educator and now board member, this is still one of the most inspiring times of the year. The work of educating children is always exciting and gratifying.

Our thanks to all, and best wishes for the 20-21 school year.

Public Comments

September 2020

Public comments were read into the record by the board members or played via voice messages (no public presence was allowed at the meeting) as follows (some spellings/names may be incomplete due to lack of information via voice messages):

The following people spoke regarding their thoughts and concerns related to the return to learn plan including; requests for more in person learning, concerns with the distance learning plan, not allowing music programs to be in person, not enough live learning/contact opportunities, the need for more synchronous learning:

Russell Saburn, Denise Smith, David Chura, Brenda Greeley, Erica Meece, Marla Halvorson, Erin Antus, Anne Hoeksema, Lisa MacIver, Stacy Dimberio, Marina Udd, Tabitha and John Devlin, Kate Chura, Steven Kaski, Brooke Maciver, Alli Ahlers, Natalie Boheim, Brandon Stone, Nick Crist, Amanda Buckng, Catherine Benziger, Wesley Chura, Michael & Kimberly Maki, Willem Hoeksema, Anya Powell, AJ Axtell, Leah Halvorson, Michael Latterell, Rebecca Saburn, Serenity Schoonover, Jeff Goetzman, Evelyn Christiansen, Michelle Statz, Maranda Everson, Andrew Hayden, Laura Simonson, Len Johnson, Kelly Lapcinski, Kim Kroll.

Erica Henkel, thanked the district for the quality distance learning programming.

Cruz Mendoza, spoke regarding the disparate discipline numbers/rates and the achievement gap.

Communications, Petitions, Etc.

September 2020

Chair Lofald stated that there were no communications received.

Superintendent's Report
September 2020

Student Representative Nabihah Imtiaz (East): Reported teachers have been easing students into Canvas and distance learning the past two weeks and coursework will begin on Thursday. Two seniors have committed to UMD for basketball, congratulations to Maddie Thompson and Noah Paulson. The executive board is creating a welcome back video that they hope will help raise morale in the students. Hound Pack is holding virtual orientation for freshmen this week. East will hold the ACT on October 6th to replace the date canceled in the spring. Students and staff continue to find creative ways to run clubs and organizations virtually which gives her hope for what the rest of the school year will hold.

Student Representative Phoenix Ocean (Denfeld): Reported that while the start of the school year is not normal, Denfeld has been able to hold on to some of its traditions with modifications. Staff volunteers dropped off yard signs, t-shirts, and advice from the upperclassmen link leaders. Some seniors participated in a socially distanced version of the senior sunrise and chalk a lot. Chromebooks and hot spots have been distributed and soon textbooks, instruments and other materials will be handed out. On October 6th an opportunity for seniors to take the ACT at their school will be offered. Recently the boys' and girls' soccer teams have peacefully knelt before their games in protest of injustice. They continue to be responsible members of the community while exercising their right to speak up for what they believe in.

Superintendent Magas stated: The public comments resonate deeply with all of us, I know this is an incredibly challenging time for our parents and students and it's not a time that stopped. I think many of us thought that when we went into closure in March that they would be coming back before the end of the school year, and thought we would be able to start the school year in the fall as a regular school year, but as time goes on we realize the deep impact of the pandemic. We realize how challenging it is to meet the needs of student learning and student safety, and the needs of our district to make sure people are geared up to serve our students needs well and do what's most important – to keep them safe. I believe it's incredibly important as well that we balance the two needs. The two greatest interests of our school district, which are of course – we are a learning institution and it's about student learning/academics, and it's also about safety. What strikes me as the most challenging in these times is that it is very difficult for us to balance those two. Anything we do that allows for more in-person puts a little more into the risk and safety factors. So, it's that tale of how do we pick the right choice? How do we make the best of a very bad situation as we weigh safety and student learning? We are committed to doing our best to serve our students and families, and we know there is frustration on the part of everyone involved. First and foremost, I look to our students, our students want to learn and be with their friends. I have sadness in my heart and frustration that it isn't possible. When I see students, who are entering their senior year, as you two are, and know that their senior year will not be like any else's senior year has ever been. Even if we are able to completely return in person it is still a very different year and I want to say how much I appreciate the resilience that our students, parents, staff, teachers, administrators and community have trying to work through this together. I know that it is a challenge, but it is a challenge that we are up for. I know the challenges that were raised

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here are worth listening to and worth examining, and we have to really take them to heart and put into examination. What is it we can do to make sure that we're face to face as soon as possible. I don't know a single educator who is not interested in having students face to face. That's why we get into this field because we love kids. When we see our kids coming back it's difficult not to want to give them a hug or a high five to the students we care about. Yet I know much of that is not possible, and it's not possible for a wide variety of reasons. As superintendent I bear that responsibility on my shoulders. I am responsible for the district and it's something that I care deeply about, and I want to really state that the responsibility of the learning of the district and the safety of the district fall first and foremost on me. There's no perfect plan and we need to balance those thoughts of safety and student learning. I join the parents who are expressing concerns and desires to meet in person, worries about mental health concerns, and what this means for their children, for their future, what learning gaps, opportunity gaps are being caused by this. I am also heartened by knowing how hard people are working behind the scenes to improve the situation. I'm thinking about two public comments, one from tonight and one from a while ago. There was a comment tonight that there are mistakes being made that will have life long consequences for our students. That is something we have to weigh thoughtfully and heavily as far as what is it we can do to make sure that we are minimizing the impact of what we are doing. There was another comment made a couple of months ago that resonated with me and grounded my thinking and that was that lost learning can be recovered but a lost life cannot. We are using caution, we are using safety as something that guides us. We are wanting to make sure we have balance of learning, of safety, and of the need of our students. I have been here for two and a half months and I've been very impressed with the hard work of our teachers, our staff, our principals and our administrators and they are rocking it. They are doing such hard work to lift the schools, but I also want to give support to my team because they are working hard to provide that support as well as they prepare for the three models of in-person, hybrid, and distance. There are many challenges, every weekend and every evening I've heard from them. They are working into the evenings and on weekends because they care about and love our kids. We are trying to make sure that we are able to serve the kids in the greatest way possible. So, if there's somebody to blame, don't blame our principals and administrators. As superintendent of the schools the responsibility of educating our students falls squarely on my shoulders. Our teachers returned to us just three days prior to the beginning of the school year, they needed time to gear up to serve our students. It's been just two weeks today and they are completely overhauling the way that we teach. It is said that education changes slowly, but they're working feverishly to develop curriculum to reach out to students and families, to make sure that they're leaning about new technology, new software, new devices and we have to allow our educators a little bit of grace as they completely turn the way they teach on its head and learn to teach in new ways. So again, if there's someone to blame don't blame our teachers, as superintendent it is my responsibility to lead us. It's my responsibility to take us through these challenging times and I'm certain that we will overcome the challenges before us. When I was hired in March, I committed myself fully to the Duluth Public Schools. I live two blocks away and I just heard the bells chime, and when I'm awake at night I'm thinking of our kids and I'm trying to make sure we are making the best choices. This is a time that is unprecedented and it is a very different time for us. It's not business as usual and we have some additional challenges that other districts don't. There are things that are great about Duluth. I'm speaking about the commitment of families, the community and of our staff to doing so much here, and that is beautiful. When I look at some of the other challenges we face there are things that are different here that have to be considered. Some of the challenges that we face are related to the challenge of in person learning.

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We all want in person and we will have in person as soon as we can. If our rates stay low and if we are able we are not opposed to it, if we're able, to have in person sooner than the November date we stated. We also want to make sure that we're committing to something we can actually accomplish so if we're starting at distance and we're trying to switch to another model we want to make sure we're doing something well before we immediately try to switch and do something differently. We are preparing for both but it takes a little bit of time and it takes more than two weeks to make sure we are ready. The one thing I probably regret the most is the two weeks, well 9 days, that we are using to gear up for changing our way of teaching is those 9 days were meant as a period for us to connect with kids to make sure kids had devices and make sure students were registered in distance or in person if they wanted and make sure we were geared up with our teachers while at the same time reaching out to students. We reached out to our families and provided some learning. I understand that this does not feel like the distance learning we are striving for, but it's not yet fully in place. The elementary are going to hybrid on Monday and in less than a week the secondary are going fully with their education on Thursday. There was much in place, but what I'm most regretful for is that we probably should have communicated that clearer. These days were meant as a transition period and it's a transition period that MDE and MDH recommend taking when they switch models, again these are things that can be overcome. The challenges of in-person learning that are specific to Duluth are 1) Very high student to teacher class ratio's (30's or even 40's) and if we are having people come back to in-person learning we have to think about are we able to have any degree of social distancing between people that is a factor. We also have the lack of space for child care. I know that it was addressed in the comments that we should use the high schools and we did pause the one day of hybrid that we were going to be able to offer because we needed space for our child care. When we looked at that we wanted to make sure that we had additional sites in case one of the sites had to close down. So if Lincoln park had to close down we would move the day care to Denfeld because by law we have to serve child care first, the same with Ordean and East. I know people are frustrated saying why child care first and it's because it is a state mandate. That and we don't have many additional spaces. Another comment that was brought up numerous times was synchronous learning. I think synchronous learning can be very powerful, there's no doubt about that, but there are also advantages to asynchronous learning and I'll talk about that in a minute. If we were to dedicate ourselves to synchronous learning there are challenges specific to Duluth that we would need to overcome. We don't have in place a one to one device ratio, we never have and we are not there yet. We are increasing the number of devices as quickly as possible and we have many devices on order, but because of the huge world demand we are waiting on more devices. Also, we have limited Wi-Fi in the city despite our hotspots and outreach with community efforts. That is another factor that influences our ability to do lots of synchronous learning. The district also has financial limitations. Our fund balance is really low, and many districts use their fund balances when something catastrophic occurs, they're able to dip into that. We don't have a large fund balance to dip into so we have to do things from a fiscally responsible perspective. Again, those distance learning challenges we're going to be able to overcome those. Asynchronous learning is part of a blended learning model that we have where we're going to be focused on teaching kids both with some synchronous learning and asynchronous learning. When you don't have one to one devices you can't do synchronous learning for multiple students in the same household, and we know that it's an equity issue. We also know that if we say we are doing just synchronous learning there are going to be many families who don't have a device, don't have Wi-Fi, kids who are taking care of their younger siblings that won't be able to be in class online at a certain period

of time. Asynchronous learning is something that allows for more student individualization, it allows for students to do the work on their own time. That flipped model of learning doesn't mean there is no learning, it does mean there is a new way we have to learn to do things. I know that student engagement we have challenges with, not having every parent being able to be next to their child when they are supporting that learning. That's something we are working really hard to overcome by partnering with community partners. It's also scalable when you think about asynchronous learning you're needing to think about a camera and document camera in every classroom, which we just don't have, along with the one to one device and powerful enough Wi-Fi for multiple users at home. Those are challenges of synchronous learning that are avoided by having this blended model. We took this approach partly from an equity perspective because we believe not just in serving some learners but truly serving all learners. Finally, we also believe in the collaborative power of our teachers. The old way of delivering education is outdated. It's not a pizza, instruction is something that happens and it's cultivated and can be more powerful if we have multiple people contributing to that content and by producing asynchronous learning we have opportunity for our teachers to work together to create splendid model lessons that can be shared and that students can take part in. Again, this sounds like another promise and it's something that again as superintendent I am responsible for the learning that takes place here and I am deeply dedicated to making sure that we are able to serve our kids and we are going to reflect and learn from what we heard tonight from our parents. We're going to reflect and learn and take action based on what we hear. There are many great points on what can be improved on and we are dedicated as a team of educators, administrators, and teacher. Most of all I want to thank our parents and our community members for their dedication and patience, and we know that patience is not a forever thing. We know your sense of urgency about caring for your kids, the ones you love the most is foremost in your heart and we are right behind you with our care for what we want to do as a district and I'm committed to that.

Superintendent Magas gave an update on the return to learn planning.

Chair Lofald reviewed the schedule of meetings.

Policy Committee Report

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Member Loeffler-Kemp presented the Policy Committee report which was available electronically to each school board member.

Monthly Committee of the Whole Report

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Member Lofald presented the Monthly Committee of the Whole report which was available electronically to each school board member.

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Human Resources/Finance Committee Report
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Member Trnka presented the Human Resources Committee report which was available electronically to each school board member.

Consent Agenda
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M-Durick Eder, S-Loeffler-Kemp, to approve the Consent Agenda. Upon a vote on the consent agenda, the same was approved – 6-0

Special Resolutions/Other Action Items
September 2020

None

Other
September 2020

M-Oswald, S-Durick Eder, to adjourn the meeting. Upon a vote, the same was approved – unanimously.

Chair Lofald adjourned the Regular School Board Meeting of September 15, 2020 at 10:19 p.m.