

Farouk Rajab called the virtual special meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. Members present were Jack Morehouse, Craig Esposito, Alisa Morrison, and Heidi Simmons. Also present were Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary, Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent, and Mary Anne Butler, Assistant Superintendent. Candidates present for Board of Education vacancies: Frank Todisco, Gordon Lord, and Faith Leitner

The following motion was made by Alisa Morrison and seconded by Heidi Simmons.

Motion 1: To move item VI. - Election of New Board Members to item III. under Comment from Citizens on the agenda.

All: Aye

Comments from Citizens Relative to Board Agenda: The following community members sent forward emailed comments:
Laura Conti – (emailed comment): “Good Afternoon, Please make the health and safety of our students staff and community your highest priority. This meeting of a few hours is being held virtually for the health and safety of stakeholders, yet in a few short weeks our schools will be a safe place to teach and learn for seven hours? Thank you for your attention. I appreciate the difficult work you are undertaking.”

Nicholas and Ashley Couto-Tewell – (emailed comment): “Dear Stonington Board of Education Members, This letter is in regards to the essential reopening of our schools this fall. We are parents to a son who will be going into the second grade and a daughter who is in pre-school. As parents and concerned members of the community, we have been diligent in keeping ourselves informed of current events and been active in listening to town meetings, reading relevant information, and speaking with parents. The surveys sent out to parents and staff and the subsequent results depict the communities’ response to reopening schools and we hope that the Board takes this information and decides to re-open schools full time this fall. There are of course some students and staff that are at risk and would not be able to return to the physical classroom and it would be wonderful if these students and teachers were paired together to provide the best virtual learning experience for their circumstances but this should not be the same option for all those students and staff that are ready to return to the classroom and continue the education of the younger members of our community. The steps we start taking now will help us get to the point where almost all students and staff will be able to return to the school buildings, which is what we all hope for as this is important for everyone. We understand that things may look a little different with the return to the physical classroom, but the American Pediatrics Association has put together a plan that they believe will keep our teachers and children safe as well as look out for their best educational interest, which is represented in Plan 2 proposed by the Reopening Committee. Plan 2 offers the protection necessary while providing our children with the education they need and desire and does so at a cost that is manageable for the town. Plan 2 is the only plan that meets the state requirement which was put in place because the state understands the needs of our children for full time in classroom instruction. The hybrid model does not provide our students with the necessary school system that they need to excel and quite frankly could provide more issues if there were to be a Covid-19 outbreak in our community. Those families that work full time would need to find childcare for those 3 days off from school and would therefore be spreading any infection to other family members, care takers or programs in our community that will be helping to provide care. Keeping children in their class cohorts and in their usual school year schedule will help keep the community safer in the event of a breakout. My husband and I are both essential workers that work full time and during the virtual learning period we relied on help from family members who were available because they were out of work due to the closure of schools and businesses. Schools and teachers are most certainly not babysitters, but schools are the place for our children to learn and grow as they have been for generations and the teachers have the job of providing our children with a quality learning curriculum. An education is something that has been so dearly treasured in our country and it has been well proven that a virtual learning program is no substitution for our school’s education system. Our children have already endured several months of a virtual learning program, which we all understand was necessary at that time, but did not benefit our children’s education. The schools and staff did an amazing job with what was thrown at them and there are no complaints from us with how the Deans Mill School Administration and Teachers handled the transition. They did what was necessary at that time but now it is time for school systems to make the educated adjustment necessary to continue our children’s education in the classroom going forward. The switch to virtual learning was a swift adjustment deemed necessary at the time but this is no longer the case. As the state has reopened most people have returned to their jobs and it is time for our schools to reopen as well. The Stonington Community is expecting the Board of Education, as elected officials, to do what is best for our students who each of you were elected to represent. The surveys sent out to the families and teachers make it clear what the community is looking for and research from all over backs up that the reopening of schools is essential for the education of the children of Stonington. The surveys were sent for a purpose, please don’t make it a waste of money and time and not take those responses into consideration. Please do what is best for our children and their future and choose Plan 2 to reopen our schools” Sincerely, Nicholas and Ashley Tewell

Michelle Gonzalez – (emailed comment): “Good afternoon, Has there been any consideration taken into account for students

upon reopening with life threatening food allergies and where they will be able to safely eat their lunch? Under normal circumstances, my son would remove himself from an area where someone was eating peanuts and or tree nuts. In a closed in classroom, he will not be able to do so. What accommodations will be made for my son and other students with life threatening food allergies? Thank you for your time.”

Michelle Gonzalez, SHS Parent

Ammar Anbari, MD – (emailed comment): “As a physician and a parent of two students going into eighth grade, I would like to make a statement about school opening. Covid-19 is the most deadly pandemic our country has faced in over 100 years. It has taken the lives of over 140,000 people and made millions of others very sick. I have witnessed many of my own patients and colleagues get infected with Covid, and some of them unfortunately died. Many states have taken a very strong approach to this pandemic and shut down businesses early which helped reduce the spread of the disease. But no state has been able to eliminate the spread. The CDC, and most epidemiologists and infectious disease doctors are predicting the fall and winter to be particularly challenging because of the combination of the coronavirus and the return of the yearly flu. Opening in-person schools in any district and in any capacity is not safe for our students, teachers, staff and parents until there is a proven vaccine. Despite all the measures - mask wearing, socially distanced classrooms, and extra cleaning that schools are proposing to put in place, we all know that it is still not totally safe. Even if our schools invest millions of dollars in every possible health measure to reduce the spread, our best data so far suggests that Covid will continue to spread throughout every school and every town if schools open in person in any capacity. A recent study from South Korea conducted on 65,000 people found that students between the ages of 10 and 19 can spread the virus at least as well as adults do. They concluded that in person school reopenings will trigger more outbreaks. Furthermore, there have been numerous recent reports of summer camps, day care centers and schools that have seen outbreaks in their facilities despite their best efforts. Our teachers and staff, a quarter of whom are very vulnerable to getting very sick, are being asked to put their lives on the line to achieve this goal which is both wrong and unethical. The teachers in our school district managed to put together a phenomenal online learning program on a very short notice. I believe that we can and should continue this program during the fall and until we have a vaccine. School opening should not be an economic decision or a political one. It should be purely made with the students’ and staff’s best interest in mind. I feel very strongly that opening schools in any capacity will jeopardize the health of our students, teachers, staff, and families. Sincerely, Ammar Anbari, MD

Chris Ward – (emailed comment): “First off, is the option 3 still available (as circled in the attached PDF)? I do not want my kids to return to Stonington Middle School in September. They both have pre-existing conditions that make them high-risk in regards to Coronavirus. Parent help: explain IN GREAT DETAIL what that might entail. And any parent that touches ANYTHING that the kids will touch will be required to sign notarized letters stating their lack of travel and strictest adherence to precautionary measures..right? If you’re forcing kids back to school. How many extra buses will be run? What’s the cost? You ask for parents to drive kids to school when possible. Will their be SPD directing traffic since some genius deciding to cram all the middle schoolers in Town in to a Middle School that has one of the worst engineered parking lots I’ve ever seen (I’m a designer, by the way). 3 feet must be from back of desk to front of desk unless the kids won’t need to read, write, or type under any circumstances. Because leaning over a desk at all will break the 3-feet. Also, shoulders/arms that overlap the 3-feet is a violation. EXACTLY who and EXACTLY how were the bathroom and locker room monitors vetted? Because if you think teenagers color inside the lines, you’re nuts! Heck, I had a player I coached that the entire team knew was a smoker and he vaped in the bathroom at SMS. How will the entire classroom be sanitized between classes? Not by MY kids! Cross contamination! How will the entire gym be sanitized in between classes? Not by MY kids! Cross contamination! How far will the spacing be in that pathetically small cafeteria? And who will be responsible for sanitizing THAT in between lunches? Not by MY kids! Cross contamination! And I mean every table and every chair needs to be sanitized in between lunches. If they’re eating in classrooms, they need more than 3 feet distance. One kid chokes or something goes down the wrong pipe, how many people get infected? How does a spit-filled band room work? How does a spit-filled chorus room work? I anxiously await your expedited responses!

Andrew Feinstein – (emailed comment): “I am a special education lawyer in Stonington who also has a son at Deans Mill School. I am co-chair of the Government Relations Committee of the national organization, Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA), and Legislative Chair of the state organization, Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK). As such, I have been deeply involved with the Connecticut State Department of Education in the development of its school reopening plan, issued on June 29. But, make no mistake, I think the plan is very risky in requiring all students to be in school full time in September. Moreover, the plan, by requiring each district to develop and cost out a variety of options, has resulted in a significant waste of resources. But, I do not write to critique the state plan. Rather, I will address the Stonington Plan dated July 15. In the interest of time, I will just make a number of bullet points:

1. Van Riley and the school team have taken the process very seriously and should be commended for their work.

2. Stonington was rather slow out of the blocks in starting its distance learning program in March, but, by April 1, had developed a strong and effective distance learning program, that worked well for some students.
3. Following the state's ill-advised guidance based on a misreading of FERPA, Stonington shied away from synchronous learning. That was a big mistake. In planning for future remote learning, virtual whole class sessions need to be a priority.
4. The Stonington reopening plan essentially rejects the all students-all day model required by the State Department. It is right to go so. Nevertheless, if the Board submits a plan rejecting that model, it is certain the State Department will not accept it. Rejecting the state's model is ensuring a fight. It is a fight worth making.
5. The number of COVID-19 cases are skyrocketing in the South and in the West. Connecticut, for the moment, has the pandemic under control. Given the nature of the virus, however, we cannot rest in confidence.
6. Full compliance with CDC Guidelines — even the real guidelines before the Trump Administration ordered them watered down — does not guarantee that no one gets COVID. It is just a matter of reducing the odds of transmission. School children go home to parents and grandparents. They play with each other. We know that they are less likely to become symptomatic, but we do not know if they serve as vectors to others. With that in mind, we ought to be erring on the side of extra caution.
7. The Stonington plan does not look at other creative models of service delivery, particularly the use of itinerant teachers and service providers. Use of such providers provides a middle ground between in-school instruction and remote virtual instruction.
8. We need to focus on social-emotional learning and away from academic instruction until the pandemic is resolved. Specifically, virtually all testing should be done away with. Further, students should be engaged in experiential learning, in the classroom and outside the classroom. Part of that experiential learning should be cleaning and sanitizing, reducing the need for the hiring of 4 additional custodial staff.
9. Plan 1B would have teachers on duty from 7 am to 7 pm but adds no additional money for increased compensation. This is clearly unrealistic.
10. Plan 2, relying on three-foot social distancing is, in my mind, far too risky to adopt.
11. It is not sound to have bus monitors for just the first two weeks of school. Kids on busses do not always follow rules. We cannot ask bus drivers to attempt to enforce social distancing and mask wearing. We will need monitors on busses throughout the year.
12. The Board would do well to look at a model in which students are in school for two or three hours a day and have access to virtual instruction as well. In that way, shifts could be managed with less added cost.
13. One of the major drivers of in-school instruction is the need for childcare while parents work. The Board should look at creating year-round camp-like programs to provide the needed childcare, with education being a portion of such a program.
14. There have been no waivers of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Students with disabilities have been entitled to a free appropriate public education, as defined in their IEPs, since March 13. Stonington, like all other districts, has a large remedial education obligation, known as compensatory education. Discharging that obligation should be part of the reopening plan.
15. Stonington needs to be extremely careful in pressuring parents to drive their own students to school. This is a serious equity issue, with a potential for discrimination against single parent families and parents with limited income.
16. The state plan is silent on what steps to take if a student or a teacher tests positive or becomes symptomatic. Stonington's plan needs to be explicit about what happens. Furthermore, the plan needs to contain an explicit testing protocol.
17. The plan talks about isolation rooms but does not discuss when and how they will be used.
18. All the plans, except for Plan 3, will, undoubtedly result in a major glut of traffic around the schools. The plans are silent as to how that will be managed.
19. The state plan is clear that parents can opt out of in school instruction and be guaranteed of distance learning. For students with IEPs, that distance learning program must guarantee that the student receives a free appropriate public education. For that reason, the Stonington plan should require that IEPs are written both for in school instruction and for distance learning.
20. The State reopening plan may be the largest unfunded mandate in history. Towns need to organize to make it clear that, without a huge input of state and federal money, far beyond the CARES money, no town can be expected to carry out the requirement for all students in school full time in September.”

Melissa Kwan – (emailed comment): “Dear Board Members, Thank you for the work you are doing to prioritize safety within the district's reopening considerations. After listening to the Reopening Task Force meetings and reading all supplementary documents, I ask that you please err on the side of caution when determining the best course of action for reopening. The CEA's Safe Learning Plan calls for specific measures to be in place to ensure a safe reopening of schools. One of these measures is the implementation of weekly testing of all students, teachers, and staff who return to school as well as clear protocol for contact tracing. The plans that were presented last week did not specify how this imperative testing and tracing would occur. Recent survey results indicate that there are many students and staff members who meet the CDC's definition of "people who are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19" and/or "might be at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19." As both a teacher and parent in this district, I am deeply concerned about the safety of my students, my co-workers, and my loved ones. As you plan for the safest options to reopen, I ask that you please find a way to meet the testing and tracing protocols necessary to keep our community safe. In addition, as a twenty-year Connecticut public school teacher, I have not faced a more challenging situation than distance-learning during the months of March through June of 2020. Teaching remotely from a crowded environment while also parenting my own children was inordinately difficult, but I worked tirelessly to make the best of the situation and still provide a quality education for my students. Despite the negative aspects of distance learning, the fact is that not one member of my household became sick. We were all safe. Without a vaccine, it is highly likely that our state may face another full shutdown at some point. With that in mind, I feel that it is crucial that we devote at least as much time to improving the distance learning model for both teachers and students as we are devoting to in-person learning plans. Teachers at all levels must be a part of the conversation. Leaving teachers out of the Reopening Task Force goes directly against the CEA Safe Learning Plan's advocacy for a "cooperative school district planning and oversight process" and it leaves me questioning, both as a teacher and parent, how the best interests of all learners are being served. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

Election of New Boards Members – Farouk Rajab, Temporary Chair noted that Faith Leitner, Frank Todisco, and Gordon Lord have joined the meeting. He added there was a democratic candidate that sent him an email last minute to withdraw himself for the running of the democratic seat. Mr. Todisco gave a short summary of why he is running for the Board of Education seat.

The following motion was made by Jack Morehouse and seconded by Heidi Simmons.

Motion 2: To move to appoint Frank Todisco to Candace Anderson's vacant seat for the remainder of that term.

All: Aye

Farouk Rajab and Board members congratulated Mr. Todisco. Mr. Rajab asked him to stop by the Town Hall to get sworn in so that he can start attending the meetings. He noted this vote is not official until he is sworn in. Mr. Todisco thanked the Board for their vote of confidence and confirmed he would get sworn in first thing the next morning.

Mr. Rajab noted we have two wonderful candidates to fill the Republican seat. Ms. Leitner and Mr. Lord gave a brief summary of their background and why they would like to serve as a member of the Board of Education.

The following motion was made by Heidi Simmons and seconded by Jack Morehouse.

Motion 3: That Faith Leitner fill the vacancy for Alexa Garvey for Board of Education.

Motion failed

The Board discussed the motion.

Jack Morehouse commented the Board received many letters of support for Mr. Lord and if elected believes he would make a great addition to the Board of Ed and will do a good job. He feels that the Board lost two woman and to replace with two men would be unfortunate. He added Ms. Leitner has experience, and in the middle of a pandemic and investigation there are a lot of moving parts to the Board and a learning curve. He feels that Mrs. Leitner can hit the ground running. He spoke of his past experience with Mrs. Leitner when she was on the Board. He voiced that if Mr. Lord ends up being the one chosen, he comes very highly recommended, but he supports Ms. Leitner.

Heidi Simmons agreed with Mr. Morehouse, we have been lucky with the candidates that have been left out of the woodwork so quickly to fill the two vacancies. She is most impressed with Ms. Leitner's authenticity and heart, because that is where she speaks. She added even when Ms. Leitner is not on the Board she is struggling to make things safe and right for the students. Our Board needs heart, passion to make things right and an authentic public servant.

Ms. Morrison stated she was not comfortable with the current campaigning discussion, a statement can be made but voiced that she rather just call the vote.

The Board gave their vote for the Republican seat.

Craig Esposito voted for Gordon Lord, Alisa Morrison voted for Gordon Lord. Farouk Rajab commented he appreciated and thanked both candidates for their interest in serving on the Board and has the greatest respect for the two candidates, but his vote is for Gordon Lord. Gordon Lord spoke he appreciated the Board's confidence and will try to bring heart and authenticity to the Board as Ms. Leitner did in the past. Mr. Rajab asked that Mr. Lord to stop by the Town Hall to get sworn in so that he can join the next meeting.

Reopening Report

Dr. Riley noted that a survey went out to families and staff and another will go out in August after the Board decides tonight on a reopening plan. He spoke of how many teachers and families do not want to come back. He added there will be a distance learning model available for those families. At the August 13th Board meeting he will give another update to the Board, because of the continued daily changes. The district will be relying on Ledge Light for direction if a staff or student member is infected with the virus. He hoped to have all the answers to the questions received through the reopening task force email but will have that available for the next meeting. He spoke on the State's recommendation for reopening, and number of school days and hours students will need to attend. He thanked the task force committee for their work.

Reopening Plans

Dr. Riley reviewed each of the plans noting if there is a spike in the virus and need to close we will be using the distance learning plan. He explained the constants for all plans, how they meet CDC and American Pediatrics model requirements. The state is requiring the district have reporting liaisons at each site where parents and others can get questions answered. He explained the transportation issues and the use of monitors on buses for the first two weeks. He added the Food Service department will continue to provide breakfast and meals. There will also be mask breaks and we are looking at plexiglass barriers for desks for student safety. He reviewed the costs associated with each plan. He explained the difference between the spring distance learning model and fall model. He noted that parents can change their minds from in school to distance learning at any time. Dr. Riley asked the Board to vote on the plans presented; Plan 1A, 1B, or 2 – every student, every day; Plan 1C – hybrid model; Plan 3 – distance learning model.

Farouk Rajab noted these are fluid plans. Dr. Riley noted the plans need to be submitted by Friday, July 24th to the State. Mr. Rajab added distance learning will be provided for all families. Craig Esposito asked what the plan for the extra costs is. Dr. Riley said as soon as the Board approves a plan the Board needs to have a discussion with the Board of Finance because every plan costs something and there needs to be support from the Board of Finance. Mr. Rajab asks if there are State funds available. Dr. Riley explained we are waiting for the CARE funds but uncertain how much they will be. Alisa Morrison asked if parents commit to transporting their student, are they able to change their minds. Dr. Riley replied yes they can.

Each of the Board members explained their rationale for which plan they decided on. Heidi Simmons read an editorial from the Day titled "Don't be a Jerk". Heidi Simmons, Alisa Morrison and Jack Morehouse were all in support of Plan 2. Mr. Morehouse also voiced he like the hybrid plan because it gives students an opportunity to interact with their friends and teachers but also keeps them out of school for a few hours and days which reduces the risk of catching the virus. Craig Esposito voiced he did not support Plan 2 but would vote for it because the State has not given us an option and we are experimenting with the health of our community and our children but feels we do not have any other alternative when the mandate is to have students in school five days a week and no promise of funds coming from anywhere. He added he reluctantly votes for Plan 2. Mr. Esposito commented the better idea is on line and hybrid are better alternatives. Farouk Rajab reminded everyone that distance learning will be an option for all families, because we do not understand the complexity of all families. There are students who thrive with distance learning and those who do not. Farouk Rajab voted for Plan 2 with a caveat that we have a distance learning plan and a hybrid plan.

The following motion was made by Alisa Morrison and seconded by Farouk Rajab.

Motion 4: To approve Plan 2.

All: Aye

Jack Morehouse asked is there a possibility we end up with a hybrid model. Dr. Riley responded yes, we will get some parameters from the State and health department. They will let us know when we need to go with a hybrid model. The Board had questions and a discussion on next steps, State requirements for hours and days in the classroom, and the use and types of masks.

Revised 2020-21 School Calendar

Dr. Riley explained the State said we could have 177 days on the calendar but we have 180 on this revised calendar. He suggested to move back the start of school to after Labor Day and have four Professional Learning Days up front to look at protocols and safety issues. Farouk Rajab noted the early release days on September 8, 9 and 10. Dr. Riley explained this is a State suggestion because students have not been in school for a while this helps them get familiar with protocols and teachers. Mr. Rajab also noted that graduation is still on June 18th.

The following motion was made by Farouk Rajab and seconded by Heidi Simmons.

Motion 5: To accept to move the starting of school year to September 8th.

All: Aye

Board Comments/Concerns

Alisa Morrison noted that last week it was brought up that we are appealing the FOIA decision and she had asked to add this item to this agenda and had two other Board members agree with her and felt she was ignored. She requested a special meeting next week for a potential executive session on how we proceed with that. The Board discussed when the special meeting was to take place and items to be put on the agenda. Mr. Rajab reported that he had been in touch with Attorney Chinni and asked that she have a report ready prior to the August 13th Board meeting. He also requested that the report be sent to the entire Board and new members.

The following motion was made by Jack Morehouse and seconded by Heidi Simmons.

Motion 6: To adjourn at 7:40 p.m.

All: Aye



Alisa Morrison, Temporary Board Secretary