

Board of Education Regular Meeting
Conducted Remotely
September 14, 2020

Call to Order

Board Chair Davis called the meeting to order at 5:01 p.m. via Zoom teleconference call. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: Board members Jamie Drzyzga, Debra Dudack, Melissa Finnigan, Brian Fry, Glenn Gazdik, Scott Lingenfelter, Susan Mercik Davis, Maureen Sattan, Michael Sepko; and Superintendent Timothy Van Tasel, Assistant Superintendent Michelle Zawawi, and Business Manager Bill Hoff

Absent: None

Melissa Finnigan stated that she had become aware that the public calling in could not see the presentation. Mr. Van Tasel confirmed that a copy of both the presentation and the video itself would be posted on the district website tomorrow.

Recognition

None

Public Comment

Jen Bombard, 6 Whitfield Way, thanked the Board, administrators, teachers, and staff for their hard work in reopening schools. She was disappointed that the Board meeting is being held virtually. She supports the increase in in-person learning, and she asked the administration to review distance learning at the secondary level as she feels it is not effective.

Mike Saridakis, 717 Two States Ave, asked where tonight's presentation will be posted on the website. He questioned why the district is not opening fully when in previous presentations and correspondence over the summer indicated that if the health metrics were favorable, schools could fully open. He noted that in the parent survey sent out this summer, 75% of parents preferred full time in-person learning.

Krista Pochron, 3562 Phelps Road, questioned why schools cannot return to full in-person learning as she is a nurse practitioner who works in a nursing home where restrictions have been eased. She added finding and paying for daycare is a challenge as well as helping her children with distance learning.

Susan Richardson White, 824 Newgate Road, thanked everyone for the extraordinary work. She is grateful for the hybrid learning model and appreciates the smaller class sizes. She shared data from Georgia Tech relative to COVID-19 spread and infection rates.

Board Member Comment

Board member Dudack commended the district in the successful reopening of schools and credited that to the extensive planning that took place.

Board Member Sepko, thanked administration, teachers and parents for the effort to get schools open. Board members Drzyzga, Finnigan, Fry and Gazdik echoed these comments.

Reports to the Board

- Superintendent's Report
 - Mr. Van Tassel thanked the administration, staff, students and families for making the first two weeks of school successful. The goal is to get students back to school full time and the district is working towards that.
 - Mr. Van Tassel thanked the parent members of the Parent Advisory Committee for their partnership and collaboration: Ann Ho, Kelley Rypysc, Corinne Walters, James Mol and Brian and Micaelle Martin.
 - Superintendent Van Tassel announced that Denise Raymond, McAlister PE teacher, has been nominated for the Professional Award from the National Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.
 - He thanked Carl Casinghino, SHS teacher, and SHS students for developing COVID-19 safety trainings for staff and students.
 - Suffield High School was ranked around the top 1500 of high schools in the country by U.S. News and World Report for second year in a row.
- Board Chair's Report
 - Board Chair Mercik Davis said she has been in communication with First Selectwoman, Melissa Mack and Town Attorney Derek Donnelly relative to holding in person Board meetings. The Board of Selectman decided to keep meetings virtual at this time. The Board of Education could possibly be the pilot board for holding in person meetings.
 - She stated the Board and administration have also been in regular communication with the Board of Finance to discuss COVID related expenses and how it is impacting the Board of Education's budget.
 - She noted she has received many emails from the community and welcomes these communications. She appreciates the kind comments and recognizes this is a difficult time for all.
- Business Manager's Report
 - Mr. Hoff thanked M&J transportation for a great start to the year and thanked parents for their patience with the new schedule.
 - The State and Federal government is allowing for free breakfast and lunch for all students, both in person and distance learners through December 31, 2020.
- Board of Selectmen's Report
 - First Selectwoman Melissa Mack said the Board of Selectmen decided to keep Board meetings virtual for now and reevaluate this decision in a few weeks. The rationale was to allow for inclusivity for all who wanted to attend these meetings to be allowed to do so safely. She noted the recommendation is still to stay home and stay safe so virtual meetings is the best option at this point. It also gives officials time to evaluate the health data, especially with families coming back from summer vacations. She noted the health data is two weeks late at best. She also pointed out that virtual meetings have enabled unprecedented transparencies and participation by the public. Ms. Mack added there are space challenges at Town Hall to accommodate proper social distancing at meetings, and there are added expenses for cleaning and for technology equipment to allow for hybrid meetings.
 - Ms. Mack said the town identified early on that childcare will be an issue for many parents. To that end, the Town is offering a daycare option for families through the Parks and Recreation Department at a cost of \$600/month. This program will be offered throughout the school year and will adjust as the school reopening model changes.
- Board of Finance Liaison's Report
 - None

Approval of Minutes

MOTION #21-12: Dudack moved to approve the Board of Education meeting minutes of June 8, 2020, June 15, 2020, June 22, 2020, June 30, 2020, August 17, 2020, September 3, 2020, and September 9, 2020. Drzyzga seconded the motion. All members voted in favor. The motion passed unanimously **9-0-0**.

Consent Agenda

None

Discussion/Action Items

- **Approval of Amount to be Designated to the Non-lapsing Account**

Mr. Hoff said that state law allows school districts and towns to set up a fund to roll over any surplus at the end of each year. Discussions have occurred with the Board of Finance and the Board of Education. Up to 2% of the budget can be rolled into this account, and use of these funds must be approved by both Boards. Based on the district's year-end state report, we are seeking to designate \$150,000 into this account. The Board of Finance will make the final decision.

MOTION #21-13: Sepko moved to designate \$150,000 of the 2019-2020 Board of Education budget surplus to the Non-lapsing account, subject to Board of Finance approval. Gazdik seconded the motion. In response to a Board member's question as to what happens to those funds if the Board of Finance does not approve it, Mr. Van Tassel said the amount would be returned to the town general fund. In response to a Board member's question as to under what conditions the Board of Finance may not approve this designation, Mr. Van Tassel said the Board of Finance is very open to utilizing this rollover account, but the end of year financial situation of any year could be a reason as to when they may not approve roll over funds into this account. All members voted in favor. The motion passed unanimously **9-0-0**.

- **High School Athletics Update**

Mr. Blain said 221 student athletes are currently participating in athletics, which is only 17 fewer students than last year. We are currently in Phase II of the athletics reentry program, which ends this week. Phase III begins September 21-30 and will allow for full team practices. Phase IV runs from Oct. 1 through November 6 and will include regionalized games. The football season has been cancelled, per CIAC guidance. Senior nights will be scheduled at the beginning of each season. At the middle school, athletics will begin on September 21 for its two sports: field hockey and cross country. Students will be practicing in their cohorts.

- **Phase II School Reopening**

Mr. Van Tassel stated the administration has relied on the guidance and advice from the district's School Medical Advisor, Dr. Richard Segool, and North Central District Health Department (NCDHD) Director, Patrice Sulik. Mr. Van Tassel said he has considered all perspectives in making this recommendation; however, his main concern is the health and safety of students and staff. Mr. Van Tassel shared as of September 11, the district has 12 students and 5 staff in quarantine. For Phase II, Superintendent Van Tassel had planned to recommend a 3-day/2-day alternating week in-person learning model K-12 for cohorts A and B, and a temporary full distance option. This hybrid model will keep cohorts and social distancing intact and increase in-person learning; however, distance learning coordination will be more difficult without the Wednesdays as planned in Phase I. He believes this is the safest option, with the most controls. Due to significant community feedback, though, he is also proposing an option of a 4-day week in person learning model for K-5 or K-8, keeping Wednesdays for teacher planning. He recommends that the high school maintain the 3/2 split hybrid model regardless of the model at

the lower grades. Interim Principals Kris Pryce and Gina Olearczyk said their teachers are overwhelmed and the Wednesdays provide the additional support they need to plan for teaching both in-person and virtually simultaneously. Superintendent Van Tassel said this model does concern him because it eliminates the smaller cohorts and decreases social distancing. Patrice Sulik recommended the most conservative approach be taken as it has the longest shelf life.

Board Chair Davis asked for clarity, and Mr. Van Tassel said depending on the feedback he receives from the Board, he intends to move to the four day in-person plan for K-5 or K-8.

A Board member pointed out the low headcount at SMS, and asked what Wednesdays would be like going forward, should they still have it as a planning day. Interim Principal Kris Pryce clarified how the district intends to use Wednesdays, asynchronously.

A Board member passed on a community concern about the inability for students in the younger grades to follow all the technology, and weighted in supporting the four-day model.

A Board member expressed concerns of not following the public health recommendations with cohorting.

Board Chair Davis requested Board members to clearly state their opinions on the two plans proposed by the Superintendent.

A Board member asked for clarification: if K-5 goes to the four-day model and 6-12 goes to the 3/2 model, the teachers at SHS and SMS wouldn't even have the Wednesday work days and they're the ones doing the hybrid. Mr. Van Tassel confirmed that it is a tradeoff. The Board member expressed that other professions are stretched, our kids need to be in school, and if they can go four days, why not make it five days?

A Board member asked for Principal Smith's opinion for the middle school, who stated that cohorting was his big concern. The Board member supports 4-day model K-5 and 3/2 for 6-12.

A Board member expressed support back in school as much as possible, and could support even five days K-5 and increased in person learning for 6-12, citing State guidance on in-person reopening.

A Board member asked about testing, return to school protocols for quarantined individuals, and contact tracing. Mr. Van Tassel said it depends on the circumstances of the students; there are protocols. Ms. Sulik says a retesting metric for returning to school is not advised. The Board member has observed varying value in distance learning, could support a 3/2 plan, but weighed in as supporting the four-day plan, recognizing the risks, but acknowledging the need for more in person learning.

A Board member asked for clarification on how elementary administrators had assessed the desires of the teachers. No official survey was done, but feedback was received less formally. The Board member is concerned that the public health advice be followed and also stated that if cohorts are compromised, five days is preferred.

A Board member asked if the upcoming decision is time limited, and Mr. Van Tassel said he was moving away from that and planning to make decisions based on observations as time goes on. Mr. Van Tassel said he heard from the Board tonight their desire for more in person learning,

which moves him to the four days model in the younger grades, though he will need to walk it back if health circumstances dictate. The Board member expressed a desire for more in person learning, acknowledging the elementary administrators' desire to keep Wednesdays as work days, and weighed in as supporting the 4-day program, with future reconsideration for moving to five days.

In response to a Board member's question relative to what fully-distant learning will look like with an increase in-person learning, Mr. Van Tassel said with increased in-person learning, we are giving up planning time and, therefore, it will be more difficult for teachers to be able to provide a robust distance learning program. He discussed providing possible additional supports, such as using coaches and starting a virtual Saturday academy.

A Board member weighed in with a concern of different schools having different schedules, and supports the 3/2 model to maintain that consistency.

A Board member asked why Mr. Van Tassel has interpreted the Board response as supporting 4 days, why we can't maintain the status quo hybrid and why Mr. Van Tassel feels it is ok to disregard the expertise of public health leaders. Mr. Van Tassel reiterated that he is responding to what he is hearing from the Board, the State, and public health professionals. He is hearing that the majority of the Board want to move to four days.

A Board member asked for clarification on social distancing impacts of moving to the four days. Mr. Van Tassel provided context and noted that if the district moves to a 4-day a week model, staggered start times would need to be instituted.

A Board member weighed in with a support of the 3/2 model due to the local public health recommendation and would like to see a measured approach. Mr. Van Tassel plans to communicate a decision tomorrow and welcomes any public comment near the end of the meeting tonight.

Subcommittee Reports

- August 20, 2020 – Curriculum & Instruction subcommittee meeting – Board member Drzyzga said the committee discussed scheduling a distance learning workshop.
- August 27, September 3 & September 10, 2020 – COVID-19 Ad hoc committee meetings – Board member Mercik Davis said committee received updates from administration on reopening plans, concerns and struggles with the reopening of schools, and a discussion of the 3/2 hybrid model.
- September 3, 2020 Finance and Facilities – Board member Sepko said the committee discussed the vacancy turnover factor for certified and non-certified staff, COVID expenses incurred by the district, water testing, and the town-wide facility study RFP.

Board Liaison Reports

- CREC – Board member Sattan said CREC is meeting this Wednesday
- Agriscience – Brittany Burke who graduated last year, was awarded the Silver Recognition Award for diversified livestock.
- CABA – No report.

Future Business

None

Public Comment

Drew Hamilton, 40 Stratton Farms Road, said he supports staying in the current hybrid model, see how it progresses, and then move toward the 3/2 hybrid model.

Amanda Trelease, 3 Williams Circle, asked how will fully remote students be impacted with more in person learning.

Jason Neely, 1189 Mapleton Avenue, supports the current hybrid model and said we should listen to local health officials.

Ann Richardson-White, 824 Newgate Road, said parents are concerned about getting to work and need students in school. If you do different hybrid models at each of the schools, it will be a bigger problem for working families with children on different schedules. Moving to another model than what we are currently in, goes against local health officials' recommendations. She believes the district should take the medical risk more seriously.

Krystal Holmes, 42 Michael Lane, agrees with Mr. Hamilton and supports a more conservative approach, keeping the current model and hopefully moving to the 3/2 hybrid model.

Laura Zinnen, 1245 S. Grand Street, said her students are attending school in the full remote model and wants to make sure her students are not left behind. She added her children's teachers are doing a great job.

Heidi Englehardt, 237 Birch Road, said her special needs granddaughter needs to be in school more. If safety precautions are followed, she supports the 4-day a week in person learning.

Mike Saridakis, 717 Two States Ave, said he hears those who express concern about the increased risk of exposure with increased in person learning; however, public health officials have made errors on many forecasts and predictions. Contracting COVID is not a life or death proposition for most. He reminded the Board that its mission is to educate our children. The district should mitigate the risk based on state guidelines and inform families so they can conduct their own risk assessment.

Kristin Allard, 68 Woodland Terrace, said her children are attending school in the full remote model and has concerns that distance learning will be less involved with more in person learning. She said at the middle school, cohorts are not strictly by teams.

Hisham Abouelleil, 66 Deep Brook Harbor, said the town's current numbers are low because of the steps taken to mitigate the risk of infection. He believes we should continue with the current hybrid model.

Julianne Williams, 1870 North Street, said we should be following the advice of our health care professionals. Her children are full remote and their learning should be considered as well. If we make decisions we are not prepared for, it could be more detrimental.

Kara Kettles, 18 Magnolia Drive, said she is a teacher in Massachusetts and supports getting children back into the classroom as much as possible with safety precautions in place.

Krista Pochron, 3562 Phelps road, said there are other illnesses such as the seasonal flu that cause similar effects as COVID-19 and understand the school is doing everything they can to keep students and staff safe. We now have extensive knowledge on how to treat, intervene, and prevent COVID-19. She supports parents who choose to keep their children home, but there should be an option for parents who want more in-person learning.

Chris Piccoli, 691 Suffield Street, said students' safety can be ensured if the right precautions are taken. He believes parents should have the ability to choose the option that would work best for them.

Sabrina McDonald, 427 North Grand Street, said she fully supports a 4-day a week model as the current model is unsustainable for her family. The health data supports full in-person learning.

Chris Devanney, 3700 Phelps Road, is concerned with the social emotional health of his children. Many children are at home alone. Mental health concerns are just as valid as the risk of COVID. He suggested a survey be sent to parents seeking their concerns regarding their children's mental health.

Board Member Comment

Board members Sattan, Finnigan, Fry, Drzyzga and Mercik Davis thanked the public for attending and their input and asked for civility, patience and kindness. Board member Lingenfelter thanked parents and the public who offered their comments this evening.

Adjournment

Sepko moved, Fry seconded to adjourn the meeting at 9:04 p.m.

Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of October 5, 2020.

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Sattan
Secretary