

Board of Education Special Meeting
Conducted Remotely
October 26, 2020

Call to Order

Board Chair Mercik Davis called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m. via Zoom teleconference call.

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

Board Chair Mercik Davis said the purpose of holding this meeting fully remotely was to ensure compliance with the CT Governor's new regulation regarding in-person meetings and to provide full access to the public. Board Chair Davis reviewed the public comment guidelines.

Public Comment

Amy Healy, 185 North Main Street, commended the Board and Superintendent for keeping the hybrid schedule. She did not believe the plan described in the parent survey is the best plan as she was concerned about the impact on full distance learners who would not receive live instruction if the district moves to full in-person learning. She was also concerned with the increased risk to students and staff in a full in-person model.

Julianne Williams, 1870 North Street, expressed her concerns for limited instruction for full distance students if the district returns to full in-person learning. She was told full remote classes would not be an option for full distance learners. She noted the COVID-19 cases are rising and she believed another full shut down will occur. She does not want to have to choose between the health of her family and her children's education.

Kristen Allard, 68 Woodland Terrace, said she thought the survey information was unclear and she could not get answers to her questions. The health metrics support the district remaining in the hybrid model. She was disappointed in the lack of information provided for full distance learners and feels parents have to make the choice between their child's education and their health. She had specific questions to how the education will look for full distance learners with full in-person learning.

Suzanne Richardson-White, 824 Newgate Road, thanked the administrators, teachers and Superintendent for their tireless efforts. She expressed her concern that the district is considering moving to full in-person learning when the health data supports the hybrid model. She referenced the state and Hartford country metrics.

James Mol, 399 S Grand St, thanked the Board, administration, Superintendent, teachers and staff. He said the hybrid model has provided the greatest security for students and staff while providing the most in-person learning. If we move to a full in-person model, schools will close. He said he would prefer his children attend school in person two to three days a week than none at all. If we put the teacher population at risk, we may not have teachers to manage even a full remote learning

model. He asked that school to remain in hybrid otherwise we are putting students and staff at greater risk.

Jennifer Rodriguez, 560 Thrall Avenue, said moving to a full in-person model is not data driven. She questioned the rationale for why it is being considered. She also questioned why live instruction would be eliminated for full distance learners if school went to full in-person learning. She said the health data should drive the decision.

Ben Rodriguez, 560 Thrall Avenue, thanked the Board, administrators and teachers and said the district should maintain the status quo. Full in person learning will result in a substandard education for full distance learners. The data is very clear and supports the status quo.

Board Chair Mercik Davis read an email submitted to the Board from Krystal Holmes, who commended the district for how they have handled this school year. She has been well informed, feels her children are safe in the hybrid model, and fully supported keeping this model. She recognized no decision is perfect, but the hybrid model will provide a safer environment.

Discussion/Action Item

- Discussion of School Reopening Plan

Mr. Van Tassel said the purpose of the parent and staff survey was to gather stakeholder feedback, help inform decision-making, promote transparency and maintain open communication. He apologized that the information he provided was confusing and caused angst to families. He shared the results of the parents and staff surveys, which showed an almost even split for elementary parents who chose either full in-person model and families who chose either the hybrid or the full distance models. At the middle school, the majority of families chose the hybrid model. At all three schools, teachers and staff overwhelmingly chose the hybrid model over the full in-person model. Superintendent Van Tassel also shared area districts' current school models and noted some districts do have elementary in-person while secondary is hybrid, but there are also several districts that are in hybrid. The average positive COVID-19 cases in all of these districts is 6.53. Suffield has had 10 positive cases since the beginning of the year. Mr. Van Tassel discussed the metrics and thresholds that will be used in determining the appropriate school model status moving forward for moving to both full in person learning K-5 and full distance learning district-wide. Any decision is subject to the North Central District Health Department (NCDHD), the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), or the Governor's directive. Mr. Van Tassel noted that the CDC has revised the definition of close contact. The district is looking at creating classroom quadrants at the secondary level to reduce the number of students and staff potentially needing to be quarantined. Mr. Van Tassel said he recommends the district remain in the hybrid model based on the current metrics. Mark Janick, SEA president, said he also surveyed the teachers and the results were similar to the Superintendent's survey results. He said all teachers want to be back in full, but they are concerned for the safety for their students. He added the hybrid learning model is very challenging for teachers. Suzanne Wosko, teacher at Spaulding, said Mr. Van Tassel has done an outstanding job for Suffield. She noted the hybrid model is working well at the elementary level and the students are getting used to the new structure. Spaulding teachers are concerned with the students' and staff safety. NCDHD Director, Patrice Sulik, answered Board members' questions in regards to the shortening the 14-day quarantine period if a negative COVID test is provided and what other districts' thresholds are that have more in-person learning. Ms. Sulik said a negative test does not clear anyone to get back to school more quickly because the incubation period for COVID-19 is 14 days. Ms. Sulik said some school systems that are doing more in person learning have an increase in cases; however, it is not conclusive where the

exposures are occurring. She discussed the use of quadrant classroom layouts and encouraged districts to have seating charts with assigned seats. In response to Board members' questions, Mr. Van Tassel explained that the threshold state, county and Suffield metrics will be used going forward in decision making. He said in-person learning will be phased in and based on health data. Mr. Van Tassel said the CSDE is requiring districts to continue offering full distance learning. He noted if we move to a full in-person model, it will be challenging for teachers to have a full classroom and monitor a small group of fully remote learners. Board members discussed the threshold metrics and asked for clarification around what constitutes a case. Ms. Sulik said the district should treat a number of students in one class who test positive as an isolated cluster of cases and not use that situation to skew the direction of the learning model. Board members discussed the survey data and a Board member noted that by grouping those who opted for hybrid and full distance together minimizes the significant number of families who opted for full in-person learning. Board members discussed the need to offer synchronous learning to full distance students, the logistics of moving from one learning model to another and the impact to students, students moving in and out of the model they chose, and looking at contact tracing on a case-by-case basis. Mr. Van Tassel said the health data is monitored continuously and there is a plan to move into the different learning models. He added that it is challenging for teachers and staff to stay on top of students who are choosing to stay home on in-person days or students moving in and out of full distance learning. A Board member said he would have liked to Board to take action on this decision, and supports following public health metrics, though we did not follow the metrics when they indicated full person learning could take place earlier in the year. In response to a Board member's question relative to a correlation in the recent positive cases, Mr. Van Tassel said there is reason to believe that there may be a correlation between them, but he was unsure of how the health department reviews and determines a correlation.

Public Comment

Daniel Bean, 945 Thrall Ave, asked will full distance students be able to remain in full distance if the district goes back to full in-person learning?

Jeff McDonald, 427 North Grand Street, asked if a decision to change the school model is made immediately if the two-week average so indicates?

Amy Healy, 185 North Main Street, was happy to hear asynchronous learning for full distance learners is off-the-table. She asked if schools go back to full in-person learning and full distance learners are moved to a remote teacher, and if schools go back to hybrid or full distance, will those students return to their regular classroom teacher?

Mike Saridakis, 717 Two States Avenue, said the school model decision should not be made by one person. Is there a plan to move to full in-person once a vaccine is available? Can the school require students and staff to get the vaccination?

Kathy Muska, 55 Brandywine Lane, said she does not envy the Superintendent's or the Board of Education's position and appreciates their hard work and efforts.

Michael Loosemore, 43 Woodbridge Drive, said he would like clarification of who is coming up with the metrics in determining when schools open.

Adjournment

Sepko moved, Fry seconded to adjourn the meeting at 9:06 p.m.

Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of November 2, 2020.

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Sattan
Secretary