

Approved Minutes
SCHOOL BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Albany Area Schools – ISD #745
Blattner Energy Arts Theatre
November 2, 2020

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Chair Winkels at 6:00 p.m.

2. Roll Call

Present: Winkels, Kreuzer, Hansen, Carbajal, Paulsen, Sand, Pennie

Absent: None

3. Reschedule November 11th School Board Meeting

Veterans Day – unique window because of canvassing results of election – making for a short time frame for scheduling. November 12th at 5:30pm –

Motion Carbajal

Second Hansen

All in favor

4. School Learning Plan Decision

Mr. Johnson reviewed a number of data points and much of the guidance and thresholds continue to be moving targets. On Oct 27th The Commissioner of Education released revised guidelines, with the pillars being:

- Protect health and wellness of students, staff, and families
- Prioritize safe in person learning
- County data 1st point of data & affording districts to look at more localized data
- After initial selection of learning models, the decision to shift models should shift because of levels at school level, and even building levels while and continuing to review county and local data is referred to as the “scalpel approach”
- Also, confirmed cases, quarantines, close contacts, and other health data

County and school district data was reviewed. The Dashboard from Stearns County was reviewed.

Western Stearns county numbers continue to be high.

Within the walls of school – data reviewed ---203 quarantines of students, generally have been between 100 to 130 in Oct and most recently, case rates increasing to 26 staff last Friday and today 230 students and 36 staff quarantines. These increases cause alarm for providing enough teachers/support staff to facilitate class. Cumulative cases from the beginning of school year to current - 44 positive cases staff and students combined. 46 school buildings in the state with 5 or more cases.

A question – Staff that’s on quarantine, if tested and negative, can they come back? This depends on the situation with close contact there is a 14 day requirement. If positive case within household can go up to 24 days if unable to isolate, adding complexity and difficulty to managing the district.

If they just have symptoms, they are allowed to get tested and if a negative test, they can return.

Question: How do they teach if quarantined? – Most are teaching from home. But need additional staff to be in charge of students in the building.

Carbajal- after a long weekend, spending time going through numbers, looking at trends, we need to ask what’s in the best interest of staff, kids and community.

Mr. Carbajal put a motion on the floor for a learning plan, with a 14-day distance learning mandate, commencing shortly because of rising numbers concern especially within the staff. He reviewed the plan. The plan included beginning distance learning for the middle and high school on November 5 and students returning to school on November 19.

Motion by Carbajal, seconded by Hansen to approve the plan as presented.

Discussion:

Hansen questions as it relates to the covering challenges with staff, do we have a number where we cannot cover. Mr. Johnson responded that there is no perfect and exact number it is hard to pinpoint, but we are there now, if not already having exceeded it. Last week at Avon Elementary they were very nip and tuck for coverage. To make class work, many resources pulled in different directions, we pull resources from other areas which is not ideal. Member Hansen likes the “reset” hopefully significantly helps with quarantine counts.

Comments from attendees:

An audience member brought up a question to continue through Thanksgiving, with the elementary schools participating, essentially distance learn the entire district. The community needs to be engaged in these decisions. Also, it doesn't make sense athletics going and school not going. Community needs to respond better with their adherence to safety guidelines.

A teacher asked the board for distance learning to start on the 9th. This Thursday is the end of the quarter. Doesn't make sense to start the last day of the quarter. She also encouraged the board to start 11/10 and also extend after Thanksgiving, coming back Dec 14th for one week and two days.

Carbajal stated the reason went with the 6th was because of the concerns he's heard from staff and families – the sooner the better.

A parent reminded the board that the data for Albany High School data is two weeks behind. He is concerned about the harm caused to students, but understands we are doing the best we can. We have to think about the students – be more positive. Harm, depression, should also be a concern.

Board member Pennie reminded the board – kids are not super spreaders. The staff has done and continues to do an amazing job of controlling and safety. The kids are much better off being here socially and emotionally.

A teacher reiterated the data cumulative cases and staff and students – interested to know what location they are in to dig into data. In Avon they are short of support staff. Bringing up a concern over quarantining wrong people. In Sept – several students out and when she did distance learning for 5-6 school days she felt connected with students the full day. Understand DL is knocking at the door.....from her perspective she feels that 5th graders can handle distance learning because she has implemented it with success.

A community member reminded us that we cannot say definitively that students are not spreading.

A parent acknowledged this is a no win situation-community and teachers pulling different directions. Unfortunately, creating a fight between teachers and community with the kids used as ransom. He has lots of respect for all teachers. Distance learning is a train wreck for more than 50% of students – do not get a lot of things they need by not being here.

Respected friend cardiologist at SC Hospital – stated that he is more worried about kids driving home from school than from Covid as it relates to children. The parent reminded the board, the remedy cannot be more detrimental than the problem itself. He feels distance learning is more detrimental than the problem at hand. We need a path to normalcy – but will take open minds and creativity.....challenge the community to stop the spread. Remember it's not parents against parents, as kids are the ones suffering. He reminded the board that we were elected by the community to be the voice of the community.

Another parent thanked the board for service, and stated they are voted in for a reason to be the voice and decision makers for the community. His two kids that are quarantined where the data seems weak at best. The parent asked a question of the 200+ quarantine: Are we being overly aggressive in pulling out teachers and kids? How do we provide the best level of education for kids? – otherwise you may lose children to other districts. Is the data relative to staff, and are we holding staff accountable for their decisions inside and outside of school? How do we hold adults/community members accountable? He also acknowledged teachers are under immense pressure, noting a study reinforcing this. Please do everything humanly possible to keep these kids in school. Kids need to get the education they deserve.

Mr. Johnson, responding to the question, we are following the Dept. of Health reporting guidelines. We also run our decisions past our local resources to ensure safety and adherence to the rules.

A senior student stated it's time to worry about seeing quarantine teachers/ staff – are these symptoms or positive cases. He is OK with Mr. Carbajal's plan and likes the set date to come back. Also, likes activities continuing. He reminded the board that there is very little infection with sports team, good at abiding by rules.

A teacher, relaying a question from a teacher friend: Would the board consider Pre K to 2nd grade – in person and 3 and up to distance learning?

Mr. Winkels reminded our discussion should center around a decision impacting the middle school and high school.

A parent wanted to talk about wellness. She was OK with the plan as it relates to her family. If there is an end date to come back it is palatable. The virus is not going away. We should allow teachers or people who are at high risk to opt out and allow students that want to learn the ability to learn in school. Her son stated learning is not happening at home, with many kids playing video games, on the phone, and these behaviors draw concern to long term learning consequences.

A Pod example was shared from another elementary school, where kids are in pods and quarantine pods instead of entire class – Elk River.

Board member Sand shared examples from parents – signs of depression, kids being isolated, worrisome social emotional health & anxiety. And also stated the community needs to take personal responsibility

A teacher and parent gave a shout out to work from teachers. They are giving it everything they got every single day. They are doing the best they can to make a difficult situation the best positive.

A senior student that has been to every incident command team, listened to teachers, parents etc, and feels students are being used as pawnsaffecting students more negatively than positively. Students show this negativity and students are growing frustrated about not being able to see friends, and missing out a big part of high school all the activities and memories. With taking a break there is a real concern about students' decisions.

A school employee asked if there are there still going to be kids coming into school while on break---welding, special ed, etc.....

We are able to make minor concessions to special ed, lab work, tech ed, etc. -minimal but allowed.

A parent reminded the board that home school was an option. Kids are at school because parents want to have them in school. Kids are happy to be there. Her 8th grader is really struggling with hybrid, and she is concerned about moving to distance for that student.

A question was presented– what do the teacher’s contain relative to teaching time/etc- possibly building in extend school year to increase quality of education?

He asked the board to think outside of the box.

A teacher, speaking for middle school teachers and end of quarter, stated we are not going to get quality distance learning day by starting so early, suggesting pushing day out until the 10th.

Member Kreuzer thanked the families for the trust they have given the board and the teachers. When we take oath of office, we agree to provide an equitable, quality education for every student. There is a concern over distance learning being equitable, especially in long term. He reinforced the safety of school, with safety procedures. We also need to always consider the alternatives when moving from hybrid – equitable education, safer than school, what do families want, will infection rates change etc. All parents that have approached him wanted kids in school at a minimum hybrid. We cannot allow decisions to be divisive – giving examples. At this time, if we do not have the teachers/staff/bus drivers to continue, the 14-day proposal makes a lot of sense.

Mr. Winkels discussed distance learning – giving thought to the social emotional effects and being really concerned about students and wellbeing. Distance learning makes a lot of challenges in and of itself.

Cassie brought up the biggest concern- staffing. There were four incidents at least where we have reached critical levels. She also agreed, social emotional effects are real, and the community effort is critical.

Hansen agrees with the board's viewpoints – like the plan gives us a reset. He is worried about the fact that numbers are not likely to go down in the short term. Worry that going into distance learning for two weeks we are going to have a hard time coming back from this.

He was on call with MN Dept. of Health – the experts' perspective that kids are safest in school as they are following CDC guidelines. He is very torn as wants kids in class, but does not want to minimize impact with staff. Do we continue Hybrid if we can staff it? Try to make it to Thanksgiving? Is this a better time? Parents are getting the impression that distance learning days are not very productive – students not getting contact effectively. He would like to see continuing in person learning....move the day down the calendar further?

Don reiterated the concern about the older kids acting responsibly in distance learning.

A staff member reminded the board- when you say break – teachers are still teaching and this is not a “break”.

Don – pointed out how much effort is being put in by teachers to improve distance learning and the significant improvement that has happened.

Mr. Winkels called for a vote on the motion:

In favor of: Carbajal, Kreuzer, Hansen, Sand, Paulsen

Against: Pennie, Winkels

Mr. Winkels made closing remarks, and reminded the community to be safe.

5. Adjournment

Motion by Kreuzer, seconded by Carbajal to adjourn the meeting. Supported by all present.

Agenda completed at 8:00 pm.

Matt Kreuzer, Clerk