

Frank Todisco, Board Chairman called the special virtual meeting to order at 7:00p.m. Members present were Heidi Simmons, Board Secretary, Farouk Rajab, Gordon Lord, Craig Esposito, Alisa Morrison and Jack Morehouse. Also present were Lily Haghpasand, Student Government Representative, Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary, Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent of Schools, Mary Anne Butler, Assistant Superintendent and Allison Van Etten, Director of Special Services.

### **Comments from Citizens**

Rachel O'Dell shared a letter on behalf of the high school paraprofessionals. She voiced as a parent and an employee she sees both sides and understands why everyone wants to go back to school but we have come this far and would like to have schools open at a point when it is safe. She read the letter that expressed thoughts from the high school paraprofessionals regarding returning to school in an in-person model and they supported Dr. Van Riley's plan. She noted that returning to a full in school model can leave the employees feeling vulnerable and unsupported. She expressed the groups' thoughts of staying with the hybrid model at this time.

Bruce Yarnall noted he is a special ed teacher at the high school and thanked Dr. Riley for understanding in a really difficult time. He gave an example of holding a Board meeting with Board members and other community members rather than in a room such as the size of the District Office cafeteria but in a classroom where it could make everyone feel uncomfortable. He used that as an example of what teachers are being asked to do when we speak of being with the freshman class, being in a room with 15 other students and two teachers, where they are constantly reminding students to pull up their masks. He noted the Board has a difficult decision to make and thanked them for their work but asked they think about that and the situations teachers and students will be placed in.

Melissa Kwan noted she is a teacher at the high school, community member and parent of students in the district voiced her concerns for full in-person learning at this time. She noted as a teacher she wants nothing more than to welcome students into the classroom again but no teacher wants to see a student or their family member suffer from a preventable illness. She spoke of the current model and the difficulty of it for teachers, but noted that this model is the safest. She asked the Board to consider the in-person model only once all have been vaccinated.

Tori Gimple noted she is a para at the middle school and read a letter prepared by the paraprofessionals at the middle school. She voiced her concern for the return to full in-person learning due to a number reasons, such as 1) adhering to the CDC guidelines of maintaining 6ft distance for safety, 2) not all staff will be vaccinated immediately, 3) putting teachers in an environment that does not meet CDC guidelines makes one ask how much they are valued, 4) higher number of people in the building makes a higher chance of spreading the virus, 5) many staff are eating their lunches in their cars so they can feel safe, 6) the unguaranteed safety in the cafeteria when staff and students need to take masks off to eat, 7) transfer and exposure at lockers and hallways, 8) how will students transition back into the building. She noted returning to a full in-person learning is not sensible at this time and asked the Board to delay the leap to open schools forward. She voiced the group supports Dr. Van Riley suggestion to continue with the hybrid model until all can be vaccinated and hold safety first above everything else.

Nicole Torres spoke she and her husband are health care providers and understands this is challenging and appreciates everything the teachers and the Board are doing. She spoke of her decision to move her younger students to St. Michael's school and the success the in-person five day learning with the three to six feet distancing. She asked at what point Stonington will decide to go back, if we don't go back this year four days, since there will always be COVID-19 and CDC guidelines will not change. She spoke of the in school rate of transmitting the virus. She voiced that individual families and teachers need to make individual choices. She asked if the teacher survey was done before or after the Governor's announcement to vaccinate teachers and has a new survey gone out to them afterwards speaking of the change of 4-5 day in-person learning. She feels we need to see what is best for the majority with mitigation measures whether now or in the fall. She asked if Stonington cannot provide the education students need is it possible for parents to get a waiver for those who cannot afford and need to continue to stay at their jobs, to get a waiver to attend other schools.

Ashley Tewell spoke as a parent of a Deans Mill student and on behalf of other parents. She addressed the timeline of events of the remote learning model in Stonington. She voiced that a plan to return to in-person learning should have been worked on from the first day of school and now six months have gone by and the Board has not put any thought into making this happen for the children. Ms. Tewell commented the hybrid model is not the best model at this time, since it has put a toll on children, parents and teachers. Many children need in-person learning and is worried about long term affects with the current model. She read articles related to the affects of the current model. She spoke of the proposed plan but voiced it is time to fully reopen the schools and do what is right for the students and their future.

Kate Wagner noted she is a physician in the community and discussed what she feels is a discrepancies between what everyone thinks is the best path forward for the reopening. She noted that the national call for reopening schools is coming from the medical community, they are evaluating the data and are saying we need to prioritize in-person education and done safely. She commented our theory from last summer is wrong, regarding the spread of the virus by children, this has been proven false. She noted would not ask for in-person education if there was not solid data to support this. She voiced her concerns regarding the current hybrid model and that it is causing more harm than good. She spoke of other districts and the guidelines they used. Spoke of why she moved to this district. She encouraged teachers who are worried about returning to the full in-person model to reach out to data that is available. She feels we need to educate ourselves and make rational evidence-based decisions. We have enough data and need to move forward to do what is best the children.

Dan Kelly a parent of a high school junior and would love to see him in school six days a week 200 plus days a year. He noted his grades have suffered but believes the safest way is to continue in the hybrid model. He commented about the employees trying to get appointments and his assistance with that. He spoke about neighboring schools going in full time and the need to close due to COVID-19. He commented on the ventilation at each of the school buildings and recommended holding off the full in-person model until May 1<sup>st</sup> when doors and windows can be opened. He added we have the tents and teachers can teach outside. He voiced that we should go back after April vacation because everyone needs to get vaccinated. He added we have gone by CDC guidelines, why stop now. We are almost there so let's go back to four days on May 1<sup>st</sup>. He noted he hoped the Board will make the best decision.

Lisa Hoagland commented she is a substitute teacher in the district and it is disappointing not to see the schools in full time. She commented her own students are struggling and she recently attended the virtual meeting for incoming high school students. With all the data we have now; why would anyone question the in-person learning model now and feels the health and the well-being has to be put first. She voiced if the survey shows that the majority of the parents want kids back in school there is no other choice. The kids are in a disadvantage of surrounding schools. She voiced these decisions that are being made for her kids are detrimental to them. These decisions are costing her students their future. She asked to please open schools fully. She spoke of her personal experience with a Westerly teacher who is high risk and has been going for four days since September with only one student contracting the virus. She spoke of the CDC guidelines, and data supporting less than six foot distancing. She voiced her concern of her own students desire to go back to school, concerns of the mental health of students. She asked about state funding for COVID-19, and how it could be allocated to hire more teachers, and add additional trailers to accommodate more students. She asked that the district think outside the box, things can be done and have to be done.

Michael Evering spoke that one of the most important things that parents look for when looking to live in a particular town is the school system. He noted that up until recently his family thought that Stonington is the best place for his family to be. He voiced that he feels and so do other parents that Stonington has failed the parents of this town. School administration has let down both the parents and children down. He feels that what was proposed last week was too little too late, because other districts have this done already. He feels this should have been done six months ago. What should be done if the Board and the administration cannot get this together is to have vouchers to send their kids to private schools.

Corinne Johnson voiced she does not think the kids should go back full time and feels the hybrid is much safer. She added her and her children have anxiety about going and not going to school. She noted she lost 80% of her work and she and all are struggling this year. She believes going back would cause more anxiety for the children. She feels it would be safer and better if we waited until more teachers and staff vaccinated. She voiced she does not think we are ready yet. We have been like this for about a year and only have three more months left. Let us wait until the fall, when we know it is safer, have more facts and more people vaccinated. Need to be more safe and careful.

#### **Discussion Regarding Family Surveys**

Dr. Riley noted we made sure these surveys were valid, by making sure there was no duplication of information. He noted that more than half of families want children back and some want to stay hybrid. We had about 90% of families who did the survey.

#### **Regarding Return to School In-person**

Dr. Riley went over the summary outline of his current proposed plan presented on February 25<sup>th</sup> and suggestions as to where we go next. He shared his plan which would start on March 15<sup>th</sup> and meets all the CDC guidelines. He noted this plan will be able to bring back grades K, 1, 6 and 9 students. The principals will send out surveys to parents of these grades to see what they prefer.



He added grades K and 1 will have a choice of four days or full distance and grades 2,3 4, and 5 will remain in current model. Wednesday would stay the same as now. Dr. Riley asked that parents provide transportation if they can, as some are now. The middle school 6<sup>th</sup> graders and 9<sup>th</sup> graders will have an option to come back four days or full distance. He noted that 10<sup>th</sup> graders would come back on March 29<sup>th</sup> and if all works well all high school students can come back after April break. Dr. Riley noted if the Board directs him to go forward with the plan we will not be able to follow the 6ft distancing guideline. He suggested if the Board would like to have all kids come back it would mean less than 6ft and would bring a plan back at the March 11<sup>th</sup> Board meeting.

Lily Haghpasand spoke on behalf of only of the high school students she does not know how logistically this is going to work out. She would like to stay hybrid and maybe in the fall bring back students four days, since the majority of teachers have not been vaccinated yet. She feels March 15<sup>th</sup> is not a smart move because of the exposure of the students to the risk of COVID-19. She would like to see the Board wait until we re-evaluate and see where teachers are with the vaccine. She spoke of spacing issues in some of the classrooms, feels learning in another space is not feasible. She would like to go back to full in-person but right now it is not worth the risk, but if a student needs four days they can. If the Board decides to go back she feels it is neglecting the distance learners because it is hard for teachers to have two classrooms at one time, having a few distance learners on a computer is neglecting their education because they are choosing to stay at home for whatever reason. If you are looking to improve the education of all in the high school the distance learners will not have the same education or resources. She spoke if we are full in-person we need to evaluate when to pull back and return to a hybrid. She voiced we need to have a number to go by if the spread is large in the community to bring it back, it is dangerous especially at the high school with students who have mobility and exposure.

Dr. Riley noted he has looked at every school and every level and whether to split up students which is very disruptive. He noted at the high school we would maintain the 6ft by moving the class to a larger room or learning pod which would meet in the library. If the students don't all fit in the 6ft model those other students would go to the library pod and join on line. He also noted the ventilation at the high school is fine for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade to come back and meet the CDC guidelines including masks and 6ft distancing.

Lily Haghpasand voiced she would like to each school considered individually and feels at high school putting any class in gym or library does not add to their education and also puts the teacher at a disadvantage. She encouraged the Board to see the high school separately because if the Board wants everyone back by March 15<sup>th</sup> that will not allow enough time to get everything ready.

Allison Van Etten, Director of Special Services shared communications that last week the district was asked by Ledge Light to provide a number of doses that the school district would need. We did a quick survey and had 371 employees respond to the survey, out of that we have 325 that are planning to get the vaccine. She reported as of last week we had 43 staff who had previously registered and received their first dose. The roll out of the vaccine for educators has been tricky and start date was this past Monday. We had staff go today and earlier this week as well. As soon as we received the link from Ledge Light we sent the link via email system to the entire staff to get registered for the vaccine. We are estimating as of this afternoon we have about 20% of our staff who still need to get their first appointment. We will continue get other alternative resources out to staff to try to get staff to get earlier appointments. Chairman Todisco asked 371 responded to the survey out of how many? Ms. Van Etten responded the initial count was close to 425 staff which also includes bus drivers because bus drivers are part of the qualifying group. We also have people for that for various reasons are choosing not to get the vaccine, the survey is anonymous so we are not collecting the rationale for that.

Ms. Simmons voiced she agrees with Ms. Haghpasand about separating the different levels. She commented about the elementary children return to school and thanked Dr. Riley for prioritizing their return. She voiced in-person instruction in elementary school is not only preferred but essential and will impact the rest of their lives. She is adamant that the elementary school children get back as soon as possible back. She is aware that we are in this process of phasing but would like all of them to be back by March 15<sup>th</sup>. She noted March 15<sup>th</sup> we are proposing to do K and 1, March 27<sup>th</sup> grades 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>. She feels the greatest problem is the distancing, particular the CDC concern, but noted the CDC only recommends that 6ft distancing happen. She spoke that she has researched other viewpoints from World Health Organization, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and AAP and has a copy of the petition signed by 80 health experts and infectious disease physicians. She reported that her research shows that if we respect all other mitigation measures that less than 6ft distancing is acceptable. She added she feels we can consider CDC guidelines but there are other guidelines we can consider to apply these to a reopening timeline. She spoke of the juggling of two cultures that teachers need to do with teaching students both in-person and full distance. She encourages to have in-person teachers focus on in-person teaching and if we have enough teachers to become remote than have those just focus on remote learning. Students are more isolated learning from home and suffer more mental health issues. She spoke about ventilation at each school building and efficiency of the systems at the elementary schools, which has contributed to little transmission inside the school. She noted there is no perfect plan just less bad options. She voiced that robust summer school is not going to make up for all of the time that has been lost for the children this year.

She summarized by saying we have two state of the art elementary schools with plenty of space and perfect air circulation, willing population of students begging to attend, science to support the distance other than CDC six foot distancing, strategies we can figure out for substitute teaching that she believes the Board of Finance would help with that, because she feels we should separate the two cultures in-person and remote. She would like the Board to consider elementary, middle and high school differently and should be approached differently. She would like to respect the teachers and would like to consider the teachers schedules for those who only want to be remote and those who want to be in-person.

Jack Morehouse noted Dr. Riley has started on a plan to bring students back four days a week and asked that we create a plan that creates the least amount of anxiety for staff but brings all students back with a priority on the younger students. All industries have struggled, but we are all in this together and need to help everyone get through this. Our primary reason for being here is for students and we support staff also and every component that supports students. He feels that the students need to get back to school as soon as they can and as safe as possible. His asked is to have Dr. Riley complete a plan and noted that he appreciates all the time and effort he has put into this.

Alisa Morrison commented she agrees with Mr. Morehouse and her priority is to get everyone in as soon as possible and feasible. She would like to see report from Dr. Riley regarding ventilation and the 6ft and how that is going to look.

Gordon Lord thanked Dr. Riley and Mrs. Butler and the entire staff for putting the report together. He feels the community has spoken they want to go back to school and we as a Board and administration need to do what we can to make that happen in a safe and expeditious way. We can look at what other parts of the country is doing but in Southeastern Connecticut it has taken time because of all the factors that went into it. He commented that our neighboring towns are looking at phasing in plans and believes we need to do the same. He noted we have K, 1, 6 and 9 ready to go back on March 15<sup>th</sup> which is awesome. He agreed with Mr. Morehouse and would like to move forward and would like to get as many kids back to school by May 1<sup>st</sup> as possible. There are risks to do that, we have the voice of the community, we have a vaccine 85% of the staff going to go get the vaccine and we need to give them time to feel comfortable and safe. He added if we don't do this now try to go back then when we are going to do it. He noted we will be living with COVID for years to come and we will need to adapt to it. We have the voice of the community and a vaccine and teachers are signing up and more locations to get it. He encouraged everyone has to be patient. We have four classes going back and administration is committed to doing it in a safe and speedy way but let us do it right. He added let us be aware that if we do go back and it is less than 6ft, which he advocates for in a safe way, it exposes us a bit and maybe we will need to quarantine but that is a risk we take right now because we need to get back in school for the mental health of our children and get back to the new normal. He ended by saying I look forward to seeing the plan of the next phase in approach.

Craig Esposito commented he agreed with a lot of what Ms. Haghighpassand has said about the equity issue, of going some people full time and some on line creates somewhat of an equity issue but not sure how you would unfortunately avoid that. He spoke that as a part of the LEARN Board and listening to other districts have done you really need to jettison the 6ft foot rule in order to make this work. For most districts they have reduced the distancing back to come back. We will have to look at bringing it down to 3ft to bring people back and support the people's comments about doing it in a thoughtful way. If we reduce the distance maybe there are other mitigating factors we can do to compensate and incorporate. I think the data for the most part is safe to bring people back. He would like to continue with the hybrid but seeing what others have accomplished we need to give it a try.

Farouk Rajab thanked everyone for their thoughts. He noted that Dr. Riley and the administration is presenting the Board with a plan for seven of the thirteen grades. He noted that the decision that needs to be made is that the Board is ok with the concept of less than 6ft distancing so Dr. Riley can come back with a plan for the remainder of the grades and believes that is the direction we should go into. He would like to have administration come back with a plan with a phase in timeline with a focus on the safety and mental health of the children. He agreed with Heidi Simmons that we should give a greater focus to the elementary grades but also with a focus on the health and safety of our teachers and administrators. He added we should move forward with the plan that was presented with K, 1, 6 and 9 10, 11, and 12 grades and ask administration to come back with a plan for the March 11<sup>th</sup> meeting so we can vote on that as well.



Chairman Frank Todisco voiced we are at a point we need to return all kids to school four days a week as quickly and as safe as possible. He would like to see the plan fully built out that accomplishes those goals. He is mindful that we have educators that have anxiety going back prior to getting the vaccine and that will be a key component of what is brought forward. He acknowledged that the work has just began because it is not just bringing them back for spring, but what do we do in the summer and fall. COVID-19 will not go away. He voiced he would like to see an advisory council form and tap into the talent and expertise that we have in the community. They would not be making decisions that is the role of the administration and Board of Ed but would provide input that we may not be considering or bringing a skill set to the table that the Board does not have. He noted that there is a consensus from at least six of the Board members that they want to see the plan build out and brought back next week to get kids back to school in a timely manner and prioritizing elementary kids. Chairman Todisco asked the Board their thoughts on forming a small advisory council.

Gordon Lord agreed to the advisory council noting that we have a passionate and knowledgeable community that we can tap into and supported that idea. Heidi Simmons also supported that idea, as we bring all this information and research it will support some of these ideas. There are so many other references we need to consider when we are go forward. Alisa Morison also thought it was a great idea. Chairman Todisco will work with Dr. Riley in populating that idea and the number of people on the council. We are asking Dr. Riley to come back with a comprehensive plan that would bring all of our students back as quickly and as safe as possible taking into consideration all of the components we discussed tonight including the vaccine and the facility concerns and the recommendation that go along with that for next Thursday's meeting.

Farouk Rajab asked that the Board put in motion the K, 1, 6, 9, 10, 11, and 12 plan. Chairman Todisco asked the Board if anyone was objecting to the plan that was brought forward to bring those grades back. He added he did not hear anyone saying they were. Heidi Simmons voiced she was not objecting but did not want that to inhibit the timeline of the other grades coming back. She voiced she thinks the elementary could happen quickly and not in April or May. She spoke of the distancing and ventilation being important but do not have to worry about the ventilation at the elementary schools because it is state of the art. Mr. Lord asked if the current plan K and 1 maximizes the 6ft and if the plan to bring grades 2-5 would impact the distancing and are we open to looking at less than 6ft. Dr. Riley noted he appreciated Mr. Rajab wanting to do a motion but it is not necessary to make a motion to bring back K, 1, 6 and 9. He reported that there will be some changes if we go less than 6ft. We are moving some of the classes into other rooms such as the music rooms. If we have more students come back it can affect the distancing. Dr. Riley noted we will move forward with the March 15<sup>th</sup> plan. He spoke of the ventilation issues at each building and will have information for the Board on that next Thursday. He noted the K, 1, 6 and 9 plan might change with this larger plan. Chairman Todisco noted that he wanted to make sure the plan has a timeline attached to it so that the Board and the community knows what to expect.

Jack Morehouse voiced his concern about the roll out of this plan and asked if we have already notified the K, 1, 6 and 9 parents and if we have we received feedback. How are we notifying them? Dr. Riley reported that we have letters going out, we were waiting for the meeting tonight to send them out and they will be going out tomorrow morning. He noted the letter has a list of some of the impacts and knowing these what would they want to do four days or full distance. Heidi Simmons asked Dr. Riley at what point will you decide it will be less than 6ft. Dr. Riley noted that the Board has directed him to do a plan with less than 6 ft. and we cannot do any of those other grades unless we do less than 6ft. We will present a plan with what the impacts would be and other mitigations to make sure things are as safe as possible. Dr. Riley summarized the Board's asks for the plan to be as soon as possible, as safe as possible and less than six feet. Jack Morehouse asked does it create an awkward situation if we are sending out letters to parents and we are saying we are going to maintain the six feet and then next week at the meeting we decide to go to less than six feet and students are put in a situation of less than six feet does it create confusion, because that is the last thing we want to do. Dr. Riley explained parents will always have the option to pull their student and have a remote option. We will have that option for every grade because that has to happen. Chairman Todisco noted he confirmed that he believed Dr. Riley was clear on the asks of the Board and will connect with him on the advisory council piece.

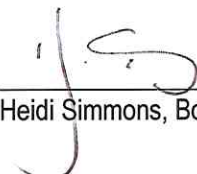
**Board Comments/Concerns** – The Board had no comments or concerns.

#### **Adjournment**

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

**Motion 1:** To adjourn at 9:11 p.m.

All: Aye

  
Heidi Simmons, Board Secretary