

The Dexter Board of Education held their August 16th meeting both in-person and virtually to allow for virtual public participation. No community members were in attendance in person, and approximately 725 people logged in via Zoom.

SCHOOL PRESENTATIONS – COVID-19 MITIGATION OPTIONS

Superintendent Dr. Timmis presented the DCS 2021-2022 Safety Plan including the current status of local COVID-19 transmission, CDC and Washtenaw County Health Department recommendations and proposed options for COVID-19 mitigation (slideshow available on the DCS Board website at <https://www.dexterschools.org/district/board-of-education/meetings>). Timmis praised the Dexter Schools community as “extremely resilient and patient” during the pandemic, and thanked community members for their passion and engagement.

Beginning with a ThoughtExchange survey, Timmis asked participants to share any questions they have as students return to school this fall. Over 150 community members contributed questions, most asking about masking, social distancing, vaccinations, virtual learning and lunch protocols. Returning to the slideshow, Timmis shared the District’s goal this year: “Kids are learning safely in school buildings, every day, for 2021-2022.” He reviewed COVID-19 data from the past year up to the most current data as of August 11, 2021, and shared that the Washtenaw County Health Department (WCHD) has created 4 levels of community spread to guide masking recommendations. As of August 9, Dexter is at the “substantial” level of spread, for which the WCHD “strongly recommends” masking for indoor settings.

Timmis detailed further WCHD recommendations regarding screening, student illness decision-making, isolation, close contact, quarantining and testing. Specific quarantine and testing instruction for classroom & bus settings, indoor vs. outdoor sports and vaccinated or unvaccinated individuals was also relayed, along with the recommendations from both the CDC & MDHHS for universal masking in all schools. Following more data detailing child cases, vaccination rates in 48130 and what other districts are planning, Timmis presented two options for the Board to discuss.

- **Option 1:** Masks required for K-6 students when community spread level is moderate, substantial or high; masks required for all students & staff when spread is substantial or high. Universal masking on buses & for all visitors.
- **Option 2:** Masks required for K-6 students, regardless of community spread level; masks required for all students & staff when spread is substantial or high. Universal masking on buses & for all visitors (no visitors when level is high).

Timmis noted the fact that household quarantine protocols for covid are not new, they are the same as pertussis and chicken pox protocols. Also, masking on buses is not a local decision, but a federal order which must be followed by all districts. After the slideshow, Timmis conducted a second ThoughtExchange survey asking participants what remaining questions they have following the presentation.

FIRST PUBLIC PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITY

Over 25 community members commented during the first opportunity for public participation, mostly Dexter parents. Many who spoke are parents of students younger than 12 who cannot receive the vaccination, and are concerned about virus spread if all students are not masked.

Several parents cited freedom of choice as a reason to not require masks for any students or staff, as well as possible mental health issues and physical side-effects associated with mask-wearing. Some of these same parents suggested a third option be considered where masks are optional at all levels of community spread.

Medical professionals who spoke thanked the District for their work to prevent virus spread, and advocated for Option 2 as the most stringent choice. Several labeled the Delta variant a “game changer” in the recent rise in case numbers, saying we aren’t where we are a year ago, or even a month ago, due to this new mutation. Many urged layering protections such as masks, vaccinations, social distancing, etc. which all work together to control virus transmission.

Public comment went on for over an hour and a half, at which point the Board took a 5-minute recess before resuming business.

SUPERINTENDENT UPDATE

The District is getting ready for the start of school by filling remaining open teacher positions. DCS still needs paraprofessionals, bus drivers, and custodians. The fall athletics season has begun, and the tennis court renovation may be completed as early as this week. Cement and sidewalk work is happening at all buildings, but will be completed before school starts.

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES UPDATE

Student representative Aiden Naughton reported that Wednesday, August 25th is freshman orientation at DHS at 8:30 a.m.

CONSENT ITEMS

The evening’s consent items were unanimously approved in bulk, including accepting the resignation of ECSE teacher Kristin Bartenslager and approving the hiring of Molly Hampsey (Beacon & Creekside Music), Roger Sprau (DHS Art), and Angela Muscato (Occupational Therapist).

ACTION ITEMS

MASB is hosting a Back-to-School Legal Workshop from 9 a.m. – noon on Thursday, Aug. 26 and have recommended districts send at least one board member. The cost is \$90 per person. The Board unanimously approved registration fees for any interested board trustee to attend the workshop.

DISCUSSION ITEMS

The Board discussed the District’s Back-to-School COVID-19 Mitigation Plans and community comments offered earlier in the meeting. All Trustees agreed that the Board’s top priority is to get kids back into the buildings safely, and thanked the community for their input.

Many Trustees agreed that student mental health is a great concern, whether the result of masking, isolation or other reasons, which is why getting students into buildings is so important. Several addressed community comments about freedom of choice, saying with freedom comes responsibility and the Board serves a population where a significant portion are vulnerable due to vaccination age restrictions. Questions were raised about lunch and social distancing, using tents/outdoor learning spaces and virtual learning options (including while quarantined). The Superintendent will review options with administrators.

Discussion concluded with the decision to hold a special Board meeting (in-person & virtual) on Wednesday, August 18 at 7:00 p.m. to vote on the COVID-19 Mitigation Plan. Dr. Timmis will compile and share all discussed options before the meeting so people have time to review.

SECOND OPPORTUNITY FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Five community members spoke virtually during the second opportunity for public participation, asking follow-up questions and expressing their appreciation for the District's work preparing the options as well as the Board's consideration. A Dexter grandparent stated that the worst outcome would be if the District hadn't done the absolute most it could to keep students safe. An incoming Kindergarten parent expressed concerns about lunch and social distancing. Another parent asked about the plan if school closes again, and asked the District to consider offering virtual, DCS teacher-led classes in addition to Michigan Virtual and Lincoln Learning. A final speaker thanked the District for its diligence and expressed their support for Option 2, citing that our mitigation efforts help medical professionals do their job.

BOARD COMMENTS

Trustee Alabré asked for clarification on lunch plans, as well as virtual learning options. Trustee Kangas suggested the District look into cameras that follow teachers as they move around the room, in order to provide a similar experience for virtual students. Trustee Arnold asked if the District has a contingency plan if schools are shut down again, which Dr. Timmis confirmed it does. Arnold also reminded audience members that the District will be sending out a survey following the Board vote on August 18th to gauge family interest in virtual learning.

INFORMATION ITEMS

The 7/26/21 Board Bulletin, Facilities Committee minutes, Finance Committee minutes and Committees Roster are included in the Board packet.

BOARD CALENDAR

Wednesday, August 18 – 7:00 p.m. – Special Board Meeting - Bates
Monday, August 30 – 7:00 p.m. – Board Meeting - Bates