

GATEWAY REGIONAL DISTRICT SCHOOL COMMITTEE

The Gateway Regional School District will provide an exemplary education that challenges all students in an instructional setting appropriate to their needs.

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2022

7:00 P.M.

ZOOM

<https://zoom.us/j/92503630473?pwd=VIAvbmZiRSt2M0JwbGtvbXpBeDdUUT09>

Meeting ID: 925 0363 0473

Passcode: 01050

The school committee would like to request any statements regarding the agenda of this special meeting to be sent to Superintendent Smidy at ksmidy@grsd.org. Statements should be received no later than Tuesday, February 15th at 9am for consideration.

7:00PM

I. OPENING OF MEETING

Call to order: Sarah Page, Chairperson

BLANDFORD

Keri Morawiec

CHESTER

Jeana Briggs
Jason Fogue

HUNTINGTON

David Lubbers
Pegg Dragon
Edward Renauld

MIDDLEFIELD

MONTGOMERY

RUSSELL

Tara Balboni
Sarah Page
Lyndsey Papillon

SECRETARY

Stacy Stewart

CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

Kristen Smidy, Superintendent
Stephanie Fisk, Business & Finance

OTHERS: Cecilia Moreau, Sara McNamara, Mary iPhone, Linda Hyjek, AmyToporowski, Darlene Rehor, Jim Duggan, Kate Fogue, Jenn, Theresa Brownlle, Korin Harding, Hannah Sullivan, Joseph Pisani, Kim Sakaski, Heidi Kellogg, Stephanie Conweay, Megan Coburn, Kayla Turner, Samantha McCarthy, Karen Leis, Theresa Lynch, Kendra Gregerson, Amy Thorton, Donna Morrissey, Olivia Kanner, Adam Dasilva, Wendy Koivisto, Katie Hardin, Leah Santiago, Cate Ripley, Ramona Thieme, Angela Dalton, Susan Rhoads, Jackie Sugrue, Jen Dubiel, Kayla Bradi, Val Zeh, Jason Finnie, Kurt Garivalentis, Ruth Harper, Alexis Batra, Persaram Batra, Misty Robitaille, Cathy Servaes, Alex Renton

Ms. Page opened the meeting by briefly going over the ground rules for the meeting. She then opened with the following statement:

We are thankful for the opportunity to have a productive and respectful meeting with so many members of the Gateway community. We are especially thankful for those of you who have taken the time to submit comments to us ahead of time. Please be assured that we received, read and thought carefully about your position in this matter. I have faith in our community, and Gateway as a district, that we can hear each other's voices on this matter.

Just to review tonight's agenda; first, we are going to hear from Superintendent Smidy with some details and information. We will then take time to discuss the matter of potentially rescinding or rewriting the masking policy with School Committee members. Following that, we will take public input to ask questions of or make comments to the full committee.

7:00PM II. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OF STATEMENTS

A. Superintendent Smidy will share the list of statements received.

- The list of statements received is:
- The Gateway Education Association
- James Roberts
- Sandra Galanis
- Kimberly King
- Amy and Peter DeGregorio
- Name withheld-email sjking69@gmail.com
- Eric and Crystal D'Astous
- Shawn and Danielle Weaver
- Rodney Faille
- Megan Little
- Amy Toporowski
- Jennifer Pappas
- Alla Nedeoglo
- Cathy Smelcer
- Taylor and Frank Figueroa
- Mike Mason

- Michelle Sivard
- Andrew DeMoss
- Amy Walker
- Danielle Lucia
- Tricia Anne
- Jessica Martel

7:15PM III. SCHOOL COMMITTEE DISCUSSION ON POLICY

A. EBCFA [FACE COVERINGS](#)

- Mrs. Papillon has been thinking long and hard since it was announced. She is an educator in a neighboring district. It makes her a little nervous if we think about history even in this school year. History repeats itself. She would be a proponent discussing a mid-March period and looking at cases to make sure they are declining. She doesn't want us to make any premature decisions. Particularly with staffing, subs are hard to come by. It impacts our students. Maybe there is an in between.
- Ms. Dragon read all the letters and information. She only sees one problem, 14 people support the resolution and 5 are in favor of keeping masks. She doesn't see any reason not to follow the mandates from the state. We should get rid of the masks. She feels we shouldn't be wearing masks. She is concerned about the open house. Maybe we just mandate masks for that open house. She has read a lot of material. We should follow the state mandate. She uses a better mask for her art work.
- Mr. Forge said we've heard comments from the public from the start and taken them to heart. He shares Mrs. Papillon's concerns with the potential uptick. Masks as they are used truly don't make much of a difference, and could do more harm than good. There is only one reason he would vote against ending masks and that would be if we lost funding. He is looking forward to voting to lift the mandate. He has watched kids try to play basketball in those masks. He was in Westfield today, with no mask mandates, so it seems silly to wear one in schools. He will follow federal mandates for bussing.
- Mrs. Briggs has 4 kids in the system Prek - middle school. Her youngest is too young to be vaccinated. None of them have had it and she is nervous about it. We are going to have to go back to normal. As a mom with two kids on IEPs for speech, they need to be without the masks.
- Mr. Lubbers is not a parent of a child in school so his position is not as strong as Mrs. Briggs. It is prudent because of vacation, if we come back to school unmasked that is dangerous since the vaccination rate is so low. We should lift the mask mandate in March because of the open house. Two weeks is not a long time to wait.
- Mrs. Balboni thinks it is time to end the mask mandate but supports the aspect of the teachers either as a compromise of the 9th or the 14th of March. This would put us on the same page. We support the concerns of the teachers. Two weeks isn't a huge deal, but they do need to come off as soon as possible.

- Mrs. Papillion asked about the letter we received from the GEA - the concern about ventilation especially with indoor rooms with no windows. Do we have to go back and retest rooms?
- Mrs. Smidy said we measured the air exchange in the fall and all exceeded the standard except for two classrooms which now have ventilators. They are coming back in March.
- Mr. Renauld said Mr. Forgue nailed it. We have been following these state mandates. Why stop now. Our school committee doesn't know more than the Governor. He didn't want them to begin with. They don't work. The firestation is wearing N95 and they are still getting sick. He is ready for them to go, kids are better served not wearing them. They are not wearing them outside of school.
- Ms. Smidy read Mrs. Morawic's statement. She understands all sides and struggles with the weight of it. She would support a slightly delayed lift.
- Mr. Forgue has concerns with the potential delay and how we are going to enforce it. There is no punishment or negative actions. We would have to come up with actions to take if they are not wearing them.
- Ms. Dragon said students know the state is changing this and most schools will be changing. She thinks Mr. Forgue is right, we should have masks for that one event. It is going to be difficult.

7:25PM IV. PUBLIC INPUT

Guests attending the meeting may address the committee. To address the committee: send a chat to Superintendent Smidy with your full name and town of residence, and she will acknowledge when it is your turn to speak. There is a three minute time limit per guest.

- Persaram Batra is a teacher in high school and is concerned about lifting the mask mandate, but is open to reason. Keeping it in place for a couple of weeks is a good idea if cases do spike after break. It is also difficult to find subs, also because Mrs. Smidy said the Chester and Huntington Boards of Health were in favor of keeping the mask mandate in place. He disagrees that masks do not do anything. A number of studies show that cloth masks do have some effect. He would like to see sunshine and fresh air but the February 28 change is a little too soon.
- Mrs. Smidy clarified that the Huntington and Chester Boards of health are not recommending a continued mask mandate.
- Misty Robitaille is a parent and a paraprofessional and lives in Chester. She felt like the masks shouldn't have been mandated from the beginning. She is seeing 95% of the kids wearing their masks with their noses out. The insides of their masks are disgusting. Kids wear them for multiple days. She feels people should do what is best for them and if you need to wear a mask then you can do so, but it shouldn't be mandated.
- Janna Mangini is a mom with kids at Chester. As a mom of a preschooler the masks are disgusting. She can't wait to get the masks off. She would love to see the faces of our 4 year olds again.

- Alexis Batra is a teacher at the high school. She feels for elementary teachers regarding masks. She does think we need to extend the mask mandate a little longer. Teaching with a mask on is awful. It is hard to communicate as a Spanish teacher. She doesn't know what the other solutions are. If we are not all in it together, we will keep seeing this pandemic. Masks at this point are our best solution.
- Heidi Kellogg has a grandson in high school and in middle school. Masks have been detrimental to our children and their mental health. Not seeing a smile and hearing what the teachers are saying. Amherst college students are seeking mental health help. She has had covid and she has been vaccinated and boosted, and is wearing an N95 mask. She suffocates in it. If people want to wear it and they are comfortable then they should wear it to make them feel safe.
- Olivia Kanner is a junior at Gateway. She does not fear not having a mask on. She and her parents are vaccinated and boosted. She thinks we should keep the mandate a little longer, but not all students will support it. We should wait a little longer with the cases we had a month ago. She thinks it would be hard to get them to wear them again once they are removed. It is important now, but if we were not to keep masks, she would be okay with it herself. But not everyone would.
- James Duggan is a teacher. He feels the March 14 date would be a good compromise. It may not be perfect in terms of enforcement, but there would be a light at the end of the tunnel. Clarification - the Baker administration and DESE's lifting of the statewide mandate. The state house and DESE offices are still working remotely. There is hypocrisy if it is true the state is just lifting the statewide mandate. It is released to local control, we wouldn't be breaking a state policy by extending it by two weeks.
- Linda Hyjeck is a teacher. She is not here to speak about her opinion, but she doesn't want to have students judging other students if some are wearing masks and some aren't. Please remind parents to talk to their children. They don't need to deal with the politics of our country.
- Kendra Gregerson asked if we could look into a possibility to have students test on the 27th before coming into school on the 28th. Even if we wait two weeks, it may just be extended.
- Mrs. Smidy said 146 students have opted into the at-home test kits.
- Ms. Page said that those kids could make arrangements to take the test on the 27th.
- Joseph Pisani said he attends school committee meetings as the student council rep. Tonight is his opinion and not the student body's opinion. He agrees with Mr. and Mrs. batra. The March 14 date would be a better date overall because of how many people were out after breaks. No one is super fond of the masks but we just deal with them. He wants to come back safely and have as many people as possible in the classrooms.
- Rodney Faille wrote a letter and he is not a fan of the mandates. With regards to the March 14 date, there is always another school vacation or superspreader around the corner. Covid is not going away. It is here to stay. Kicking the ball down the field we are just going to see another corner. If all the masks and vaccines don't work why do we need to wear them? Those who are concerned can get vaccinated, boosted, and they wear masks. Everyone is safe that way. He agrees with the school committee with how

the masks don't work . The CDC is also saying that masks don't work that well. Let it be up to the parents. We can't cure everything - kids always judge other kids.

- Amy Toperoski said she has been a member of Bring Kids Back. We continue to advocate for children in the least restrictive ways. Our children are being held to stricter mandates. She is not a fan of the mask and believes it should be a parental choice. She shared an article from Dr. Shira Doran about the benefit of one way masking. If you are wearing a N95 mask and you are boosted or unvaccinated then you shouldn't need to worry about everyone else. She echoed Rodney Faille, coming back from vacation is no different then coming back from a weekend. Kids travel, they have house parties and sleepovers. If you decide to continue doing this she would like to see weekly data with why we should be wearing them. If you vote to extend - she is requesting full transparent data. She doesn't think there is data.
- Val Zeh was not planning on talking. She thanked the students, school committee and parents for being here. She would like to have the masks stay. We are all done with this, we have done this for two years non stop. Her elderly parents are just as depressed as some of our children are. She asked that we do what we can to keep as many students safe as possible. It is tough when students are out. It is hard to catch them up and help them keep up. She feels for the elementary teachers and Mrs. Batra who teaches Spanish. We communicate as best as we can. We love your kids and want what is best for them. They are trying to keep as many of them and us in the building as long as we can. Substitutes are really hard to find. She is not worried about punishing kids for not wearing masks, we are not punishing them right now. She would love for us to go to the two weeks after vacation.
- Mary Lyons echoed what some fellow teachers said - we feel a responsibility to medically fragile students and staff. We did see a huge spike after the holiday break. We have far more contact with people. She would argue that going away for a weekend is the same as a week. They are going away. She hates the masks too, but we need more time.
- Olivia Kanner as a high school student it is not the parents controlling children, every student in the high school is able to form their own opinions. She has opinions different from the people who impact her life. She cares about covid and she is safe with who she hangs out with and what she does. She has never been mad or aggravated by the rules of the schools. The mental health aspect is hard, but if we had to go back to masks or remote again it would be worse.
- Janna Mangni said there will be parents who will push back. She will send her preschool student happily without a mask.. She would like the transparency of why Gateway would keep masks on. They are not saving the day when they are wearing them.
- Cathy Smelcer also wrote a letter. We should be keeping opinions out of the discussion. The N95 masks are not cutting it so you can only imagine how little the cloth masks are doing. We are in year three of the pandemic. With two week flat - their policies down there are different and they are not vaccinated and not wearing masks.
- Joseph Pisani stands in solidarity with Ms. Zeh and Olivia Kanner with the two week extension. We are resilient, teachers as well. Liv's point once we do find ourselves not

wearing masks we don't want to come back. Knowing after break there is a tendency for spikes to happen, the March 14 date seems to be the best to ensure classes are full and we can do this the best way possible.

- Misty Robitaille you can see when the kids are smiling but her kids have speech delays and it is very difficult for them to learn to say the words properly especially when they cannot see it. It is important for them to regulate how people are feeling.

7:45PM V. ACTION ITEMS

A. Waive two meeting review or take no action

Ms. Page said we are either going to propose a change or rescind the policy, but first we need to waive the two meeting rule.

Mr. Forgue made a motion seconded by Mrs. Balboni to waive the two-meeting rule.

Motion Carried (VOTE) Yeas 9 Nays Abstain Absent (Roll Call Vote)

Yeas: Tara, Jeana, Pegg, Jason, David, Keri, Lyndsey, Ed, Sarah

B. Propose change or rescind EBCFA or take no action

- Ms. Page said we would have to propose a change to the policy we had this school year. Now is when we decide to vote to remove masks on the 28th of March 14 as suggested. She hasn't stated her opinion yet, she wanted to hear what everyone had to say. She wants to take into consideration the opinion of our teachers because they have been on the front lines at Gateway and holding us together. It is important for them to know we are listening. There is a light in the middle ground. We are here and listening and as a community we are going to get there.

Mrs. Balboni made a motion seconded by Mr. Lubbers to extend mask wearing until March 14.

- Mr. Forgue said we would need to come up with enforcement rules.
- Mrs. Balboni said we can't punish anyone, so if a child chooses not to, there can't be a punishment. My kids won't be bothered if they are doing what they ask for. There is no policy on how we enforce it. We encourage it and move on.
- Ms. Page said it would be similar to how we enforce anything that is not punishment in the handbook.
- Mr. Forgue asked if we could get feedback from Mr. Finnie or Mrs. Clark. He is not trying to be glib, but if we are going to act on a recommendation what is the point.
- Mr. Lubbers said if a child comes in without a mask they just wouldn't let them in.

- Mr. Forgue said that not that is not true.
- Mr. Lubbers asked if there could be exemptions for the speech impaired and autism spectrum kids.
- Mr. Garivaltis said we wouldn't make any specific exception because it would be excluding them in a way, they would go with what the recommendation is.
- Mrs. Smidy said when there is a state mandate in place, there are expectations around conduct and school staff to make sure they are being followed. With a local mandate there would be an expectation that students would not have a punitive action with non-compliance.
- Ms. Dragon said we are currently following DESE mandates and their mask mandate ends, so we would be creating a mandate for two weeks. She only voted for the masks last time because of the money portion. We are going to have to make a policy for two weeks which is different from what we have now.
- Mr. Forgue said our policy mirrors DESE's mandates. Take our current policy and end it on the 14th. Nothing would change until the 14th. Right now our policy is for the school year and we are voting to end it on the 14th.

Mrs. Balboni made a motion seconded by Mr. Lubbers to extend mask wearing until March 14.

Motion Carried (VOTE) Yeas 6 Nays 3 Abstain Absent (Roll Call Vote)

Yeas: Tara, Jeana, David, Keri, Lyndsey, Sarah

Nays: Pegg, Jason, Ed

- Ms. Page said regardless of the decision, we stood together as a Gateway community and we did the best for the kids in the district.
- Mrs. Balboni said the masks will be gone in less than a month.
- Ms. Dragon asked if the policy on the 14 will be the dese? Or will we make our own.
- Mrs. Smidy said the current policy is all individual wear maks and remain as state until d
- Ms. Dragon said then masks would be recommended but not required. Strong recommendation that unvaccinated individuals, but there would be no punitive consequences.

8:00PM VI. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Renauld made a motion seconded by Mrs. Papillon to adjourn at 8:43 p.m.

Motion Carried (VOTE) Yeas 9 Nays Abstain Absent (Roll Call Vote)

Yeas: Tara, Jeana, Pegg, Jason, David, Keri, Lyndsey, Ed, Sarah

Respectfully submitted,
Stacy L Stewart,
School Committee Secretary