

SCHUYLKILL VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT
929 Lakeshore Drive
Leesport, PA 19533-8631

MINUTES

December 15, 2021

1.0 **The Special Meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by the Board President, David E. Moll, in the LeRoy K. Seip Memorial Meeting Room of the Schuylkill Valley High School.**

1.1 **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG**

1.2 **ROLL CALL**

Members Present: Paul L. Bendigo, Robert M. Dempsey, Nicoleen M. Kleffel, Linda R. Lash, G. Dane Miller, David E. Moll, Bryan J. O'Donnell, Alfonso F. Rossi

Members Absent: George H. Mertz III

Secretary: Linda R. Lash

Treasurer: Michelle Kauffman (not present)

Recording Secretary: Susan A. Christman

Administrative Staff Present: Dr. Cathy Taschner, Dr. Janet Heilman, Michael Billman

2.0 **PERSONS WHO WISH TO ADDRESS THE BOARD**

Eileen Coulehan, SVSD Retiree, Hamburg Resident - Masking

Russell Carter, Leesport – Masking

Holly Varner, Mohrsville - Masking

Erin Carter, Leesport – Masking

Isabella Burch, SV Freshman, Leesport – Masking

Daniel Yobb, Ontelaunee Township – Masking

John Newton, Ontelaunee Township - Masking

3.0 **BOARD**

Health and Safety Plan Amendment

3.1 The Board is requested to consider and approve the following amendment to the current Health and Safety Plan that was approved on August 23, 2021.

Students shall not be required to wear a mask when:

- A. Engaged in an activity that cannot be performed while wearing a mask, such as eating and drinking, or playing an instrument that would be obstructed by the face covering; or
- B. Participating in high intensity aerobic or anerobic activities, including during a physical education class in a well-ventilated location and able to maintain a physical distance of six feet from all other individuals.
- C. When a child/student is participating in a sports practice activity or event, whether indoors or outdoors.

Board Action: Moved by Dane Miller and seconded by Alfonso Rossi to approve the amendment to the current Health and Safety Plan that was approved on August 23, 2021, as presented.

Yeas: Bendigo, Dempsey, Kleffel, Lash, Miller, Moll, O'Donnell, Rossi

Motion passed unanimously.

- 3.2 Approves a motion to add an agenda item to consider and approve making wearing a mask in Schuylkill Valley School District optional effective Monday, December 20, 2021.

Board Action: Moved by Dane Miller and seconded by Nicoleen Kleffel to approve a motion to add an agenda item to consider and approve making wearing a mask in Schuylkill Valley School District optional effective Monday, December 20, 2021.

Mr. Miller stated that we have placed the administrators in an untenable situation where they are adversaries with parents and students who do not want to wear a mask. We do not have 100% compliance on this. We have a lot of kids who are not wearing their masks. In February 2022, it will be two years since the pandemic started. We have first graders who have not gone to school without a mask with the exception of a three-month period last spring. Mr. Rossi stated that Hamburg Area School District is bouncing children in and out of school because they're having problems with COVID. We also heard this evening from a parent that someone was bounced out of our district because we had no way to educate them for ten days. We have been in school 100% for our general population and haven't had to send any classes home. Mrs. Kleffel added that we are not going to get away from this. Our kids are always going to be sick, parents will always be sick, and there's always going to be sickness and illness out there. Last week she took an oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania ruled and voted; they listened to the lower courts and moved that along. It's not her job or her duty to mandate a mask. It is our job to come up with proper and necessary ways to educate our kids. Right now, it is going to be finding other ways of doing that whether it's coming up with online/virtual or whatever it may be. If you want to wear a mask, no one is saying don't wear a mask. She would never take that away from a parent ever; that's their choice to protect their children. Right now, our job is to give every single kid in this district an option for better education and we as a Board have to look at those options as to what that needs to look like. 2019 is not the same as 2021 and we need to be looking at all aspects of education whether it means in-person, online, having separate courses for kids, but it doesn't need to boil down to a mask or not a mask. We're not looking at the broader picture here; give the kids the option of how they want to come to school with a mask or not. They want that option of being able to come to school and educate how they want to. Mr. Rossi agreed with Mrs. Kleffel that we need to figure out the best way to educate our kids, but right now our version of educating kids is working better than Hamburg's.

Mr. Bendigo asked where we stand and how long it would take us to come up to speed if there's an overwhelming number in Berks County, or if we had to shut down the school because we don't have the staff to teach the students. Dr. Taschner stated that the district purchased services through Educere, but the challenge is that it's not our curriculum. Students can move into that immediately but it's not our teachers. People come here to get a Schuylkill Valley School District Education. It is an option that some students are doing right now and that's one option. In previous years, there was a virtual-live option that they were doing. It didn't have a learning management system (which made it challenging for teachers) and teachers had students in front of them and at home and were trying to quickly come up to speed on how to manage that in the classroom. This year at the beginning of the year it was her understanding before she got here that this was going to be an option. She doesn't believe this has come to fruition yet. It would be her recommendation if this was the case that right now we work with teachers to immediately implement an interaction one way.

Students could zoom in, watch the classroom live and benefit from the live instruction. We looked at the schedules to see if we could have teachers who are currently doing academic study hall who have different planning times at the middle school and rearrange the schedule at the elementary school so that there would be office hours and students could then also have some live time with their teachers. This would be her recommendation if the Board takes this kind of course of action. Mr. Bendigo stated that the public is used to what we did previously with virtual learning, and if we had that established that we can fall back on that if we have to, he thinks we'd all feel a lot more comfortable. Mr. Miller added that we engaged in a survey of our parents and roughly 80% of the parents responded that they wanted masks optional. We have not paid any attention to those survey results. We haven't listened to what our parents said they wanted to do. When we're looking at students having learning issues that we've already discussed, they are real and they are a fact. Students need certain feedback, input and cues, especially in the early grades for them to learn successfully. We have grades that have gone years without being able to see a teacher's mouth and without being able to hear properly. When we're looking at all of these things, that's the critical part of this whole thing. Mr. Miller trusts the parents of this district to make appropriate decisions for their students. If it's wearing a mask, great, that's your choice. If it's not wearing a mask, great, that's your choice. There are a lot of reasons why this should come to an end. He also trusts our administration, specifically our leadership team, that they will come up with the options and alternatives that work and will serve our students well no matter what their situation. Mr. Miller also noted that for the first time ever, the United States surpassed 100,000 suicides in a 12-month period.

Mr. Rossi stated that the has young children and the vaccine has only recently been made available and he wants his kids to have it, but they will not be fully through the vaccine course for another week and they received it the first week it was available. Reading Pediatrics is only giving out 27 shots per day for their entire organization. It takes a long time for the parents that want their kids to get the vaccine to actually get it and be fully protected for whatever protection it might give them. He thinks the Board should also consider not doing anything with lifting the mask mandate until at least the bulk of our population that wants to has an opportunity, but that physically can't have happened yet. Mr. Bendigo noted that the motion made is part of our Health and Safety Plan. His concern is that we should be fixing the Health and Safety Plan concerns that were raised last week about what threshold is. If we base the 25% on the average school absence rate, that's not a reliable way to do this. In some of the correspondence he received from parents, they assumed it was a 25% rate of the student body. If we just take a vote on what this motion is, what about the rest of the Health and Safety Plan and what is in that. Do we want to discuss that and recommend the changes to the Superintendent on fixing that first and see if we can incorporate that in with this motion? Mr. Miller stated that he is not going to incorporate it, let the Administrators do their work. Mr. Bendigo stated that they brought the Health and Safety Plan to the Board and to the public and it's been online. They also brought it to the Board at our last meeting on December 6, 2021 and we had questions about it and they wanted direction. He's not doing their job, they came to us for direction. Mr. Moll noted that Mr. Miller made a motion and it was seconded by Mrs. Kleffel and at this point they do not want any amendments to this motion.

Roll Call Vote

Yeas: Bendigo, Kleffel, Miller, Moll, O'Donnell, Rossi

Nays: Dempsey, Lash

Motion carried.

- 3.3** Approves making wearing a mask in Schuylkill Valley School District optional effective Monday, December 20, 2021.

Board Action: Moved by Dane Miller and seconded by Nicoleen Kleffel to approve making wearing a mask in Schuylkill Valley School District optional effective Monday, December 20, 2021.

Mr. Dempsey stated that he doesn't understand why we have to rush into this with just a few days of school left until the holiday break. He'd be willing to compromise on a date beyond December 20, sometime after the break, possibly as early as January 10, 2022, to consider this. Listening to what Mrs. Kleffel had to say, and he understands, but what he gathered from part of that discussion was that you're almost willing to accept the inevitability that more people are going to get sick, not just the kids, and they're going to carry this home and other people are going to get sick too. We need to come up with some alternative kind of education because we know it's going to get worse and that part he didn't get. He would be willing to compromise on a date other than December 20. Mrs. Kleffel added that we have been saying let's get through here and we said the same thing at the end of the school year but we did allow it for graduation. We had all voted 9-0 in July 2021 for no masks, then we changed, went back and said let's get these kids through the beginning of school. Her point is that sickness is not going away, it's inevitable. We need to be thinking outside the box as we are an awesome district. We are going to set a standard in education that no matter what comes our way we are prepared for it. We need to start here and now and need to make an example. We need to go forward, plan, and let these parents have a choice on their kids coming to school with a mask. Mr. Rossi noted that maybe the outside the box thinking that we need is keep on with what we're doing until more and more treatments are available.

Roll Call Vote

Yeas: Kleffel, Miller, O'Donnell, Bendigo

Nays: Dempsey, Lash, Moll, Rossi

Motion failed.

- 3.4 Approves a motion to add an agenda item to discuss the Health and Safety Plan.

Board Action: Moved by Paul Bendigo and seconded by Dane Miller to approve a motion to add an agenda item to discuss the Health and Safety Plan.

Yeas: Bendigo, Dempsey, Kleffel, Lash, Miller, Moll, O'Donnell, Rossi

Motion passed unanimously.

- 3.5 Approves a motion to discuss the Health and Safety Plan.

Board Action: Moved by Paul Bendigo and seconded by Alfonso Rossi to approve a motion to discuss the Health and Safety Plan.

Yeas: Bendigo, Dempsey, Kleffel, Lash, Miller, Moll, O'Donnell, Rossi

Motion passed unanimously.

Mrs. Lash asked when the plan would be effective and said she agreed with Mr. Dempsey about January 10, 2022. Mr. Bendigo answered that to give the Administrators time to come up with the virtual set ups and to have everyone briefed, he could live with that. He believes we have to fix what changes we want in the plan, then select a date through our discussion here on when it would become effective, and then we can vote on that. Mrs. Lash noted that there were requests from parents that they did not want it removed until they had time to have their children fully vaccinated. She believes we need to give them that consideration as pediatricians are only offering so many vaccinations per day. Mr. Moll added that before we set that final date of January 10, 2022, he would like to hear from the Administration if this will

give them enough time to make sure we're all set for this. Mr. Bendigo stated that the first change that was discussed at last month's meeting was the criteria on when masks would be required. The feedback that he received was are we talking about 25% of the student body or are we talking about 25% of the daily absentee rate. He has no problem with 25% of the student body, but if it gets to that situation, they could consider implementing or making masks mandatory again. Mr. Rossi asked what our average absentee rate is and Mr. Moll answered that it's 10% to 15% per building. Mr. Rossi stated that a spike to 25% would be indicative that there was an issue where we would need to take action. Mr. Miller added that's not taking into account if it's a class or a building or the entire district. That's why he doesn't like saying when we would go back to mandatory masking. This is a decision the Administration should be bringing back to the Board if they feel it's that important. Whenever the mask optional is triggered, that takes over, but the Administration needs to tell the Board that they cannot run a building or grade or a class. The Board is doing their jobs for them if we set benchmarks in saying when you hit this, there's a decision you have to make. Mr. Bendigo stated that when we get to 20%, they let the Board know that things are getting worse and highly recommend people wear masks. He's trying to get to the point where they have the leeway to move back and forth if they see a need and the public is aware of what that is and are kept informed so that the Board does not have to frequently change the plan.

Dr. Taschner summarized Item #4 in the plan which says that when there are not enough teachers we can't have school. This is a safety issue and if she doesn't have teachers here and we have 700 children in an elementary school and only 10 teachers, we can't have that. In this case she'd have to make a decision to move to virtual as we don't have time to post it and hold a meeting. Item #5 in the plan is the threshold to return to masking. She hasn't asked for the authority to say that she thinks we'll go back to masking tomorrow. We've heard how the community has different and varied thoughts about this, and that's a discussion that should come back to this table. She would be watching those rates so that if they're climbing it could be possible but not likely that would happen in 24 hours; teachers could potentially happen overnight. But hopefully she would have a day or two to see the student number climbing and be able to bring that to the Board for discussion. The Department of Health has been interesting in how they have given guidance to schools. They were originally going to do all the contact tracing but that's not happening now. Schools do their own notifications and their own contact tracing. The DOH at one point was making the recommendations whether to close schools and saying that the schools report the numbers each week and the DOH would say they've looked at the numbers and make a recommendation as to whether to close school. They haven't done this with us and this has not been her experience with the DOH. She believes they make these recommendations based on looking across the whole Commonwealth and the trends that are there, and it needs to be pretty serious for them to do that. You can see from our numbers, that recommendation has not been made to us. If it was, Dr. Taschner would be coming to the Board to let them know.

Mr. Rossi noted that the threshold should be easy to find so parents can see it and anticipate whether they will need to take off from work or find child care. Mrs. Kleffel stated that the threshold is currently in the Health and Safety Plan as 25%. The district knows where it's at as far as absenteeism and the averages, so when it gets to 20% the Board can be alerted and prepare to have a discussion, whether it's in person or Zoom. Mr. Rossi asked for the absenteeism rate to be placed on our website. Mr. Bendigo stated that the change to the plan is 25%, and 20% of the student body versus what was originally in the plan. Dr. Taschner stated that she will change the plan to 25% with a warning and alert to everyone at 20% with a recommendation if cases are high that the district highly recommends masks with a website alert as to what the daily attendance number looks like. Mrs. Lash asked if the Board needed to meet on this or could the Board give Dr. Taschner the authority to proceed. Dr. Taschner said the Board could do this, but she believes it's important to give parents enough time and she thinks the Board would want to have discussion on that. People feel very differently about this matter and she thinks giving the

Board the ability to comment and talk about it is important. Mr. Miller stated that the Board just had a motion go 4-4 to do this Monday, December 20. At least half of the people in the meeting want to get this moving forward. He totally trusts Dr. Taschner and Dr. Heilman to come up with a game plan that they can live with as this is something they have to make work, the Board doesn't as they oversee. He worries about the principals, teachers and staff having to deal with kids not wearing masks because we're currently in a mask mandatory situation. It's untenable for them and they shouldn't be in that position. That's why he's saying he trusts Dr. Taschner and Dr. Heilman to make a plan and come back to the Board with what will work. This is the same way he trusts parents to make the appropriate decisions.

Mr. Bendigo stated that this evening they gave the Superintendent direction on what changes to make to the Health and Safety Plan. We can put in the effective date and that date can't be changed unless the Board comes back and re-votes on it. The plan has been before the Board for over two months and if there are any other changes that the Board believes should be incorporated, we can do that, and if not, pick a date when it's effective and the Board can vote on that tonight. If it's going to change it needs to come back again before the Board. Mrs. Lash asked what we're doing for the education of those children that need to be out from 5-10 days or longer. Dr. Taschner noted that this is already in the plan and it states that for the remainder of the 2021-22 school year, students would be able to Zoom in live to the classrooms, see their teachers, and office hours would be included. If we go mask optional and we have some students that do not feel comfortable being in the buildings, but don't want to be in Educere, they could use the Zoom option. Mrs. Lash asked if there are no students or teacher in the buildings, would the teachers be required to teach from their classrooms, or would they be expected to teach from home. Dr. Taschner stated that if people are symptomatic, we don't want them to be there. We do have a telework policy that dictates when people will telework and when they won't. We would follow that policy until it is changed. This would mean that some people might be symptomatic and might have to teach from home and some people might be here. This is a challenge and every facet of what we're doing right now is absolutely a challenge.

- 3.6 Approves a motion to add an agenda item to consider and approve the changes to the Health and Safety Plan to be effective January 10, 2022.

Board Action: Moved by Paul Bendigo and seconded by Dane Miller to approve a motion to add an agenda item to consider and approve the changes to the Health and Safety Plan to be effective January 10, 2022.

Yeas: Bendigo, Dempsey, Kleffel, Lash, Miller, Moll, O'Donnell, Rossi

Motion passed unanimously.

- 3.7 Approves the changes to the Health and Safety Plan including the 20% and 25% thresholds, with the information to be displayed on the website in regard to our absentee rate, and with notification being sent to parents at the 20% mark, to be effective January 10, 2022.

Board Action: Moved by Paul Bendigo and seconded by Nicoleen Kleffel to approve the changes to the Health and Safety Plan including the 20% and 25% thresholds, with the information to be displayed on the website in regard to our absentee rate, and with notification being sent to parents at the 20% mark, to be effective January 10, 2022.

Mr. Dempsey stated that his issue with using December 20 as the effective date is that we have a tool in place for mitigation of the spread of COVID. His point is why remove it now when we have an opportunity to see what it's like after Christmas, New Year's, family gatherings, all through those periods of time and even a week after the kids come back, to

see what the situation might be. He's willing to compromise but he still strongly believes that the masks have been proven to help here at Schuylkill Valley. The kids have been at school uninterrupted with just a few cases and he wants people to understand where he's coming from on some of these issues. Mr. Moll added that we want to give everyone the opportunity to do what they need to do to prepare and that includes the Administration.

Roll Call Vote

Yeas: Kleffel, Lash, Miller, Moll, O'Donnell, Rossi, Bendigo, Dempsey

Motion passed unanimously.

4.0 OTHER BUSINESS/GOOD OF THE ORDER

Dr. Taschner stated that this is probably one of the hardest things that people have faced, but she has watched the community, teachers and this Board disagree and do it in such a respectful way. It's a pleasure to be here and see this all come together. Mr. Moll thanked the Board and noted that this was not an easy decision.

5.0 ADJOURNMENT

Moved by Paul Bendigo and seconded by Nicoleen Kleffel that, there being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting be adjourned.

Yeas: Bendigo, Dempsey, Kleffel, Lash, Miller, Moll, O'Donnell, Rossi

Motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:00 p.m.



Linda R. Lash, Secretary
Board of School Directors