

MANCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION

Regular Meeting

August 30, 2021

Lincoln/Virtual

PRESENT: Heinrich, Hughes, Meggers, Pattacini, Stefanovicz, Thames

ALSO PRESENT: Superintendent of Schools Geary, Deputy Superintendent Curriculum & Special Services Radikas, Assistant Superintendent Clancy, Assistant Superintendent Sone-Moyano

ABSENT: Luna, Patterson

A. OPENING

A.1. & 2. Meeting Called to Order

Chairperson Thames called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m. All in attendance participated in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, led by Mr. Thames.

A.3. Approval of Minutes of Previous Meeting

APPROVED – Minutes Regular Meeting of the Board of Education of August 9, 2021. Secretary Pattacini moved and Ms. Stefanovicz seconded the motion.

6/0 – Voted in favor.

B. COMMITTEE REPORTS

None.

C. CONSENT CALENDAR

Mr. Geary presented three items on the Consent Calendar for Board approval.

C.1. Personnel Action

Details had already been provided to the Board members with their agenda.

C.2. Transfer of Funds

- Transfer from Bennet Academy School Administration General Supplies and Materials account to Bennet Academy Library/Media Services Databases account in the amount of \$174.00
- Transfer from Bentley Alternative Education Field Trips account to Bentley Alternative Education Computer Supplies and Materials account in the amount of \$1,200.00
- Transfer from System-wide Language Arts Professional Development account in the amount of \$11,200.00. Transfer to System-wide Language Arts Instructional Supplies and Materials account in the amount of \$10,000.00 and transfer to System-wide Language Arts Periodicals account in the amount of \$1,200.00 for a total transfer of \$11,200.00

C.3. Permission to apply for the Rise Innovation Grant for the FY 21-22 in the amount of \$210,000

The Chairman called for a motion.

Secretary Pattacini moved and Mr. Heinrich seconded the recommendation to adopt the Consent Calendar as outlined in this evening's agenda.

6/0 - Voted in favor.

D. STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORT

None.

E. PUBLIC COMMENTS

Ms. Christine Paige, 165 Wetherell Street, is against the mask policy. Her students (a son and daughter) struggled last year and have dealt with rashes and sores around their mouths due to mask wearing. She claims it is hard for them to breath with masks on, especially after gym class when they may be forced to mask while still struggling to breath. She noted that her son, who was in Kindergarten last year, is shy and struggled with making connections in school as faces are important for that skill and the mask

impedes the ability to make connections. She claimed for three months her child cried because it was so hard to make connections in school. Ms. Paige wants to be a voice for our children. She feels kids are resilient and should not be forced to mask. Her family has ridden an emotional rollercoaster through this pandemic.

[Ms. Paige refused to yield the floor at the end of her time limit and Mr. Pattacini called a recess at 7:13, seconded by Mr. Thames with a 6/0 vote. The meeting was called back to order at 7:16 and Ms. Paige was allowed 1 minute to tie up her comments and reminded there is a second opportunity to speak (for 3 minutes) later in the evening. Ms. Paige claimed that the mask mandate from the state is only "guidance" and not a law and that we do not need to force our children to wear them. She feels only parents should be making that decision for their children. Ms. Paige asked the Board members to look into their hearts as parents and educators if they at all doubt the mask mandate.

Mr. Tom Stringfellow, 183 Hillstown Road, pointed out Labor Day is approaching, this being the 140th year of labor unions. He recommended a book on the Spanish American War titled *How to Hide an Empire*. Mr. Stringfellow feels it is important to hear all of history, not just the pleasant parts. He also pointed out an article about masks and the anti-vax sentiment in a magazine, *Rethinking Schools*

F. Superintendent's Report

F.1. Update on Opening of School

Mr. Geary reviewed that students in grades Pre-K through 5, 7 and 9 start school on Wednesday, September 8th. Students in grades 6, 8 and 10-12 start the following day, September 9th. Headstart begins September 13th.

Mr. Geary reviewed that we had originally planned to offer a remote option, even though it was not mandated, however the State Department legislation ultimately did not allow for any remote learning options. There may be a work-around if a student has a documented health issue or lives with a vulnerable person and he is looking into that.

Regarding masks, the state REQUIRES masks for all schools, both students and staff along with visitors regardless of vaccination status through September 30th at this point. Our attorneys, Shipman & Goodwin, looked into the mandate and

it is a binding legal requirement. The Town of Manchester has also issued an indoor mask mandate.

In addition, all school staff are required to show proof of a first dose (and an appointment for a second) or full vaccination by September 27th, or submit to weekly testing. (There is a medical exemption to vaccination, with weekly testing). Mr. Geary pointed out that the executive order was vague around this requirement and we have asked our attorneys to obtain clarity around the testing option, such as who is responsible for providing tests, how to track etc.

Regarding students social distancing, the current rule is students in a classroom (does not apply when in other areas such as gym, cafe etc) only qualify as a "close contact" in terms of contact tracing if they have been closer than 3 feet to a peer, unmasked. Hopefully this will mean far less students being required to quarantine, as that disrupts their learning.

Mr. Geary pointed out that with the precautions we took last year, only two cases out of hundreds involved possible school spread, while all the rest were exposed outside of school and no peers/staff contracted the virus from an in-school contact.

Classroom seats will be placed at least 3 feet apart, but may face any direction (as opposed to having to all face one direction last year). We are also allowing for flexible seating to be put back into classrooms.

Breakfast this year will continue to be grab and go and K-8 students will eat lunch in classrooms with desk shields for the most part. At MHS students may eat in the courtyard or cafeteria.

Students who ride the bus will have assigned seats and masks required to cut down on possible transmission as bus rules are 6 feet instead of the classroom 3 feet rule.

At Illing and MHS they will continue with directional halls and stairwells.

Mr. Geary noted that we may be able to offer field trips soon. We can have large outdoor gatherings. Music class has specific guidelines.

Regarding quarantining - if you are vaccinated and show no symptoms as a close contact you would not have to quarantine. If you are not vaccinated a 10 day quarantine is required. With adults the 6 foot distance (not 3 feet) remains for contact tracing. Specifics will be sent to staff regarding these rules.

Sports will look very much like pre-pandemic times, with the exception of masks being required inside, including in locker rooms.

We have provided students with supplies again this year and we can share those supplies as there is now less concern over surface spread of the virus.

There are currently no travel restrictions in place.

We will run more vaccine clinics as the vaccine becomes available to younger students.

Ventilation systems have been maximized, though this is harder in the older buildings.

Visitors will be allowed into buildings if necessary, masked. If it is possible to conduct your business virtually we ask that you continue to do so.

Students should bring refillable water bottles as water fountains will remain closed and we will continue with the filling stations.

Bus routes have been published. The transportation department has extra staff manning the phones during this busy period. Please be patient.

Students and staff will all begin the year with the same devices they had last year.

Elementary teacher assignments went out in the mail and Bennet, Illing and MHS will post their assignments online by Wednesday.

This week the staff will be in professional development all week. We have a lot of new hires and still have several openings to fill.

Mr. Pattacini asked for a clarification on quarantine rules. Mr. Geary reviewed that over a 24 hour period, if you are an adult and have been in close contact (meaning closer than 6 feet) with a positive individual for more than 15 minutes total, you would be required to quarantine if you are not vaccinated.

If you are a student the 24 hours/15 minutes total still applies, but the space drops from 6 feet to 3 feet. This drop in proximity only applies to classroom settings, not the bus, cafeteria, etc.

Masks breaks will occur either outside, or in the classroom utilizing their desk shields.

Mr. Pattacini appreciates the work being done to keep our kids safe.

Ms. Stefanovicz wondered what we could do to advocate for a remote learning option. Mr. Geary believes that most students learn better in person, though we had originally planned to offer a remote option for families that requested it. The state said no, even taking away the possibility of remote snow days. The legislators are currently not in session. You can reach out to your legislators to express your concerns. Many families are concerned with the health and safety of their families and Mr. Geary is not sure what the thinking behind removing the remote option was. He feels it may become an option again for the 22-23 school year if necessary.

Regarding weekly testing of unvaccinated staff, Ms. Stefanovicz wondered who pays for that and how it will be provided. Mr. Geary stated they are trying to figure out the logistics and are currently looking at the number of staff in question.

F.2. Update on Building Projects

Mr. Geary reviewed he met recently with Mr. Thames, the mayor, town manager and Building Committee chair to review current projects. Buckley is well underway. Costs, however, are rising in response to the pandemic, so we are looking at finances and building supplies. When these projects were forecast years ago we obviously did not plan for a pandemic to impact costs so greatly. In addition, making projects Net-Zero impacted budgets as well.

Mr. Geary reviewed the original cost estimates for Buckley (\$23.4m), Bowers (\$23.9m) and Keeney (\$21.4m) and the addition of Net-Zero planning pushed those numbers approximately \$4m and now current projections for those projects are now approximately Buckley (\$27m), Bowers (\$33.4m) and Keeney (\$26m). However with higher costs come higher amounts for reimbursement. At this time Buckley's contingency amount seems to be enough to cover the difference in that project. Regarding Bowers, there is \$1.4m in the contingency budget to cover part of the \$2.5 gap and we are also looking at a possible \$150k rebate. We will continue to follow up and will hold off on scaling back on any projects at this time.

Mr. Geary pointed out that we also have \$2.4m in the non-lapsing fund from last year that could potentially be used in any of these projects. When we bid Bowers in about six months these numbers may all change.

Ms. Stefanovicz wondered what the root cause of the increase was. Mr. Geary noted mostly materials and labor costs. In addition, the Bowers site is the most challenging where Net-Zero comes into play. However, it is too early to start scaling back any plans.

Mr. Pattacini wondered how we know that Bowers costs went from \$28.1m to \$33.4m if we haven't gone to bid yet. Mr. Geary noted that when the papers for Keeney were submitted in July the other projects were looked at then.

When we did the Verplanck, Waddell and Bennet projects the town bid all three projects at once to be able to move funds between projects as needed. We try our best to maximize the reimbursement rate and we certainly do not want to cut \$2.5m from the Bowers plan.

Mr. Pattacini asked about the reimbursement so far on Verplanck and Waddell. Mr. Geary will get those numbers and noted that because those schools have larger common spaces for their 525 students the reimbursement rate is a little lower.

Mr. Pattacini is comfortable with waiting the 6 months until we see how this plays out before making any major decisions. Mr. Geary also noted there is room to move in the bond.

Mr. Thames agreed with the plan to move forward and noted that the Governor praised our Buckley Net-Zero project.

G. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None.

H. NEW BUSINESS

None.

I. PUBLIC COMMENTS (Limited to items on tonight's agenda)

Ms. Christine Paige, 165 Wetherell Street, claimed the statistics show that most children have no issues related to COVID-19 and therefore should not be required to wear masks. She compared their reaction to COVID as similar to getting the flu. She would like people to do their own research. Ms. Paige was unhappy that the Board is making rules for our children and then going out to events. She claimed that we can go into stores with no masks, but we are "forcing" the kids to wear them in school. She would like that choice left up to families. She does not want to teach her children to go against authority by not wearing their masks. Ms. Paige points out that if families are unhappy with this mandate and choose to pull their students from the public school, it is the district that loses that money. She knows remote school is not an option, and her children do better in person anyway, they need the social interaction. Last, Ms. Paige claimed that child suicide rates have risen recently.

Mr. Geary replied briefly that remote learning is only an option during quarantine.

Mr. Thames added that we do not take any of this lightly and we appreciate the comments. This has been a trying year and he understands people's stress levels.

Mr. Tom Stringfellow, 183 Hillstown Road, hopes people will educate themselves about masks, though he knows every family situation is different and we are all under stress. He recommended an article on the Science of Overcoming Racism in *Scientific* magazine, as well as articles on how to help special education students adjust to mask

wearing. He recommended an article on ADHD in *Attitude* magazine. Last, Mr. Stringfellow reminded us that the 20th anniversary of 9/11 is approaching.

Ms. Sarah Bilea, 10 Livingston Way, wonders what happens if schools have to close for two weeks again. Would students then be allowed to learn remotely?

Mr. Geary agreed that if there is a temporary shut-down the state would allow for that, as they did in the past.

Ms. Bilea asked about when reimbursements come from the state, and is it paid over time or all at once?

Mr. Geary noted that when a project is fully closed out, after a punch list of items is addressed, the state then calculates reimbursement based on the number of students in the building at that time.

Claire Lippolis, 209 East Center Street, wondered the rationale behind elementary schools dismissing at 3:00pm but buses not leaving until 3:40pm. She wonders if walkers will be allowed to partake in that grace period since MELC will not start until 3:40pm. She wondered who would be watching the students for those 40 minutes and she is not happy to have to pay for MELC for afternoon care when ultimately they would not be in charge of her child from 3:00pm and she only needs care until 4:00pm.

Mr. Geary clarified our staff would be in charge of those students. He revealed the reason for the change this year was that last year it was difficult for elementary parents to accommodate PD days on Wednesdays (we started late on Wednesdays when we returned full time). This year grades 5-12 are dismissing early on Wednesdays starting in October and to that end, elementary schools were adjusted to avoid an early dismissal day. Regarding specific needs, he recommended Ms. Lippolis should reach out to the principal of her school.

Sheralyn Lazu, 22 Oak Grove Street asked about specials at the elementary level now being in a "funky" rotation of three weeks. She is not in favor of this.

Mr. Geary noted that elementary specials are now on a three week rotation schedule in elementary schools so that teachers can develop deeper relationships with students.

Ms. Lazu wondered who will supervise lunch in classrooms, noting that in the past she has been told those supervisors have been on cell phones or gave kids screen time.

Mr. Geary noted if there is a specific issue to reach out to the principal of that school, or even himself. We will continue to have students eat in classrooms at the elementary level with desk shields and noon aides or other staff supervising them while the teacher has their own lunch elsewhere.

J. COMMUNICATIONS

Ms. Stefanovicz wondered if the agenda could better reflect the 3 minute time limit for public speakers to make it more user-friendly in the agenda.

K. ITEMS FOR FUTURE AGENDAS

Monday, September 13, 2021 - District Improvement Plan Update/Professional Development Highlights

Monday, September 27, 2021 - Update on Technology

Thursday, October 14, 2021 - Bowers Update

L. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Thames called for a motion to adjourn.

Secretary Pattacini moved and Mr. Hughes seconded the motion to adjourn the meeting.

6/0 - Voted in favor.

Adjournment 8:32 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Christopher Pattacini
Board Secretary