

ROCHESTER SCHOOL COMMITTEE
ROCHESTER SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
December 17, 2020 at 5:30 p.m.
16 Pine Street
Rochester, MA 02770

Members Present: Sharon Hartley, Chairperson, Anne Fernandes, Vice-Chairperson, Robin Rounseville and Kate Duggan

Members Absent: Tina Rood.

Others Present: Michael S. Nelson, Superintendent of Schools, Jannell Pearson-Campbell, Asst. Supt. of Teaching & Learning, Howard Barber, Asst. Supt. of Finance & Operations, Craig Davidson, Director of Student Services, Diana Russo, Administrative Asst. to the Supt., Derek Medeiros, Principal, Rochester Memorial School, teachers, parents and members of the press.

Meeting was called to order at 5:30 p.m. by Chairperson Hartley.

Ms. Hartley welcomed everyone and expressed that this was a special meeting of the Rochester School Committee to address two items. She then turned over the meeting to Superintendent Nelson so he could address the first item which is the Reopening Update.

IV. General

A. Reopening Update

Mr. Nelson read the following statement:

Good Evening Everyone, thank you for joining us tonight, this is a silver lining of the situation we're in that even on a traditional snow day we are still able to meet via zoom, this is important work so thank you for being here tonight. One of the reasons we're here tonight is to really talk about where we really are with our reopening plan, mostly off the heels of our most recent meeting where we reviewed survey data from our parents and guardians, backing up a little bit, when we think of the reopening of schools in light of the COVID-19 scenario since August we really talked about how can we safely educate as many children in our schools or in an environment that they are most comfortable in. We that being said, with the approval of our back to school plan the school committee supported a primary start of hybrid learning acknowledging that any family or student who felt that remote learning was most appropriate for their needs had that option, so in other words we have done the best to meet families where they're at while putting safety of students, families and staff members as our primary focus. Our students have prodimently participated in the hybrid model since the start of school on September 16th, most students attend school twice a week on alternating days and then participate in hybrid out learning on the other two days. One thing that we have done is identified particular subgroups that we have prioritized for more in person learning if we can do it safely meeting our safety protocols, we have identified students with significant special education needs, that maybe English language learners, that have unique living situations to provide more in person services. What I've heard prodimently from this school committee and administrators and colleagues is that the other group that we have most concerned about is our youngest learners and I know we have talked about that as a school committee in recent meetings. One of the charges I left last meeting with was really to look at what options we have in terms of increasing opportunities for our youngest learners, specifically in Kindergarten, first and second grade. Tonight what you will hear is a presentation from Principal Medeiros for the school committee to consider in terms of what more in person learning could look like for those particular grade levels. As I've said many many times the situation continues to be fluid there is no set model or decision for this specific school year, so I just want to remind everyone as we present the examples in front of you today. Each day, each scenario we are presented with we consider that data and those indicators and we will adjust if needed moving forward, that's really important for everyone to remember that we are here today to consider certain options but no situation will be set this year, we have to be willing to be flexible problem solvers for the rest of the school year. I would like to thank the school committee, as well as the parents and guardians for providing us with the feedback and the association for giving feedback in terms of some of the information that you will here tonight.

Mr. Medeiros wanted to take this opportunity again to thank the Rochester Memorial School Reopening Task Force, he expressed they worked very hard throughout the summer and did an outstanding putting a plan in place that we are currently using in the two learning models, hybrid and

remote learning. He expressed that a lot of those staff members from the K-2 staff team as well as specialist teachers were on that Task Force and were also instrumental in creating this potential plan and always looking to put something in place and be ready to pivot if we needed to. He just wanted to thank everyone for their support, in particular Ms. Bacchiocchi and Mr. DellaCioppa for always meeting with him to trouble shoot when needed and always being available, and always keeping our students and staff interests in mind.

Mr. Medeiros presented the **Full In-Person for Lower Elementary Grades (Preschool, K, 1st, 2nd)**
Preschool - would remain in their full in-person model.

Kindergarten - currently has 48 students enrolled in three (3) Kindergarten classrooms in the Hybrid Model and 5 Remote Learners.

K Classroom A122 would move to the media center, B116 would remain as is adding 6 desks, and A115 would remain as is adding 6 desks. (maintaining 6-foot distancing between desks)

First Grade - currently has 52 students enrolled in three (3) First Grade classrooms in the Hybrid Model and 4 Remote Learners.

Classroom A107 would move to the music room and Classroom A117 would move to the Art Room and Classroom A105 would move to the band room.

Second Grade - currently has 54 students enrolled in three (3) Second Grade classrooms in the Hybrid Model and 11 Remote Learners.

Classroom B113 would remain as is and also utilize B111 classroom as well (this is the open classroom). Classroom B111 would move to the B112 and reassign 4 students to homeroom B113 and Classroom B110 would move to the gymnasium. The grade 2/3 remote teacher would move from room B112 to B104.

The music, band, media specialist and art educators would continue to run their respective specialist class in each homeroom by way of carts and their offices would be relocated to A107, C105, A103B/Computer Lab and A122 and A105.

Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Grade - would remain in the hybrid model of learning.

Mr. Medeiros also shared pictures of what the classrooms would look like.

Mr. Nelson expressed that a lot of the guidance has been around transportation and in terms of what that means there are limitations on buses in terms of meeting the current guidance, and meeting the social distancing, he expressed that we can safely fit 25 students on a 77 passenger bus at this time. He expressed that we are dependent on the current ridership, we have had fewer ridership this year, Mr. Nelson expressed that looking at the current ridership they do believe they would be able to provide transportation for additional days, however if there was an uptick of requests we might have to come back to the committee and present that information in case the number of buses needed to be increased. Additionally, Mr. Nelson explained that with this model, students who were quarantining might not have the “hybrid-out” services currently available to them, therefore they would have to take a traditional sick day. Mr. Nelson concluded by explaining that it’s important for everyone to know that we are able to facilitate this plan while still maintaining the 6 feet of social distancing and he expressed this is very important to keep in mind.

FEEDBACK/COMMENTS:

Ms. Hartley expressed that she wanted to add to the appreciation that Mr. Medeiros mentioned to the staff and the school leaders, she expressed that she feels honored to be part of this group that is thinking of how we can move to our next phase in education during these hard times. She expressed that she appreciates all the time and thoughtfulness that has gone into this. Ms. Hartley expressed that she’s also grateful for having the building/facilities to facilitate this plan. At this point Ms. Hartley opened up the floor for school committee members to ask questions and have a discussion before a decision is made.

Ms. Rounseville asked for confirmation of her statement that we would be bringing in an additional 77 students per day. Mr. Medeiros confirmed. Ms. Rounseville expressed that we talked about accommodating these 77 extra students in the classroom but what about the cafeteria, rest rooms, pickup and drop-off, how are we accommodating them in those areas? Mr. Medeiros expressed that

as we looked at this plan one of the big pieces was not to use the cafeteria as a classroom, he expressed that they can accommodate the K-2 students safely at 6 feet distance in the cafeteria and the 3-6 hybrid students, Mr. Medeiros expressed that if some of the families returned from a remote setting/parochial/private they do have a system in place that they could use the gym for overflow. He expressed that there will some adjustment to the lunch schedule, we would move everything up 10 minutes. Mr. Medeiros expressed that from an operational standpoint we started to use the dots throughout the building and they seem to really work, he expressed that lines will be a little longer in the building for rest room use and pick up and drop off but the system seems to work. Mr. Medeiros expressed that some of the classrooms have their own bathrooms which will also help and they also have paraprofessional support which will add to the support.

Ms. Duggan wanted to confirm that this plan would be for 5 days in person and that the hybrid choice would go away K-2 but the remote choice would remain for those students and families that are interested in that option correct? Mr. Medeiros did confirm that this plan would be for 5 days per week of in-person learning and that yes the hybrid option would no longer exist K-2 but students would still have the remote option. Ms. Duggan also asked if the K-2 drop-off area would need adjustments or provisions since there would be more students being dropped off at the same time. Mr. Medeiros did explain that some adjustments would be made with the way they line up the children for dismissal. Mr. Medeiros feels like at this point there are well prepared with staff and space but if they feel like additional support is needed they would come back to the committee.

Ms. Rounseville asked if they would need to shift any paraprofessionals as the classes get a little bigger. Mr. Medeiros expressed that at this point we have support in all kindergarten classrooms, he explained that prior to the pandemic those supports we already in place, he expressed it's been the model at Rochester Memorial for quite some time and we're very fortunate to have that. He explained that 1st grade has a couple of paraprofessionals that support that team and they have a full time paraprofessional supporting the 2nd grade team. Mr. Medeiros expressed that the same staffing would be used with the proposed plan.

Ms. Rounseville asked how does administration envision specialists working in the classrooms with gym and band? Mr. Medeiros explained that the specialists have been on carts this year, and they have been doing great work, he explained that from a physical education standpoint, Mr. Woodward has been very creative doing a lot of activities in the classroom as well as using the outdoors as much as possible weather permitting. Mr. Medeiros expressed that with band, Ms. Williamson will be setup in one of the classrooms and she will also be setup on the stage to use that space for social distancing. Mr. Medeiros expressed that all the specialists in general have been very creative and always throwing out new ideas to make this work for our students.

Ms. Fernandes asked if we a representative from the association K-2 would be willing to tell us how they feel about this process, she expressed that she believes it's an important piece that has not been heard yet. Ms. Medeiros thanked Mr. Medeiros for his presentation and expressed that he did a great job.

Ms. Bacchiocchi expressed that K-2 staff as well as the rest of the staff in the building would love to have their children back full time, however she expressed that the K-2 staff is asking is "is this the right time", she expressed that prior to Thanksgiving we had no cases of COVID at Rochester Memorial, she expressed that after Thanksgiving we started to get the COVID cases, so right after Christmas would that be the appropriate time to start bringing the children back full time? One suggestion was should we phase this in, bring in one grade level see how it goes, see if there's any uptick in cases and then bring in another grade level, work out all the logistics before we bring all the children back full force K-2. She expressed those we some of the ideas and suggestions received by staff and she wanted to share that information with the school committee.

Ms. Hartley asked Supt. if he had any thoughts about next steps. Mr. Nelson expressed that Ms. Bacchiocchi alluded to one of the big questions and that is “when is the right time”, Mr. Nelson expressed that he doesn’t pretend to know that, he expressed this is a very unpredictable situation, and that after Thanksgivings we did have an uptick in our area and statewide. Mr. Nelson expressed that he did reach out to the Rochester town nurse prior to this meeting and she expressed that although we haven’t seen transmission in our schools we have seen in our communities, therefore coming off the heels of a holiday such as Christmas and New Year’s we would want to ideally wait two to three weeks to see if there is an uptick in cases before we made decisions to move forward, Mr. Nelson expressed that was the recommendation from the health department as well as making sure that we continue to use the 6 feet social distancing, Mr. Nelson expressed that’s why we’re here tonight to talk about and what makes sense to the Rochester school community in terms of next steps.

Ms. Rounseville asked if we could accommodate families if we had an increase in the remote option. Mr. Nelson expressed that we do have some flexibility but as with everything if a high number of students chose to shift we would need to make some adjustments and bring the school committee back together to address those.

Ms. Rounseville expressed that she feels strongly that our youngest learners should be back in school, however she is concerned about the timing, she expressed that what she’s seen after Thanksgiving is concerning, she expressed this is a goal but she’s just not sure this is the right time. Ms. Rounseville expressed that while we don’t see a lot of transmission in schools it does still have impact on students and families when families and students need to quarantine. She expressed that the other thing we haven’t talked about is the hybrid option going away for these students/families, she expressed that if some families are not fully comfortable coming back full time there will be families going from 2 days to no days or fully remote. She expressed this is a great goal to have she’s just not sure how fast after the Christmas break it should be done.

Ms. Hartley expressed that one of the things we all know is that our youngest learners do need to be back to have the very best learning, however she did express that maybe more logistics need to be discussed and we need more information as well before we can make a concrete decision. She did express that the next school committee is January 7th. Ms. Hartley expressed that she would like our administrators look at some of the other logistics points and we can reconvene after the New Year to review these. Ms. Hartley expressed that they want to do the right thing for our children and be cautious of our decisions and our next steps and how they affect our children, our families and our staff. Ms. Hartley asked for a motion to ask administrators and staff to study the logistics and come back January 7th with more information and a recommendation.

Ms. Fernandes agreed with the plan set forth by Ms. Hartley and one of the primary focus should be on the health information when we come back on the 7th.

Mr. Nelson expressed that while he agrees with the sentiment Mr. Hartley shared he feels like the 7th might be too early to meet, knowing that everyone will be coming back from the break on January 4th, I would make the recommendation to schedule the meeting for later in January, just so we can have updated data from the holiday break. Ms. Hartley agreed.

Mr. Nelson recommended that Ms. Russo would reach out to the school committee with potential new dates for the school committee to meet in January.

Ms. Duggan expressed that while she’s excited about her 1st grader going back full time, she also agrees that waiting is a good idea.

Ms. Rounseville expressed that she is so grateful for everyone's dedication, she expressed that it's amazing everyone wants the same thing it's just a matter of the timing and getting it just right.

Motion to approve and request that our administrators continue to study the logistics of bringing our students back (k-2) full time and look at timing and making a recommendation of next steps
MOTION by Ms. Rounseville

MOTION Seconded by Ms. Fernandes

(Roll Call Vote: Hartley: yes, Rounseville: yes, Duggan: yes, Fernandes: yes)

Ms. Bacchiocchi thanked the school committee for addressing these issues she expressed she the teachers do want the children in full time they just want everyone to be safe, she expressed her gratitude to them for taking the time and listening to everyone and consider families, students and staff in your decision making.

B. MCAS Resolution Discussion

Chairperson Hartley expressed that Ms. Fernandes had prepared the following MCAS Resolution to be sent to state leaders as well as the Commissioner of Education and Secretary of Education. Ms. Hartley thanked the Association for their support on this letter as well. The MCAS Resolution states the following:

We, the Rochester Memorial School Committee and the Rochester Memorial Teachers' Association, are profoundly concerned regarding the Massachusetts Department of Early and Secondary Education's plan to administer MCAS testing during the 2020-2021 school year. Although we appreciate DESE's commitment to assess the Commonwealth's schools' effectiveness in educating Massachusetts' students, the social/emotional, safety, logistical, and educational impacts of the stated testing plan make it prohibitive during the current school year. As a committee, we cohesively recommend that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) cancel the administration of the MCAS assessment for the 2020-2021 school year.

Over the last several months, groups of administrators, school committee members, teachers, parents, students, health experts, and mental health experts worked together to safely re-open and keep our school open. Throughout the process we adhered to DESE's clear advice to (1) prioritize equity, (2) keep social/emotional concerns of students at the forefront (reduce anxiety), (3) provide families with a choice of learning formats, and (4) continue to educate students. As part of the larger Old Rochester District, Rochester Memorial School leadership and teaching staff crafted hybrid and remote learning models that focused on relationship building and learning in all its forms. We have focused on the "whole child". In addition, our district families have completed several surveys to assist district leaders' thoughtful planning and creating model adaptations, as needed.

Given all DESE's previous direction, we were astounded when DESE released an MCAS testing plan that defied every standard it set. In review:

- Equity:** *the MCAS always posed challenges for the Commonwealth's most vulnerable learners. By requiring this population to take the traditional MCAS during a year that is so disrupted, the test essentially is just an assessment of economic and learner inequality, as a recent Boston Herald editorial stated.*
- Social/Emotional Health (Anxiety):** *as stated by many health experts, the pandemic is having a devastating effect on the mental health of many people, including our children. We refer you to the following research published in the International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212420920313479> "In conclusion, mental health is a critical concern in a pandemic's scenario. Children and adolescents are considered a vulnerable subgroup and there is a need to reduce the mental health burden of this pandemic." In order to direct our commitment to the "whole child", we believe that our children would benefit from a continued maintenance of routine without all the adjustments made to learning schedules for weeks at a time during MCAS administrations.*
- Safety/Choice of Learning Formats:** *DESE was very clear at the outset of this school year that families who do not feel comfortable sending their children into schools for in-person learning must have an option of remote learning that is equitable and flexible. Yet, when it comes to the MCAS, they require all students to come into school to take the test. DESE must consider that families with legitimate health concerns cannot send their children into a widely used, public school buildings. At this time, it is incongruent that DESE is making this demand.*
- Logistics/Safety Considerations:** *pre-COVID, MCAS logistics clamored for full time administrative and teaching attention. Ostensibly, in order to provide adequate testing footage, other grades not being assessed*

may not be allowed in school during particular grade level MCAS. Once again, all schedules will be disrupted, and direct instruction time/time on learning is further reduced. You will agree that time on learning and students' social/emotional health should be our district's priorities.

5. **Instruction Time:** in a year when instructional time is already reduced by the late start of the school year and the split cohorts, students would be denied even more time on learning. No doubt, DESE is familiar with all the current research re: time on learning, but we reference one study from the Brookings Institution which reflects actual academic losses sustained during this and the previous school year:

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/05/27/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-student-achievement-and-what-it-may-mean-for-educators/>

In conclusion, Rochester Memorial School Committee recommends rescinding the obligation to administer the 2020/2021 MCAS because it is inappropriate to insist upon a high-stakes standardized test during a school year already defined by disruption for all students. It is irreconcilable and detrimental to further alarm our students' emotional and physical health with yet another interruption. At the local level, we believe that our priorities are the whole child, requiring us to maximize learning and health during this global pandemic, and we robustly request that DESE pivot its MCAS requirement to the 2021/2022 school year. Doing so will help ensure that the Commonwealth has the healthy and educated population to lead the state in the future. As we request that you advocate for the "whole child", we gratefully acknowledge your assistance in making these necessary changes transpire.

Sincerely,

Sharon Hartley, Chairperson, Rochester School Committee

Debora Bacchiocchi, Co-President, Rochester Memorial Teachers' Association

James DellaCioppa, Co-President, Rochester Memorial Teachers' Association

Motion to approve an MCAS Resolution

MOTION by Ms. Fernandes

MOTION Seconded by Ms. Rounseville

(Roll Call Vote: Hartley: yes, Rounseville: yes, Rood: yes, Duggan: yes, Fernandes: yes)

OPEN COMMENTS:

MOTION: by Ms. Rounseville at 6:29 p.m. to enter executive session for the purpose of exception #3

SECOND: by Ms. Fernandes

ROLL CALL VOTE:

4:0 (Hartley; yes - Fernandes; yes – Rounseville; yes- Duggan; yes)

MOTION: by Ms. Rounseville to go come out of Executive Session at 6:39 pm and to adjourn

SECOND: by Ms. Fernandes

ROLL CALL VOTE:

4:0 (Hartley; yes - Fernandes; yes – Rounseville; yes- Duggan; yes)

MOTION to adjourn at 6:39 p.m. by Ms. Rounseville

SECOND: by Ms. Fernandes

4:0 (Hartley; yes - Fernandes; yes – Rounseville; yes- Duggan; yes)

Submitted by Diana Russo