MINUTES OF
THE WILSON COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION
SPECIAL MEETING
January 19, 2021

The Wilson County Board of Education held a Special Meeting on Tuesday, January 19, 2021, at 10:00 a.m. in the Administrative Offices, 113 N. Tarboro Street. The meeting was conducted virtually using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Chairman Dr. Christine Fitch called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m. with the following members present:

Dr. Christine L. Fitch, Chairman
Henry E. Mercer, Vice-Chairman
Velma Barnes
Beverly Boyette
Blake Boykin
Rhyan Breen
Debora Powell
Dr. Lane B. Mills, Secretary

Dr. Fitch, Ms. Boyette and Mr. Boykin participated in the meeting at the Administrative Offices. The other Board members participated in the meeting offsite.

The meeting was televised on Spectrum and Greenlight Channel 22; and livestreamed through the Wilson County Schools (WCS) YouTube Channel. The public could also view the meeting through links on the WCS Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages and the WCS website. Dr. Fitch announced that in keeping with Executive Order #180, attendees would wear face coverings for the duration of the Board meeting.

Others present or participating virtually were Associate Superintendent Dr. Cheryl Wilson, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Dr. Norris Parker, Assistant Superintendent of Administrative Services Dr. Ben Williams, Executive Director of Elementary Education Jennifer Lewis, Executive Director of Secondary Education David Lyndon, Executive Director of Technology Matthew Mayo, Executive Director of Exceptional Children Melissa McFatter, Executive Director of Accountability and Testing Scott Sage, Director of School Nutrition Mary-Catherine Talton, Director of Transportation Robert Harvey, Director of Maintenance Mark Letchworth, Director of Public Relations Amber Lynch, Wilson County Health Department Director Teresa Ellen, Wilson County Health Department Environmental Supervisor Angie Manning, Wilson Area School Based Health Centers (WASH) Dr. Kim Almkuist, Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent and Board Clerk Linda Horrison, as well as Board Attorney Brandon McPherson and *The Wilson Times* Reporter Drew Wilson.

After calling the meeting to order, Dr. Fitch asked for approval of the agenda. Ms. Powell made the motion, seconded by Mr. Mercer, that the Board approve the agenda for the Special Meeting of Tuesday, January 19, 2021. The motion passed unanimously.

Dr. Fitch led the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by a moment of silence.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss revisiting the 2nd Semester Transitional Plan.

Under Revisiting 2nd Semester Transitional Plan, at the December 14 meeting, the Board voted for students to return to Plan A for elementary schools and Plan B for middle and high schools on January 25. Elementary students would attend face-to-face instruction in school buildings four days a week; middle school and early college students would attend face-to-face instruction two days a week; and high school students one day a week. The students would be in remote learning the days they were not in school buildings. The Virtual Academy would continue to be an option for students in grades PreK-12 throughout the remainder of the school year. Due to the number of COVID-19 cases and contacts increasing in Wilson County, the Board is revisiting the transition to in-person learning for the second semester.

Ms. Ellen updated the Board on the COVID-19 vaccination drive-thru event that is being held today, January 19, 2021, at Fike High School for members of the community who are ages 65 and up. Ms. Ellen shared that they had planned to give 1,170 vaccines, but they are planning to give a total of 1,800. She added that the county is experiencing an increase in COVID-19 cases, with 70-90 new cases per day and over 6,000 total cases. She hopes that the county will receive more vaccinations and teachers will be in the next group to receive them in March. The federal guidelines are changing constantly for age groups receiving the vaccine. WASH will administer vaccines to teachers and staff, along with help from school and student nurses. Ms. Ellen also shared that the positivity rate for Wilson County is 12.9%. Before the Winter Break, the rate was 14.5%. Ms. Ellen and Ms. Manning responded to questions from the Board. Lastly, Ms. Ellen thanked WCS for being a wonderful partner and for allowing the use of Fike High School for the COVID-19 vaccination drive-thru.

Dr. Fitch thanked Ms. Ellen, the Wilson County Health Department, Duke Lifepoint Hospital, Community Health Center, Wilson Police Department, Wilson County Sheriff's Department, Wilson County Emergency Management, and all involved with getting the mass vaccination efforts underway. She added that the district is happy to have partnered with the Wilson County Health Department to provide the parking lot at Fike High School for the COVID-19 vaccination drive-thru event. She hopes that as things change, teachers will be given a quicker opportunity to receive their vaccinations. Dr. Fitch is thankful that WASH will be available to provide vaccinations to hopefully decrease waiting in long lines. She expressed that the positivity rates are not good and that the Board has received concerns from teachers on returning to face-to-face instruction. The plan was for students to return on January 25 and for the Board to reevaluate this decision. The Board will hear recommendations from the Administration. Lastly, Dr. Fitch thanked Ms. Ellen and her staff for their cooperation and work.

The Administration presented a Revisiting Transition to In-Person Learning Plan with details about students returning to school, staffing and administrative services. The Revisiting Transition to In-Person Learning Plan is attached. The Board will need to decide on a plan for students transitioning to in-person learning for the second semester.

The Administration also shared concerns on the growing number of cases, which will most likely create a larger number of contacts. Increases in cases and contacts will lead to difficulties in staffing as schools and classrooms might need to close. Positive cases are reflected on the COVID-19 Data Dashboard located on the WCS website. As a result of COVID-19, the district has seen a decrease in substitutes and bus drivers. Based on guidance from the state, only 22 students will be allowed on buses in Plan B. Due to the

shortage of bus drivers, double loads will be used on routes. Some schools also share buses so if a double load is required, students will be late for class.

Ms. Boyette asked the Administration to share information on the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) sick leave not being extended past December 31, 2020. The Administration shared that this leave provided up to 80 hours of sick leave for quarantine due to a COVID-19 related diagnosis that had been documented by a medical professional, without subtracting from an employee's leave balances. If an employee must quarantine due to a medically documented COVID-19 positive case or exposure starting on or after January 1, 2021, they must use their leave balances as directed by Board Policy unless our county health director orders them to leave the work environment under State Contagious Disease Leave Policy. Mr. McPherson added that the employee is not charged for a substitute when using the Contagious Disease leave. The funds are not deducted from the employee's pay and leave balances will not be impacted. Ms. Boyette shared that even though WCS employees are covered under this leave, many parents are having to stay home with their children and they do not have the option to use Contagious Disease leave.

Mr. Boykin cited a press release from North Carolina General Assembly Senator Deanna Ballard regarding a study conducted by UNC and Duke University researchers supporting the conclusion that parents should have the option to send their children back to school for full-time, in-person instruction. Researchers examined over 90,000 students and staff. He shared that he received a lot of feedback from the community that parents want their children back in school. Since there is an issue with bus drivers, he asked could the Administration inform parents that their child has the option to ride a car as opposed to riding a bus. He shared that private and charter schools are participating in face-to-face instruction and that WCS is losing students to them. Mr. Boykin added that he would like for the Board to figure out a way to safely return students to school face-to-face.

Mr. Mercer shared that it appears the risk to students is less than it is for adults; however, it's a challenge to find substitutes when teachers are out. He understands that parents want their children in school, but the Board needs to make sure teachers are available. Parents may find it easy to send their children to school but teachers are being exposed to students and the families of those students. Mr. Mercer shared that according to Ms. Ellen, the medical concern is more of a teacher risk than a student risk. He added that he wants the students back in school but it needs to be sustainable. The district needs to be cautious and have enough substitutes to fill in as needed. He shared that the students have options to attend school face-to-face or online, but the teachers do not.

Dr. Fitch advised the Board members that they had voted at a past meeting that teachers would return to school today and students would return using a hybrid model on January 25. She felt that the Administration was being optimistic for teachers returning on March 15, though she hoped that the uptick in numbers would see a drop by that date. She stated that vaccinations are underway but everyone will receive two doses. In Wilson, the first doses are being administered. She is looking forward to a revised schedule that will allow teachers and essential workers to be able to receive the vaccine and feel more comfortable in returning to school. She shared that face-to-face instruction is the best option for students but we must be realistic about the need for remote learning and teachers not comfortable with returning to school. Based on the Revisiting Transition to In-Person Learning Plan, students in the adaptive curriculum can return to school. Staff can work from home but will have the option of reporting to their classrooms. She advised that when school is out, hunger is

always a concern. The plan does provide options on feeding families. She shared that the Administration's recommendation is realistic in making sure that the students, staff and the community are safe. Dr. Fitch also shared that she would not like to see the district lose outstanding teachers because we are returning to a face-to-face situation and teachers are not comfortable. She also shared that the district does not have enough substitutes. She added that the Board must work in the best interest of students, staff and the community.

Mr. Breen asked the Board to consider bringing back the most academically vulnerable students to school, which are grades PreK-5. He suggested bringing those students back to school on January 25 under Plan A and then revisit the subject again in March for the other grades. Mr. Boykin and Ms. Boyette agreed with Mr. Breen's suggestion. Mr. Mercer suggested that the district wait 2-3 additional weeks and then bring back the primary grades and the exceptional children. He felt that middle and high school students could manage remote learning better than elementary students.

Ms. Powell thanked the Administration and the Wilson County Health Department for information provided during the meeting. She shared that the community spread of COVID-19 is putting staff and families at risk, and the district cannot instruct students without having teachers in place. She added that it's hard to provide instruction with teachers going in and out of quarantine, and she wants everyone to be safe. She shared that the Board must look at the lack of substitutes, bus drivers and the way many teachers are having to split classes to provide coverage. Ms. Powell shared that it is important for students to have face-to-face instruction, but she is not ready to send students back to school at this point. She suggested waiting an additional 2-3 weeks or longer instead of sending students back now. This will allow time for teachers to hopefully receive the vaccine.

Ms. Barnes shared that she was recovering from COVID-19 because of a contact. She advised that she is concerned about contacts and teachers who are more susceptible, even though the numbers are low for student to staff transfer. She is also concerned about the positivity rate in Wilson County. Ms. Barnes shared that face-to-face instruction is the best way to educate students but suggested that the Board wait a little longer to send students back to err on the side of safety. She added that it is encouraging to know that teachers will begin receiving the vaccine in March.

The Administration presented the following recommendations to the Board:

- Traditional and Early College – Teachers return on March 15 (end of the 3rd grading period) and students return on March 22 (Early Colleges are on Spring Break the week of March 8).
- Students in the adaptive curriculum will still be attending school and transportation will be provided (pending the availability of staff).
- Staff can report to school buildings during the extended remote learning.
- School Nutrition can continue to provide meals for students and families.
- Bus drivers will be provided an opportunity to work in various capacities within the schools.
- Daycare centers at Beddingfield and Hunt High Schools can continue to operate (numbers are limited at present).

Dr. Fitch turned the meeting over to Vice Chair Mr. Mercer for the purpose of carrying through with the motion.

Dr. Fitch made the motion, seconded by Ms. Powell, that the Board accept the recommendations and remain in remote learning until March 15 when teachers return and on March 22 students will return. The motion passed 4:3, with Ms. Boyette, Mr. Boykin and Mr. Breen casting the dissenting votes.

Mr. Mercer turned the meeting back over to Dr. Fitch.

Dr. Fitch advised that the district will remain in remote learning, with teachers returning on March 15 and students returning on March 22; students in the adaptive curriculum will return to school on January 25; and staff will be able to report to their schools if they choose or work remotely if necessary. The district will continue to monitor COVID-19 cases and revisit students returning to school face-to-face for the rest of the semester if necessary and upon a decrease in numbers.

There being no further business at 11:48 a.m., Mr. Mercer made the motion, seconded by Ms. Barnes, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

Christine L. Fitch

Dr. Christine L. Fitch, Chairman

Dr. Lane B. Mills, Secretary