

SAULT STE. MARIE AREA PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
SAULT STE. MARIE, MICHIGAN 49783  
SPECIAL MEETING, BOARD OF EDUCATION  
Phone 906/635-6609

**Minutes – Monday, November 24, 2020**

131. **I. CALL TO ORDER**

President Smith called the electronic meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan.

132. **A. ROLL CALL OF BOARD**

Present: Daniel L. Smith, Martin R. Wolski, Christine M. Curtis, Melissa S. Pingatore, Joseph A. Cochran, Lisa A. Young, Jay D. Wilson

Absent: None

133. **B. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA**

It was moved by Member Wilson, supported by Member Wolski, that the Board of Education move to adopt the agenda as presented.

Yeas: Smith, Curtis, Pingatore, Cochran, Young, Wilson, Wolski

Nays: None

Absent: None

Motion Carried.

**II. COMMUNICATIONS**

134. **A. SUPERINTENDENT REPORT**

Superintendent Hall reviewed the MDHHS order on high school students not being able to return to school until December 9 and the possibility of including students in grades kindergarten through 8 in that timeframe.

Superintendent Hall reported the actual number of confirmed COVID cases involving students was 25 and staff 3, and the number under quarantine was 25 students and 4 staff. He suggested the numbers may have been low because the district had been closed for face-to-face instruction.

Superintendent Hall reported the Board will review the Extended Continuity of Learning Plan at a meeting on Thursday, December 3. He

indicated the review is basically a perfunctory state requirement. He stated schools have not been determined to be spreaders, but COVID cases continue to rise and the virus in our county has proven to be community spread.

Superintendent Hall asked the Board to consider the availability of substitutes to fill vacancies. He noted we have some older substitutes who are not comfortable with coming into a school. He stated, overall, the district is operating very thin with substitutes, and if we have staff who are unable to teach due to a quarantine or test positive, we may have a difficult time filling the classes.

Superintendent Hall reported he has spoken several times with Karen Senkus of the Chippewa County Health Department (CCHD) and David Jahn of War Memorial Hospital (WMH). He stated the CCHD positivity rate taken from health centers at Bay Mills, Sault Tribe, and LSSU, indicate the area is at a 5% positivity rate and rising. He reported WMH had seen its biggest number of positive cases with 65 out of 325-testing positive or 20%.

Superintendent Hall stated in general, the CCHD is very concerned with the rapid increase of positive tests. He stated the CCHD's positive test cases increased from 222 on November 3 to 684 on November 23 (300% increase in 19 days). He noted Mrs. Senkus indicated contact tracing shows that the virus is being spread community wide, and Mr. Jahn conveyed the same sentiments.

Superintendent Hall reported the health department is very concerned about post-holiday gatherings because our community saw its first spike after some Halloween activities.

Upon inquiry from Superintendent Hall, Mrs. Senkus reiterated cases are rapidly climbing, averaging up to 15 new positive cases a day over the past week. She stated our hospital capacity, in terms of treatment, is a concern.

Superintendent Hall reported Mr. Jahn indicated the hospital is close to maximum capacity and he is concerned about the number of COVID hospitalizations they will be able to take when also trying to care for patients with non-COVID issues. Superintendent Hall stated 30 days ago the hospital did not have any COVID patients, and now they have 17 including one on a ventilator.

Superintendent Hall reported everyone is concerned about the increase in positive COVID cases at the prison and the movement of staff to and from work. He indicated out of the 3200 prisoners, 1100 have tested positive.

Superintendent Hall reported Brimley, JKL Bahweting, Pickford, St. Ignace, and Ojibway Charter Schools are closed for face-to-face instruction for all grades through December 8, and Tahquamenon and Newberry Schools are operating virtually until January 4.

President Smith sought comment from the Board.

Members Wolski, Curtis, Pingatore, Cochran, and Young indicated they did not have any questions or comments at this point.

Upon inquiry from Member Wilson, Superintendent Hall stated other than the early quarantine of the JV football team and its one staff member, to the best of his knowledge, it is safe to say there has not been any transmission between students at sporting events or school. Mrs. Senkus stated she agreed with Dr. Hall's response, but it was important to keep in mind that it is difficult to gauge the spread at sporting events and school while school is closed to face-to-face instruction.

Member Wilson stated the district reported early on there was not any transmission of the virus at school and students and staff were doing well with wearing masks and sanitizing.

135. ***B. AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION***

Upon request by President Smith, Dr. Hall reported public comment would be taken by allowing individuals to virtually raise their hand, state their name, and limit their discussion to 3 minutes.

Stacey Daley reported she is a school nurse, and her husband works for the Department of Corrections. She asked the Board to take into consideration some students have parents whose work exposes them to the virus daily, but they are only tested weekly. She also stated the schools are not always notified of the number of people who are quarantining so there is an opportunity for transmission other than what you may be unaware of. President Smith stated he and the Board would take her comments into consideration.

Jody Burt reported she is a principal at the Chippewa Correctional Facility with approximately 200 prisoners and few positive cases. She indicated even though her children's teachers have been wonderful, online education is not enough to teach the foundations kids need to be successful in the future. She indicated she tested positive with no symptoms at the end of October, but her husband and children were negative, and even though anyone can be a carrier, if people are diligent with taking care of their families and social distancing, in-person education can work. She stated she is a proponent of in-person education because some children need the socialization aspect more than the educational aspect.

Scott Hockersmith stated he has 4 children and wanted to know if the district uses a matrix in determining when to close school. Superintendent Hall reported the district uses a variety of data, no set matrix, as the numbers change daily. He indicated the district gathers numbers from a variety of sources and tries to take as much of a global snapshot in providing information to the Board.

Megan Parish reported on her concern for the number of recent cases in our county. She stated she has a student in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and knows that kids do not always follow the rules, no matter how diligent their parents are. She indicated concern for how difficult it could get if kids return to school with many of the other families having issues. She inquired on the Board taking that into consideration.

Superintendent Hall reported on the hybrid mode of teaching the district has in its Return to School Plan. He stated as of now, students in grades K-8 could return on Monday, but the Board has a lot of options to consider. Ms. Parish stated if the district continues to jump back and forth between face-to-face and virtual, it appears the hybrid process would be more appropriate.

Daniela Thomas' connection was dropped.

Carrie Hough suggested if the Board is concerned about having students in grades K-8 return to school on November 30, perhaps they should consider how many days are left until the holiday breaks and what the impact is on the district.

President Smith reported all the options are on the table, and he does not know how the rest of the Board feels about it yet.

Dee Smith expressed concern for sending kids back to school before the holidays with all the anticipated gatherings, War Memorial Hospital being at 92% capacity, and the effects on older teachers, doctors, and the community.

Following her earlier disconnection, Daniela Thomas, a mother of two and a former down state school board member, thanked the Board for allowing her to speak. She reported she understood the difficult decisions the Board needs to make, but her main concern was the rate of transmission since the state mandate closure. She asked the Board to err on the side of caution and to follow the plan they have in place.

President Smith thanked Mrs. Thomas for her input.

Nick Huyck stated technology and the teachers are working virtually but it seems like the community is split on when the children should return to

school. He stated the CDC has indicated the younger children are not the super spreaders and asked the Board to move to the Hybrid plan as a good middle ground.

Christina Amend stated she was a mother of five children and was in support of moving to the hybrid approach after seeing her kids struggle with virtual learning. She suggested allowing parents the option of enrolling their children in Virtual Blue or sending them in person.

Katie Sibbald-Plitz questioned the importance of placing kids at risk with the virus by opening school up before the holidays after seeing the rise in cases post Halloween.

Tracy Casebier, teacher at the Middle School, expressed concern for opening school up too soon. She stated special education students often have additional health concerns and she wants what is best for all students and staff.

Vanessa Owaski-Patzwald reported the community needs to learn from the increase in cases after Halloween and stick to the CDC guidelines and with being around their immediate household over the holidays. She indicated some people have already reported they are not going to stay home so the cases will probably go up. She stated the district needs to consider the safety of its students and teachers.

Becky Proulx reported she had children at the Middle School and Lincoln and is grateful for virtual learning and asked if some of the Return to School plans were going to change. Superintendent Hall reported he did not anticipate any significant changes as the Board heard good comments about how school is currently working with connectivity, so he does not anticipate any changes to virtual instruction.

Amy Hjerstedt reported she worked at LSSU as an instructor and had children at the Middle School and elementary school. She thanked the teachers and administrators for moving the move to virtual learning as seamless as possible. She expressed sympathy for families who had difficulty with the move and with connectivity. She stated in the big picture, we need to keep our students, teachers, and staff safe so we can return to face-to-face instruction. She reported LSSU combined their Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday breaks to help avoid COVID transmission among communities. She thanked the Board for doing their best with making the difficult decisions.

President Smith confirmed there were no other questions and thanked everyone for their input.

**III. ACTION ITEMS AND BOARD REPORTS**

136. **A. TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF BYLAW 0131.1 – Superintendent Hall**

Superintendent Hall sought confirmation that the Board understood the motion and read the recommendation.

It was moved by Member Wilson, supported by Member Young, that the Board of Education temporarily suspend its rules of order noted in ByLaw 0131.1 for the purpose of adopting Policy 8450.05.

8450.05 - Emergency Temporary Telecommuting Policy (ETTP)

Yeas: Wolski, Curtis, Pingatore, Cochran, Wilson, Young, Smith

Nays: None

Absent: None

Motion Carried.

137. **B. POLICY 8450.05 – Superintendent Hall**

Superintendent Hall thanked the Board for approving the previous motion to present policy 8450.05 for action.

Superintendent Hall reported most employees are working from home and the select few who are not, are very segregated. He noted the district is doing a good job of being mindful of MDHHS orders and DM Burr staff have been using Clorox machines in the buildings.

It was moved by Member Wilson, supported by Member Pingatore, that the Board of Education approve Policy 8450.05 – Emergency Temporary Telecommuting Policy as presented.

Yeas: Young, Cochran, Curtis, Wolski, Smith, Wilson, Pingatore

Nays: None

Absent: None

Motion Carried.

138. **C. REMOTE LEARNING – Superintendent Hall**

Superintendent Hall announced the Board had several options in deciding on when students in grades kindergarten through eighth could return to school starting as soon as November 30.

Superintendent Hall reported if the Board chose to allow students to return prior to December 9, there would be about 80 students in

grade 8 who take classes at the high school and would not have teachers in the building due to the MDHHS ruling.

Superintendent Hall reported Dr. McFarlane had indicated some special education services have students coming into close contacts with their teachers, but they have been okay with the operations thus far.

Superintendent Hall reported the Board has been given a lot of comment from the public and teachers union, and the consensus seems to be to have students stay out until December 9. He recommended the Board call a meeting on December 3 to affirm the Extended Continuity Plan, which they are obligated to do, for submission on December 7. He noted the meeting would also allow for more up-to-date data on the number of COVID cases, quarantines, and trends.

Member Wolski indicated he preferred school to be closed until the end of the first semester to see what the county's numbers are after the potential gatherings.

Upon inquiry from Member Curtis, Superintendent Hall reported January 22 was the last day of the first semester. Member Curtis indicated she was not opposed to having students return January 4 or at the start of second semester.

Member Pingatore indicated she wanted kids back in school, but with War Memorial being at capacity, and other people moving around in the community, she was concerned about the potential spread and drop in student attendance below 75%. She stated she did not know when the magic date was or how long students should be out.

President Smith stated there was not a magic date.

Member Cochran reported the CDC Director Robert Redfield stated in his briefing last week that he did not recommend closing schools, and wearing a mask is the most important health tool we have right now. He further noted MDHSS recommended keeping school open for the mental health aspect.

Mr. Cochran stated if we do not have enough staff, or if they feel unsafe, we cannot have school. He referenced Dr. Hall's comment

that we cannot lose 20-25% of staff and expect to stay open. He referenced the CDC numbers tripling every 3-5 days, and if people do not isolate themselves, no one knows when the pandemic will end. Mr. Cochran stated he was inclined to agree with Member Curtis and have students return on January 4.

Member Young reported she is in favor of having students return after November 30, but not keep them out until January 22. She stated her children do better in school, but we cannot sacrifice the safety of our staff and students. She suggested possibly revisiting the hybrid model for at least the elementary students.

Member Young stated she appreciated all the public input and suggested parents who are concerned about bringing the virus home, to consider enrolling their children in Virtual Blue for the next quarter.

Member Young suggested the possibility of having elementary students return to school first, then the middle school students, and finally the high school students.

Member Wilson reported he had spoken with multiple teachers and they were struggling with when to open face-to-face instruction because they know kids do better with the structure and support, they get at school, but they want them to be safe and not be bounced back in and out. Member Wilson indicated it is not his opinion, but the community appears to think if students cannot return to school on the 9<sup>th</sup>, they should stay virtual until after the holidays and a 14-day quarantine. He further reported he received the community data/stats at 2 p.m. and was curious as to what Superintendent Hall's recommendation was.

Member Wilson inquired on hearing input from the two board members who work at the health department.

President Smith reported he is aware of the complexities of virtual teaching and learning, but the district must do what is also best for the district and community.

Superintendent Hall reported the Board had received a lot of comment and data, and with the rise in positivity rates and upcoming holidays, the Board needs to consider what is best for the district and community.



President Smith stated he was reluctant to make a motion but his opinion, there is always something, in the not too distance future, that could be a super spreader. He suggested the emotional effect of students not being able to see their friends in school could be just as dangerous as the possibility of contracting COVID.

Member Wolski reported would make a motion that the district stay with virtual learning until the end of the first semester and Member Curtis stated she would second that.

In response to Member Cochran's request, Superintendent Hall stated Members Wolski and Curtis would need to agree to amend their motion to not allow sporting activities before they could proceed with voting on the amended motion.

Member Wilson reported he would agree with continuing with virtual learning until January 11 or 18 but would prefer leaving some time open prior to the end of the first semester to get things figured out for kids left behind in online learning. He also indicated he would agree with going back to face-to-face on December 9<sup>th</sup> too.

Superintendent Hall suggested consideration be given for people who may be traveling through the new year's holiday.

Upon inquiry from Member Young, Superintendent Hall responded face-to-face instruction could open two weeks following the scheduled holiday break, but secondary finals would be given that week. Upon further inquiry from Member Young, Superintendent Hall stated students are taking their assessments online and semester testing would not be any different.

Member Young indicated she was looking at offering a hybrid plan to open back up.

Member Cochran stated he was inclined to go with a January 18 open date, but it was obvious the amendment to suspend all sports, practices, training, and games during the virtual period is not supported.

Member Pingatore reported it was difficult to know what the right decision is looking out so far into January.

Member Curtis reported she was not opposed to opening school on January 18 if it did not negatively affect the students who had to return for exams.

Member Wolski reported he would be okay if the Board chose to extend virtual learning through January 18 or 22.

Upon inquiry from Member Pingatore, Superintendent Hall reported the Board could modify the return date as they see fit but cautioned the frequently of that as parents and staff want some sort of continuity.

It was moved by Member Wolski, supported by Member Curtis, that the Board suspend face-to-face learning until the end of the first semester.

Yeas: Wolski, Curtis

Nays: Pingatore, Cochran, Wilson, Young, Smith

Absent: None

Motion Failed.

It was moved by Member Cochran, that the Board of Education suspend face-to-face instruction and all sports activities until the end of the first semester.

The motion failed for lack of support.

It was moved by Member Wilson, that the Board of Education allow students in Kindergarten through grade 8 to return to school on Monday, November 30, and students in grades 9-12 on December 9 per the Governor's recommendation.

The motion failed due to lack of support.

Member Young stated this was the first time the Board was able to discuss the return to instruction as a group.

Upon inquiry from Member Young, Superintendent Hall confirmed a motion needs to convey a concise decision or action.

1. It was moved by Member Curtis, supported by Member Wolski, that the district stay virtual through January 17 (two weeks after the return from Christmas break) and then return to face-to-face instruction.

Member Cochran suggested the motion be modified to include suspending all sports activity. Members Curtis and Wolski did not want to modify the motion.

Upon inquiry from Member Wilson, Superintendent Hall indicated the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) order states winter sports cannot start until after December 9 and contests cannot start until after January 1.

President Smith called for a roll call vote.

Yeas: Curtis, Wolski

Nays: Wilson, Young, Cochran, Pingatore, Smith

Absent: None

Motion Failed.

2. It was moved by Member Wilson, supported by Member Pingatore, that the Board of Education return all students to face to face instruction on December 9.

President Smith sought discussion on the motion.

Member Pingatore indicated the community is split on having students return to school and she is not sure how she feels, but after hearing all the information and the experts say it's not safe, she would prefer to decide on a return date at a later time.

Member Cochran reported he had already stated his comments.

Member Curtis stated she thinks it's too early; parents and teachers need time to plan, and she doesn't think bringing students back that early is a good idea.

Member Wolski stated he agreed with the motion as with the Thanksgiving holiday, the numbers could soar even higher.

President Smith called a roll call vote:

Yeas: Wilson, Pingatore

Nays: Young, Cochran, Curtis, Wolski, Smith

Absent: None

Motion Failed.

President Smith discussed making a motion for elementary students to stay at home until December 9 along with the rest of the grades, and then revisit the decision at the December 3 meeting when the Board also needs to review the Extended Continuity of Learning Plan. Member Smith indicated he does not like to postpone a final decision, but it is difficult to predict 6 weeks out, and it would be helpful to get current data from Dr. Hall and Mrs. Senkus closer to December 9.

President Smith stated a lot depends on the health department and he highly doubts that the numbers will drop significantly in a week. He called for the next board meeting to be held via zoom on December 3 at 7 p.m. He stated Dr. Hall would confirm the connection details.

Upon confirmation that a board president can make a motion, Member Smith offered the following motion.

3. It was moved by Member Smith, supported by Member Young, that the Board of Education extend virtual learning through December 8 for students in kindergarten through eighth grade and hold a meeting on December 3 to review current information and revisit the situation.

Yeas: Wolski, Pingatore, Wilson, Young, Smith  
Nays: Curtis, Cochran  
Absent: None  
Motion Carried.

139. **IV. ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to come before the Board at 8:48 p.m., it was moved by Member Wilson, supported by Member Wolski, that the meeting be adjourned.

Yeas: Young, Cochran, Pingatore, Curtis, Smith, Wolski, Wilson  
Nays: None  
Absent: None  
Motion Carried.

Superintendent Hall stated he hoped the audience and parents were confident the Board was not taking their decision seriously and they were using data from several sources.

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Daniel L. Smith, President

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Melissa S. Pingatore, Board Secretary

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Judy L. Sirk, Recording Secretary