

# Rockaway Borough Board of Education

## SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

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**Tuesday, August 25, 2020: 6:30 PM**

~~Thomas Jefferson School Cafeteria/Gym, 95 East Main Street, Rockaway, NJ 07866~~

Meeting Held via ZOOM Only: Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81429216745?pwd=Y2hvLzI1ZFZLWjhGQTBzRVl6TnJxdz09>

Meeting ID: 814 2921 6745 Passcode: JrFYi3

### **1. Call to Order:**

*The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m., by Mrs. Christa Smith, Board President, by reading the following announcement:*

"In accordance with the Open Public Meeting Act, The Rockaway Borough Board of Education has provided adequate notice of this meeting to the public by having the time, date and place thereof advertised in The Daily Record newspaper, posted on our website and at town hall. **The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the plan to reopen the schools (student instruction method) for the 2020-21 school year and any other business before the Board.** Official action will be taken.

### **2. Board Member Roll Call:**

***Mrs. Linda McGovern, VP - Present***

Elected 2017 Board Member to 1<sup>st</sup> Term (Full 3-year term runs to Dec. 31, 2020)

***Mrs. Alexis Piombino - Present***

Elected 2018 Board Member to 1<sup>st</sup> Term (Full 3-year term runs to Dec. 31, 2021)

***Mrs. Christa Smith, President - Present***

Elected 2019 Board Member to 7<sup>th</sup> Term (Full 3-year term runs to Dec. 31, 2022)

***Mr. Jeffrey Tobias - Present***

Elected 2017 Board Member to 1<sup>st</sup> Term (Full 3-year term runs to Dec. 31, 2020)

***Mrs. Karen Walter - Present***

Elected 2018 Board Member to 1<sup>st</sup> Term (Full 3-year term runs to Dec. 31, 2021)

***Mrs. Phyllis Alpaugh, Superintendent of Schools - Present***

Appointed 2017 Chief School Administrator & Non-Voting Board Member (CSA/Supt)

***Mr. William Stepka, SBA/Bd. Sec. - Present***

Appointed 2017 School District Business Administrator (BA) & Secretary of the Board

Mr. Stepka Declares: All Board Members Present

In attendance were all 5 district administrators and approximately 160 public members present which was comprised of the general public, parents of district students, and staff members.

*The Pledge of Allegiance was then held . . .*

### **3. Motion to Enter Executive Session: 6:40 PM**

Be it Resolved, that the Board enter into Executive Session (Private) for the purpose of discussing a legal issue pertaining to a construction contract now in place, the nature of which will be made public when the need for confidentiality no longer exists.

***Moved by: Mrs. Piombino Seconded by: Mrs. McGovern Voice Vote: All Ayes***  
***(At this time, this Public ZOOM meeting was paused, and the Board entered into another, separate & private ZOOM meeting to conduct Executive Session.)***

### **4. Motion to Adjourn Executive Session and Return to the Public Meeting: 8:57 PM**

***Moved by: Mrs. McGovern Seconded by: Mrs. Piombino Voice Vote: All Ayes***

### **5. Discussion/Determination of the Delivery of Student Instruction**

The Board discussed and determined how the district will reopen for students on September 8, 2020. The Superintendent stated that since the Lincoln Interior Improvement Project is behind schedule approximately 3 weeks, she recommended to the Board that all Lincoln Students start the school year learning "virtually" and to resume the in-building instructional program on Monday, October 5, 2020. Thomas Jefferson students will be in-person with an A/B hybrid schedule as previously announced.

***Mrs. McGovern, moved, seconded by Mrs. Piombino, to adopt & approve the following resolution:***

*WHEREAS*, there have been delays regarding the construction project at Lincoln Elementary School; and  
*WHEREAS*, Lincoln Elementary School is unable to be opened and the Board will invoke the safety and health measures set forth in Executive Order No. 175; and

*NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED*, that, in accordance with Section 7 of Executive Order No. 175, in light of the inability to open Lincoln Elementary School and therefore satisfy the health and safety standards required by Executive Order No. 175, the Board will commence the 2020-2021 school year at Lincoln Elementary School via full-time remote instruction through October 2, 2020; and

*BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED*, that the Board shall provide the Department of Education with all updates as requested.

*Roll Call: Mr. Tobias: Aye; Mrs. Walter: Aye; Mrs. Piombino: Aye, Mrs. McGovern: Aye; Mrs. Smith: Aye. Resolution Unanimously carried.*

### **6. Public Comment**

There were close to 160 participants on the ZOOM virtual meeting. The following addressed the Board regarding the plan to reopen schools and the preparations to protect everyone from the spread of COVID and the delivery of the instructional program to students.

Mrs. Jeri Hurley & Mr. Michael Onischuk, district teachers and co-presidents of the Rockaway Borough Education Association (RBEA), read a statement and provided it in writing and is attached to these minutes.

Other persons who addressed the Board:

Mrs. Jill Bottomley

Mr. Michael Leahy

Mrs. Pat Lee

Mrs. Schiefer

Mr. Michael Onischuk

Mrs. Carol Coulter

Mr. Ed Graf

Mrs. Monica Koenecker

Mrs. Sherry Rich



# ROCKAWAY BOROUGH EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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Jeri Hurley & Michael Onischuk // Cindy O'Brien // Daniele Ferrone // Nicole McCarter // Aileen Schumacher // Dodi Yobs & Amy

*Read by*

DeFelice

Co-Presidents

Vice President

Treasurer

Recording Secretary

Corresponding Secretary

Association Representatives

August 25, 2020

## *Public Statement RBEA to Board of Ed.*

We thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening. We are not going to claim to be health experts, but we are going to ask that you truly hear our concerns and consider them when making the best decision for Rockaway Borough, because we are confident that this Board always listens to all of the stakeholders. The Rockaway Borough Education Association (RBEA) conducted a survey and shared the results with the administration on July 13. This survey was conducted prior to the creation of a district reopening plan. The data was very clear on the following points:

- The RBEA was pleased with the communication and creation of the Return to School Committee
- Close to 90 members agreed that they would “definitely return” or “likely return” in September if the district could follow the “anticipated minimum standards”
- Approximately 72% of respondents said they would feel more comfortable if the district went above the “minimum standards”
- The RBEA remained committed to continuing to work with the district for a detailed plan

After the creation of the district plan, the RBEA surveyed members once again and subsequently shared the results with the administration on August 19. Once again, the data was clear:

- Based on the district plan, approximately 76% (out of 99 respondents) do NOT feel comfortable returning to in-person instruction in Rockaway Borough
- Since virtual is now an option, 77% (out of 99 respondents) feel that VIRTUAL learning is the safer option instead of in-person/hybrid as suggested by the district

The numbers don't lie. After reviewing the district's reopening plan, the RBEA believes that it places its students, educators, and the entire Rockaway Borough community in harm. The district's plan is flawed. We are not ready to return to in-person instruction because, from an academic standpoint, the staff is not prepared due to the lack of a detailed plan and lack of communication/guidance on the part of the administration. It is impossible for appropriate preparation without information. Additionally, we do not believe that administration can ensure all proper safety protocols are in place for a healthy and safe return. Based on our data, you would expect our members' confidence to rise with the creation of a plan; however, members feel the complete opposite. While wearing our “educator hats”, our members want to return to the classroom, see their students' smiling faces, and offer them the quality education and support that the RBEA is used to providing. However, our members personally feel that they are unsafe and it is not worth the risk to themselves or their families.

School starts in seven days for staff and in fourteen days for students. This should be a time for final preparations around campus, not a time for “still searching for answers.” The decisions should already be made and clearly communicated with our members and our families. While communication with the RBEA started off well, there were no final meetings with the Return to School Sub-Committees prior to the release of the plan. There are still many outstanding concerns and unanswered questions:

- We are waiting to receive schedules, class lists, and our COVID-19 Handbooks. Additionally we are seeking clear answers to how we are teaching with the current schedule; essentially, what is school going to look like? We need to know specific aspects of the plan in order to teach effectively. As previously stated, it is impossible to plan appropriately. Just yesterday, we got word that we would be using live streaming, without a detailed plan. When will we receive details? The administration has also decided to repurpose our regular schedule and create a seven period day that focuses on core subjects. This creates huge inequities among core area teachers and specialists in terms of student contact time. Not only does it increase time spent with core area teachers, putting them at risk of a higher viral load, it decreases the amount of time that students get to see their specialists.
- While the district plan might have met the “anticipated minimum standards” set forth by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), we want to know why we are settling for minimums? Are minimums safe for our children and staff? Members expressed they would feel safer with more stringent standards. This is especially true in regards to holding parents accountable for daily screenings and reporting them to the district. Your recommendation tonight further divides us and makes only half of us safe.
- Complicating matters even further is the fact that Lincoln School may not be ready to open due to construction. There must have been issues and delays with the construction if they were not able to finish it on time. When will our maintenance staff have the time to properly wax and protect our new floors that were just installed? What time will be left for Lincoln School teachers to come and set up their classrooms to welcome our youngest students back to the district? Currently, every classroom is packed up in boxes.
- Unfortunately, in Rockaway Borough, we are also faced with outdated facilities - Thomas Jefferson is 61 years old and Lincoln School is 106 years old. While we understand that the ventilation systems are operational and are “operating as intended”, they are really just moving air around, not trapping the virus. The filters just collect dust and spread dirty air. The systems are operating as they were intended in 1959 and 1914. According to Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations, MERV filters rated 13 or higher properly filter the virus and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Our systems can only handle MERV-4 filters, which are listed as residential filters. Surely, our mechanical systems must be past their useful life. According to Governor Murphy’s Executive Order 175, districts that cannot provide a plan for adequate ventilation may opt to begin the year remotely. Have we done any research to see if our ventilation systems can handle better grade filters? We understand that MERV-13 filters may burn out the motors, but can any other filters better protect us? At this point, you must be questioning the safety of all people in our buildings overall and across the State of NJ as many schools’ ventilation systems are inadequate.
- School districts, specifically superintendents, must sign Attestation Forms that certifies that the district has met certain criteria to reopen. Will we sign the attestation form? If not, what does that say about our plan?

The RBEA has been advocating for a safe return to school all summer. We have joined various associations in calling for a remote start, including the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), the New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA), the New Jersey State School Nurses Association (NJSSNA), the National Education Association (NEA), the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), the Morris County Council of Education Associations (MCCEA), and many other local education associations across the state. We have also added our name to two letters that were sent to legislators, education officials, and Governor Murphy. One of them came from the MCCEA and another from a united group of local education association presidents. The RBEA also advocates and supports its individual members to remain safe on a daily basis by seeking accommodations and leaves that they are entitled to use in the case of pre-existing conditions. A remote start will allow the district to continue finalizing detailed plans for virtual and in-person hybrid learning. We appreciate the hard work of our partners in education - our administrative team. We look forward to continuing to collaborate and work together to form a detailed plan. We want to come back as soon as possible, but if we are unprepared to teach, that is not a good look for our educators or the administrative team. There is going to be a "new" normal in schools that all stakeholders will have to adjust to with a tight learning curve, especially in terms of socialization and teaching styles due to social distancing and other mandates. We understand that virtual learning can affect a child's intellectual, physical, interpersonal, and emotional well-being. It can also put hardships on parents of children. It is far from ideal. But we know that the talented educators of the RBEA can make it a great experience even if we can only meet through a computer screen. If given the chance, with standards and expectations set by our administrative staff, we are sure we can connect with all students effectively.

You heard us loud and clear in July when we advocated that the district MANDATE masks for all students. We appreciate you listening to our voice. We ask you once again to hear us and value our professional opinions. For many reasons, as stated above, we are just not ready to reopen our schools for in-person instruction and it is time to admit it. The district not only has a legal responsibility to educate the children of this district safely, but also a moral and ethical responsibility to protect its students and staff. It is not worth putting everyone at risk. We want to make this very clear - we stand with and fully support the superintendent's recommendation for a full virtual start to the school year - not just one school. We believe a phased-in approach will allow us to further plan for the school year when hybrid and in-person schedules may have to be used. On behalf of the RBEA we are asking you to postpone in-person instruction and the re-opening of our physical school buildings. Our members feel unprepared and unsafe. An all-virtual start to the school year is the safest model and allows the district to complete the plan and start a phased-in return to in-person instruction. We want to be back in our classrooms, but can't until it is safe. The RBEA will go to any extent and exercise any option possible to ensure the health of all of their members. Rockaway Borough is unique; if anyone knows the ins and outs of this place best, it's the staff. If our members don't feel safe or prepared coming back, it is for a reason. We want to avoid a tragedy that would absolutely rock this small community. We also desire to be prepared for our students. Thank you for your time and consideration for maintaining the safety of Rockaway Borough students, staff, and community members. We would appreciate any responses to our questions as well.

Sincerely,

Michael Onischuk and Jeri Hurley

RBEA Co-Presidents