

VIDEO/WEB CONFERENCING – DISTRICT WEBSITE LINK via ZOOM

REMSEN CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
SPECIAL BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING
SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

MINUTES

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mary Lou Allen, Brian Parent, Mark Williams, Stephanie Karis,
Patrick Nolan

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

OTHERS PRESENT: Timothy Jenny, Daniel O’Bryan, John McKeown, Catherine
Chandler, Dale Dening, Kelly Runniger, Gary Winghart

Meeting called to order by Mary Lou Allen, Board President, at 6:30 p.m.

Motion by Mark Williams, second by Patrick Nolan to go into Executive Session at 6:30 p.m. for the sole purpose of discussion of the postponement of fall sports.

Motion by Brian Parent, second by Mark Williams to return to Regular Session at 7:05 p.m.

Mrs. Allen welcomed everyone to Remsen’s board meeting.

Good evening and thank you for joining us. We heard from several parents and two student letters that asked for a chance to ask questions and voice concern regarding our decision to postpone athletics. Our BOE members have read all correspondence that was sent to me or to them. Before we open up the floor for discussion, I will share some information and answer the questions that were included in the emails and letters that were sent. After that we will open up the floor for additional questions or comments. Directions for the public participation session will follow.

As mentioned in my letter last week, we have experienced many challenges and difficult decisions throughout this pandemic. This decision is particularly difficult because of the fact that it is up to each individual school district and when our students and parents see that other districts are allowing athletics to continue, it upsets our community and our student athletes. Why them and not us? We definitely understand that frustration.

From the beginning of the pandemic, our priority has been to keep students and their families as safe as possible. Our priority over the summer was to determine if we could safely have students return to school in some capacity as we all know having them here, in-person is very important. In the elementary, with many changes and a reallocation of staff, we were able to get 100% of our elementary students here for in-person instruction. At the high school, we were able to get 50% of students on any given day. In both buildings, we have put safety measures and procedures in place to help keep everyone as safe as possible. This does not mean that we

can say that we will 100% be able to prevent the spread of COVID. It does mean that we have a very high chance of keeping the level of risk minimized.

From 7:00 AM until 3:00 PM we have put many different safety measures in place to minimize the level of risk associated with COVID-19. Masks, social distancing, modified schedules, no assemblies, no events, no concerts, no visitors...we can't even have regular PE classes. We can't get 100% of our students safely into high school yet. It does not make sense, in good conscience, to require our students and our staff to adhere to over 150 pages worth of strict guidance and requirements during the day, but set it all aside to allow athletics to occur after 3:00 PM.

With all of that said, I will try to answer your questions that were emailed to me and then we will allow for public participation. Please hold your questions or comments on any of these answers until it is time for public participation.

For each question or comment that was sent, I will read the question or comment and then provide answer.

1) Boys' and Girls' played soccer indoors and out all summer and no one got sick

As a school district, it is our responsibility to minimize risk for our entire student body. We are still in a pandemic. While we are completely aware that students took part in club activities among other summer activities, in no way were they affiliated with the school. Just like you may make a decision to go somewhere tomorrow evening, the decision for our high school students to participate in club activities outside of the school is at parental decision. As a school, our job is to minimize risk for our entire student body as much as we can during this pandemic.

2) Social-Emotional Well-Being

We understand and agree that athletics helps the social-emotional health of our student-athletes just as being present in school 100% of the time is essential for all students' social emotional health. We are not dismissing this fact. There are many aspects of mental health for our students that must be considered, not just sports for our student-athletes. Some students are scared to death of this virus and are just trying to make it through a school day while others are not worried about it at all. The mental health of students who are genuinely struggling and scared about the pandemic is worsened when they hear others say that no one will get it or that letting down our guard is okay. It is not fair to them to make being worried or anxious about the pandemic a "bad thing". The mental health of these students and the mental health of the rest of our student body was not mentioned in any of the letters or questions I received.

3) All other schools in Section III are trying to make sports happen

It is true that many schools are moving forward to try to make sports happen this fall. However, it is important to note that 42% of schools in our section voted that sports should be postponed until at least January. 42%. 42% of schools believed that for the safety and health of students and staff, the section should hold off until at least January. It is unfortunate that the State or Section III did not delay for all schools and it is unfortunate that schools have been put in this awful, awful, situation. So far in our section III, Cooperstown, Waterville, LaFargeville, and Remsen have decided to postpone. The entire Southern Tier Athletic Conference made up of

teams in Section IV postponed all sports until January. The *Executive Director of STAC Kevin McGoff* said *postponing was the best scenario to keep students safe. "Being a difficult decision and weighing all the factors, it would have been very difficult to accomplish something safely and in the best interest of the athletes," said McGoff.*

McGoff said other factors played into the decision, including transportation and the possibility of a COVID-19 spike this fall.

The Interscholastic Athletic Conference also pushed All Fall Sports to March on Saturday. Cooperstown and Oneonta had made their decision before the section III announcement. All schools in Section 8 and 11 (Nassau county and Long Island) have postponed. In addition, there are still more schools that will be making their decisions this week.

With all that said, regardless of what other schools are deciding, we must make a decision based on what we believe is best for our school, Remsen.

4) Why as a parent and a community member were we not brought in on the discussion? There were no surveys or zoom town hall meetings. There was not an opportunity for parents and community members to ask questions or the opportunity to discuss the decision the school was going to make.

4A) I felt blindsided where everything else was communicated and asking for parent opinions. My concern will be the major decline in the student body morale, mental health and decline in the population if sports take place in other schools. Parents are already looking into alternatives such as sending their students to neighboring districts.

4B) Why wasn't a survey sent regarding fall sports? Why wasn't anyone on the sports booster club included in this decision making

We completely understand that everyone appreciates to be included when decisions are being made. We also understand that you appreciated all of the zoom meetings and information that we have shared with you and we plan to continue to do that indefinitely. However, some district decisions need to be just that, district decisions. When we heard that the section was going to leave it up to the districts and they had decided not to postpone for all schools, I wanted to get the information out to all of you as soon as possible so that you did not get excited about the section III announcement and then receive a district letter days after the fact that stated the exact opposite. We wanted to ensure that you had the most accurate information as soon as possible so that you would not be misdirected over the weekend. The letter answered many of the questions that we thought our community might have. We wanted to send out this information and send home a school messenger so that you had the information as soon as possible. As far as the sports boosters question, they are a fantastic organization that contributes a great deal to our students and to our school, but their responsibilities do not include making district decisions.

5) If there are financial issues within the school, why are the taxpayers not being told about them? What are they? And "A dollar amount is being put on each student"

First and foremost, this decision was not based solely on financial issues. It was a secondary fact that we wanted to share with the community regarding other issues heading our way in addition to the pandemic that we are dealing with. We are not placing a dollar amount on each student.

There are not financial issues within our school. There are financial issues within NYS that could have a devastating impact on our school finances and schools across the state. We have been talking openly about this since February of last year. Our budget presentations, our budget newsletters, budget workshops, and the budget hearing slides all discussed potential fiscal stress based on New York State's financial status. It has been all over the news for months and the Governor has stated in many of his press conferences that if the federal government does not pull through with funding, all municipalities including schools could face up to 20% cuts in funding. The huge problem that we are all facing is that no one knows if it is really going to happen. We are all holding our breath. Currently, NYS division of budget is withholding 20% of our aid still owed to us from the 2019-2020 school year.

Someone asked the question, what is NYS is currently withholding from Remsen. First, let's start with NYS freezing our foundation aid (our main source of state aid revenue with no increase for this year) [in budget hearing presentation mentioned this represented an average loss of at least 149,000 given 5-year average of increases] and an additional \$164,600 that was removed from our state aid package and replaced with federal stimulus money. Next comes the potential for a devastating 20% reduction in state aid that was mentioned a moment ago. It has already started to happen. As of today, NYS is currently withholding \$91,941 of our school's financial aid owed to us for the 2019-2020 school year. It is currently a withholding, but if federal funds do not come through, it could be a permanent reduction. If this trend continues and the federal government does not pull through with funding, schools across NYS, including Remsen will experience state aid reductions up to 20%. For Remsen, over 55% of our revenue is State Aid or \$7,301,393. Twenty percent of that amount is \$1.46 million dollars.

Someone asked the question about our school budget information, it is all posted online under our district, business office tab.

Someone also asked what our increased costs in spending due to COVID have been. To date in COVID supplies we have spent approximately \$22,907. And our bus screeners are costing about \$750 each week.

It is also important to note that we made adjustments to our budget last year to make it a 0% operating increase from budget to budget. In addition, we have not replaced three teachers (2 retired and one moved) in addition to not replacing two teachers that are retiring in one month to prepare to weather the potential storm.

If someone asks:

[Fall sports would cost between 20 and 25 thousand dollars (14,656 for coaches, and about another 10 for trans, officials, fees, tec.)]

6) It is stated in the letter that, "Each school district will make a decision based on facts and factors attributable to their specific district and plans." What are Remsen's facts and factors? I want to know EXACTLY why Remsen made this decision.

Remsen's facts and factors are specifically our reopening plan and safety requirements. We based our decision on athletics on Remsen's current status. All students and staff have strict safety procedures to follow, we can't have 100% of our students in school yet, and PE classes are

extremely restricted...kids have to be 12 feet apart. We are not allowing gatherings, assemblies, concerts or after school events, it should not be any different for athletics. Allowing athletes to participate at this time would be deliberately putting them at a higher risk (rigorous physical activity in close proximity to students from across our region without the ability to follow the procedures we have in place for all students during the regular school day) and in turn could bring that back into school to students and staff who did not decide to take that risk.

Extracurricular means “in addition to normal course of study”. As of today, we cannot safely have 100% of our students back in school for their normal course of study. We do not believe it is time to start athletics. For the several people in the community demanding the Exact Science behind our decision, there is nothing exact about this Pandemic. Our decision to postpone athletics is a judgement call based on everything that we just mentioned.

7) It was stated in Mr. Jenny’s letter, “It is not practical or attainable to keep our athletes at an appropriate social distance and it is not feasible to expect our athletes to tolerate wearing a mask during strenuous physical competition.” Why is this an issue when the guidance states, “if a shorter distance is required, individuals must wear acceptable face coverings, unless players are unable to tolerate a face covering for the physical activity. Why is Remsen unable to adhere to the guidance without compromising all other safety measures?

This information was included in my letter to point out just that...that the guidance requires it but then states in the same sentence that they do not need it. To work so hard during the day to keep students masked and distanced in an effort to minimize risk and then disregard these same measures after school for rigorous physical activities that we currently can’t allow during the regular school day is not a wise choice. Moving forward with athletics at this time increases the level of risk and contradicts everything that we are doing during the day in school.

8) The guidance states that we are not required to have locker rooms.

Yes, we understand that locker rooms are not required but the fact that we do not even have them open is just another factor that we wanted to share with you.

9) Why is Remsen unable to safely start any athletic season if all of our neighboring districts seem to be able to work it out? What is different in the Remsen School District? What are the exact reasons that Remsen feels they cannot start the fall sports season?

For all of the reasons stated above. Again 42% schools felt the same way we did but decided not to postpone once section III announced that they were not going to postpone for everyone. There are schools that have still not started in-person learning and are currently fully remote. Other schools just started in-person yesterday. Each district has made these decisions based on what they believe to be best for their students, staff, and community. It is a judgement call.

10) Why is playing at school on a school field different than what our kids participated in over the summer? I would rather have my child play and the school not allow any spectators than to not have a season at all.

Our job at school is to minimize the risk for all students. All students. What families decide to do when not at school is completely up to them. But it is our responsibility to minimize risk by limiting chances of potential exposures to the greatest extent possible.

11) Many teenagers only come to school in order to participate in sports. Now they are seeing their friends in neighboring school districts planning on starting on Sept. 21. They don't understand and as a parent, I cannot explain it based on what has been currently released to us.

I sincerely hope our answers tonight will help you to explain this to them and that we can help all of our students understand that we know how hard this is for them but that it is important for us to all to be reminded of the current situation we are in and why we made the call that we did. It is not about what other schools are doing, it is about what we are doing here at Remsen.

12) How are all other school districts being hit with the same budget cuts are moving forward with sports?

Again, please remember that this was not solely a financial decision. The finance piece was mentioned as a secondary issue in the letter. I cannot speak for the other districts in terms of their plans, but I can tell you that all districts moving forward will have to make many difficult decisions if the withholdings from the State become actual reductions in State Aid.

13) Did you consider canceling just modified and JV sports and allowing the seniors on the varsity teams to get their chance to place soccer and run cross country?

We believe it is not time for sports to start. It would not be right to have some teams start as that would defeat the whole purpose of postponing.

14) All of the safety guidelines the school has put in place will not stop COVID. Any one of us can go to a store, a gas station, work and bring it to our family and community. If other schools have decided to allow sports to continue then Remsen should also.

We agree that we cannot guarantee that we can stop COVID, but we can say that we are doing many things to minimize the level of risk. We never should make decisions solely based on what other people are doing.

15) I may be looking into options to transfer my child to another school district that is allowing sports if Remsen does not reevaluate their decision.

I love Remsen, and I know that you do too. I would certainly hope that we are stronger than that and that we would not allow the postponement of athletics during a pandemic to encourage us to leave. Rather, it should encourage us to stay, knowing that we are willing to make extremely difficult, and unpopular decisions in what we believe to be the best interest of our kids, our staff, and our families.

16) The message the district is sending out to students is that the district doesn't believe in their own students as other districts are supporting their students, we can only stand by and watch the district strip each child of their dignity one by one.

This is not the message the district is sending out, far from it. As parents we can help by speaking with our children and explaining to them that Remsen cares so very much about them that we are willing to make an extremely hard call to keep them as safe as possible while we are still in a pandemic. If children hear us as parents say things like "the district doesn't believe in their own students", then of course they will think that. But, if we, as parents, help them

understand difficult decisions, difficult circumstances, and the importance of persevering through it, we will all get through this.

17) It should be a parent's choice if they want their child to participate.

That statement works for deciding as a parent what your children can do outside of school. Here at school, we must think of the entire student body, all parents, and all community members, not just our student athletes. We have said that we will work to help everyone be as safe as possible during the pandemic. All families have entrusted us with working to make this happen, not just student-athletes. We should not forget about all of the parents who think this is the right decision to make and are thankful that we are making it. We must think of everyone during this time.

18) "We allowed three people to stand alone and make a decision for all"

This is not true. There were not three people in a room that made this decision. The ultimate decision was made by myself and the Board of Education.

To Summarize

We completely understand the concerns and frustration. We share all of them with you. This is not easy and it has not been easy. However, we are still in a pandemic. We are not yet out of the woods. We are responsible for helping our students and staff follow over 150 pages of guidelines throughout the day to minimize risk. Moving forward with athletics would allow our kids to be exposed more than our guidelines permit during the regular day and in turn, they would also be exposed to all of the other students from other schools while not protected. We deliberately have kids in cohorts and at 50% in the high school, following all guidelines during the day. We have medically compromised students, high risk and/or elderly community members. Yes our kids could bring home any number of viruses to their families, and yes we understand that our immune systems need to be strong. But right now, we are still living in a pandemic. A pandemic that has caused serious illness and death. We have been fortunate that it has not hit us as hard here as it has other areas, but we would be irresponsible to state that we are immune from it hitting our school and our community. As parents, you have the right to decide what you and your child do after the school day ends, but as a school, it is our responsibility to minimize the level of risk during this pandemic for all students, staff, and community members.

There is no definite answer as to when all of this will be over. We are living in a time that we would have never imagined. How we choose to deal with adversity, how we choose to react, how we choose to speak to and respect each other, and how we choose to overcome will define us as people.

As a district and as a community, I would much rather have us look back on history and know that we were overly cautious than to look back and say that we were hasty and did not do enough.

To student athletes, especially our juniors and seniors

We know that this is extremely difficult for you to hear and that you are very upset. Know that we care about you as well as all of our students. Just like when your parents have to make difficult decisions that you are not happy with and you respond, "but mom all of my friends are going" or "but dad, all of my friends are doing it". Your mom or dad responds to you that they

are making a decision that they feel is in your best interest regardless of what your friends are doing, and that you will understand someday when you are older. Similarly here, we as a school, know that many of the other schools are “going”, but we are making the difficult decision because we believe that it is in the best interest of ALL Remsen students. **IF** the pandemic situation improves, and we can make up for your missed season in the middle spring season, that is being called Fall 2, we will certainly do whatever we can to give you that opportunity, and to find teams for you to play against.

We will now allow time for public participation. Please type in the chat box your full name if you would like to speak to the BOE and I will call on you one at a time. Just as if we were doing public participation in person, once I call on you, please state your full name and proceed with information that you would like to share with the BOE. Please remember to keep all statements, questions, or comments appropriate and please be respectful of other community members while they are speaking.

At this time (7:45 pm) the meeting is open for public participation:

Richard Lehman: Thank you to the BOE for meeting this evening. Sports Booster are very involved in doing all they can for the kids and have their own facebook page. With all Sports Booster has done for the school, we were not told anything. Sports Booster should have had a voice prior to making this decision. As a parent of a Senior who plays one sport (soccer), this is his last chance to play. Seniors want to play!

Richelle Singer: Thank you for meeting tonight to hear our concerns. As a taxpayer and parent, I believe parents should have been a part of this decision.....it should have been a community decision. What about the rest of the 2020-2021 school year? Will there be sports at all? My daughter is a Senior this year. I am an alumni and I chose to have my children go to Remsen.

Is there a salary decrease for the Athletic Director? Because if there is no sports, there is no need for an Athletic Director.

Tim Jenny – As soon as it is safe for students to play, there could be a shortened season in the spring. The Athletic Director receives a stipend.

Kelly Hajdasz: Thank you for holding this meeting. I feel blindsided by the decision. You should have asked parents how to do this. What ideas did they have? Students are losing out. Parents should have been asked to come up with ways to have sports

Toni Klossner: Thank you to the Board for meeting. My son is a Senior. Who was consulted as medical professionals to say it was not safe?

Tim Jenny – It was a judgment call. Medical experts were not consulted.

Toni Klossner: We all have children affected by not playing sports. I want the Board of Education to overrule this decision and allow kids to play sports.

Madelyn McCormack: I am a Senior and play three sports. It is more than a game to us. It's my last year to play. Please give us a chance. A shortened season is better than no sports at all.

Mrs. Allen thanked Maddie for coming forward.

Cassie Anderson: Did you look to other schools for guidance? Did you look at what Section III put out for guidelines to play sports?

Jamie Lichtenberger: Our students can go to BOCES every day so why can't they play sports? Very unfair.

Tim Jenny – At BOCES, students must adhere to wearing masks, social distancing, etc.

Jessica Jones: I am very frustrated with how this is being handled. You needed to involve parents in this decision.

Melissa Hollenbeck: I have a 10th grader who loves sport of cross country and an 8th grader who loves soccer and cross country. The majority of athletes want to participate. Kids have played in summer leagues without any problems. What does “indefinite” mean? When will sports be allowed? The BOE and district have done a disservice by deciding not to allow sports for RCS students. There should have been a community meeting before this decision was made. If sports are not played, what will happen to the money set aside for this specific purpose?

Ryan Graves: Thank you for your time. I have been RCS student since kindergarten. I love sports. The decision to not have sports is hurting students who want to go to college and play sports. It does not just hurt students, but their families and friends as well. I am not in favor of your decision to cancel sports.

Private: I support the Board of Education's decision.

Jessica Jones: Students look forward to playing sports.

Cassie Anderson: What will be the point at which we can return to sports? When? Winter sports?

Tim Jenny – The situation will be monitored as we would need to see what is going on with the pandemic. It is possible fall sports would be moved to spring. Fall 2 season between winter and spring sports with adjustments.

Dale Dening - Schools have until Friday, September 18th to opt out of the fall season.

Alice Shufelt: I applaud Melissa Hollenbeck, Toni Klossner and Maddie McCormack. What about social distancing? If parents can transport students to school, why not parents transport students to athletic contests?

Toni Klossner: You are affecting all kids' lives and their futures.

We are here to overturn decision and speak to the Board of Education. Why is the board not speaking?

Teresa Decker: My daughter is a Junior and has played with the same group of girls since they were 6 years old. Most of the girls on the varsity soccer team are scholar athletes with a 90 and above average. They excel at both academics and sports.

Great job, Ryan Graves! Parents deserve a vote!

Thomas Anderson: Government said we could play sports. Kids played all summer long. Why did we not take actual facts – look at the medical facts – we should take that into account.

Dale Dening stated that Lowville Academy will only be playing four schools, all of which are in Lewis County.

Why weren't we given the option? Schools in Oneida County play in Oneida County

Why not send a survey to parents asking for their input?

Robin McCormack: Sports is more than a game to our players. Please re-consider.

Diana Houck: I am parent of sophomore and son who was a senior last year. Many kids playing together since they were in elementary.

Why has BOE not spoken a word?

Mary Lou Allen stated “We are here to listen to what you have to say. We, the Board of Education, must make the best decision for all RCS students.”

Richard Lehman – addressed Mary Lou – Nikki played sports; addressed Stephanie – think if this was happening to your children – Mr. Dening – think of your children and how they would feel if they could not play sports.

You have no proof that playing sports spreads COVID-19.

Ryah Spatto: Even though I do not go to Remsen, I know there are athletes planning to go to college to play sports.

Toni Klossner: I think everyone attending this meeting disagrees with the BOE's decision.

Public Participation closed at 8:55 p.m.

Motion by Brian Parent, second by Patrick Nolan:

“RESOLVED, that the Board of Education agrees to postpone Remsen Central School

athletics until further notice effective September 15, 2020.”

Roll Call Vote:

B. Parent – Aye

S. Karis - Aye

M. Williams - Aye

P. Nolan - Aye

M. L. Allen - Aye

Motion by Brian Parent, second by Patrick Nolan, to adjourn the meeting at 8:57 p.m.