

**AMESBURY SCHOOL COMMITTEE  
SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES  
AMESBURY CITY HALL  
March 13, 2020**

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Present at 1:00 p.m. were Mayor Gove, Chair; Kate Currie, Mel Webster, Maryann Welch, Elaine Bucher, Joan Liporto, and Jared Fulgoni, Superintendent of Schools.

**This meeting was conducted under the ‘Executive Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law G.L. c.30A, §20’, signed on March 12, 2020.**

1. COVID-19 Response

Mayor Gove began the meeting by recapping the developments over the past few days concerning the Coronavirus pandemic. Including the Emergency Declaration by Governor Baker and the continued recommendations to practice good hygiene and social distancing.

Superintendent Fulgoni talked about the closing of the Amesbury High School on Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup> out of an abundance of caution due to a student displaying possible COVID-19 symptoms. Friday morning there was a conference call with the Massachusetts Director of Education who did not mandate or recommend the closure of all schools. The Governor does not support the closure of schools either. Despite this recommendation, a number of schools have already announced that they are closing. Many schools are not closing due to positive cases but the inability to keep schools open due to staffing issues caused by fears of the virus. The Amesbury Middle School had approximately 200 students absent on Friday.

Fulgoni explained that Superintendents across the state are grouped into regions. Amesbury belongs to the North Shore Superintendents Roundtable. The roundtable has drafted a letter asking the region’s superintendents to sign stating they are closing. This contradicts the recommendation of DESE and DPH. If Amesbury does not sign on, we would likely be the only district in the region to stay open. Amesbury must choose one of these options.

Mr. Webster asked what the state’s response would be if a vast majority of districts did indeed close.

Mr. Fulgoni indicated there would be another conference call Friday afternoon with the commissioner and he was hoping for more direction then.

Ms. Bucher asked what the status of the scheduled March 24-25<sup>th</sup> MCAS tests were and what plans were discussed for rescheduling.

Mr. Fulgoni stated that during the conference call Friday morning, it was indicated there were not currently plans to postpone the testing. However, if schools were closed, the state would look at extending timelines.

The state has also encouraged districts to keep lunch programs operational, even if the schools themselves are closed.

Mr. Fulgoni stated that the 2 week proposed closure was unfortunately very arbitrary and may ultimately have to be extended if the virus peaks at the wrong time.

Ms. Currie asked if the committee should hold off making a decision until after the 1:30 call with the state.

Mayor Gove indicated that information was changing so rapidly.

Mr. Webster noted that if the letter from North Shore Superintendents went out announcing school closures and Amesbury was not a signatory to the letter, residents would likely keep their children home anyway.

Ms. Currie questioned what would happen to students who were kept home by parents if the schools remained open.

Mr. Fulgoni stated this was playing out in other districts that had closed and lead to operational deficiencies due to parents/teachers staying home, as well. It is impossible to know what will happen in 2 weeks. State guidelines only call for a school to be closed for 2 days if there is a possible case in the school. The current discussion is over closing for 2 weeks out of an abundance of caution.

Ms. Welch stated it did not seem feasible to try to keep schools open and operational over the next 2 weeks.

Mr. Webster stated another issue is districts are not prepared for distance, online learning over the 2 week closure. Likely kids would simply not have school if the district closed for 2 weeks. The issue of serving meals also raised concerns as some students rely on the school to provide meals.

Mr. Fulgoni indicated there would be the possibility of providing “grab and go” meals using the high school as a central pickup location.

Lyndsey Haight, Executive Director of Our Neighbors Table (ONT), was invited to address the committee on the issue of food insecurity. She stated one of the unknowns was what happened if kids were home from school and parents were still working. She also indicated there may be reimbursement available for districts that continued providing meals.

Ms. Liporto indicated Amesbury did not meet the threshold to receive reimbursement.

Ms. Haight stated ONT would remain open, although they may be transitioning to a curbside distribution program and possibly home delivery. The question remains as to what happens when there is inevitably a positive case in 2-3 weeks’ time.

Mr. Webster indicated it wouldn’t be possible to run a school system with every district around Amesbury closed. While it is true districts are reacting out of fear, without a plan, it is unlikely there is another option at this time. Mr. Webster asked for the number of students in the free/reduced lunch program.

Ms. Liporto indicated the number was around 700 or 30% of students.

Ms. Currie asked about the number of students who did not come to school today.

Ms. Liporto answered approximately 400 students were absent.

Ms. Bucher agreed that the decision to close may be premature but may not ultimately matter due to the inability to keep schools open with teachers and students absent. Both options are bad but we have to choose one.

Mr. Fulgoni indicated some schools felt they were making the decision to close based on social pressure and fear but did so anyway out of the inability to function if they stayed open.

Jack Morris, Amesbury Health Director, stated that the pandemic had caused a hysteria which led to these decisions being made. He agreed with the Superintendent that there would likely be no choice but to follow surrounding schools and close.

Mayor Gove asked for comments from Facebook live to be read aloud.

- Mandy Mladenoff PUBLIC COMMENT: We should stop worrying about what other schools are doing and do what's right for our kids and our community. The answer to that is closing our schools to mitigate the spread of the virus. Everyone will be re-evaluating in two weeks.
- Stephanie White PUBLIC COMMENT: How can we flatten the curve and create social distancing while our children are sitting at crowded lunch tables daily? We have no choice but to take a step back and reevaluate after 2 weeks of closure.
- Michelle Richio Lamott - How many meals /kids are we talking about? 25/50/100 plus
- Stephanie Vasey – I have not heard one person say to keep open.
- Jason Burnham – If their opinion is that it is premature please explain what makes us different from China and Italy do we wait for our medical infrastructure to collapse?

Mr. Fulgoni stated the decision to keep the school open so far was based on the direction of the State DPH.

Mr. Webster stated that because everyone else is closing, Amesbury would have to close. 2 week may not be enough time, a month may be a more appropriate amount of time. The state will need to make accommodations. Safest thing will be to close for 2 weeks.

Ms. Bucher stated the committee was not taking this lightly and there were many factors to consider including childcare and meal service.

Ms. Welch asked what would be the next steps if the committee voted to close.

Mr. Fulgoni stated one of the first steps would be to meet with representatives of the labor unions to determine things such as whether hourly workers would be paid over the 2 weeks. A discussion on the opportunities for distance learning would also take place. There are a lot of moving parts.

Mr. Webster asked about the plans for providing lunches and possibly breakfasts to students.

Ms. Liporto indicated there should be plenty of food on hand and the most likely scenario would be running a pickup program out of the high school cafeteria.

Ms. Haight commented on next steps including steps the Mayor's Office and City Council can take to help those effected by a shutdown. What is Amesbury going to do to promote containment besides closing schools?

Mayor Gove asked for additional public comments to be read:

- Lauren Gibson Courtemanche Public Comment: If the governor has banned gatherings of 250 or more, why does that not apply to the schools?
- Christian Scorzoni Public Comment: Will the Superintendent be making a formal recommendation on what to do?
- Jason Blackburn Public comment: without access to testing how can we make decisions based on the governors guidance?
- Josh Sorgini Public comment please close the schools
- Sorgini Josh Public comment close the schools or y'all are gonna get some law suits on your hands when a bunch of 5 year olds get corona
- Shannon Carroll PUBLIC COMMENT: If the HS student tests positive will they finally close the schools? How deep do we need to get before recognizing closing now is the safest option to help out our immunocompromised community and do our part?
- Maryrita Malloy Styer Public comment: I wish the superintendents had more state support with this decision. I would like to see the schools close

Mayor Gove stated these were all valid comments and concerns. On the city side there was a three phased approach to determine how city offices would approach interactions with the public. Closing the schools may lead to an acceleration of the timeline for containment on the city side.

Mr. Webster stated if the schools are closed, the district really can't tell people what to do and we must rely on common sense. People should really just stay home. Hopefully the community will come together.

Mayor Gove asked for any final comments from the public:

- Josh Sorgini PUBLIC COMMENT: They're talking about common sense while sending hundreds of kids to be sent to be together in close quarters while there's a worldwide pandemic.
- Jason Blackburn Public comment: Flattening the curve is the most important thing right now to prevent the spread. Those who need tests cannot get them even when exhibiting symptoms or having been exposed to it.

Ms. Welch asked if there had been any comments by the public in favor of keeping the schools open.

Ms. Thayer stated the vast majority of responses called for the schools to be closed.

Steve Stanganelli asked if the Library would remain open.

Mayor Gove indicated a decision had not been made yet. Although it had been made in other communities.

***Mr. Webster made a motion to close the Amesbury Public Schools through March 27, and during that time to have the Superintendent and administrative staff continue to meet to determine next steps and have a plan in place to reevaluate the closing in 2 weeks, second by Ms. Bucher. Vote: Yes, unanimous.***

Mr. Fulgoni asked for a friendly amendment recognizing how quickly the information is changing and acknowledging the situation and circumstances may change before Monday.

Mayor Gove asked for clarification from the Parliamentarian since the vote had already taken place.

Ms. Welch stated she had an issue with saying the situation may be reevaluated before Monday due to the fact that parents needed to make appropriate plans for their children.

Dr. Catarius reported that DPH had stated on a conference call that they did not believe the closing of districts would slow or prevent the spread of the disease. Every closing decision was a district decision.

Mr. Webster stated the committee must be ready to reconvene at any moment.

Ms. Bucher said it did not appear the state would act against the district to keep schools open.

Mayor Gove stated the committee would remain connected and continue to monitor the situation.

Mr. Fulgoni stated an initial email would be sent announcing the closure and a more detailed message would be sent over the weekend when more information was available. He also stated that he had received a message that AFT Amesbury supported the closing of the schools.

Mayor Gove asked for a motion to adjourn.

***Motion by Ms. Currie to adjourn, second by Ms. Welch. Vote: Yes, unanimous.***