



LIVINGSTON BOARD OF EDUCATION WORKSHOP/VOTING MEETING MINUTES

Monday, January 11, 2021

Public Session - Virtual Meeting Via Zoom and Facebook Live – 7:00 p.m.

A **Workshop/Voting Meeting** of the Livingston Board of Education was held on this date in the large conference room in the Administration Building and via Zoom. The meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. by the Board President, Samantha Messer, who announced that adequate notice of this meeting has been provided by amendment to notice approved at the Board's reorganization meeting on January 4, 2021 and posted at the Board of Education office and communicated to *The Star Ledger*, *West Essex Tribune*, *TAPinto Livingston* and the Livingston Township Clerk.

Members Present: Pamela Chirls, Seth Cohen, Vineeta Khanna, Ronnie Konner, Samantha Messer and Aditya Desai

Also in Attendance: Dr. Matthew Block, Steven Robinson, Lisa Capone-Steiger, Mark Stern, Susan Burman, Shawn Kelly, Bronawyn O'Leary, Carlos Gramata and Joann Goldberg

There were approximately 420 members of the public and staff watching remotely through the webinar and via a Facebook Live Stream.

Ms. Messer explained the purpose of tonight's meeting is to elicit and respond to the great deal of feedback we received from the community and to present a revised plan that will improve the academic and social experience of both teachers and students. Ms. Messer continued that no one tonight will be entirely satisfied with the plan and that it is everyone's goal to return to full in-person learning as quickly as we can. COVID numbers are currently high but as people become vaccinated and numbers go down, we will be able to provide more in-person instructional time.

Ms. Messer added she has spoken to the leaders of the high school HSA to discuss what social activities they can do once the 25 person gathering limit has been lifted and they are meeting with Mr. Stern next week to brainstorm possibilities. People are encouraged to share their ideas.

In addition, Ms. Messer reached out to local business owners to discuss what type of in-person social activities they may be able to safely provide to those who are comfortable with such gatherings.

Lastly, Ms. Messer addressed the incident that occurred at the U.S. Capitol this week.

Superintendent's Report

1. Hybrid Scheduling Update

Dr. Block provided a mid-year hybrid model update explaining that our facilities have been open for hybrid learning for four months at the elementary level and three months at the secondary level, we had a very successful fall athletic season and are one of the few school districts in the area what was able to stay open to a large extent between Thanksgiving weekend and winter break.

Dr. Block explained some of the factors impacting our in-person learning plan include the "orange" or "high risk" designation we receive from the Department of Health, staff absences from medical and family leaves and the number of families who withdrew from in-person learning to remain fully remote.

Dr. Block continued from December through January, we have reevaluated our in-person program through engagement with secondary student feedback groups, reexamined our cohort schedules, planned and prepared for the implementation of professional development to refine our hybrid instructional practices and asked secondary families to recommit to either in-person hybrid or all remote learning so that we could reassess our cohort structure. Dr. Block added they also are taking into account the student capacity for average classrooms based on six feet of social distancing.

Dr. Block shared a number of student focus and faculty focus group highlights and then proposed how we would go forward for the second half of the year at the secondary and elementary levels.

At the secondary level, Dr. Block explained we plan to reduce to two cohorts to provide additional frequency for students to be in school facilities or in-person learning more often and are restructuring the high school schedule to include fewer, extended daily class periods to give teachers more flexibility and offer additional opportunities to conference with students and small groups. The middle school schedule will keep classes a bit shorter. Schedules are still evolving and are a work in progress.

The adjusted plan will take effect in coordination with the start of the second semester on February 1, 2021. Principals are hoping to share details of the secondary school hybrid schedule adjustments early next week. Each school schedule may be a little different.

At the elementary level, Dr. Block explained we plan to remain open in the current cohort schedule as long as we remain in the "orange" designation and may move to one cohort sooner if there is a significant change in the in-person population that allows for continued six foot distancing in classrooms. Dr. Block added we are already working on plans for one cohort as well as a longer day and will be ready to implement those plans when health and safety dictates that it is the appropriate time.

Dr. Block concluded that we have pivoted several times this year and will need to continue to do so; however, he is hopeful that with help from the vaccine and spring weather, the final months of the school year will begin to look more like the school we remember.

Mr. Cohen clarified that we received very close to 100% of responses from the secondary survey, that principals will share schedules early next week, that there are homerooms in each building that meet the six foot distancing threshold although it is not evenly split and that principals will coordinate the cohorting daily schedules to make it the same from school to school.

Mr. Cohen encouraged the administration to continue the pursuit of having a full day of school in the buildings that includes lunch for students. Ms. Messer echoed Mr. Cohen's desire to pursue a full day.

Mrs. Chirls asked if there is any variation in the percentages of attendance across the buildings and Dr. Block responded there is not.

Mrs. Chirls asked, based on concerns heard about a longer period schedule, if we plan to hold any brief pilots to see how students and teachers respond to the adjustment. Dr. Block responded in getting feedback from students and teachers and with support we provide in professional development, we believe we will be ready.

Mr. Desai stated he has also heard concerns from other students about what the implications might be by having 75 minute periods adding we won't know if it is a pro or con until it is implemented.

Mrs. Konner stated she is interested in knowing what conversations have been had about offering other activities or ways to engage children in a longer day without the use of Zoom, how the 75 minutes are going to work out and what kinds of best practices can be shared with teachers through professional development to manage that instruction.

Mr. Stern responded that some of those questions became the reasons why expanding to a 75 minute period became an option. Mr. Stern added when they met with teachers and students, they heard there was a desire for more conferencing and connection.

Mrs. Khanna asked what the strategy was behind having longer time at the high school but not at the middle school. Mrs. Khanna added she understands children and teachers are seeking that personal connection and suggested utilizing parent volunteers to assist in managing this time.

Mr. Kelly responded that the amount of time for middle school will be similar to what we have in our current model and they felt a need to differentiate between middle and high school because of the way they structure and organize their school day. They plan to provide more time for students to connect with teachers in their schedules during the second half of the school year.

Mrs. O'Leary added a shorter time period is more appropriate and giving teachers more time during the second half of the day to connect with students helps with the social emotional learning aspect.

Dr. Block added they are all working through a collaborative process to create new scheduling that is thoughtful, methodical and balanced. These schedules may be a little different at each level based on what the principals and supervisors believe their students need. Dr. Block added these changes are in response to the feedback we received from students and teachers that included changing the pace of having too many classes in one day, not having enough access to connect with teachers and teachers needing more time in a period to get through materials. Dr. Block requested everyone give our educators and leadership the chance to sort through all of this so that they can create an experience that actually balances what the students expressed that they need with the academic goals that we want them to achieve.

Ms. Messer asked if we can get a breakdown of what the 75 minute period looks like when we send out the schedule so parents can get an idea of how the new structure will work.

Ms. Messer asked if there is an opportunity to look at a certain grade at the elementary level to see how many sections would max out our space and could we then think about using some of our larger spaces to start to bring back some elementary kids in five days a week, even if its not in all the elementary schools.

Mr. Cohen asked if there is a need to add an additional professional development day to our schedule and Dr. Block responded they plan to handle this through our department supervisors and asynchronous time but if they discover they need more time, he will bring that request to the board.

Mrs. Konner requested we continue to provide students with opportunities to share their ideas and be part of the solution.

Public Input on Agenda Item ~ up to 15 minutes

Alison Handler, 14 Hearthstone Terrace, asked that we be mindful and thoughtful about how we communicate this new change to parents and students, for clarification on whether this is a half day schedule, would like to push for a longer day of school, if we would consider removing gym or finding a different way to handle and for communication about the difference in timing of the end of the marking period between middle and high school.

Stefanie Cohen, 20 Stonewall Drive, stated reducing cohorts and a change to the quarantine period will get more kids back in school. Mrs. Cohen asked why we can't take the current schedule and just go to two cohorts.

Cheryl Paredes, 21 Burnet Hill Road, expressed a 75 minute period might be a little too long and suggested we bring lunch back to school.

Jason Bauman, 21 Wingate Drive, suggested that rather than listen to the single individual at our local Board of Health, that we, in conjunction with the township, put together a committee of medical professionals, who reside in town, to gather their opinions about safety in schools.

Julie Schacter, 19 Nottingham, expressed her displeasure with this school year, is not in favor of a 75 minute period, sees an issue with the equity of assessments and would like to see a full day of school that includes lunch.

Liz Conklin, 2 Canoe Brook Drive, stated she believes that the change in quarantine rules will help get students to come in person, asked if a student participates in athletics, can they have a pass on taking gym and asked if the hours of school would be different or is it only the structure of the day that will change. Mrs. Conklin asked if start and end times of schools could be different at schools to avoid conflict during pick up and drop off.

Dr. Block responded that principals will communicate with parents and students to prepare them as we pivot in this next direction as soon as possible. Dr. Block continued that the structure of the day will generally be the same, students will be in for the same amount of time but more often due to the two cohorts. Dr. Block continued these changes don't have anything to do with the teachers' union and that we are working to create a better experience for our students.

Dr. Block continued we are working on providing more instructional time, more interactivity and on the assessment issue.

Dr. Block continued that right now, the mandate is that we work with our local Department of Health who do reach out to nurses on their staff, epidemiologists and the Department of Health at the State level so there is more than one person involved in decision making.

Dr. Block responded that physical education is a class that has a place in the schedule and is also a graduation requirement.

Helene Korn, 7 Cherry Hill Road, asked if Fridays will be completely asynchronous days under the new schedule, has concerns about changing to 75 minute periods and asked why we don't stick with the schedule that seems to be working and just have two cohorts.

Dr. Block responded that Fridays will not be completely asynchronous under the new schedule.

Sharon Apple, 73 Rockledge Drive, asked if we could share the focus group size and distribution across grades.

Ilyse Shainbrown, 2 Mountain Ridge Drive, asked if there is a way to hold kids who chose to come in as hybrid accountable for their attendance, expressed concern that 75 minute periods will only allow for four classes a day so students won't see some of their teachers for several days at a time. Mrs. Shainbrown asked for clarification that students will have a scheduled class on Fridays.

Michele Cohen, 15 Woodland Terrace, asked that with the increase in the class time to 75 minutes at the high school, do we plan on eliminating every third day being asynchronous in the afternoon.

Andrea Bershad, 15 Camelot Drive, expressed concern about what the 75 minute periods will look like from home, about the rotation of classes, and how students in AP classes will get enough time to be able to prepare to take and pass those exams.

Dr. Stacy Bernstein, 3 Canterbury Road, asked what the vaccination process is for staff, suggested keeping the schedule the same with more in-person time and expressed her displeasure for asynchronous learning and having 75 minute class periods.

Mr. Stern responded he held focus groups through English classes in grades 9 through 12 over the course of a week and a half. Mr. Kelly responded he met with representatives from both the student council and the builders club that included students from both grade levels and his team leaders and counselors also provided him with a list of students. Mrs. O'Leary responded she had team leaders provide names of students to include in the groups.

Dr. Block responded he has heard the feedback tonight about how the 75 minutes will work, how often kids will see teachers, how asynchronous kids are not being engaged and that they prefer a straight schedule so the administrative team will need to go back and address this again since it is different from what came out of the focus groups.

Dr. Block reiterated there is no plan to have a fully asynchronous day.

With respect to the vaccination, Dr. Block stated we are waiting for 1B to be called and we are actively encouraging all staff to be vaccinated as soon as possible.

Ms. Messer will research how vaccinations are being distributed to school districts she works with in New York.

Dr. Block continued that we do hold students accountable for in-person attendance but, if after applying that pressure, a family chooses to become remote, they are allowed to do so per the Governor. Accountability for attendance lasts only as long as that person is committed to in-person learning.

Mrs. Chirls asked if there is a way we will work with teachers so they can get the content they need to students ahead of the AP exams.

Mr. Stern responded this will be a constant conversation they have moving forward to make sure everyone is getting what they need.

Julie Schacter, 19 Nottingham, stated she doesn't think kids are interested in sitting on Zoom for a longer period of time, that AP and subjects like Math and language need to meet on a more frequent basis for consistency and progress and agrees with decreasing to two cohorts.

Boris Grushin, 7 North Drive, asked if he could see the presentation now and Dr. Block responded it will be posted on our website first thing tomorrow morning.

Maren Harris, 5 Bolling Drive, asked how parents might increase student engagement and suggested utilizing parent volunteers in a TA model by having them in break out rooms on screen to supervise and keep students on track.

Tara Abella, 55 Elmwood Drive, is happy about the possibility of elementary students going to one cohort and asked what is holding us back from having elementary students in school for a longer day that includes eating lunch.

Sharon Apple, 73 Rockledge Drive, stated it seems to her that the children who participated in the focus groups represented well adjusted kids who participate in leadership programs rather than a random sampling of the population.

Dr. Block responded he is listening to all the concerns about the 75 minutes and understands parents want more students to be interviewed for focus groups.

Dr. Block added that the big struggle for a full day at the elementary schools is lunch. He will contact a few out-of-state districts who are in full days to see how they are handling lunch.

Dr. Block continued that when PTOs and HSAs ask him how they can help, he suggests socialization activities. He is not sure how we can use them in a classroom setting due to certification requirements but he will think about it.

Robert Novick, 6 Corner Stone Way, stated switching schedules is not the way to go and 75 minute class periods are too long.

Semira Mount, 20 Ross Road, reminded all educators that our youth will be our future leaders in 15 to 20 years so encourages the board and administration to be open minded. Mrs. Mount suggested we put together a panel of parent volunteers to work together to get kids back in school full time this year.

Laura Goren, 8 Tremont Terrace, stated the LIVWELL 07039 organization has been providing programming to teachers and students since September and they noticed the most popular classes were where younger students could spend time with older students.

Spencer Korn, 7 Cherry Hill Road, confirmed there will be five days of in-person learning, doesn't agree with longer classes and then meeting less frequently, believes students should be meeting as much as possible, especially in their core classes and suggested we change the technology so teachers can teach more to students in person. Mr. Korn recommended parents with constructive feedback reach out to the district through the emails on the website.

Dr. Block responded there are no plans to have a fully remote day each week in the schedule.

Boris Grushin, 7 North Drive, asked why students can't be in five days a week at the elementary level and asked if there is a chance we wouldn't be back in school full time in September.

Dr. Block responded we are extraordinarily hopeful with the distribution of the vaccine that we will be in a different place in the spring and are planning to be back in September. Dr. Block reiterated we will encourage all staff to get the vaccine as soon as they are able.

Dr. Block continued that five days is not off the table, but we need to see what our numbers are for distancing in the classroom. If we are able to and can do proper social distancing, we have plans in the works to bring our kids in for five days a week, hopefully at some point soon.

Mrs. Khanna asked how we make the focus groups fair and all inclusive so that everyone's voice is heard.

Mr. Cohen expressed concern we are speaking to a particular cohort in the student base and suggested we go back and look at who was in that group to make sure we are not overrepresenting one part of the population.

Mrs. Chirls added it is clear from tonight's public comment that we need broader feedback particularly from our middle and high school levels and possibly parents, who are witnessing their children's behavior while they are working from home.

Mrs. Konner agreed with taking another look at these groups before the plans are finalized.

Mr. Cohen asked if there has been any guidance from the State to make vaccines mandatory for staff.

Mrs. Steiger responded she doesn't know if the State will require it but we may be able to as employers; however, she is awaiting additional information and recommendations from the Department of Health before she is able to speak publicly on the subject.

Mrs. Chirls suggested sharing whatever the proposed schedule might be when going back for additional feedback.

Mrs. Chirls asked when we consider schedule adjustments, design or build in time for students to get the content and preparation they will need for the AP tests.

Mr. Desai added that he agrees with the sentiments from tonight that the asynchronous time is not used productively and students look at it as a shorter day. Mr. Desai also agreed that students have too much down time and recommends when periods are extended to 75 minutes, teachers be actively engaged with students for the majority of that time period. Mr. Desai added it should be communicated that teachers will not be lecturing for the full 75 minutes.

Board Reports

Mrs. Konner and Mrs. Khanna attended a meeting of the Livingston Committee for Diversity and Inclusion where they explained there will be a virtual program and community donation drop offs planned for Martin Luther King Jr. day on January 18. Search @LCDINJ on Facebook for more information on this day of service.

Mrs. Konner added the committee is reorganizing themselves and one of the subcommittees discussed was one for black history month. Suggestions or comments are welcome.

Mrs. Konner continued the committee is trying to put a list together of other programs being held on MLK day and ask that those be shared with them.

Mrs. Konner announced in a communication she received from the Garden State Coalition of Schools, tomorrow Governor Murphy will be giving his State of State address and their next meeting will be held on January 27 at 9 a.m. where John Mooney from NJSpotlight will be the speaker. In addition, they gave kudos to MPMS students who spent the month of December participating in #DoGoodDecember, which encourages students to incorporate acts of kindness into their daily practices.

VOTING ITEM

MISCELLANEOUS

Mr. Cohen moved the following:

5.1 HIB Report

Resolved, that the Livingston Board of Education accepts the findings of HIB cases.

Mrs. Chirls seconded the motion.

ROLL CALL VOTE - Ayes - Mrs. Chirls, Mr. Cohen, Mrs. Khanna, Mrs. Konner, Ms. Messer
Nayes - None

Public Comment ~ up to 15 minutes

Joe Griffin, 202 West Northfield Road, asked what adjustments are being made to the curriculum to make up for lost instructional time and why are all assessments now online assessments (LinkIt and Literably) that are created by the district rather than the teacher who works with each class.

Boris Grushin, 7 North Drive, expressed he likes the way public comment was handled tonight.

Mrs. Steiger responded that since June, teachers have worked with principals, supervisors and district leaders to look at the curriculum to see where the imperatives are for kids. Mrs. Steiger added we are constantly planning and adjusting the curriculum as needed. In addition, tools for assessment such as LinkIt and Literably have always been completed online as our benchmarking tool. Mrs. Steiger continued we always try to balance between digital and in-person assessments but it may seem that more are online right now because students are not in school.

ADJOURNMENT

Ms. Messer thanked everyone for their participation and feedback tonight. Ms. Messer announced that any additional questions and comments should be sent to either Tellus@livingston.org or LPSvirtual@livingston.org.

At 9:52 Mr. Cohen made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Mrs. Konner seconded the motion.

ROLL CALL VOTE - Ayes - Mrs. Chirls, Mr. Cohen, Mrs. Khanna, Mrs. Konner, Ms. Messer
Nayes - None

Respectfully submitted,

Steven K. Robinson
Board Secretary