

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
February 2, 2021

Present: Ms. Andrea Prestwich, Chair
Ms. Kate Bowen, Secretary
Ms. Amy Checkoway
Mr. Michael Crowley
Ms. Tara Donner
Ms. Evelyn Gomez
Mr. John Phelan, Superintendent
Ms. Janice Darias, Assistant Superintendent
Mr. Anthony DiCologero, Director of Finance, Business and Operations

CALL TO ORDER IN OPEN SESSION – 5:30 PM

Vote to convene in Executive Session for the purpose of discussing contract negotiations given that a discussion in Open Session may have a detrimental impact on the School Committee’s bargaining position.

1. OPENING BUSINESS

1.1 Return to Open Session

Committee Chair Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at 6:34 p.m.

A statement was read by the School Committee on the death of Henry Tapia along with a proclamation against racism, which was followed by a moment of silence.

1.2 Citizens’ Concerns

YZhou – Asked for clarification on close contact for contact tracing. I believe it is a 6’ or less with 15 minutes of contact. If student is sitting next to a positive case but meets those marks, does that mean no contact. - Yes, but we will confirm with Director of Nursing.

Meryl Junik-Holidays/Homework policy comment. The listed policy indicates absence is implied for homework leniency, but there are some families who observe evening customs and feel the need to be in school. The policy should take these situations into consideration. - We will address this at a Policy Subcommittee Meeting.

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda

Superintendent Phelan will add a “Return to Learning” statement which includes a statement on vaccinations.

3.3 Return to In-Person Learning Committee will follow 3.4 School Calendar 2020-2021 (vote).

1.4 Chair’s Report

Committee Chair Prestwich shared some questions and comments from the School Committee Public Questions and Feedback Google form. The form may be found [here](https://www.belmont.k12.ma.us/bps/Portals/0/docs/scpublicdocuments/2020-21/Chair_Report_Feb_2_%202021.pdf)
(https://www.belmont.k12.ma.us/bps/Portals/0/docs/scpublicdocuments/2020-21/Chair_Report_Feb_2_%202021.pdf)

A brief update on COVID testing was given. Belmont has signed up for the state COVID surveillance testing pilot and are advertising for additional nurse positions to help with upcoming testing and vaccinations. No vendor has been assigned to Belmont yet but the pilot is expected begin March 1. Testing is important to early detection, removal of asymptomatic individuals before spreading, Wellesley is a model of identifying asymptomatic clusters. Testing is a big piece of getting back to in-person learning, along with vaccinations.

1.5 Superintendent's Report

The district has applied for pooled surveillance testing and is in the training process of the Binex/NOW testing. March 1 is the anticipated start date for the state pooled testing pilot. The Tri-County Superintendent's Roundtable members along with union representatives wrote a letter to Governor Baker asking for teachers to move ahead in the Phase II vaccination priority list.

The Superintendent also recognized the letter that was sent out Friday regarding school schedules was not what parents were expecting, but the work is continuing. The small changes brought the district toward compliance with DESE requirements. The administration looks forward to announcing the working group for in-person learning.

1.6 Student Advisory Council Report

The Student Advisory Council – Alexander Fick, Laura Jansen, Divya Natarajan, Grace Kane and Alexandra Kold, offered their report. Alex: The Belmont High School activist club began a petition to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples day in the Town of Belmont and on the school calendar. The Select Board announced it will be discussed at Town Meeting in May. Laura: Students are excited to go to school during in-person days of the hybrid model, finding remote days harder to focus. Seniors have finished college applications and are hearing back from colleges and are making their decisions. Divya: Community service has always been a large part of high school experience. Annual Pink for Presidents competition between grade levels concluded with senior class bringing in the most donations. With the help of Ms. Masterson, an English teacher, seniors connected with elementary students in a virtual community reading program. Grade 12 students volunteered to read stories to elementary age students. Grace: The athletics report covered the winter season which included 3 sports (basketball, hockey and alpine skiing) Although the season was cut short and included many modifications, it was a good development year used to improve skills. The new Fall2 season which will begin soon is a great opportunity for sports that were not able to compete in the fall. Ally: In performing arts, the winter play is Shakespeare's Winter's Tale. There are limited rehearsals conducted at recommended distances and include a Google Form check-in system to ensure a safe and productive time. Improv is being done in smaller groups which is beneficial for working on individual skills. Everyone is managing these challenges in a beneficial way.

2. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

2.1 No unfinished business

3. MAJOR BUSINESS

3.1 BHS Program of Studies (Vote)

Arto Asadoorian, Director of Visual and Performing Arts presented a proposal for a new school-based music class to be added to the High School Program of Studies. Modern Band will utilize popular music as its central curriculum and will teach students musical styles they may already have some familiarity with; rock, pop, Motown, soul, hip-hop, R&B, electronic dance music, and other contemporary styles.

It will look like a traditional ensemble class but with different instruments and repertoire. The objective is to appeal to students who are not currently being served by the traditional music program while allowing experience for a different repertoire. The class will be open to all students in grades 9-12, and budget impact will be minimal, assuming the current level of staffing is maintained.

Committee members discussed the data shows students who learn music, perform higher academically; benefits of having both "windows" and "mirrors" approach throughout the music program; no limit to capacity in the program;

need for greater state governmental support of appropriate protocols for music and performing arts during the pandemic. Mr. Asadoorian relayed that the MA Music Educators group is advocating for such support from the state.

On a motion offered by Kate Bowen and seconded by Tara Donner, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to add Modern Band to the High School Program of Studies.

3.2 BHS Community Service Requirements (Vote)

Belmont High School Principal, Isaac Taylor, presented a request for a reduction in community service hours. While there are students that have completed many hours of community service, this request was meant to accommodate seniors who during the pandemic are either having a difficult time finding opportunities or have a compromised individual at home and don't want to risk exposure to COVID. As a graduation requirement, the Class of 2021 would have all hours waived, the Class of 2022 would have their hours reduced by 20 hours, and the Class of 2023 and 2024 would reduce by 10 hours each. The thought behind including the lower classes was to be fair in not expecting these students to complete four years of community service in two.

Committee members asked questions to understand how pervasive the need was, to what extent exceptions or extensions could be made in lieu of eliminating the requirement, other changes to the requirement that were considered in lieu of eliminating, recognition that student connections to others is critical in this time, concerns for stress were raised. Student Representative Fick spoke to his experience; he completed his service as a freshman in full.

A motion of support to waive community service hours requirement for the Class of 2021, and reduce community service hours requirement by 10 for the Class of 2022, and reduce community service hours requirement for the class of 2023 and 2024 by 10, was offered by Mike Crowley and seconded by Tara Donner and it was VOTED on a roll call (4-2-0).

3.3 School Calendar 2021-2022 (Vote)

Current School Committee Policy regarding school calendar dictates when Labor Day occurs on or before September 3rd, the start date for students will be the Wednesday after Labor Day. When Labor Day occurs later than September 3rd, the start date for students will be the Wednesday before Labor Day.

The Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee asked for a week delay to the start of the 2021-2022 school year to have more time to move into the grades 9-12 wing of the new building while construction begins on the grades 7 and 8 wing. The School Committee agreed the delay was important to the project but noted it would cause school to begin on Rosh Hashanah. Committee member Checkoway asked to consider starting school a day later than the original delayed proposal to avoid having families make choices on whether to attend school the first day. The Committee discussed the importance of having the same level of respect for all religions along with the impact the first day of school has on children in general, and quite uniquely in the return to school in a pandemic environment. There was an acknowledgment of desire by some committee members to review the policy on the first day of school as to not begin on a religious holiday. Superintendent Phelan recalled the earlier deliberations on the complex subject, and relayed that there would be a shift of the initial K half-days to be on Friday/Monday, rather than Thursday/Friday but no other impacts.

Public Comments were taken from Meryl Junik and Danielle Lemack. Ms. Junik noted that the holiday was "high holiday," as such warranted consideration, as well messages are inconsistent with respect to homework and attendance to observe the holiday, by policy. She recalled the policy was a pilot, and asked for reconsideration.

On a motion offered by Kate Bowen and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to accept the school calendar 2020-2021 with the first day of school for staff to be Wednesday, September 8, 2021, and the first day of school for students to be Thursday, September 9, 2021, as a revision to the Belmont Public Schools 2021-2022 school calendar.

3.4 Return to In-Person Learning Committee

Kate Bowen took over as Chair temporarily for the following resolutions.

On a motion offered by Andrea Prestwich and seconded by Tara Donner, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to endorse the letter sent to Governor Baker written by the Tri-County Superintendent's Roundtable along with 23 union Presidents, urging him to prioritize educators and make them eligible to receive COVID-19 earlier in Phase 2.

On a motion offered by Andrea Prestwich and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to make a statement that the School Committee is committed to return to full in-person learning in the fall as long as federal, state and local officials and health experts say it is safe to do so.

The School Committee will also send a letter to Governor and State Representatives in support of the Tri-County Superintendents letter.

Superintendent Phelan introduced Michelle Reinhart (superintendent intern) and Drew Echelson (former school superintendent) who offered a presentation and who will facilitate the Superintendent's working group.

The purpose of the Return to In-Person Learning Working Group is to develop tools that support Belmont Public Schools in determining when and how to bring more students back to in-person learning. They will continually draft sets of rolling recommendations to outline the path to full-time in-person learning. The working group members will be selected by February 12 and will begin with a first meeting on February 22. Going forward the group will meet weekly and will send progress updates to the community twice a month. The composition of the group will be derived from members of the School Committee, School administrators, educators, Town Board of Health, High School students, parents and community members. There will be subgroups focusing on critical areas such as classroom and non-classroom capacities, vaccinations, weekly testing, PPE and health supplies, COVID metrics, with equity and access as a guiding theme for all subgroups.

Committee members discussed the group and expressed support for it - noting that they would like to see an epidemiologist on the group, and more generally members of the scientific community, reserving the option to add more members should there be a need identified. Representatives from the SEPAC community were also discussed as needed.

3.5 Math Acceleration

David Palmer with Belmont Math Parents spoke about the Chenery Math Acceleration Program which has offered math placement options for students who develop at a different pace. The program has been eliminated in its current format the last couple of years with a working group made up of school administrators and parents was established to collaborate on solutions. Mr. Palmer is in favor of reinstating the Acceleration Program, implementing a placement option for fall 2021 to address the needs of current Chenery students, keeping the Grade 7 algebra 1 and Grade 8 geometry classes, allowing flexibility for appropriate placement at the High school, and build a thoughtful communications and outreach to traditionally underrepresented populations to ensure equitable access.

Committee members discussed the proposed change as presented in February 2020, just prior to the pandemic closure of school operations. Committee member Prestwich requested to have the topic put on the Curriculum and Instruction Subcommittee agenda for Friday.

4. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)

- 4.1 Finance Subcommittee- Held a meeting this morning and discussed the FY21 Q2 financial reports.
- 4.2 Policy Subcommittee – no report
- 4.3 Curriculum & Instruction Subcommittee - Will meet Friday, February 5, 2021.
- 4.4 Capital Budget Committee - Will meet Friday with department heads.
- 4.5 Warrant Committee – Will meet Wednesday, February 3, and will review Q2 financial reports for town and school.
- 4.6 Belmont High School Building Committee – Will meet Thursday, February 4. Recently voted equipment fixtures package and discussed emerging technologies and air quality issues; cost of cafeteria furniture is still outstanding but expected to be on budget.
- 4.7 Community Path – Will meet tomorrow with abutters. There is a new rubric for these project that will be reviewed, greater attention to equity populations served by projects, such as affordable housing and seniors.
- 4.8 Financial Task Force II - Meeting planned for Monday, February 8, with follow up process work.
- 4.9 Rink Working Group - Met January 26 – Looking for more information to present on town based project.
- 4.10 EDCO - Met February 1 and focused on the financial situation of the organization. The next meeting will be on February 10th.
- 4.11 Long Term Capital Planning Committee –Will meet February 24.
- 4.12 Equity Subcommittee- Will be sending out an invitation to community members and organizations that do racial justice work for February 8.
- 4.13 Structural Change Impact Committee-meeting Thursday morning and will discuss draft report to Select Board summarizing changes and options that are being pursued.

5. OTHER BUSINESS

- 5.1 Consent Agenda
- 5.2 Personnel Items
- 5.3 Business Items
- 5.4 Approval of Minutes

6. ADJOURN

On a motion offered by Mike Crowley and seconded by Kate Bowen, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 9:56 p.m.



Catherine Bowen, Secretary

Respectfully submitted by: