

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
February 23, 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

1. OPENING BUSINESS

1.1 Call to Order

Committee Chair Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

1.2 Citizens' Concerns - none

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda - none

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](#) and a sample of questions and answers (4 of 12) is listed below.

Karessa Kuntz – Is summer school available for elementary school. If not, what are the hurdles to get over? - Administration is looking at offering academic camp this summer.

Jennifer Attridge – I am looking for the BPS learning benchmarks and cannot find them. Also, questions and answers for the School Committee are still not being archived on the website for later review. - The district curriculum is aligned with state frameworks, available on the DESE website, and the district's curriculum leaders will give an update on the curriculum at the March 23 School Committee meeting. Answers to questions are available as PDFs under "public documents".

Lindsay Doherty – I have read varying terms regarding the hiring of "math specialists" if the override passes. Could you please clarify what a math specialist is? I have read some documents using math "coaches" who do NOT work with students. – We hope to hire math specialists to provide math instruction to students who are not meeting benchmarks. We have used the term "coaches" but we are definitely talking about people who will work with students.

What would the per pupil spending be if the override passes? – It is very difficult to say what the per pupil expenditure will be. Presumably it would increase but that would depend on how much enrollment increases also.

Chair Prestwich gave a brief update of surveillance testing. Belmont is matched with Ginkgo and the nursing team worked over vacation to prepare for the work. Ginkgo released the consent platform today and materials have been ordered. The district will work this week to communicate to families, students and staff. The pilot will be for high school students and staff starting in March 2021, for 4-6 weeks of testing.

1.5 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Phelan offered thanks to the nursing staff who have worked relentlessly during the year and who will continue in the upcoming weeks with the added testing. The DESE Commissioner announced changes in the guidelines for bringing more students in person and they will be shared in a call scheduled for Wednesday, February 24, 2021.

2. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

2.1 No unfinished business

3. MAJOR BUSINESS

3.1 CMS Solar Panel Project

Superintendent Phelan provided an update on the Chenery Middle School Solar Panel project. The district has been working over some time to put solar panels on the Chenery gym roof. Belmont Light Department was asked to organize and lead the work. Chair Prestwich and Supt. Phelan reviewed a draft Memorandum of Understanding with Belmont Light to cover power usage, financial savings to be received, and the space on the roof where the panels will sit. The groups identified next steps to proceed with the project and sent the draft to Town Counsel.

Superintendent Phelan welcomed the Belmont High School Solar Action Club, represented by co-leaders Shea Brams, Francesca Kitch, Margo Danahy and Shanta Pai. The group gave an overview of their club which consists of approximately 60 students spanning the four high school grades. They are active in supporting local, state and federal climate topics as well as Belmont's town-wide sustainability goals, and encourage zero net energy with the Middle and High school Building. The group offered support for the Chenery Solar Panel project moving forward and the importance of the FY22 school budget.

Committee members commended the students for their engagement and acknowledged support for the project, as well as the history of the community solarize campaign that resulted in the donation to the Town.

Committee Chair Prestwich took some questions and comments from the community.

Tim Flood – Was the placement of the panels changed from the original plan? – The placement of the panels was originally set for the metal roof over the gym. Due to its lower placement being more susceptible to vandalism and sight lines, the upper roof was considered but negated once it was found the roof would need to be replaced. The project was brought back down to the lower roof.

3.2 Return to In-Person Learning Update

The first meeting of the working group occurred on Monday, February 22, 2021. Agendas and documents from each meeting will be accessible to the public the day after each meeting via the school website. Rolling updates will be given every two weeks with a goal of being effective and efficient. Moving grades K-2 faster to in-person learning was discussed to align with state and DESE guidelines. Superintendent Phelan reviewed the working group membership and that it was created in order to represent many different stakeholders and draw on distinct perspectives and areas of expertise within the community. The administration commits to a fully transparent process and to work effectively and efficiently in moving the work forward.

Before having students come in fully in person, the district will need to survey parents on their preference of in person learning vs. remote learning with little flexibility to change. Capacity pressure test can then be calculated based on the new decisions.

Committee members discussed if there was a need to accelerate the work of the Return to In Person Working Group, acknowledging that the planning preceded BESE's recent vote; the group is on track. Member Checkoway suggested a presentation from local experts may be helpful on the science and research findings to date, Member Gomez agreed, noting the importance of keeping certain metrics updated. Discussion of MCAS was raised, and the priorities for in-person learning time needs.

Committee Chair Prestwich took some questions and comments from the community.

Ray Ausrotus – How fixed is the 6' distancing guideline and will we consider 3'? Will data from the community impact an accelerated set of recommendations in light of a decrease in COVID in the community?

Supt. Phelan relayed that six feet is the rule with CDC but they provide flexibility with mitigation measures like face masks, cleaning, air exchange in place. The district can move towards closer distances as need be. Chair Prestwich affirmed that local data is a very big piece in the equation for moving kids back into school.

Rob Ang – What is the plan for remote only families? I did not see a working group member that is remote only.
– Supt. Phelan relayed that there are several remote only representatives in the working group and the district will offer remote only services.

Chris McLaughlin – Is there any plan to use calculations from last fall with pressure testing (100%) capacity with 6' distancing? Will you run the numbers again at the current capacity with varying distances (5', 4', 3')? – Supt. Phelan relayed that the district did pressure tests last July (on website); the working group has floor plans of the schools and will be working on these calculations.

Douglas Ficci – What is the best case scenario? Is it possible for the children to get back full time or is it off the table? – Supt. Phelan relayed that the district will have to take all factors into consideration; it is a good thing for students to be in person with peers and teachers, and believe the numbers are going down, and expects situations where we can have more students back.

3.3 Hybrid Planning Update

The School Committee and the Belmont Educators Association has been meeting to collectively bargain the elementary and middle school models. They have met in February three times to date and continue to actively meet.

Committee Chair Prestwich took some questions and comments from the community.

Casey Wall – Still struggling with recommendations to potentially extend the day and why it cannot be discussed outside of negotiations. Why is the Winn Brook meeting 10 minutes less than the other elementary schools? – We are unable to comment on the first question. Superintendent Phelan has spoken with Casey Wall and looked at the process for the Winn Brook School start of the day. It will be discussed with Principal Mecklenberg upon her return.

3.3 Center for Disease Control Updated Guidelines

An update to the CDC guidelines were issued before February break. The key themes from the new guidance is to have a multi-layered approach to keep in-school transmission risk of COVID-19 low, recognizing community transmission levels and case counts important. At low or moderate rates of transmission, schools should generally be fully in person (even if this means physical distancing may be less than 6 ft. in some circumstances). Focus on equity when we approach this work and vaccinate school staff

and teachers as soon as supply allows for it. Belmont has been following the updated CDC guidelines all along and has little disruption to how students have been going to school due to using the 6 foot protocol. Belmont is taking part of the Binnex diagnostic testing for symptomatic individuals and is starting the screening testing pilot March 1 if the provider Ginkgo is ready for the process. Although vaccinations for teachers is not a condition of in-person learning, it gives peace of mind for safety of staff and students. According to CDC continuum of risk, Belmont is classified as Medium risk. The District is exploring what next steps can be taken for the rest of the school year.

Committee Chair Prestwich took some questions and comments from the community.

Patrick Whittemore – I hear a lot of “What’s good for the teachers” but I do not hear “What’s best for the students” and parents are getting frustrated. I encourage you to think of the children first.

3.5 FY22 Budget

Superintendent Phelan presented the FY22 budget and the upcoming \$6.4M override on the town April ballot. If the override does not pass, the district will be required to cut \$2.07 million in the form of approximately 22 fewer teachers and staff and \$564,000 cuts in programs such as athletics, theater, and music and other academic electives. With additional funds from an override, the district will move forward with requested positions from last year and will add 10.6 FTEs in additional positions over the next three years to support the work on equity and SEL, smaller class sizes, the district re-configuration plan and better academic programming. Overall, the students in Belmont are served by lower funding per student and served by fewer teachers (per 100 students) than almost every other district in the state. Although Belmont schools have been increasing teacher FTEs at a slightly higher rate than student enrollment, the students in Belmont are in larger classes than in most districts across the state.

Committee members discussed the importance of the override funding while acknowledging the difficult timing.

Committee Chair Prestwich took some questions and comments from the community.

Mary Lewis – Wondering if we were close to state averages, would we have had a better time this past year and how much harder will it be to get back to normal education if override does not pass. – Supt. Phelan relayed that it will be a challenge if override does not pass because 22 teachers will be lost and class sizes will go up.

Charlie Conroy – Gave a personal comment of support for the override and schools. Can you comment on where the enrollment projections came from? – Supt. Phelan relayed that outside consultants reviewed twice since 2015 to offer two reports which were backed by Massachusetts School Building Authority findings. The district will be at a 4800-5000 student level by 2024. Belmont’s recent reduction in enrollment is primarily due to the impact of COVID and falls below what other districts have experienced in loss. It will be seen over the next two years if the enrollment increases revert to previous rates.

4. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)

4.1 Finance Subcommittee- A meeting was held this morning covering FY21, FY22 updates and Federal grant impact.

4.2 Policy Subcommittee – no report

4.3 Curriculum & Instruction Subcommittee - Recent meeting held on February 5, and discussed the math acceleration program.

- 4.4 Capital Budget Committee meeting – Upcoming meeting Thursday, February 25 to review list of needs in preparation for Town Meeting.
- 4.5 Warrant Committee – met Wednesday even and discussed no override budget and Governors state aid, Chapter 70 funding shortfall.
- 4.6 Belmont High School Building Committee – no report
- 4.7 Community Path – On site meeting to cover access issues at Commuter Station Concord Avenue, Leonard Street.
- 4.8 Financial Task Force II – no report
- 4.9 Rink Working Group – no report
- 4.10 EDCO – Will discuss the financial viability of the organization at the next School Committee meeting.
- 4.11 Long Term Capital Planning Committee – Upcoming meeting on March 10, 2021
- 4.12 Equity Subcommittee – Community Forum tomorrow to talk about how to work together to advance equity goals in the school system.
- 4.13 Structural Change Impact Committee – Report was submitted to the Select Board and can be found online. Upcoming meeting and community forum, both on March 4.

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 Tara Donner, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 9:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by:


Catherine Bowen, Secretary