

**BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES**  
**REMOTE MEETING**  
**JANUARY 12, 2021**

Present: Ms. Andrea Prestwich, Chair  
Ms. Catherine 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. – 5:30 p.m.

**1. OPENING BUSINESS**

1.1 Return to Open Session

Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at 6:37 p.m.

1.2 Citizens’ Concerns

There were no citizens’ concerns.

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda

There were no adjustments to the agenda.

1.4 Chair’s Report

Committee Chair Prestwich shared some questions and comments from the School Committee Public Questions and Feedback Google form. (chair\_report\_12\_Jan\_2021.pdf) Belmont is using the Board of Health recommendation of 14 days for quarantine period, the logistics and cost of the COVID surveillance testing are continuing to be worked on and that its bearing on increased capacity in the school for students is not anticipated right away.

Committee member Gomez offered the following statement to acknowledge the unfortunate events of last week in Washington D.C.:

*“It is critical as elected officials and leaders that we acknowledge and reflect on the unfortunate violent events last week in Washington, DC.*

*Teachers are always among the nation’s first responders to world historical developments. We are thankful for the leadership and care exhibited by our teachers and staff during this challenging time. Our children watched the events unfolding in Washington last week, many with fear for their own safety and questions about the continued systemic inequities in our system. Now our children turn to us, and even though we might not have the answers they seek, it is imperative that we listen and process these events together.*

*We, as the Belmont School Committee, should recommit to doing everything we can to combat division, hate, and racism through actions and discussions in our community. Not giving the events of Washington DC recognition is dismissive of the magnitude of what we're seeing right now and perpetuates the systems that many are working tirelessly to break down. We remain committed to countering the systemic inequities that exist in our school system and empowering all students with the skills, knowledge, and confidence that they need to be successful as citizens and future leaders."*

## 1.5 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Phelan noted for this off-cycle meeting, the administration is taking the opportunity to update the community on some items the district is working on. (Document: SC.Update and Recs.1.12.21.1)

A letter was sent to parents earlier in the day, updating everyone on testing and vaccination. Belmont has gained access to the State/DESE sponsored mobile testing unit - for symptomatic and close contact cases - if needed, and has signed up for and is awaiting materials for the DESE sponsored BinaxNOW antigen testing. Nursing staff will begin training once materials are received. (This is not surveillance testing). School Nurses will be vaccinated with Belmont's First Responders this week as part of Phase 1 of the Governor's COVID vaccine roll-out plan.

The Belmont Board of Health, the Nursing Director, and the School Committee Chair have explored several surveillance testing models and have taken part in multi-district discussions on partnering on testing. The district will apply for the Governor's "pool testing" 6-week pilot initiative, and has attended the DESE conference call on the pool testing initiative today (1/12/21). The district will continue to explore other options, such as the Mirimus surveillance testing on their own or in collaboration with the multi-district group, as there may be better or more economical options than the state is providing.

It is also working with the Board of Health to support the phased vaccination plan set forth by the state that currently includes teachers in Phase 2.

The Superintendent presented the formation of a "Return to In-Person Learning" Committee, with the make-up of the committee to be determined in the coming week. This K-12 group will explore the challenges and opportunities for more in-person learning this spring and in the fall.

Strategic planning continues, after the district's hope for an override was discussed at the last SC meeting. Next week's meeting will discuss the budget again and will include a question and answer forum to hear feedback. The annual budget hearing will take place later in the spring, as it is usually scheduled.

All schools are in hybrid learning models and continue to identify successes and challenges, leveraging strengths while responding to challenges.

## 2. **MAJOR BUSINESS**

### 2.1 Elementary Hybrid Advisory Committee- Review of Recommendations 6:50 p.m.

Superintendent Phelan welcomed and introduced the elementary hybrid advisory committee, which was tasked with identifying successes and challenges in the current model. The team consists of parents and administrators from all four elementary schools, representing students in hybrid and full remote, METCO students, those on IEPs, and students with English Language Learner services. The goal was to provide feasible recommendations based on a parent/guardian and staff survey to refine and enhance the current hybrid model.

The recommendations included: change the "specials" (art, music, PE) from asynchronous videos to live/synchronous remote classes; change Wednesdays from in-person days (that alternated between cohorts) to

fully remote synchronous for all students while increasing the in-person days (M,T,TH,F) to offset the decrease of in-person time on Wednesdays; and add optional live drop-ins with “specials” teachers on Wednesdays.

The team reported if these changes can be implemented, there will be good improvement on the elementary model resulting in more live engagement, less asynchronous learning, extended in-person time for hybrid students on some days and simplified schedule for teachers and staff.

The School Committee asked questions of the Advisory Committee regarding the available data or other limitations. The team responded with the overall available time to research and report out as a restriction, and found it challenging to balance more in-person learning with more social time. Data showed there was a larger level of student engagement with teachers contrasted with lower peer to peer connection/engagement. DESE does not count peer to peer learning time toward its requirements.

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

*Casey- Was disheartened that the committee was not given the ability to make big changes. With in-person learning is so important, was any thought given to extending days to 1pm?* The in-person learning committee will look at that possibility, but it will be difficult with large class sizes and lower staffing along with COVID protocols in place.

*Mariola- Asked if there has been discussion about Cohort inequity. Her daughter’s class has student cohorts at 15 vs 6. Those discussions have begun at elementary level.*

*Heather-Asked how did you look at the data? remote vs. hybrid, included ELL and SPED, and from different grade levels?* The advisory team did ask all those questions in the survey and did segregate the data that way. The diversity of the committee helped unpacked those ideas.

*Caitlin-Conveyed disappointment that an increase in instruction was just from specials, and asked if any thought was given to increase core classes?*

*Megan- Conveyed it is a great process you are going through, and was curious about transportation logistics. If we are no longer transporting students, did we lose money?* Last year after the schools closed, the payments to the bus company were decreased. This year, payment will be based on days of service.

Superintendent Phelan supports the recommendations of the advisory committee and is not sure they need a vote because they are an enhancement to the already approved hybrid plan. Committee member Bowen reminded the group their practice has been to review recommendations and vote later (if needed), but some aspects need to be negotiated first. Member Checkoway noted that we are continuing to make improvements both formally and informally, recognizing that we will not have one thing that meets everyone’s needs.

## 2.2 CMS Hybrid Advisory Committee- Review of Recommendations

7:15 p.m.

Superintendent Phelan welcomed and introduced the CMS hybrid advisory committee, which was tasked with identifying successes and challenges in the current model and making recommendations to improve the hybrid model. The team consists of students, parents/guardians and school leaders. Key priorities were determined by the survey data and hybrid models from comparison schools (18) then looked at via multiple lenses; student,

parent, equity, contractual obligations. Key priorities surfaced from data and were put into three categories: non-negotiables, nice to have, and if possible.

The recommendations: to retain a similar structure, remove the WIN (What I Need) blocks from the in-person days and reallocate that time to live remote instruction of ELA, math, social studies, and science in the afternoons; add live remote encore instruction in the afternoons; and lengthen the periods on remote synchronous Wednesdays.

The next step is to work with faculty to put changes in place. The ultimate goal is to ensure that students are ready for the next grade level. The middle school has the most complicated schedule in the district even before COVID. Space and teacher-to-student ratios have also been a constraint from pre-COVID days.

School Committee members asked the team to come back to give specifics on the schedule and asked if there were any barriers with policy. The BEA was invited to be part of the hybrid committee but declined.

Committee Chair Prestwich asked the community for questions and comments.

*Tim Flood- Both reports were supposed to be reviewed and recommended. He felt he heard a lot of what we cannot do and asked that going forward the district focus on what we can do even with restraints. Mr. Flood encouraged thinking outside-the-box like swapping BHS and CMS students in buildings. The district is tight in every building with modular units at the middle school, Burbank, and high school. The possibility of having all kindergarteners in one school, some specific grades going remote was reviewed over the summer when the district thought it could not use all rooms in school buildings. Facilities was able to fix room issues.*

*Danielle- It is hard for our children and they are not getting much homework. How are we going to get them to the next grade if they are not getting writing assignments? At the elementary level, we have specialists focusing on key work. It is a challenge, and we will review, realign, keep moving forward and these changes will help.*

*Alba- On the suggestion to take WIN block out, what happens if I don't have WIN block because I go to EL services?- Your services will be met and we will help you.*

*Sandi- New DESE requirements need to be implemented by January 19 and it sounds like we may not meet that deadline? While the motive behind increasing instructional time was good, how DESE when about it was not. Districts were not given enough time to plan and we may need to make up time at the end of year.*

### 2.3 Student Opportunity Act Plan (vote)

7:45 p.m.

Assistant Superintendent Darias presented on the district Student Opportunity Act Plan for submission next week. The original submission date was last spring but was interrupted with the pandemic. The plan is required by DESE to explain how the district will use additional Chapter 70 funding from the state to address opportunity gaps in subgroups. The legislation was approved in late 2019 but the funding in year one of the multi-year plan was limited so only some districts received extra chapter 70 funds. Belmont did not receive additional funds, however all districts must submit the 3-year plan. Our district plan is to continue and deepen our work of improving the school experience and learning outcomes for our black and brown students. The development of the plan included community engagement and feedback opportunities, which took place in March 2020. The district received about \$300,000 less than anticipated with the Student Opportunity Act.

***On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to accept the Student Opportunity Act Plan.***

Superintendent Phelan thanked Ms. Darias on her continued work in this area. The district has seen a shift in adult culture to understand differences and help all students learn. There is still much work to do with MCAS results, participation data, and discipline data. Funding has not been received yet but the district has been supported by groups in the community, FBE, BAR, along with district funds.

#### 2.4 School Committee Goals Updated (vote)

8:00 p.m.

Committee member Donner read the updated school committee goals that were discussed at a previous School Committee retreat. The goals that were organized in overall focus area priorities. Member Donner read the goals for the record:

#### **Committee Policies + Protocols**

- Data + File Management for public documents
- Implement Continuous Improvement Practices as a Committee

#### **Budget**

- FY22 Budget/Override Preparations
- Budget Process Review
  - Role of collaboration with other town boards early in the budget process

#### **Advancing District Strategic Vision + Core Values**

- Improving Community Relations/Engagement
- Equity
  - Establish subcommittee on equity
  - Subcommittee will set goals and report back to full SC
- Belmont Middle and High School Issues
  - District Configuration Planning
  - Start Times

#### **COVID**

- COVID-related Issues (including, but not limited to the following)
  - Transportation changes as a result of the pandemic environment
  - Time on Curriculum oversight
  - Feasibility of COVID testing
  - Changes in after school care/programs
  - Potential summer programming

#### **Community Partnerships**

- Transportation and Traffic Issues
  - BHS/MS
  - Fees
  - Community Path
- Donated Solar Array - Chenery

- Complete Multi-Year Process to achieve installation of solar panels
- Ice Rink

**Labor Relations**

- Contract Negotiations for 2020-21 and 2021-23

***On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to accept the School Committee Goals for 2020-2021.***

**3. ADJOURN**

***On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Catherine Bowen, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 9:20 p.m.***

Respectfully Submitted by:

  
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Catherine Bowen, Secretary