

**BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES**  
**REMOTE MEETING**  
**January 19, 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 DiColohero, 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 Call to Order

Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at **6:36** p.m.

1.2 Citizens' Concerns

There were no concerns raised.

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. There were many similar questions that she addressed as a whole, noted that email replies are repeated as a necessity of managing the volume of questions.

1.5 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Phelan highlighted some events and opportunities. The annual MLK Community Breakfast was held Monday, January 20, with Boston Globe Associate Editor and Op Ed Columnist, Renee Graham, as guest speaker. Proceeds of the event go to support the Belmont Public Schools METCO Support Fund. There will be a SEPAC meeting on January 28. Details were sent out via email and may be found on the BPS website. The Foundation for Belmont Education announced Rapid Response Grant awards in December and January totaling \$9,609. The grants were awarded directly to teachers to support children in the classrooms. Upcoming FBE events were also highlighted.

Superintendent Phelan thanked all the nursing staff who have been working during the week and weekends to conduct contact tracing and other added responsibilities during the pandemic. It has been a challenging last two weeks.

## **2. MAJOR BUSINESS**

### **2.1 CMS/Elementary Hybrid Update**

At the last School Committee meeting, the CMS and Elementary Hybrid Advisory Teams presented findings on the hybrid learning model survey results, and made recommendations to the administration. These recommendations are being negotiated with the Belmont Education Association.

Superintendent Phelan introduced CMS Principal Karla Koza to give more details on the Chenery hybrid schedule from the last School Committee meeting's presentation. The draft proposed changes include: in-person days with four (4) core classes, two (2) additional core classes in afternoon and one (1) WIN block in afternoon. At-home days would include three (3) Encore Classes, with one (1) additional encore class in the afternoon, 2 WIN blocks and live extra help for Core and Encore classes. Students will transition home a little earlier in order to fit in two live instruction classes in the afternoon. The schedule tries to minimize asynchronous time and increase live instruction. Recommended changes will result in 6 hours of added live instruction over a two-week period.

Other improvements to the schedule include reading and media specialist for students who do not have foreign language classes, live teacher help whether teacher or child initiated. Alex Fick, student advisory member asked if the district would consider extending asynchronous time when WIN time is removed. Principal Koza responded that there are scheduling issues that need to be considered, such as teacher prep time and consultation time with guidance.

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

*Casey Wall- Was surprised we are not talking about elementary children returning to in-person learning when they have been identified as low transmission individuals. She was also curious why we have to negotiate with the teachers for each little change with in-person time. The teachers are within their contractual day so why the need for negotiating these small details?* Superintendent Phelan replied that these are appropriate items that are negotiated and are done so in all districts throughout Massachusetts. The elementary advisory group did provide recommendations and we are working changes out in negotiation sessions. Contracts are available on the district website.

*Caitlin Carceo- Concerned about lack of teaching both cohorts at same time. How are we meeting State standards with in-person learning of core classes only at 50%. Also commented that Belmont has always shone in education but lack of action in the summer to produce working remote hybrid model. Her fear is we will lose families that are invested in education as they see what is missing here.* Superintendent Phelan agrees with Ms. Carceo and has the same worry, as right now the teacher to student ratio and per pupil expenditure is one of the lowest in the state. The district is asking families to look forward past this trying year and not judge the entire district during a pandemic.

*YZhou- Had an observation of the cohort system where the separate cohorts were out of sync and never at the same pace. The new schedule does not seem to address that problem. I suggest switching cohort A/B in the afternoon.* Superintendent Phelan addressed that Chenery considered switching cohorts to alternatively begin in the afternoon, but educators felt that it was best to keep some level of continuity. Staff are considering shifting the week to begin on Wednesday to reorder schedules to adjust for lesson planning.

### **2.2 Student Learning Time Update**

The district informed the Department of Education of the advisory teams' work on updating student learning time based on the DESE shift in learning expectations. Clarification of requirements was requested from the Department of Education, as was an extension to the plan deadline (Feb 1). A decision is forthcoming.

### 2.3 Testing Update

Superintendent Phelan introduced Director of Nursing, Beth Rumley who presented COVID testing options.

Mitigation strategies maximize the in-person learning with masking, distancing, cohorting, hand hygiene and daily symptom checks. The district is taking part in Safer Teachers, Safer Students K12 Testing Collaborative meetings. Director Rumley gave an overview of surveillance pool testing and explained it could act as an additional mitigation strategy. The testing identifies asymptomatic positive individuals, and includes grouping 10-25 samples per pool. Three (3) companies, Gingko, Mirimus, and CIC, were looked at to learn more about their product, process and cost. Mirimus was the preferred product largely because of the ease of taking the test. In addition, the group is also looking into BinaxNOW testing for symptomatic individuals to have the ability to test in school if students or staff are symptomatic. Recent trends have found an increase in positive cases from familial exposure. Students on quarantine at home are testing positive, but surveillance pool testing would not identify these cases. It was deemed that providing testing options for parents and guardians would be helpful.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Public Health are introducing pooled testing in the coming weeks. Districts will receive test kits but no other support will be provided. Schools will be required to use staff resources, which are already stretched to the maximum. There are challenging logistics with the surveillance program: unmasking in classrooms to take sample collections; districts will be responsible for the cost of retesting a positive pool; multiple software platforms for DESE programs and Abbott BinaxNow reflex testing; additional costs after initial six (6) weeks. Belmont Public schools did submit an application for the program and will review information as it becomes available.

The School Committee discussed the State surveillance pooled testing program and noted both positives and negatives. Testing would allow children to stay in classrooms and would help gather data needed to make informed decisions. Concerns centered on funding and the lack of staff resources needed for the program. The program assumes there is a COVID coordinator or enough staff for implementation.

Committee Chair Prestwich is in favor of participating in the State option but other committee members have reservations given the limited funding, staffing constraints, and relative benefit to improved school operations. The group discussed the idea of identifying a coordinator and an outside partner (hospital, University, EMS service) to help with testing. Continued mitigating strategies and COVID testing should be a collaborative approach with the Town Board of Health and Schools as partners.

Chair Prestwich invited questions and comments from the community.

*Amy Kirsch - We should try the 6-week pilot program. We do not have to continue, but it will give us a baseline for the community. There are parent volunteers that would be willing to help out.*

*Jamal Saeh - Do we know anything from schools currently conducting surveillance testing in order to keep schools open? - Wellesley Public Schools detected a cluster and found it had originated in the main office, which changed their layout and mitigation strategies within that office.*

*Alix - I support Chair Prestwich's statement to take advantage of state testing. We cannot wait and learn from others. We have to move forward swiftly. Has anyone contacted Foundation of Belmont Education to see what they could do in regards to funding? - Yes, we have had preliminary discussions with FBE.*

*Danielle Lemack - As we see evolved hybrid models shortening in-person time, would a testing program potentially increase the time our children can be in schools? - Testing along with a vaccine will allow that, but air quality and the 6-foot distance requirement are restrictions. The next item on the agenda, Return to In Person Learning Committee, will address these ideas.*

The district hopes to have teachers be in the vaccine group by the State in early February.

## 2.4 Return to In-Person Learning Committee Update

Superintendent Phelan made a proposal to the School Committee for a Return to In-Person Learning Committee. The charge of the committee is to frame conditions for increased level of return to in-person learning by grade span; analyze barriers to successful and safe return and problem solve these challenges in small groups; and draft a set of recommendations that outlines a path to full-time in-person return to school and submit them to the Superintendent for review.

Composition of the RTIPL committee would be School Committee members, Administrators (Central Office/Principals), Town Board of Health Director/Board Member, BEA Union Reps/Educators, Parents/guardians, community members. Working as a whole group and through subcommittees, the committee will focus on critical areas for a full and safe return to school looking at communications/outreach, facilities and food services, nursing, PPE and health supplies, scheduling and instructional models, and transportation.

Superintendent Phelan proposed the committee members will be selected by January 31 and will have a first meeting by February 12. Recommendations will be submitted to the Superintendent by April 16. Michelle Rinehart and Dr. Drew Echelson of Harvard Graduate School of Education will facilitate the process

School Committee members discussed the idea of the Return to In-Person Learning Committee and were in support of its incorporation. It was deemed more discussion is needed to formalize the process the group would work under; subcommittee under the open meeting laws or advisory working group. RTIPL committee members would represent all viewpoints such as remote learners, hybrid learners, METCO students, educators.

Superintendent Phelan suggested the Committee should be large enough to facilitate its own subcommittees and be able to gather input from committee/community members with expertise in important fields – particularly Epidemiology. It was agreed the Administration will begin soliciting community members for the larger group and discuss the roles of the subcommittee members at the next School Committee meeting. High school students were inadvertently left off the committee make up group in the presentation slides.

## 2.5 School Calendar 2021-2022

Two versions of school calendar were presented to School Committee for review. Version 1 is consistent with the policy that states when Labor Day occurs later than September 3, the start date for students will be the Wednesday before Labor Day. This year, the Belmont Middle and High School Building project will be coming to the end of phase one where the old building will be emptied and the transfer of infrastructure and utilities to the new building will occur. The building committee asked that school begin later to accommodate the work to bring the new building on line for the 2021-2022 school year.

Version 2 of the school calendar has staff beginning the Tuesday after Labor Day, September 7 and ending June 23. Under the existing policy, staff would begin August 31, and end June 17. Superintendent Phelan requested an off cycle start to the 2021-2022 school year.

School committee members were in favor of the later start to the 2021-2022 school year. Committee member Gomez, requested discussion be had for a calendar change from Columbus Day to Indigenous People Day and Assistant Superintendent Darias indicated there was one complication with version 2 where Jewish high holidays will be impacted.

### **3. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)**

#### **3.1 Finance Subcommittee-**

The committee met this morning and approved minutes, disposed of surplus technology and received an update of the joint Select Board, FTF2 meeting.

#### **3.2 Policy and Procedure Subcommittee - no report**

#### **3.3 Curriculum and Instruction Subcommittee**

The committee met January 15 and discussed a proposal for a new music course at BHS, Modern Band.

#### **3.4 Capital Budget Subcommittee**

The committee will meet on January 28.

#### **3.5 Warrant Subcommittee**

The committee will meet tomorrow night to discuss FTFII recommendations about the override, COVID reimbursements, and planning for January 25 public forum.

#### **3.6 Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee**

The committee met this week to discuss furniture budgets and are moving along on time and on budget.

#### **3.7 Community Path Subcommittee**

The committee will meet on January 20.

#### **3.8 Financial Task Force II**

The committee met last Wednesday and voted unanimously to recommend \$6.4 million override to the Select Board at an upcoming meeting on Friday, January 22.

#### **3.9 Rink Working Group**

The group met to discuss a single ice sheet option for the rink and the potential of partnering with a public entity.

#### **3.10 EDCO Subcommittee**

The Committee met last week and will have an upcoming meeting.

#### **3.11 Long Term Capital Planning Committee**

The committee has divided into subgroups looking at policies and planning. They will meet as a full committee a week from Wednesday.

3.12 Equity Subcommittee

The committee is meeting Thursday, January 21 to discuss equity audit.

3.13 Structural Impact Subcommittee

The committee had two meetings and will meet this Thursday to start a specific plan to determine consistent criteria for options of community input.

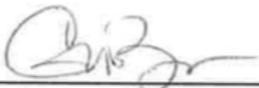
**4. OTHER BUSINESS**

- 4.1 Consent Agenda - None
- 4.2 Personnel Items – None
- 4.3 Business Items – None
- 4.4 Approval of Minutes - None

**5. ADJOURN**

**On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 9:22 p.m.**

Respectfully Submitted by:

  
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Catherine Bowen, Secretary