

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
January 5, 2021

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

Absent: Ms. Evelyn Gomez

1. OPENING BUSINESS

1.1 Call to Order

Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at 6:33 p.m.

1.2 Citizens' Concerns

Amy Kirsch – *Questioned whether contact tracing was done over the winter break and asked if it will be reported.* Yes, numbers will be updated tomorrow.

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda

There were no adjustments to the agenda.

1.4 Chair's Report

Andrea Prestwich shared some questions and comments from the School Committee Public Questions and Feedback Google Form.

1. *Valerie – Concerned about contact tracing rules and informing close contacts.*
The School Department is following the Health Department guidelines on close contacts.
2. *Carissa – Discuss hybrid teacher administrative roles*
Not sure what that is referring to; unanswered.
3. *Gina-What is happening with student [covid surveillance] testing?*
No actions have been taken yet. The district is looking at logistics of a testing program.
4. *Jamal - Question about data on student engagement, reassessing and improving?*
Groups are currently looking to improve; groups are set up doing that.
5. *Steven B-There is a link on the main website for a spreadsheet of archived questions which does not seem to be working.*
School Committee Member, Tara Donner acknowledged that at the school committee retreat it was noted and put on a to-do list to change the link.

1.5 Superintendent's Report

The Superintendent would like to emphasize continued safety with mask wearing and other practices. He urged the community to continue to be vigilant. The school department is working daily with the Board of Health, school nurses, and families, and clarified they do follow the 6' rule as close contact. He thanked the Town technology department, Belmont Media and families for helping to establish live streaming of hockey and basketball games - all the departments that jumped into action. Superintendent Phelan and School Committee member Donner toured the new Belmont Middle and High School building. Building progress is going well, and they were both impressed with the learning space and how it exemplified the visioning work that was done last year and are proud of the project. There will be another tour in two months and School Committee members will be invited again. There have been over 110 meetings of the Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee.

2. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

There was no unfinished business.

3. MAJOR BUSINESS

3.1 Food Service Update

Dustin O'Brien, Food Service Director, organized and oversaw food services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning with modified in-person learning on March 16, 2020, Belmont opens meal pick up to all free and reduced households and soon after began home deliveries. By March 29, 2020, USDA lifted restrictions on eligibility so any family interested could pick up meal kits. Food service operations continued throughout the summer to the present day. In-school meals continue for full in-person students. More than 250,000 meals have been provided to families in the last 9 months. This was a great community effort with some giving donations (masks, bags, books) and others volunteering their time.

Meal Kits include 7 breakfast & 7 lunch meals, and families can come by once per week to pick up for any child 0-21 years of age, and all are *free of charge* through June 30th, 2021.

Currently, there is sufficient food supply for any family that requests a meal kit. The team delivers to 600 students and 500 students pick up meals. Food Services would like to offer other food options but are constrained by shelf-life. Some efforts for waste reduction have also shifted with the to-go model and previously low-cost supplies, such as gloves, have gone up considerably.

3.2 Belmont Family Engagement Network (BFEN)

Superintendent Phelan introduced the members of BFEN, a group he has been meeting with for the past 6 months; the BFEN founding members Jill Norton, Amanda Fernandez, Martha Loftus, Emily Rodriguez, Jeff Liberty, to the School Committee and community members. The members shared their personal and professional connections to Belmont and public education.

The parent group originated in February 2020, with the primary goal of family engagement in the schools. They began meeting to focus on visioning work with the reconfiguration plan and have evolved to help bring a parent voice to the district and School Committee in an organized, data driven way so they can share information and insights with the district. They view families as a vital part (co-authors) of student education and the group aims to be inclusive of all families and to be a conduit with all community groups. They will host an upcoming "Community Conversation" on January 27, 2021.

School Committee Chair Prestwich inquired about examples of concrete things the group would do, such as holding signs for an override. Jill Norton answered that they would provide information, an unbiased resource. Community member, Tim Flood relayed concerns they are straddling School Committee responsibilities and may add more bureaucracy; he had questions about representation and accountability of the group. Jill Norton replied BFEN wants to help the School Committee and administration, and reach out to families. Amanda Fernandez sees the group as leveraging the visioning work done to prepare for the new school. Jill Norton sees the group as adding capacity to the School Committee, elevating engagement, and helping to create policies and initiatives.

3.3 Kindergarten Registration Update

A district Kindergarten information night will not be held in person this year, but rather each elementary school will hold a virtual Kindergarten information night. PowerPoint presentations will be available on the BPS website covering the registration process. Online registration will begin January 29. Superintendent Phelan reminded the audience that full day Kindergarten will be free next year and going forward.

It was clarified that the process begins on the registration page of the website and each elementary school will have information nights. Member Bowen requested that we keep track of how many students have to be placed outside of their neighborhood school, and noted the extra challenges associated with COVID operations for getting to and from school.

3.4 Student Learning Time Update

Superintendent Phelan thanked staff for the tremendous amount of work that has been done in the school buildings and Central Office with regard to curriculum and instruction and the changing and complicated DESE requirements in remote/hybrid learning.

Janice Darias presented new Student Learning Time regulations. DESE implemented emergency regulations requiring daily contact and changing the required number of hours of live instruction over a two-week period. BPS received a preliminary report based on the DESE survey submitted November 6, 2020. Adjustments were made to the numbers since the November 6 submission; DESE provided clarification on regulations and the High School has since transitioned from remote to hybrid. Belmont is currently at an average of 33 hours of live instruction over two weeks with the new minimum set at 35 hours by DESE. The Elementary and Middle School Advisory groups will make recommendations to the Superintendent and School Committee next week, to meet the required live instruction time. The district will submit the changes to DESE by the 2021 deadline.

School Committee members inquired as to the difficulty in meeting the minimum hour requirement. Assistant Superintendent Darias indicated the district will be able to make the adjustments that are needed with no need to seek a waiver. Member Checkoway asked about what resources have been newly made by DESE to make the changes. DESE did not provide any tools or resources as to how to best implement plans in order to increase student engagement. Member Bowen noted that much of the testimony given for the decision was to address student mental health and safety. Committee member Donner has been impressed with the student-teacher connections under these circumstances and quality of instruction. Superintendent Phelan shared his agreement with the intent, fortunate that the advisory groups were already in place.

There have been recent community requests to bring Kindergarten students in-person seeing there is a small transmission percentage with this group. School Committee member Bowen asked if the district

has looked at this possibility. Ms. Darias stated they have not looked at the details of reports noting with the six (6) foot guideline, it would be difficult.

Chairperson Prestwich took questions and comments from the community.

Casey Waller – Looking at how low numbers were at elementary schools with a group that needs more help, I believe we need to do more to get elementary students in person 3-4 days a week. I would like you to consider spacing 3' apart vs. 6'.

Response-Increasing live instruction is a goal of the advisory group. We cannot bring back all the students because we do not have the space or extra staffing to do so.

Rich Hanna- Does not like the blanket 35 hour minimum. There are not enough core classes. The 35 hours is a weak goal. How do we stand with other districts on color level.

Response-Belmont is yellow with 700 cases updated daily.

3.5 FY22 Budget Update

Superintendent Phelan gave context for the FY22 budget presentation that incorporates work with School Committee, Financial Task Force, Warrant Committee and other Town departments. (Belmont Public Schools FY22 Draft Budget Summary Revised for SC 01-05-2021) The Select Board is considering the use of free cash for FY22 and all Town departments are all looking at their data to determine how to move forward, whether there is an override on the ballot in spring or there is use of free cash. The presentation is a narrative with an appendix, which includes figures.

The district's goals refocus on the district reconfiguration and visioning work in support of providing students with 21st century skills. The needed FTEs are not just to increase the overall number of positions but also to maintain current levels, as the district was on pause this year due to the pandemic. The Belmont Public Schools is at a fork in the road to continue growth in learning and to achieve smaller class sizes for the benefit of the grade reconfiguration and opening of the new BMH school. With no override, substantial cuts will occur and will affect services. The pandemic highlighted the district's low staffing in its difficulty to change to a remote learning model.

School committee members voiced how vitally important the override is to keep and improve student learning. January 19 will be the next School Committee meeting focusing on budget.

The group then viewed the Appendix slides, which included comparison data to other districts. Michelle Rinehart (Harvard intern) utilized the DESE RADAR tool to collect the data, which showed Belmont below other districts in state funding (per pupil), less teachers even though we have been increasing recently (FTE and \$), and higher class sizes. Although the district is getting good student results with less spending, they have less curricular opportunities for our students than other districts and are falling behind in their view of success. (Robotics program not robust, no coding, no math/science coaches)

School Committee members appreciate the specificity of the presentation. The details highlight the district's disadvantage in a lower per pupil expenditure when compared to other towns. In the classroom, having fewer students allows a teacher to offer individualized attention and instruction.

4. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)

4.1 Finance Subcommittee

The Finance Subcommittee met this morning and worked on preparing for the FY22 budget.

- 4.2 Policy and Procedure Subcommittee – no report
- 4.3 Curriculum and Instruction Subcommittee – no report
- 4.4 Capital Budget Committee – no report
- 4.5 Warrant Committee – no report
- 4.6 Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee – no report
- 4.7 Community Path Committee – no report
- 4.8 Financial Task Force II – no report
- 4.9 Rink Working Group- no report
- 4.10 EDCO – no report
- 5.11 Long Term Capital Planning Committee – no report

5. OTHER BUSINESS

- 5.1 Consent Agenda

Vote on donations from Lueders Environmental

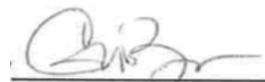
On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Catherine Bowen, it was VOTED on a roll call vote to accept the donations from Lueders Environmental, 5-0-1.

- 5.2 Personnel Items – none
- 5.3 Business Items - none
- 5.4 Approval of Minutes - **moved to a future meeting**
November 24, 2020 Finance Subcommittee Minutes
December 1, 2020 Finance Subcommittee Minutes
December 8, 2020 School Committee 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 9:53 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by:



Catherine Bowen, Secretary