

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
March 9, 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 Return to Open Session

Committee Chair Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at 6:38 p.m.

1.2 Citizens' Concerns

Sarah Isenberg - Proposals submitted to BPS concerning rescheduling of AP exams to June; prefer to take exams with pen and paper, take the exams earlier as opposed to online in June as determined by Administration. – The proposal was received yesterday and the administration and School Committee will look at it. There are several external factors that play into these decisions.

Amy/Henry Zuccarello – Speaking on the same issue but would like to offer a student perspective, not an easy administrative solution but one that shows the administration cares for the students.

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda

EDCO will be the first item on the agenda to accommodate an interpreter.

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 11) is listed below.

Kelly Michaud –Can you speak about the challenges regarding having lunch at school? Would volunteer lunch monitors be helpful. I know a number of parents that would be willing. – Will be discussed later in the agenda, but barriers are 6 feet distance for eating. We are currently looking at using the café, gym and outside tents to make this work along with individualized tables for students. Yes, we may be seeking volunteers to support this process.

Maysoon Shomali – Cancelling SAT at BHS meant that parents are scrambling to find a testing site last minute. When asked about the cancellation, the administration is telling people that “we are not allowed to limit to Belmont Students”. Who is making that decision?... – The College Board does not allow us to offer Belmont-

only tests on Saturdays. SATs were offered during school day in October for all Belmont students interested. Saturday SATs will be offered in the spring and will be open to students (Belmont and non-Belmont).

Jamal Saeh – There are reports of teachers cold in the classroom because windows are open, and required to have adequate ventilation. Are windows required to be opened in any classroom to maintain the required air exchange standard/audit that was done by BALA? - All rooms have the appropriate amount of air units and do not rely on windows. We made additional purchases in December to keep windows closed.

Allison Dahl – Do you intend to request, or have you considered requesting, a waiver from DESE that would limit school reopening for any grade or groups of students? - No, grade 5 may go back later than K-4

1.5 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Phelan reported on the new Kindergarten registration process for the 2021-2021. It has been going well and includes the ability to upload and review documents online. There have been 241 elementary registrations and is in line with last year's numbers. The fall 2 sports season is under way for volleyball, cheerleading, football, girls' swimming and winter track with 256 student athletes participating. Two spectators per fall 2 athlete will be allowed at home and away games. The Belmont Summer Enrichment Program is returning this summer. Registration will open on March 15. The District will be requesting authorization from Town Meeting to submit for federal reimbursement on Foster Care Transportation; it is eligible to receive 20% reimbursement on funds expended. The district has spent \$203,000 between 2017 and 2021. This year would yield ~\$6,000 in reimbursement, which would go directly to the Town.

Many families have expressed surprise at the recent announcement that BFEN will be advising the school administration and School Committee. The School Committee is the governing body of the schools. BFEN is a parent support group.

2. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

2.1 No unfinished business

3. MAJOR BUSINESS

3.1 EDCO Dissolution Discussion

Superintendent Phelan introduced the American Sign Language interpreter for the EDCO discussion and Amy Checkoway, Committee member who would give the presentation.

EDCO Board voted in February to initiate the process for dissolution/termination of the organization by June 30, 2022, based on severe financial issues. The organization's main focus has been professional development of its member districts. EDCO also provides four academic programs to K-12 students with special needs and at-risk youth. A loss of grants and contracts over time, insufficient enrollment, and turnover in leadership has led to recent challenges and the current financial situation. In addition to the vote to initiate dissolution, the Board also gave the Executive Director authority to close individual programs as of June 30, 2021. There will be a transition plan for current students. Member districts (16 in number) will be assessed an additional \$60,000 to cover the FY21 operating cost deficit, and must each vote to approve/not approve the dissolution by the end of March. Amy Checkoway, EDCO liaison proposed two motions.

Motion 1: The Belmont Public Schools is in support of terminating the EDCO Collaborative as of June 30, 2022

Motion 2: The Belmont Public Schools will provide written notice to the EDCO Board of the intention to withdraw from the EDCO Collaborative effective July 1, 2022, pursuant to Article X of the EDCO Articles of Agreement.

A vote of the School Committee will be taken at the next meeting.

Chairperson Prestwich took comments from the community.

Steve Weiner – As a member of the hard of hearing and deaf community, Mr. Weiner communicated his personal experiences and support of EDCO and their programs. He urged the Committee to continue with deaf and hard of hearing programs in order to have full and equal access this community deserves.

Thea Cabral – A Belmont resident and graduate who was mainstreamed Grade 1-9 and went to the EDCO program at Grade 10. EDCO changed my life. I realize the organization will most likely dissolve, but I wanted to take the opportunity to articulate my view and experiences. I want it on the record that there is a disparity and inequity. I want Belmont to vote in favor of the deaf and hard of hearing program be moved to a new or different collaborative like MetroWest.

Jean Cabral- It is vital that these children have access to a full education and not just books, but social as well. I ask that students are truly supported in their transition to another program.

Tim Flood- How many Belmont students are being served and what facilities are being utilized? Can Belmont support these students internally or will it be out of district? – Currently one (1) Belmont student is being served by EDCO. The main sites are located at their own space in Bedford, and at Newton North High School and one in Boston.

The School Committee is committed to serving EDCO students and finding alternative services if a dissolution is voted. Member Checkoway reiterated that the guidance is to ensure the best position financially, and has reached out to Sen Brownsberger and Rep Rogers, they are very aware of the budget constraints our district is facing.

3.2 English Language Education & Special Education Services Update

Director of English Language Education, Lindsey Rinder, offered an update on the Belmont English Language Education Program. Currently, the program services 352 English learners and monitors 418 former English learners. The curriculum covers listening, speaking, reading and writing. This year, students are receiving the same number of minutes of service as in previous years and have focused on better aligning to grade level curriculum. The program has seen an increase in time that is spent on the language of math grades K-2, and has expanded the social justice focus. Students have benefitted from teacher collaboration and project-based learning. Program concerns are a decrease in spoken language, difficulties using writing feedback, student isolation and for some students, reduced engagement. The district is planning for summer ELE programming which will include in-person “camp”, remote parent groups and language enrichment.

Ken Kramer, Director of Student Services offered an update on special education services. Belmont currently provides services and supports to 604 students, both in and out of district schools with the majority (502) receiving services in district. The breakdown is Preschool 65 students, Elementary 170 students, Middle school 176 students, High School 110 students. Highest needs students are typically placed out of district to meet their needs. These students number 102 with 64 served by LABBB and other Collaboratives and 38 served by private placements. The Preschool has been able to operate its full in-person preschool classrooms, therapy services and special education evaluations since September and added a remote classroom to accommodate these parent requests.

IEP Teams are continually monitoring student progress and assessing any need for additional services and supports, as school closures have magnified student needs. Last fall 2020 the department had a backlog of evaluations due to COVID closures in March 2020. Now the department completes 85-95% of assessments on time and anticipate being in compliance by the end of the summer.

Two additional grants were secured in 2020 for the purchase of additional equipment and curriculum materials in an effort to minimize student contact and cross contamination. An increase in staffing in addition to the purchase of instructional materials has aided in these efforts. The Preschool also plans to hold its Extended School Year (ESY) services fully in person as has typically been done in past summers.

Committee members asked questions of the presenters. Dir. Kramer relayed that the backlog of assessments has been caught up; the pandemic has magnified issues for some students, no overall increase of students identified for assessments.

Chair Prestwich took questions/comments from the community.

Natalie Sierra - Seeing where there is more student need, will there be more services provided in summer. – The department will review if students need extended services even beyond the summer hours. It is anticipated that there will be an increase in need.

3.3 Return to In Person Learning Working Group Update

In conjunction with recent DESE requirements and Belmont's low level of community transmission, the Return to In Person Learning Working Group has two clear goals:

- 1) Full in person learning for K-4 students by April 5, 2021, in a model that will have students in school 5 days a week and will offer academics, specials, lunch, and snack as part of the school day, and provide transportation;
- 2) Offer a fully remote option for K-4 students that includes academics, specials, and specialized instruction with particular attention paid to community-building among remote learners.

To abide by Department of Elementary and Secondary Education rulings, the district will do away with the hybrid learning model.

Students will be distanced at a minimum of three feet during classroom instruction and six feet during unmasked times of lunch, snack and mask breaks. Remote learners will operate in remote only classrooms and will have the same school hours as in-person students. Dedicated administrative support will be in place from the district and teachers will be current district staff with additional hires as needed. Desks and tables will have to be purchased, and tents rented, as well as new bus routes defined, among many operational adjustments.

Full in-person learning for middle school students is mandated by April 28, 2021, and the district's goal for the 2021-2022 school year will be to begin the year in-person.

Member Crowley commended the district and School Committee for taking up this work in advance of BESE's vote. Committee members acknowledged the challenges for families who have to stay remote, looking to minimize impacts. Member Bowen asked the group to look at double-masking, not yet in guidelines, and to utilize parking lots for tents to accommodate use of green space into the spring. Member Donner noted that masks are required in the new guidelines from the CDC for K and 1 grades. The district has utilized the CDC guidelines throughout the year.

On a motion offered by Mike Crowley and seconded by Tara Donner, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote by School Committee as the policy setting body for the schools to accept the recommendations from the Return to in-Person Learning Working Group for K-4 with the understanding that adjustments may be made as we go forward with implementation.

4. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)

- 4.1 Finance Subcommittee - no report
- 4.2 Policy Subcommittee - no report
- 4.3 Curriculum & Instruction Subcommittee - Met February 25 to review Grade 12 Capstone Project Pilot
- 4.4 Capital Budget Committee meeting - A preliminary estimate to fully replace the Chenery roof would be \$4 million and HVAC replacement estimate at \$4 million as well, but not yet based on inspection of actual conditions. No funding mechanism has yet been identified.
- 4.5 Warrant Committee - Met March 3 with a presentation from the Board of Assessors. Will meet next on March 17.
- 4.6 Belmont High School Building Committee- no report
- 4.7 Community Path - Meeting March 10 and looking for a letter of support from the School Committee for grant applications
- 4.8 Financial Task Force II - Met last week for recommendations of work moving forward.
- 4.9 Rink Working Group - Met earlier in the day to review the upcoming presentation to Select Board and School Committee.
- 4.10 EDCO - (see earlier)
- 4.11 Long Term Capital Planning Committee - meeting May 10
- 4.12 Equity Subcommittee - First community forum was held last week.
- 4.13 Structural Change Impact Committee - Met March 4 and hosted a forum on structural changes and services in the Town for residents.

5. OTHER BUSINESS

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

School Committee Minutes - February 2, 2021
Finance Subcommittee Minutes-February 9, 2021

On a motion offered by Mike Crowley and seconded by Tara Donner, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to accept the School Committee minutes of February 2, 2021 and the Finance Subcommittee Minutes of February 9, 2021.

6. ADJOURN

On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Amy Checkoway, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 10:21 p.m.


Catherine Bowen, Secretary

Respectfully Submitted by: