

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
JANUARY 4, 2022

RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA

DATE: January 20, 2022
TIME: 9:10 AM

Present: Ms. Amy Checkoway, Chair
Ms. Kate Bowen
Mr. Mike Crowley
Mr. Ralph Jones
Mr. Jamal Saeh
Mr. John Phelan, Superintendent
Ms. Janice Darias, Assistant Superintendent
Mr. Anthony DiCologero, Director of Finance, Business and Operations
Jaden McKinnon, Student Advisor

Absent: Ms. Meghan Moriarty, Secretary

1. OPENING BUSINESS

1.1 Return to Open Session

Committee Chair Amy Checkoway called the meeting to order at 6:39 pm

1.2 Citizens' Concerns

These meeting minutes may include statements by members of the public. Although the School Committee tries to reproduce these statements faithfully, the School Committee does not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed in these statements and cannot guarantee that the information contained in these statements is accurate.

Elshad Kasumov – Inquired about many COVID related topics including number of invalid pooled tests administered at home and if BPS has reached out to community to help with health and safety protocols.

Heather Rubeski – Asked if health and safety protocols will be covered during the Health Update.

Meryl Junik – Question regarding homework policy and if her previous inquiry about the policy on religious holidays can be addressed with the Policy Subcommittee.

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda

Agenda Item 4.5 Testing and Vaccine Health Update will be moved up to 4.1

1.4 Chair's Report

Chair Checkoway made a statement acknowledging the new phase of the pandemic, with uncertainty and increasing positive cases. Ms. Checkoway thanked the tireless efforts of the BPS, staff, nurses, custodians and indicated the SC and Superintendent, in partnership with the Health Department, communicate daily to focus on safety of students and staff. Patience and support was asked of the community.

1.5 Superintendent's Report

In the interest of time, the Superintendent did not provide a report.

2. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

2.1 No unfinished business

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- School Committee minutes of November 23, 2021
- School Committee minutes of December 14, 2021
- Policy Subcommittee minutes of November 1, 2021

On a motion offered by Amy Checkoway and seconded by Ralph Jones, it was VOTED, on a roll call vote (4-0-1) to accept the School Committee minutes of November 23, 2021.

Crowley - abstain

On a motion offered by Amy Checkoway and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED, on a roll call vote (4-0-1) to accept the School Committee minutes of December 14, 2021.

Bowen - abstain

On a motion offered by Mike Crowley and seconded by Kate Bowen, it was VOTED, on a roll call vote (2-0-0) to accept the Policy Subcommittee Minutes of November 1, 2021.

Bowen and Crowley aye

4. MAJOR BUSINESS

4.1 Testing and Vaccine Health Update

Superintendent Phelan reported on the return to school from winter break with respect to increasing positive COVID cases. (SC Document: Health_Updates_SC_1_4_22_final). Staff attendance in the district averaged 85% the first two days back from winter recess with 72 staff members out Monday and 73 out on Tuesday. All staff members including paraprofessionals, administrative assistants, educators, administrators and custodians are pitching in and playing different roles to maintain the structure of the school day. It was noted that staffing levels may be an issue moving forward, which could ultimately impact the school day. Student absences included 605 students out on Monday and 473 out on Tuesday. The average daily attendance rate in the district is roughly 95%, but the past two days showed an approximate rate of 86%.

Due to self-reporting of absences by family and staff, specific COVID data is difficult to ascertain. Mr. Phelan indicated the district may have challenges for the rest of the week and going forward with staffing levels and lunch time. In order to conduct lunch as safely as possible, masks will be required unless eating, lunch period will be shortened, eating outside will occur when possible, and assigned seating will be established to support contact tracing. The usage of tents for winter was addressed and not recommended for logistical concerns (versus financial barriers)). Tents may not survive the snow and wind.

Superintendent Phelan recognized that, similar to last year, safety guidance from authorities (CDC, DESE, DPH) is inconsistent and changing, and there are questions regarding the different recommendations in isolation guidelines (5 and 10 days). His health team continues to meet weekly, and adjustments were reported in athletics and extracurriculars with limited cancellations of games and contests due to coaches and athletes testing positive. For the next two weeks, the district will have the following temporary

mitigation strategies in place: locker rooms restricted to athletes only, spectators limited to two adults per player, and some practices limited in time to reduce overcrowding in the fieldhouse and other spaces.

The Belmont Health Department and School Nurses continue to identify new COVID cases. There were 212 cases from the school community reported during the break (12/24/21-1/3/22) (updated from 130 in the SC packet document).

Updated vaccination rates were presented along with consent rates over time from both in school pooled testing (CIC) and at home testing (Veritas). SC members agree there is work to be done to increase testing participation, especially at the high school level.

Superintendent Phelan acknowledged that the majority of families and staff members want to be in school, but understands some families have members with health concerns.

School Committee members asked questions and commented.

Most SC members voiced their support of the administration's efforts to combat and track the recent COVID surge and encouraged Belmont families to sign up for and participate in pooled testing. Chair Checkoway encouraged the district to leverage family networks such as PTOs to help with this communication effort. Member Crowley asked about the district's financial and logistical challenges to test all staff and students, as they hear from families what "other districts" are doing. Mr. Phelan responded that although two nearby towns have partnerships with organizations that helped test students on their reentry from break, other towns only test staff and very few test all students, or even participate in pool testing. Member Saeh focused on data collection and data use going forward, and suggested the that the question of when to change strategies based on rates be brought to the Health Department. Belmont currently has a 4% positivity rate compared to a Middlesex County average of 20%.

Discussion arose regarding changing guidance, and Superintendent Phelan confirmed the district is following DESE guidance, including a 5-day isolation period for positive COVID cases, and emphasized the district is obligated to offer in-person school. Members addressed testing before coming back to school, adjusting elementary lunches, remote considerations requiring DESE approval, and differences in consent percentages and pool testing participation percentages.

Chair Checkoway took comments and questions from the community.

Elshad Kasumov- Asked what number of tests come back invalid or improperly labeled, and suggested the district ask community members for mask donations and testing partnerships.

Director of Nursing Rumley reported low rejection rates because nurses follow up with families that incorrectly labeled. Superintendent Phelan indicated the district will hold off on volunteers until COVID numbers go down.

Heather Rubetski- Suggested elementary students be offered lunch outside similar to CMS and BHS students, and stated if the district is following CDC guidelines of return protocol (5 days return), students must stay masked with no exceptions, even during lunch.

Fred Halpern-Smith – Commented "safe" is misnomer and asked if the district could validate symptom checker usage. Made suggestions in the way swab kits could be given out to encourage pool testing completion.

Mariola M – Commented on pool testing and inquired as to how to involve more families w. Asked if the district could make quarantine different for various levels of school (elementary 10 days and middle/high school 5 days).

Superintendent Phelan commented that different quarantining levels was discussed at the Middlesex League meeting recently.

4.2 BHS Program of Studies

Superintendent Phelan welcomed High School principal Isaac Taylor along with the following members of his staff:

Assistant Principal - Daniel O'Brien

Director of Mathematics - Jonathan Golden

Director of Social Studies -Deborah McDevitt

Director of Foreign Language - Victoria D'Annunzio

BHS Program of Studies is reviewed annually for needed changes to course offerings. Assistant Superintendent Darias commended the group for expanding the curriculum and improving learning opportunities during a very difficult year. *(SC Document: 2022-23_ProgramOfStudies_Presentation1_2022)*

The members of the Belmont High School faculty proposed to add three new courses:

- AP World History: Modern -replaces AP European History and aligns with College Board
- Chinese 5 Honors – opportunity for seniors who do not want to take an AP level course
- Statistics and Probability Honors (combines 2 half year courses)

The directors explained the details of each course along with any staffing and budget implications.

Additional changes to current courses were also proposed:

- Change in department name and area of study from “Foreign” Languages to “World” Languages. Aligns with rest of the country and our equity/diversity goal.
- Change Proficiency level of the Chinese 5CP course to “Intermediate”
- Combine Digital Art 1 (1 semester) and Animation 1 (1 semester) to create Media Arts 1 (full year)
- Change Music in television sand Film from one semester to full year courses

Chair Checkoway allowed for questions/comments from SC members. It was clarified that if the merged Chinese class is taken as AP, the appropriate credit will be given. Also, changing half year courses into year-long courses may draw more students to a discipline and make it easier for them to follow the course selection process.

The School Committee will vote on the proposed changes at its next meeting (1/18).

4.3 FY23 Budget Timeline

Chair Checkoway signaled that budget talks will begin to intensify going forward. Ms. Checkoway asked SC members if they had questions regarding the budget timeline for FY23. *(SC Document: FY23_School_Budget_Calendar_Schedule_2021-12-23_DRAFT)*. Initial discussion has occurred with the Town Administrator in anticipation of a potential joint meeting the end of January. Upcoming SC meetings will include forums (beginning January 18) to seek community input. BPS Finance Subcommittee meetings will also occur before joint meetings with the Select Board and Warrant Committee.

4.4 2022-2023 Calendar Discussion

Superintendent Phelan presented a draft version of the 2022-2023 school calendar, which would begin the Wednesday after Labor Day. (*SC Document: School_Calendar_2022-2023_DRAFT_version2 and Document: CroftsPolicy_6001_School_Calendar*) This initial calendar for the 2022-2023 school year is once again indicating a start to school that is inconsistent with SC policy due to a request from the Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee. Mr. Phelan noted the needs of the construction team to continue progress on the 7/8 grade wing and to work on the Fieldhouse ceiling and flooring. Beginning school after Labor Day would give the construction company 10 weeks of work instead of 9 weeks. Due to this current school year's later start date, school will also end later this summer. The summer of 2023 should not have the same construction-related constraints that will occur during summer 2022.

Superintendent Phelan proposed that the first day for staff as Tuesday, September 6, 2022, and the first day for students as Wednesday, September 7, 2022. This would set the last day of school (including 5 snow days) at June 23, 2023, and with no snow days, June 15, 2023.

The School Committee will vote on the calendar at its next meeting (1/18).

4.5 Registration for 2022-2023 School Year

Superintendent Phelan presented information on the BPS registration process for the 2022-2023 school year. (*SC Document: SC_Slides_Registration_Opening_2022-2023*) Once again, registration will be conducted remotely. Registration for K-12 students will open January 28, 2022 and will be promoted on the BPS website, newsletters, and local media. Presentations for new families may be found on the K-4 webpage.

Timelines for registering children and the placement dates were noted as follows:

January 28 - Registration opens

April 8 - Deadline for submission of completed registrations for first round of school placements on April 12

May 20 –Deadline for submission of completed registrations for second round of placements on May 24

August 1 - Deadline for submission of completed registration for third round of placements on August 2

Rolling registration in effect after August 2.

Superintendent Phelan thanked Christine Trischitta and Krys Murphy, along with building administrative assistants, for their work on registering 400-500 students each year.

4. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)

Meg Moriarty and another member of the Rink Design Committee will come to January 18 School Committee meeting for discussion and input.

Capital Budget Committee will come to SC in early February.

Safe Schools group met with members Bowen and Checkoway about their program. They will come before the full SC mid-February.

Finance Subcommittee meeting on January 11 will be used to plan for community budget forum on January 18. The subcommittee will discuss the carry forward/roll over costs used to maintain current level of services.

The Middle and High School Building Committee will have a public forum on January 17. They are looking to make up some money in the budget.

5. OTHER BUSINESS

5.1 Consent Agenda – Vote to accept 2 donations (Food Service Department and General Fund)

On a motion offered by Amy Checkoway and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED unanimously (5-0-0) on a roll call vote to accept the donation of \$1,500 to the Food Services Department and \$100 to the BPS General Fund.

6. ADJOURN

On a motion offered by Kate Bowen and seconded by Jamal Saeh, it was VOTED unanimously (5-0-0) on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 9:04 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Amy Checkoway". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A".

Amy Checkoway, Chair