

**Special Merrimack School Board Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Wednesday, October 28, 2020
Remote Meeting**

Present: Chair Guagliumi, Vice Chair Barnes, Board Members Schneider, Rothhaus, and Hardy. Also present were Superintendent McLaughlin, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio, and Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell.

1. Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance

Chair Guagliumi called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Chair Guagliumi led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Public Comments

Chair Guagliumi stated public comments could be sent to publiccomment@sau26.org or by going to sau26.org where a meeting link was provided. She said all comments would be read and written into the record but noted the name and address of the speaker had to be provided.

There was no public participation.

3. Status of School Operations in the Context of COVID-19

Superintendent McLaughlin explained there were three considerations that impacted the recommendation he would make to the School Board.

1. To assess the level of community transmission of the virus. (State of New Hampshire)
2. To assess the level of in-school transmission of the virus. (State of New Hampshire)
3. Staff availability. (Unique to each School District)

Superintendent McLaughlin said to date, the Town of Merrimack was considered to be in the “minimal transmission” category.

Superintendent McLaughlin stated as of October 28, 2020, there was a low level of in-school transmission across all schools in the District. He added that student absenteeism due to illness was less than 15%.

Superintendent McLaughlin, referring to staff capacity to conduct classes and school operations, said although it was “normal” it was also something of a “misnomer.” He said because of the strict guidelines for staff there were absences which were due to a mild cold/flu symptoms and not COVID-19. He added in light of that the District was relying on contracted substitutes which were dedicated daily to a particular school, pointing out the substitutes were used every day.

Superintendent McLaughlin said the total number of confirmed, positive cases of COVID-19 amongst staff since September 9th was two. Further, he said the total number of confirmed students who had tested positive for COVID-19 between September 9th and October 27th was one at the James Masticola Elementary School, zero at the Reeds Ferry Elementary School, the Thorntons Ferry Elementary School, zero at the James Masticola Upper Elementary School, two at the Merrimack Middle School, and eight at the Merrimack High School. He said the average daily student absences due to illness between the first day of school and October 23rd was 1.6%. Superintendent McLaughlin commented that the data supported that Merrimack was at a very low or minimal rate.

Superintendent McLaughlin recommended that the District maintain current operations which were partially hybrid and partially fully remote with an allowance to switch options. He added the reason he decided to maintain the current operations and not go to the complete in-school option was that he believed the numbers were minimal because of the system that was currently in place, he pointed out that only half of the population were physically present in the schools on any given day.

Superintendent McLaughlin commented that given the trajectory of the virus in the State of New Hampshire and in the local community, albeit low, had increased as well as in surrounding communities.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio shared that on each of the individual school websites there was an icon and a form that talked about switching cohorts. He said it would take up to 14-days for a decision to be made as to whether or not the request could be accommodated and there was an appeal process if need be.

Superintendent McLaughlin pointed out that switching cohorts could be very challenging and could dismantle the whole system. He said that while they would allow the option to switch cohorts the reason for switching had to meet the criteria.

Superintendent McLaughlin explained the criteria which he hoped would help the community understand why a certain decision was made relative to a school closing or in a worst-case scenario if the District closed.

1. The data relative to community transmission and in-school transmission. (Data received directly from the State of New Hampshire) He said if they saw the numbers increased to 15% - 30% or above it would be a clear indication that on a data-driven decision matrix they would have to close a particular school or the District.

Superintendent McLaughlin said what was more likely to happen was a variety of scenarios that did not fall under the data category but were, nevertheless, very real.

Scenario #1

The Red Zone – Characterized by sudden, unplanned, non-linear, and unpredictable events. (Multiple close contacts within a school or across schools.)

Scenario #2

The Purple Zone – Either sudden or anticipated events which related to the staff or administration’s capacity to conduct class and school operations. He said an example of that might be if more students requested remote instruction than the current staff deployment could observe and if that happened, they would have to seriously reconsider the current model.

Further, Superintendent McLaughlin said staff had a right to the same accommodations that anyone else had and if their personal circumstances required them to go remote for a period of time and there were more remote teachers than there were of students in the actual building they would have to consider another model.

Superintendent McLaughlin commented that teachers live in other communities other than Nashua and if there were a cluster of COVID cases in one of those communities it could affect multiple teachers who taught in the District, perhaps even an entire grade level team.

Superintendent McLaughlin shared some of the factors that could contribute to the District having to go to a red zone:

- Travel outside of New England (State Mandate) which the Board followed up by creating a Travel Policy.
- Attendance at large gatherings.
- Cold & Flu Season. (Impossible to distinguish whether a person was experiencing cold & flu symptoms or COVID-19 symptoms)
- Inaccurate or incomplete reporting of travel or symptoms could become a huge factor in their ability to predict and plan for the future.
- Not following District policies and procedures regarding masks, social distancing, hand-washing, and related safety protocols.
- Superintendent McLaughlin commented that what happened in the community like a sporting event or holiday gathering had an impact on the schools and therefore, should not be of a surprise to anyone that the District would have to respond in an appropriate way.

Superintendent McLaughlin stated that schools had to seek a balance between their educational mission and their health and safety responsibilities. He also said that pandemic impacts could be swift and unpredictable. He further added that working together offered the best opportunity to meet and beat the challenges of the pandemic.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio said every school was maintaining and looking at the glass half full. He said they would continue to be adaptable and make refinements as they moved forward.

Ms. Julie DeLuca, Principal, Thorntons Ferry Elementary School, stated there was a comprehensive plan in place and they had been able to keep most of the schools open. She said they were adhering to the social distancing measures which were still at six feet, utilized

PPE equipment, as well as the use of desk shields for those students who needed more direct instruction. She thanked the families for reinforcing the importance of wearing masks, especially with the younger students.

Ms. DeLuca said they continued to get devices out to families and ensured the remote learners had all of the appropriate materials and would continue to refine things as they moved forward.

Ms. Marsha McGill, Principal, James Mastricola Upper Elementary School, stated grades pre-kindergarten through grade 6 had implemented weekly social and emotional learning lessons using the Second Step Program and were an integral part of their instruction. She said the students were supervised at recess by known staff members which gave them an opportunity in a non-academic environment to spend time together.

Ms. McGill commented that each school had a student support team who met weekly to implement support systems for students either individually or schoolwide.

Ms. Michelle Romein, Principal, James Mastricola Elementary School, shared that Canvas was the new learning management system and the first day of training would be held the following Monday. She added a feedback form would be available on each of the school's websites for parents to share information with their child's teacher in an effort to make the hybrid and remote environments successful.

Ms. Romein shared they had a new partnership with Demonstrated Success which was a company that put together educational opportunities for staff and parents. She said information would be forthcoming to help parents support their children in both hybrid and remote learning environments.

Ms. Kim Yarlott, Principal, Reeds Ferry Elementary School said they devoted the first six weeks of school to building new relationships and routines. She said they had recently started to administer assessments that looked at where students were currently and where they needed to go. She added that all of the teachers met in professional learning teams every Friday.

Ms. Yarlott said parent/teacher conferences would occur in November and report cards would be issued in early December.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio commented they were working with Ms. Fern Sieden, System of Care Coordinator in developing support groups for those targeted areas of students who may be struggling. He added the counselors and teachers were looking at ways to reconnect with students during some of their extended days and flex days.

Mr. Adam Caragher, Principal, Merrimack Middle School, commented he wanted to highlight three areas; academic, technology, and social and emotional learning.

Mr. Caragher said they were reviewing the supports and the timing of those supports that were in place. He also said they knew and understood the importance of afterschool activities

and they were exploring ways to provide opportunities for students such as a drama club, art club, and other afterschool activities to help provide a connection for students.

Mr. Caragher shared that they also used the “attendance stoplight” tool which allowed them to connect with numerous students who were struggling academically, socially, or emotionally.

Mr. Caragher said all of the students at the Merrimack Middle School participated in a remote version of the New Hampshire Statewide Assessment System. He also said while it was not new for their remote students and staff, for the past week and a half they were working with students via Zoom instruction because the school was shut down for two-weeks due to COVID. He expressed appreciation to the Information Technology (IT) Department for all their assistance.

Ms. Sharon Putney, Principal, Merrimack High School said the six areas of focus were in the areas of academics, social and emotional learning, organizational skills, technology, communication, and flex days.

Academics/Social & Emotion Learning

- Scheduling software to begin to schedule students who may be having difficulty.
- Tutoring
- Volunteers – National Honors Society and the Math Honor Society students tutoring.
- Staff run afterschool help sessions in the afternoon and possibly some evenings.
- Homeroom advisory team who was focusing on connection and community at the high school.
- Students checking into Compass, homeroom teacher’s monitoring it, and counselors getting involved if need be.
- Identifying students having difficulty on the independent extension days and having staff checking in with those students.
- Student support team which met once per week with a focus on the tier three students.

Organizational Skills & Technology

- Students needed additional help with their executive functioning skills.
- Working on the migration to Canvas.

Communication & Flex Days

- Parent feedback form.
- Parent/Teacher Group posts weekly updates.
- Flex Day focused on students catching up on their work and a planning day for teachers.

Ms. Heather Barker, Student Services Director addressed the following items:

- Continued focus on individual students and their individual needs.
- Find pathways for students who need services in the school building.
- Continued to work with families on an individual basis regarding hybrid and remote learning.
- Exploring different pathways to live instruction.
- Expand flex day special education services trying to find more pathways to live instruction for some students.
- Expanding support of the general curriculum.
- Expanding opportunities for chances to come into school live when safe.
- Working with Gateway and the Greater Nashua Mental Health Group.

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell addressed the Board and said most days two custodians were on duty. The custodians transitioned from a five-day, eight-hour per week schedule to a four-day, ten-hour schedule in order to keep the schools sanitized. He added they had maintained the portable sinks, maintained the hand-sanitizing stations, the hand-sanitizers in every classroom, sanitizing wipes, and sanitizing spray. He thanked the School Board for approving the policy on masks.

Mr. Bill Morris, REAL (Remote Education Academy for Learning) Coordinator, addressed the Board and said the bulk of the focus for him was building relationships with the administration, teachers, students, and parents.

Board Member Schneider asked why it would take fourteen days to respond to a request to switch cohorts. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio replied it was due to scheduling and it would take multiple conversations to determine a decision. Board Member Schneider suggested the wording be changed to “they would likely be contacted ahead of time to begin talking through the options such that at the end of the fourteen-day time period the parents would have an understanding of what the decision might be.”

Board Member Schneider asked if a student switched from hybrid to remote if there was a chance one of their classes might not be offered remotely. He asked if the District was looking at ways to even the playing field in terms of the kind of classes that were available for remote and hybrid. Ms. Putney replied they tried to ensure that all students would have the “must-haves” and make sure they could make progress towards graduation.

Board Member Rothhaus commented that she felt the closing of schools should be guided by a risk-based approach. She said she was hopeful that they would be trying to get more kids back in school. She also said she was concerned for at-risk students.

Chair Guagliumi asked if the opportunity to switch cohorts was expected to be on-going or was it for a finite period of time. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction

Fabrizio replied the only thing was that since they were switching semesters and courses at the high school, they may have to have some considerations in an effort to set numbers.

Superintendent McLaughlin commented as they looked at the holidays, cold & flu season, the spike in COVID-19 cases, nationally as well as locally, the District would stay with the hybrid model for the time being. He said they looked at data daily and they had no interest in staying remote or hybrid one second longer than they had to. Further, Superintendent McLaughlin said as soon as they had a scenario where they saw that transmission was down they would go to the School Board and request to go back to in-school learning. He added they would give parents a time period for transition.

Chair Guagliumi thanked everyone who joined the meeting and thanked them and the teacher's for everything they were doing. She also thanked the custodians for all of their hard work.

4. Process for Developing the School Board Budget Message to Administration

Chair Guagliumi asked each of the School Board members to put together their budget message so they would be prepared to relay it to the administration on November 2, 2020.

5. Public Comments on Agenda Items

Vice Chair Barnes read aloud from an email which was received from Mr. Mark Heimberg, 7 Linda Lane, as follows:

First, let me commend our teacher's and administrator's districtwide on delivering a quality education to our students in the most bizarre circumstances. Not only are our students learning but they are engaging in sports and other enriching activities and trying to live as normally as possible. While we continue to struggle with the effects of COVID in our community, nation, and world, I would like to emphasize that none of the changes being implemented are permanent and are the result of heroic efforts across the board. As such, as parents and community members, we need to be patient and support our school district, its leadership, and those in the trenches to the best of our ability. My sincere thanks.

At 9:52 p.m. Vice Chair Barnes moved (seconded by Board Member Schneider) to adjourn.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0 by a roll call vote.