

**Merrimack School Board Special Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Remote Meeting
March 30, 2021**

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

Chair Guagliumi stated the meeting proceedings would follow RSA 91-A:2 which stated that all parties must contemporaneously be able to hear and speak to each other and be audible to the public.

1. Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance

Chair Guagliumi called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Chair Guagliumi led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Guidelines for Public Participation for Remote Meeting

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.

3. Public Participation

Vice Chair Barnes read aloud from correspondence received by the School Board as summarized below:

Ms. Katharine Hodge, 44 Belmont Drive

Good evening, as much as I would love for the students to return to the high school full-time 5 days a week, I think any more disruption will only further negatively affect the students. Most students are set in a routine that they are comfortable with and the parents are comfortable with. With only approximately three months left in the school year, I think at this time it would be detrimental to once again disrupt these routines.

While I think we should have been back at school full-time a long time ago, at this point I do not see any benefit.

Ms. Kerri Hayes, 16 Four Seasons Lane

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of you greatly for your efforts through a very difficult time. I have heard that schools will reopen fully when it is safe for staff and students to do so. However, I would also argue that schools partially open is not a safe mental environment for many children.

We are now in a different “wave”, an escalating mental and behavioral health crisis. I have spoken with many parents (in town and surrounding areas) through this who have shared very difficult stories. Stories of children who had never struggled academically who are now failing and disengaged, who are on months-long waiting lists for therapists, who now have behavioral disorders that have surfaced/or have been exacerbated (through COVID), who have experienced weight loss and gain due to stress, (more) children who are cutting, who went to the ER with suicidal thoughts to seek help who were kept in a hallway for days on end until “a bed” opened up at a mental health facility. Parents have contemplated whether taking their child to the ER was the right decision given the lack of mental health resources available which added further trauma to the experience. I cannot bear to hear these stories. I am sure you cannot either.

A transition back to school as soon as possible is not the fix-all for this worsening crisis, but it will help alleviate some of this over time. I am sure we all agree most students need their in-school routine to effectively learn and the support of their teachers, trusted counselors, support staff, and friends. This wave I speak of we feel is much more concerning and impacts many more than COVID does at this time. CDC guidelines have been updated and many schools have been open/reopened full time successfully. Let’s learn from other districts that have gone before us. It is time to go back for those who choose to do so.

What are the hurdles to overcome and plans for each school to offer not only remote and hybrid but 4-5 days in-school for quarter four? Given the James Masticola Upper Elementary School follows the elementary model, they should be able to transition back full-time now. Time is of the essence.

It is a helpless feeling when you feel you cannot provide the support your child needs. We promised our boys we would speak up and advocate for change. I appreciate your time.

Ms. Gina Rosati, 15 Dunbarton Drive

With the upcoming election approaching and some changes of the School Board possible, I wanted to thank the current School Board for safely navigating the storm of COVID-19. As a nation, we have not had a health crisis of this magnitude for over a century. The Merrimack School Board was faced with conflicting information coming from the federal government, many opinions on which direction to take, and no easy answers.

As a parent of two Merrimack graduates and a long-time Merrimack school volunteer, I know many of the teachers in the Merrimack school system. I have been very concerned for their health, especially those who are 50+ in age and/or have pre-existing conditions. There are people who will tell you that scientific data shows a limited spread of COVID-19 within schools and that it’s safe to hold classes in person, but I believe that while we will never know if we’ve been too safe, we will certainly know if we haven’t been safe enough.

As I write this, 550,165 people are reported dead by Johns Hopkins due to COVID-19. That tells me that the United States, as a nation, has not been safe enough. This article, by Education Week, states that **“As of March 23, 2021, at least 906 active and retired K-12 educators and personnel have died of COVID-19. Of those, 252 were active teachers.”** <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/educators-weve-lost-to-the-coronavirus/2020/04>

The good news is that in Merrimack, no teachers or school staff have died of COVID-19, and vaccines are now available to all teachers and school staff. Merrimack has seen over 1,600 cases of Covid-19, but I believe that the hard decisions the Merrimack School Board and administration made to go remote when necessary has saved lives.

Ms. Sarah Leland, 149 Naticook Road

As a parent of two students at Merrimack High School, I urge you to keep the hybrid model as it is until the end of this school year. The students have had enough change this year, and while it is far from ideal, staying with the hybrid model is what they are used to.

The district administration has been unprepared this entire school year for any “pivoting” to fully remote or fully in-person, and it is highly unlikely they will be able to put together a viable plan for returning students to an all-in, four- or five- day a week instructional model by the start of the fourth quarter. A change would create many scheduling issues that would take weeks to iron out, disrupting any actual teaching or learning that would happen by maintaining the current hybrid model. The final quarter is 9 weeks - there aren't 2-3 (or more) weeks to work out the kinks in a new instructional model.

In addition, bringing all students back would create a revolving door of quarantining for classes and grades. There isn't enough room to bring back all the students whose parents want them back and maintain even 3 feet of physical distancing. There have also been many positive COVID-19 tests in the last week in the high school alone. Adding more people for more days will only compound the problem.

Furthermore, teachers are exhausted and worn out. They are frustrated and feeling hopeless and unappreciated. They have been asked, throughout this year, to implement a different instructional model in each of the three quarters so far. They have had to manage multiple technology platforms and devices with no warning of the change, no preparation time, and inadequate training. They do not need the additional burden of a new schedule, new classes, or more potential exposure to COVID.

I ask you to keep the hybrid model as it is. Students and teachers are worn out, and another change - a change that will only last one quarter and that has a high potential for sending whole schools to fully remote as COVID cases multiply - is not in their best interest.

Ms. MeiLani Dumont, 4 Ellie Drive

I would like to take the opportunity during this meeting to plead with you all to make an immediate change to the current high school hybrid model. My son, like many other students, is struggling with the current teaching model. Without disclosing deeply personal information, I can't stress enough how much he is overwhelmed with the numerous applications required to get through his work every week. I cannot put into words the loneliness he faces 3 days of the school week.

Please remember that these are kids, not adults in the working world. They are not college students. They may be able to maneuver numerous games and every social media platform there is, but they are not business people. Canvas, as we were told, was the “one-all-end-all” solution. Although it could be, it is far from it because the teachers do not use the platform consistently from one class to the next. There are applications used within applications. My child has 6 classes and it's like he has 6 different jobs. I question how many of the board members, school administration, and teachers have done trial runs on these systems from a student perspective. In January, before the close of the 2nd Quarter, I sent a very detailed email including attached screenshots and use cases on what my child experiences from one class to another. I asked that they instruct the teachers to use the Canvas platform the same way to alleviate the unnecessary stress it is causing just to find things within the system. It took nearly a month to get an acknowledgment from the school (Principal). No action was taken. I am deeply disappointed.

Email is heavily relied upon, and it was pushed upon our students without guidance and proper training. The amount of non-relevant emails received from the school, on top of the emails from his teachers is staggering for a high schooler. It is like a full-time job. Using email efficiently requires time to learn and specific organizational skills, a skill that teenagers lack per the Executive Skills webinar you offered us a couple of weeks ago.

Additionally, the various tools used to get and submit assignments are not 100% reliable. Emails in my son's Send box are not found on the teacher's end. Assignments that I witnessed my son doing are received as blank, in the Kami system (I personally researched this problem out and found articles from other districts that have experienced the same issue).

My son is still not getting grades and assignment statuses back at a reasonable time for all classes. Up until last week, one class had not posted grades in PowerSchool (or is it Canvas?) since March 5. We are nearing the end of this quarter and we've only had grades and assignment statuses posted into the first 2 weeks of the start of the quarter. In a few incidences, teachers have mistakenly marking work as missing and because grades and updates are behind, we don't realize until up to 2 weeks later.

Let me be clear. I've repeatedly asked my son if the work is too hard, and he tells me no. I've repeatedly asked if the number of assignments is too high, and he told me no. He tells me he feels alone. He feels he is left to figure this out on his own the 3 days he is home every week. He tells me how difficult it is to use the school's tools. He is withdrawing further and further. I'm expressing our issues that are not unique to other students. It takes a tremendous amount of time AFTER class to search for additional classwork to be done remotely, upcoming assignments, track submitted or missing assignments, check for announcements/notifications in Canvas, read through email, and troubleshoot issues with the technology. I have personally taken on the role to try and manage this. It is affecting my job and other family responsibilities. I have a degree in Software Development. I work for a technology company and I spend an insane amount of time with this. My son is so overwhelmed and stressed out before he even starts assignments. It is no wonder his effort on schoolwork is minimal.

I am pleading again with the school, and now the School Board, to make a change. Our kids need to be in school communicating face to face with teachers. They need to physically be connected to schoolwork. They need to be around other students. They need to hear the commotion of school hallways. They need the chatter and laughter. They are sitting home with a system that is not suited for any child. I realize there is an excessive amount of pressure placed on the teachers. I know they are overwhelmed. However, something needs to change

4. Updated Proposal for In-Person Learning in Grades 5 – 12

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio stated that parents and students could choose to attend school either in-person or online five days per week but the proposed return to full in-school instruction was May 3, 2021. He said schools would remain open and concurrent learning would stay in place. He said Friday's would continue to be "WIN" (What Individuals Need) days. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio explained the District would have some challenges with meeting the recommended spacing and reiterated it was up to the parents and teachers to choose what worked best for them. He added all of the existing safety mitigations would remain in place.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio explained that tents would be added to each building to allow for additional space.

Board Member Hardy moved (seconded by Board Member Rothhaus) to accept the plan as proposed with an adjustment of the date for grades 5 through 8 to begin starting Monday, April 12, 2021, and the high school beginning on May 3, 2021.

Board Member Rothhaus called the question.

Motion Failed 2 – 3 – 0 by a roll call vote. (Nay – Chair Guagliumi, Vice Chair Barnes, and Board Member Schneider)

Vice Chair Barnes moved to accept the plan as proposed with a return to school for grades 5 through 12 on May 3, 2021.

Motion Failed due to the lack of a second.

Board Member Schneider moved (seconded by Vice Chair Barnes) to bring grades 5 and 6 back to school on April 19, 2021, and grades 8 through 12 on May 3, 2021.

Motion Carried 3 – 2 – 0 by a roll call vote. (Nay – Board Member Hardy, and Board Member Rothhaus)

5. Discussion Concerning Travel Policy

Ms. Melissa Gagne, Human Resources Manager, stated the recommendation would be to quarantine for 10-days for travel outside of New England and Internationally with the following exceptions:

The following people do not need to quarantine after travel domestically, internationally, or on a cruise ship:

- Persons who are 14 days or more beyond completion of COVID-19 vaccination – this means a person must be at least 14 days beyond receipt of the second dose of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, or at least 14 days beyond receipt of the single-dose Janssen (Johnson & Johnson) COVID-19 vaccine.
- Persons who are within 90 days of a prior SARS-CoV-2 infection that was diagnosed by PCR or antigen testing (if a person had a previous infection that was more than 90 days prior, then they are still subject to quarantine).
- Students and Staff required to quarantine due to travel have the option of shortening their travel-related quarantine by getting a test on day 6-7 of their quarantine to test for active SARS-CoV-2 infection (SARS-CoV-2 is the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19); this test must be a molecular test (e.g., PCR-based test).

Vice Chair Barnes moved (seconded by Chair Guagliumi) to accept the administration's proposed language for travel.

Motion Failed 2 – 3 – 0 by a roll call vote. (Nay – Board Member Schneider, Board Member Hardy, and Board Member Rothhaus)

Chair Guagliumi stated the discussion would be tabled until the next School Board meeting.

6. Public Comments on Agenda Items

Ms. Michelle Proulx, 17 Kimberly Drive

First and foremost, I think the children should be given a voice in this and they were not. My child and I both feel that going back to school full-time is not safe and it's not fair to them at all. There is no way that this pandemic is over and most children are not allowed to get their COVID shots. Why not wait until everyone is vaccinated? My daughter and I really feel that changing this again now would be so much more confusing. She's just finally gotten used to this and doesn't want to have to go through another big change again so close to the end of the year.

I talked to a lot of staff at the Merrimack High School and a lot of the children and everyone I have spoken to does not feel comfortable with going back to school full-time. I hope that you respect that and do not force these children to do something they are not comfortable with and something that could potentially be dangerous to their health and to the parents' health that they come home to.

I personally have two co-morbidities with one being asthma and I would rather not get COVID. I have been nothing but super careful. I don't even grocery shop anymore. I think taking away my safety as well as the safety of all of our children by forcing my child to go back to school full-time is extremely dangerous. I would hate to get COVID because my daughter was forced to go back to school. At least wait until everyone is vaccinated. I can't say this enough.

Chair Guagliumi noted that the scheduled non-public session would be held at the next School Board meeting.

At approximately 11:36 p.m. Chair Guagliumi moved (seconded by Board Member Hardy) to adjourn