

**Merrimack School Board Special Meeting  
Merrimack School District, SAU #26  
Merrimack Town Hall – Memorial Room  
November 18, 2021**

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**Present:** Chair Guagliumi, Vice Chair Rothhaus, Board Member Hardy, Board Member Peters, and Board Member Barnes. Also present were Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Yarlott, Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen.

**1. CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Chair Guagliumi called the meeting to order at approximately 7:00 p.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chair Guagliumi announced that Vice Chair Rothhaus would arrive after her work commitment.

Chair Guagliumi pointed out that the School Board would accept public comment via email and to do that members of the public could send emails to [publiccomment@sau26.org](mailto:publiccomment@sau26.org).

**2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Jennifer Jobin, merrymeeting Drive stated that she appreciates the work of the School Board. She wants her child to continue attending school in person. She supports mask wearing and asked the board to consider the facts and not to listen to loudest opinions.

Lisa Mungovan, 14 Lamson Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
I would like to encourage all of you to vote for a mask mandate in our school district. Cases are rising in every school. If our schools had an 80% vaccination rate, I would not need to see the need for a mandate - but every health expert on the planet has said the first line of defense to Covid-19 is vaccination. Second comes distancing (which schools cannot do) and masking. This mitigation practice is detrimental to student health and safety. I am thankful my 11 year old and 9 year old have received their first vaccination doses - but they are still vulnerable. My 4 year old who attends preschool in the district, is still vulnerable. As an adult past 6 months post second vaccination dose and ineligible for a booster - I am now vulnerable too. Immunity is potentially waning with the vaccines as in Massachusetts breakthrough cases are up by 44%. As cold weather has settled into New Hampshire for these upcoming months, children will be inside more during school as illnesses circulate and now is the time to implement better strategies. As a district, we can do better. Please do better.

Vice Chair Rothhaus arrived.

Sara Locke, Cota Road noted that COVID cases are increasing without a remote learning option for students. The School Board has the responsibility to keep children safe, in school and keep staff safe.

Chery Corian, 5 Portside Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
I, first, want to thank you all for your service to our community and can't possibly understand how hard the decisions you make are, knowing you will never make everyone happy. I can

only hope you continue to always think of the kids first and do what is right instead of trying to win over groups of people, on either side.

I know that you are considering taking the parent opt-out of masking away. As cases are getting out of control, I completely understand why you would do that, however I was hoping you would consider a different "opt-out" and that is for children who are fully vaccinated.

My kids are 5 and 8 and attend TFS and like most kids their age, they need some sort of motivation to do just about anything. I have been telling my kids, leading up to their vaccination appointment, that when they are fully vaccinated, they will no longer have to wear masks in their classroom, which they have been very excited about. I agree that kids who are not vaccinated should continue to be masked but why not reward the kids who are making the sacrifice and doing their part for the community by allowing them to decide whether or not to wear a mask in class. This also aligns with the data, since most of the cases have been in the elementary school, where kids have not been eligible to get vaccinated until recently.

On another note, I want to thank the district for all of the focus on reading this year. TFS has started using Heggerty and I get so excited to read Julie's weekly "Hawk's Happenings" which gives us updates on the use of this program in class, among lots of other great things going on at the school this year. I'm so happy for my kindergartener to get such a great program from the get-go! My third grader, who gets extra reading services, will also benefit greatly from this program! I love that we are now trying everything we can to get them off to a great start with reading to prevent the need for extra help in the future, which can also affect their other subjects greatly.

Finally, I want to thank you for approving the half day in March for the teachers to get the "Think Kids Collaboration Protective Training." As a parent of a child with challenging behaviors due to ODD, ADHD and ASD, I'm SOOOOOOOO happy to see a focus on improving how we can better help and manage challenging behavior in the school and classroom. This will help these kids tremendously and benefit the teachers and the classrooms in the long run, too!

With all of these amazing, new programs and trainings, you are helping to make Merrimack a great place for ALL kids, not just the natural learners, and I can't thank you enough for that!

Sheana DeBourke, Belmont Drive stated masks were never worn to reduce flu and colds. A 20-day quarantine is too long without access to remote learning. Decisions should not be made out of fear.

Kathy Komar, Belmont Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) Once again, I am writing to say mask if you want BUT leave the rest of us alone. They DON'T work, they give you a false sense of security and you all know this. One study says they work, the next study says they don't, even fraudci can't make up his mind. Please step off this merry go round and let parents make the best decisions for OUR children. We are tired of the games and will do what is best for our families while allowing others to do for theirs. Please STOP this never ending cycle and let people live their lives with the God given freedom we all have. If you choose to live in fear so be it, but we WILL NOT!!

Bill Pflingston, 17 Jessica Drive stated he is the voice for individuals who reject the government's gross over reach for trying to raise our children. The Board's vote tonight will be remembered in 2022 and 2024. He asked the Board to keep the current mask policy.

Rebecca Dalrymple, 1 Hitchinpost Lane (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) I am writing tonight to ask please while numbers are rising, refresh air becomes limited, and vaccines just becoming available that you consider mandating masks. For the parent who did not want masks we have had the opt out option for 2.5 months now and have suffered the consequence with numbers rising. Vaccines have just become available to those who want to take that step to protect their children. Please give us some time to protect our children.

People around the holidays will be out with family in friends in large groups which data shows will increase numbers even more. We also have the flu season upon us so not only will it help with the Covid rising numbers but will hopefully also slow down the spread of other sicknesses and allow the children to stay in school.

Andrew Morris, Horseshoe Pond stated he is vaccinated and a believer in vaccines. He asked the board to consider how long we want kids to feel like they do not live in a normal world because this is the new normal world. No amount of vaccination and masking is going to make COVID go away.

Melissa Eaton, Carriage Lane, (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) I have 3 children in 3 different schools (Reeds, Middle and High School). Having the option to opt my children out of wearing a mask has had such a positive impact on my children this school year. The last year and a half was awful for my kids with at least one of my children saying they are not going to school this year if they had to wear a mask. He failed most of his classes last year because he gave up and hated being at school. It was a nightmare for him to wear a mask as he has asthma and was struggling to breath with it on all day. This year he has turned it around and his grades have improved. I worry that if he is forced to wear a mask, a repeat of last year will happen. I really want this to be a successful year for all my children.

I commend the board for listening to parent's concerns and I have faith that you will continue to listen to parents as we know what's best for our children and situation.

Chad Horton, 39 Whittier Road stated masks do not provide full protection. The wealth of accumulated data indicates children are less likely to become infected, less likely to be infectious, less likely to have severe symptoms and less likely to be hospitalized. Covering a child's face mutes the nonverbal forms of communication and can result in robotic and emotionless interactions and cause anxiety and depression. He asked the board to not act reflexively based on fear of COVID and institute another round of needless masking that will do nothing to stop a virus that will always be with us. He asked the Board to make sound not emotional decisions based on universal data that all points to the same thing; children are the lowest risk group.

Beth Grady, 15 Parker Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) I wrote a letter which was read aloud at Monday's School Board meeting. In this letter I discussed the exponentially growing Covid cases within the Merrimack Schools. I did a comparison between districts that have a mask mandate with no opt-out to those that do not. The numbers were crystal clear yet not surprising at all. When I wrote this letter the number of Active cases in Merrimack was 51 as of Friday, November 12th. I was appalled. I

went and checked the numbers again just 4 days later, and they were up to 91. That's right. In just 4 days the already alarmingly high Covid cases within our schools had nearly doubled.

I have been watching the School Board meetings and can say that everyone, Board Members and the residents of this town have a common goal, and can agree on one thing. Children belong in school. Unfortunately, due to Covid, many children are missing out on invaluable instructional time. On Wednesday alone, Merrimack had 91 absences due to active cases, 78 absences due to quarantining (unvaccinated household contacts) and 85 absences due to symptomatic students pending results. This means that on one day alone, 254 students were absent. 254 students missed out on instructional time. Most of these students will remain out 10-14 days.

Masks have been proven to reduce the spread. I have heard people speak at these meetings claiming, "My child, my choice". Unfortunately, even more than a year and a half into this pandemic some people do not seem to understand that wearing a mask protects others from the mask wearer. I believe the saying goes, "My mask protects you, your mask protects me". When a parent chooses to "opt their child out" they are actually choosing to put other children in danger. They are not simply choosing for their child. Their decision impacts many. Children whose parents have been diligent about following all the experts such as CDC, American Academy of Pediatrics, NH Department of Health and Safety are still getting sick and losing out on instructional time because other parents are making the choice to put children at risk. This is not right.

The Board has always said that they would regularly revisit the district's mask policy due to trends in numbers. If the numbers were rapidly decreasing would you revisit for a more lenient policy? Likely. Now that the numbers are rapidly increasing it is time to revisit and remove the opt out choice. With ages 5-11 beginning to become vaccinated the hope is that the numbers will decrease soon, and when that time comes perhaps another change can be made. This situation is fluid and the mask policy should mimic the current data.

I wholeheartedly believe that the members of this board's number one priority is the well-being and best interests of our children. 91 active cases, 254 students absent and not receiving instruction? That's simply not putting children first. Jenna, Cinda, Shannon, Laurie, Lori, is your number one priority the safety and well-being of the children? Do you want to see as many children in school as possible? If so, please do what ALL of the experts are recommending. Please heed the recommendation of the CDC, WHO, APA, and NH DHHS and keep a mask mandate but please remove the opt-out feature.

Heather Robitaille, Springfield Circle stated she supports people's right to choose but not when it interferes with receiving a safe education. She supports temporarily pausing the opt out option and revisit the data monthly. She asked the Board to continue to support the data, to pause the parent opt out until the numbers return similar to those in September and to revisit the policy transparently.

Rita Despres, 37 Berkley Street (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) I am writing in support of suspending the opt-out-option for masking in our schools. At the start of the school year, the board voted to allow families to opt out of masking requirements, with the understanding that data could change at any time.

That time is now. The data listed on the Covid dashboard shows that numbers are rapidly rising, putting all of our students and staff at risk for contracting Covid.

In fall of 2020, students whose families chose the hybrid option were switched to fully-remote prior to Thanksgiving and throughout the holiday season, returning to in-person learning after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

Now, the 2021 holiday season is among us. People will be gathering with families, travelling to functions, and increasing their circle of contacts. Many of the prior mitigation measures have already been terminated, including the separation of individual desks and plexiglass partitions.

The goals of the school board should be twofold: to keep students safe, and to keep children in the school buildings, learning from our dedicated and exceptional staff.

This is not the time to ignore the data. This is not the time to continue to make this a political issue. This is a matter of public health and ignoring the science behind what the factual data shows is irresponsible, dangerous, and unacceptable.

Please make the right decision here. We are counting on you to keep our children safe.

Lindsay Thibeault, 19 Pleasant Street asked the Board to keep the mask opt out to a minimum, look at the transmission in the schools and effects that COVID has on children. She questioned why we are treating COVID different than the flu. She acknowledged efforts to intimidate the School Board.

Cindy Parente, 7 Shady Lane (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I would like to take a moment to praise all of you. Back in Sept, when tempers were on edge, you promised to keep an eye on Covid statistics in our schools to forge a path forward. Tonight's emergency meeting is proof positive that your concern for our children, our community at large, is ultimately rooted in science as the number of active cases has jumped from 9 to 87 in a matter of weeks!

The virus is surging in NH creating an opportunity for the Covid 19 Virus to further mutate, threatening all of us. Tactics such as mask wearing, social distancing, washing hands and, especially vaccinations, have proven effective in combating the spread of this disease that has already claimed over 750,000 American lives.

I urge the board to remove the mask "opt out" option for our children. We simply must stop this disease in its tracks.

### **3. OLD BUSINESS**

#### a. Health and Safety Task Force Recommendation

The current mask policy was reviewed and summarized.

- Opt-out option at parent request while students are in the classroom
- Masks to be worn in all other areas within the school building
- No masks required when outside
- Masks are mandatory on buses

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen reported approximately 1,250 students (about 1/3 of the school population) opt out of mask wearing while in the classroom. Mr. Olsen reported the number of positive COVID cases and the number of students in quarantine have increased in the last two weeks. Not all schools in Merrimack have been impacted to the same magnitude.

According to the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services communities with a test positivity rate of 5% or more are considered in condition of substantial transmission. On November 16, 2021 the test positivity rate in Merrimack was 18.4%, compared to 6.6% six weeks prior.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen supports the recommendation of the Health and Safety Task Force for a target approach rather than a blanket approach to the mask policy.

Recommendations to the mask policy are:

- If the number of positive COVID cases (staff and students) in an individual school is 5% (or greater) of the total number of staff and students in the building, masks will be required for all staff and student while in the school building.
- No masks will be required while students and/or staff are outside or while eating lunch/snack.
- If the percentage of positive cases (staff and students) in the individual school is below 5% for two consecutive weeks, the opt-out mask policy will be reinstated.
- It is the recommendation that, if approved by the Merrimack School Board, the revised policy be effective Monday, November 22, 2021.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen reported the test positivity rates in each school as of November 17, 2021.

James Mastricola Elementary School	7.74%
Reeds Ferry Elementary School	2.35%
Thorntons Ferry Elementary School	3.30%
James Mastricola Upper Elementary School	2.96%
Merrimack Middle School	1.23%
Merrimack High School	0.52%

Mr. Olsen encouraged individuals to practice mitigation recommendations such as staying home and seek testing when sick, vaccination for community members 5 years old and above, maintain healthy handwashing and cleaning practices and proper mask wearing

Board Member Barnes asked if there is data available to determine how many schools are impacted as a result of students having to quarantine due to a sibling's positive test results. She expressed concern with student absenteeism without the ability to learn remotely.

Board Member Barnes suggested find a way to allow students to attend classes from home while quarantining using existing technology.

Board Member Barnes supports the idea of consistency with mask wearing and revisit the data at the January 18, 2022 meeting.

Board Member Peters asked if the Mastricola Elementary School numbers were random or clusters.

Mr. Olsen responded there were four clusters (3 to 5 in each cluster) at Mastricola Elementary School.

Board Member Peters questioned at what point do we acknowledge this is not working within the district. It may not be an in school problem. She would consider a targeted approach in cluster areas for two weeks

Board Member Hardy stated the decision of masks should be based on facts and data, not emotion. Wants everyone to be protected until everyone has had the opportunity to be vaccinated. Appreciates the recommended targeted approach now with a review of the data at the January 18, 2022 meeting.

Vice Chair Rothhaus would vote for continuing to follow the Use of Masks by Students and Staff Policy (EBCVM). It was designed to meet the COVID outbreak and was administered according to the established procedures of the district. The document was modified on October 18, 2021 to specify if there was a community transmissions or clusters the School Board would revisit the policy. She is supportive of the policy and discussions.

Chair Guagliumi supports the proposed targeted mask recommendation. She supports reviewing the COVID data at each school board meeting. She would also advocate another mitigation attempt if a specific classroom was affected and not necessarily the entire school. She expressed her concern of how to maximize and make school more effective for those in quarantine.

**MOTION:** Board Member Hardy made a motion to accept the recommendation of the administration giving Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen authority to enact his recommendation based on the 5% of occupants testing positive as presented effective Monday, November 22. Chair Guagliumi seconded the motion.

**Discussion:**

Board Member Peters stated she was not comfortable with the motion because it lacked an end date.

Vice Chair Rothhaus referred to the current policy. She hopes to move forward in January.

Board Member Hardy was not willing to amend her motion to include an end date of

December 31, 2021 because she believes that two consecutive weeks at 5% is the end date.

Board Member Barnes is not concerned about an end date because the chair has the authority to add an agenda item entitled "Board's response to COVID Data" on every agenda.

Vice Chair Rothhaus and Board Member Peters would like the motion to include an end date.

Chair Guagliumi stated she will add Board's response to COVID Data to the December 20, 2021 agenda.

**MOTION:** Board Member Hardy amended her motion to accept the recommendation of the administration giving Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen authority to enact his recommendation based on the 5% positivity rate effective Monday, November 22 with the ability to review the data at the December 20, 2021 meeting and again at the January 18, 2022 (the day after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday). Chair Guagliumi seconded the amendment to the motion.

**The amended motion passed 5-0-0.**

- b. Board Response to the Health and Safety Task Force Recommendation

#### **4. PUBLIC COMMENT ON AGENDA ITEMS**

Tom Gibson, 25 Packard Drive, supports finding a way to teach students that are not in school due to COVID. Parents have a choice to vaccinate or not they should have a choice to mask or not. He heard bullying tonight and board should not be bullied.

Ashleigh Lowe, W Chamberlain Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) Thank you all very much for your service and dedication to our students. I am sure that none of you ever thought your service to this town would be so stressful or fraught with such tension.

I write to day to plead with the board to please strengthen our current policy on masking. When the current policy was put into place, there was wording that it would be revisited monthly and changes could be made at any time if the situation with Covid 19 changed. Without taking up time with statistics and specific numbers, it is clear that case counts are up. Hospitalizations are up. Deaths are up. I saw on the news just this morning that for the first time in months, the predicted numbers of deaths is not expected to decline. Record numbers of children are becoming ill with covid. It is time to straighten the mask mandate and remove the option for parents to opt their children out of wearing masks. I do expect that there are exceptions to be made if the student has a disability that makes masking too challenging for them. Those exceptions should be allowed on a case by case basis. However, for those students who can tolerate a mask and have no medical reason for an exemption, I believe not it is time for them to help protect our community ask mask up while in our buildings. We have surrounding districts that are 4 times the size of Merrimack who currently have less than half the number of cases in schools. Those districts have mask



mandates. It is time for the board to vote with science and protect our students, faculty, support staff, and every other person who spends time in our school buildings.

It is essential that schools remain open. My son spent a year and a half remotely learning from home. He has autism. He is on an IEP. He finally went back to in person learning at the end of June and it has been so good for him. I have returned to work. I am sure my family is not the only one in town who finally feels some sense of normalcy returning to their household after such a tumultuous year. Having to adjust all over again to a district shut down and/or a return to remote instruction would be devastating.

Please vote in the best interest of the safety of our community. Please vote to remove the opt out of the current mask policy and protect our students.

Kathy Komar, Belmont Drive questioned a piece of data in Mr. Olsen's presentation.

Pat McGrath, 7 Peter Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

As a past school board member for two terms, I want to share with you a litany of decisions that prior Boards and or Administrations made.

In the event of a fire, all schools practice how to safely evacuate a building. That is risk management for all concerned.

Should there be a hazardous emission near to a school building, plans were designed, reviewed, approved and practiced to evacuate to a designated location was risk management for all concerned.

Should there be an intruder into one of the buildings, plans were designed, reviewed, approved and practiced to shelter in place was risk management for all concerned.

Requiring that all coaches, educators, support staff, and substitutes submit to background checks, that was risk management for all concerned.

When asbestos was discovered in the school buildings, plans were designed, reviewed, approved and funded to eliminate that health hazard was risk management for all concerned.

When the ravages of storms imperiled students safely traveling to school, administration protected all concerned by keeping the schools closed. That was risk management for all concerned.

When mold was discovered in JMUES, a plan was designed, reviewed, approved and funded to eliminate that health hazard was risk management for all concerned.

When PFOAs were discovered in the drinking water for Merrimack, a plan was designed, reviewed, approved and funded to eliminate that health hazard for all concerned.

Given this pattern and practice of providing a safe learning environment for all concerned, the implementation of a facial covering policy is a risk management practice that is beneficial for all concerned as it is judiciously implemented by administration. It makes for a better and healthier community of learners and classroom success leaders.

Robert Reisman, Iris Drive supports universal masking until everyone has had an opportunity to be fully vaccinated. He liked the targeted approach and would advocate for mandatory masking at the elementary and upper elementary schools.

Kaitlyn Bernier, 2 Birch Street (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I am writing to you today to ask you to reconsider the stance on the current masking policy within our schools. Right now, students can opt out of wearing masks, regardless of how many positive cases are in their class. The current cases of Covid are rising quickly in our town and everyone is feeling the negative affects, whether they have been following guidelines all along or not. Other towns around us with more students have less covid numbers than we do and have mask mandates in place. This seems to be a trend that makes a lot of sense.

It's time to revisit this policy. It is important to be able to pivot and make the changes necessary to ensure the health and safety of our children.

The data shows that Covid is spreading in our schools, and with the upcoming holidays, this will likely continue to get worse. The school board's main concern should be keeping our students safe and keeping them learning in an IN-PERSON format.

Masking is the best way to keep our children in the schools and to keep them advancing in their education.

My hope is that by suspending the opt out option, we will be able to minimize the already quickening spread through our schools and town. Even by delaying your decision to mandate masks until NOW has had negative consequences that will be felt for weeks to come within the schools.

We are still digging out from the effects of a full year of remote learning. Students need to remain in the school buildings, where they have access to our dedicated teachers and support staff. Speaking of which, those teachers and support staff all need YOUR, and the communities support and recognition, GRACE and an actual pandemic bonus! Merrimack is NOT competitive with surrounding towns in our pay for substitutes. Please consider increasing the pay, at least during the height of teacher shortages.

Our children deserve the best that we can give them. We all want to enjoy the holiday season and not be stuck quarantined because of something that could have been prevented. Please vote to suspend the opt-out option for masking.

Thank you for your consideration and dedication to our community. We are grateful for your commitment to our future generations.

Antonio Giancola, Baboosic Lake Road commented that the mask opt out has worked for almost 3 months. The increase at James Masticola Elementary School could be a result of other factors.

Naomi Halter, 10 Everest Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I have learned a lot since I started coming to school board meetings a few months ago. I've learned that there are a lot of challenges and exciting projects on the horizon for our schools, like lowering the drop out rate, streamlining our curricula, switching to standards-based reporting, and supporting our teens and families so they can better focus on their education and preparing for adulthood.

We cannot accomplish any of that if we keep getting stuck on masks.

We need your strong leadership to bring us through this.

You must make a decision tonight that keeps as many of our kids in school as possible, even if it is unpopular. After that decision is made, if you continue to reject the guidelines for schools from the NH Department of Health and Human Services and allow families to opt out, you must spend some time crafting your own metrics, so we don't have to have another meeting every time the Covid numbers ebb and flow.

Let me be clear: masks reduce the spread of respiratory illness, including Covid. Our community, and our schools, are seeing record high numbers of Covid. This is keeping hundreds of kids out of school each day. Until we see absenteeism go back down to the levels we had in September and early October, everyone in school should be masked.

Michelle Karkatos, Swift Lane, school counselor in another district, stated the main theme for student defiance she deals with is wearing of masks. Masks need to be used properly and replaced when soiled.

Jennifer Liba, 6 Tomasian Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

Thank you for all of the time and hard work you put into making our schools better.

I am writing this evening to implore you to reinstate the mask requirement and social distancing practices at our schools. Our number one priority is to keep our children in school so they can learn and grow. As of the past two weeks, the number of covid cases in our schools has spiked significantly. Whole classrooms are being affected, students and educators alike. It is not only the specific classrooms though, family's (Moms, Dads, Brothers and Sisters) are now missing out on weeks of school and work. Additionally, we all know there is a substitute teacher shortage, so having educators out with Covid is the worst case scenario.

Masks are proven to decrease the spread of the Covid virus indoors. Social distancing has been shown to decrease the spread of the Covid virus. At my child's school, social distancing is minimal at best in the classrooms. Students are seated at desks organized in clusters or at multi-person tables. That may have worked for the first couple months of school, but now that we are indoors with windows closed, it is not working.

The district proved last year students could be at school and be safe from Covid. They could be in their classrooms, participate fully in their studies and be with their peers. We need to figure out how to create that safe, healthy environment again. Merrimack's Covid case numbers in our schools are shocking and sad. At a previous meeting, a Board member stated if the number of cases started to increase, changes would be made. The cases have increased significantly, it is time to make changes.

I appreciate you taking the time to read my email.

Ashleigh Tenhave, Shelburn Road stated it is taking longer to get a COVID test because there are not enough people to perform the COVID test. This could contribute to some students having to stay out of school longer. She wished the mask recommendation could have waited until vaccinations were available to everyone.

Joanne Grobecker, 27 Craig Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

Thank you for all the time and thought you have put into ensuring all students in Merrimack receive a quality public education.

I implore you to make your decision tonight with the understanding that an in-person education is best for all students. Do whatever it takes to keep all students in the buildings and learning from educators in person.

There were 257 Covid Related absences yesterday and only 9 of them were staff members. That makes 248 students that did not receive an education yesterday.

I trust the board to come to a decision that allows all students to learn in person.

Rebecca Stats, 11 Bradford Drive stated masking should be a choice between the parent and child. Her children wear masks at school out of fear. A mask mandate removes the ability to think critically and is damaging our children.

Craig Belhumeur, 12 Bradford Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) I am unable to make the meeting this evening but would like to voice my opinion none the less. I still do not feel our kids need to be masked, nothing has changed in my opinion and firmly stand against a mask mandate. At least let us keep our mask out option.

Lindsey Burns, 9 Cynthia Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) I am asking that our schools consider a mask mandate until at least after the Christmas break. Other towns have been using sliding scale numbers of cases to determine mask usage and I would also be in favor of this. I am not in favor of an opt out option any longer with these numbers and amount of times my child has been a "close contact" in the last few weeks.

Sarah Hartwell, Joppa Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) I'm writing to request that you follow the recommendations of the state epidemiologist and his team and mandate masks for all in the school buildings. Hopefully vaccination of the student body will make this a temporary measure, but it appears to be a necessary one at the moment.

Nancy Murphy, Brenda Lane spoke in support of mask months ago. She expressed concern with the current COVID transmission rates. It is time to put mitigation measures in place and to balance input from parents and professionals.

Christopher Despres, 37 Berkley Street (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record) Everyone is aware of the rising number of covid cases in our community. We can all view numbers and statistics to see that things are looking grim with our current masking standards in place. We need to remove the option to opt-out for our schools.

But I will not be talking about that. Instead, I want to talk about the subject of bullying in Merrimack.

We've all been told that bullies are the bigger kids who threaten to shove you in a locker or to take your lunch money away from you. Those aren't the bullies that I am concerned with in our town tonight.

The bullies we need to worry about tonight are the ones that stand around a crowded room during a pandemic, unmasked, with their hands across their chest. The kind of bully that makes you call the police before this very meeting to make sure they are present.

We're told that we have to stand up to the bullies and that's how you get them to leave you alone. I wish this was always true. But it's not. They will still be bullies after tonight's vote. You can't change that with your vote.

Your vote can only do one thing. Save lives. It can save a grieving family who may lose their loved ones. It can prevent a lengthy and expensive hospital stay. It can save a parent from losing their job, because their children were close contacts and half the class is now remote and they can't take the time off of work without getting fired. Your vote can do all of these things.

I ask that you ignore the bullies around us and do the right thing.

Sabrina BeeBe, Wire Road asked for clarification on the time frame for submitting public comments through email.

Dana Knight, 17 Dahl Road, (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I would like to state wearing of masks, vaccinations, and social distancing still the smart way to beat this pandemic, and assist our townspeople are protected from each other.

John J. Grady, 8 Abenaki Circle (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

My darling wife and I have been Merrimack residents and taxpayers for forty-six years. During this time each of us dedicated many years in Merrimack town and School District government and we appreciate your time and efforts.

Our two daughters, now adults, received excellent educations and we always knew that Merrimack schools kept them safe. In my forty-one years as a teacher and principal in neighboring communities, I always tried to base my decisions on what was best for the kids and I am confident that you will do the same tonight. It is essential to keep them safe. Listen to science. Listen to the medical experts. Please vote to mandate mandatory masks in our schools for staff and students. Thank you.

Angelic Lippman, 8 Owls Court (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I am writing to ask you to keep the mask mandate and remove the general "opt-out" option for masks. While I am aware some classes only have a few opting out, there are several who have half the class opting out. I have been made aware that in some of these rooms with high "opt-out" rates, there is an increase in covid spread and quarantines. As of today, 81 students in the Merrimack school district are positive for Covid, another 63 are out quarantining, and 69 students are excluded awaiting testing. Therefore a total of 213 students are currently not in school in Merrimack according to the Covid Dashboard. When looking at the daily Covid dashboard it is showing a VERY alarming trend. Numbers of cases and quarantines are rapidly increasing and something needs to be done to help mitigate this spread. When looking at surrounding districts with mask mandates with no opt-out, such as Nashua and Manchester, the rate of spread is not as high. I am a teacher in a school with a full mask mandate and students do great with them and they do not interfere with learning or socializing and it helps to keep the kids where they belong, which is in school. I would also encourage other mitigation measures be put into place, such as desks all facing the same direction and spread out as much as possible as I have heard some classrooms still have desks in groups and students facing each other.

Members of this board have publicly stated that the opt-out policy could change "on the dime" and that time is now. It is an emergency situation that warrants the board to take away the opt-out unless in cases with a doctor's note for those with certain needs. Please follow through with your promise to be flexible and change policy as the need dictates, which it does. I also suggest creating metrics to take the guess work out of this going forward. Other districts such as Manchester, Nashua and even Hudson base their mask policy by rate of positive cases in their district. Perhaps Merrimack can consult with a local health expert and create a set of metrics to go off of going forward. I know that everyone is tired of this pandemic. However just this week I lost another person I know to Covid and have seen Covid symptoms in children that have led to hospitalizations. Please help to keep the students safe and remove the opt-out option for masks until the rate of infections has gone down.

Caroline Herold, 31 Valleyview Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
I used to tell my kids that there was to be no screaming in the car because there was no way for those of us who didn't want to hear it to get away. We just need to be considerate of each other. It seems similar to the idea behind masks on the bus.

Spacing students in class 3 feet or more and unmasked in a classroom would be reasonable because it allows for a comfortable distance for those who are concerned. Walking in the hallways is more congested, and students have no choice but to be confined to that tight space - even if it momentarily. So, let's be CONSIDERATE of those who would prefer not to get sick, and wear a mask in the hallways.

A solution is obviously too difficult to agree upon because we have lost sight of the idea of compromise and consideration.

Just wear a mask in the halls - just like on the bus.

Rachel Paepke, Tinker Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
I wanted to extend my appreciation for the work that you all do on a day-to-day basis for our school community. I appreciate the time that you all take out of your day and from your own families to support the district.

I know you will get to hear from many members of our community tonight, both from the pro- or against-mask realms; each member has their own story or reason for their stance. Each voice matters and all should be heard. But I ask you, as a board, to stay focused on the near-term priority of keeping as many kids and staff in school through the next couple of months. This would require a change to the current opt-out policy, and would follow the recommendation of the Superintendent and the Health & Safety Taskforce. I am sure you all understand the magnitude of your decision and how it will directly impact the numbers of students and staff that may have to be absent for an extended amount of time due to illness or quarantine.

Should the board decide to keep the mask opt-out policy in place, this will put students and staff at a higher risk for absences due to illness or quarantine, meaning students will continue to miss out on their school experiences. No student should be put in a position of having to be absent for an extended time, away from their educators, friends, or maybe their only meal for the day when there are tools and resources around us such as masks, extra cleaning protocols (i.e. fogging at night), hand washing and social distancing, that help support kids being in-person. I urge you all tonight to make a decision that utilizes the tools

that surround us to achieve the district priority of keeping as many students/staff in the buildings for in-person learning.

Karin Mortimer, Everest Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I'm writing to you tonight in full support of the recommendation to suspend the current 'opt out' mask policy. The board agreed that this policy would need to be reviewed and suspended if the numbers went up. The numbers are up. They are WAY up. Positive cases, the frequency of close contact emails, and wait times for PCR test results ..... they are all way up. I firmly believe the only way to keep the schools open through the upcoming holiday travel season is to require everyone in the building to wear a mask with no option to 'opt out'. I urge you all to ignore the noise, focus on the data, and vote to support Mr. Olsen's recommendation this evening.

Lisa Martinho, Shore Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

Please end the mask mandate for all Merrimack students. If kids still want to wear them then let them. We chose to opt out of wearing a mask. The change from last year I see in my child is profound. We cannot take a step backwards we must move forward! Thank you

Dawn Worsley, Cota Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

Thank you for calling this emergency meeting to address the escalating COVID transmission in town, and the schools.

My granddaughter attends Thorntons Ferry Elementary School (TFS), and loves it. She loves her teacher, her classmates, the administration and the opportunities available to her. After a year and half of computer screens, it's been a long time since I've seen her so bouncy. In fact, she recently had to take 2 sick days (non-COVID) and yelled at my daughter for missing school. We need to keep the schools open. Everyone agrees on that.

My daughter and granddaughter live with me. Last year I had two health emergencies that have now left me vulnerable to COVID infection. My daughter and I are vaccinated, and my granddaughter received her first dose last week. We have personally taken all precautions that we can, but I unfortunately also have to depend on others' responsibility for my safety.

Revoking the opt-out for masking in the schools is urgent, for the safety of the entire community — especially families like mine. Regardless of this personal liberty claim being yelled about, there's a more pressing personal responsibility to keep the entire community safe.

You, as members of the school board, have a responsibility for our children, but also to this entire town. I hope you take that seriously.

Karen Brown, 15 Four Winds Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

Thank you for your continued service to our community through these unprecedented times. Thank you also for taking time away from your families to convene this emergency board meeting.

When the mask opt-out policy was enacted earlier this year, members of this Board stated that the decision would need to be revisited should the number of Covid cases increase. Based on numerous pieces of scientific evidence, we have arrived at that crossroad. The Merrimack School District Covid Tracking sheet shows Covid related

absences have been above 200 per day since November 14<sup>th</sup>. It has more than doubled in the past two weeks.

Yesterday, Dr. Benjamin Chan, the Epidemiologist for the State of New Hampshire provided an update on COVID-19 in our schools. There are two pieces of information that I ask you to consider when voting on the mask policy this evening.

There have been 262 identified COVID-19 clusters in New Hampshire schools since the beginning of this school year.

Paraphrasing Dr. Chan, "there is evidence of schools contributing to community transmission. Kids are bringing COVID-19 home to their families, some of whom are becoming sick."

No matter where you stand on the issue of masks, we share one common ground. It is in the best interest of all children to remain in school. I am asking that you vote tonight to enact a temporary policy of universal masking in our schools. A short-term measure to stop the community spread that is occurring in Merrimack and throughout schools in our state. The surge is here. We need to act with leadership to ensure our children experience as little disruption as possible.

Matt Clement, 65 Patten Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

First I will say that I am disappointed that you didn't act SWIFTLY (I think the term was "ON A DIME") last week as you assured parents you would if things change with COVID. They clearly changed in the past week or two with numbers climbing to their highest levels. With Mr. Everret's recommendation to do mandatory mask it should have been voted for and approved last meeting but was not because of a procedure snafu and I suspect a fear of backlash from the mask opposers who didn't bother to show up at the last meeting as they have done for every meeting. It was pretty rare that I heard nearly NO objection to masks at the last meeting likely because everyone is aware of the numbers.

I also heard about the committee's recommendation for 5% of the population have COVID before mandatory requiring masks and I must say that is absolutely absurd to allow 5% of the entire population of the district to be sick before doing what should have been done from day 1. We know better and the proof is easy to find by simply looking at Nashua or Manchester numbers versus our numbers for a much smaller student population. I strongly urge you to do what the parents are majority asking and make masks mandatory for ALL students except those very rare medical exceptions which doesn't include parents that simply feel their freedom is being hurt. Keep the kids in school and the best way to do that is masks and vaccination.

Brian Townsend, 5 Merrymeeting Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

We are writing to urge you to adopt a mandatory mask policy, at least with respect to all Merrimack elementary schools. There are 175 active Covid-19 cases in Merrimack and, according to Merrimack School District's Covid dashboard, a total of 94 student cases at this time. That means, 54% of *all* active cases of Covid-19 in Merrimack are in our schools.

Nashua and Manchester, our State's two largest cities by population, each have fewer total cases in their schools than we do in ours. Nashua schools' Covid-19 cases make up only 9% of the city's total cases (44 out of 505); Manchester schools' Covid-19 cases make up 15% of total cases (86 out of 575). Our schools make up an alarming 54% of the total active cases in all of Merrimack. The clear difference other than the outrageously lower number of



cases in much more crowded schools is that masks are mandatory. In other words, masks are working.

We were very disappointed to read the Health and Safety Taskforce's recommendations this evening. Masks should be mandatory NOW. We should NOT be waiting for all schools to get to 5%, allowing this virus to continue to spread. This is irresponsible and unfair to our children.

Masks should be mandatory for all until Covid-19 cases in our schools and community decrease.

Christine Reedy Hemingway, Haines Terras (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I have 3 kids that go to TFS- one in 1st grade and 2 in preschool.

I want to thank all of the educators and staff for their hard work during these ongoing uncertain times.

I write you tonight in complete disgust with what is happening here in our district. We are failing. When the board met on Monday and Mr. Olson presented his recommendation on masking, this board chose to vote it down due to transparency to the 1/3 of anti maskers in this town. As a result- you risked children's health/ safety for a few days longer- so that the town is " aware" there will be a vote on masking. I am not sure I see the logic here. What I see is the board catering to keeping people happy- over fact based scientific data. I also see us teaching our kids that we don't need to make health decisions based on facts. If the science isn't relevant in your decision making process, what is...

Since the start of school my 3 kids have had a total of 8 covid tests combined due to colds and needing a test to go back to school. I appreciate the process and I am all for testing to be sure we are not getting people sick. I feel the schools should be doing more with testing, optional weekly testing would be a good way to show we are all doing our part to minimize the spread. It is also becoming increasingly hard to get a rapid covid test only keeping children from learning that much longer.

I have received a close contact letter and was told by a school nurse if it is only one you received, you should be fine. Then went on to share her personal experiences, minimizing the situation, TFS has the highest cases in the district. It is disheartening and very concerning to hear the lack of concern over this- as if, it is just no big deal. We have lost sight of what we know works and forcing everything back to normal. Nothing about kids needing 8 covid tests in 2 months is normal- nothing at all.

More can and needs to be done to mitigate cases in our schools. When I have visited the students class, all desks are facing inward. My daughter came home from school one day this week with a headache because there were kids screaming in the lunch room for the entire lunch period at the top of their lungs, all while not wearing a mask because, they were having lunch. Nothing was done, the student was simply told they could not be first in line when lunch ended. Based on the numbers at TFS, I find all of this unacceptable and concerning.

As adults (and some kids I know) we know what will minimize the spread based on data/ science. So, I have to ask, why this board is more focused on making sure parents are happy. The goal should be children are safe when they attend school. I have heard over and over we are in this together- everything I see as a parent in this community is showing the

exact opposite. We can and need to do better than we are right now for our children whom we should be protecting.

Alan Beebe, Wire Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I would like to briefly discuss my experience with masks this school year as it relates to tonight's agenda item.

At the beginning of the school year, my wife and I informed our child's school that we had made a decision that our child would not wear a mask or face shield anywhere and at any time. This includes in classrooms as well as in hallways.

Only one time since the first day of school has my child worn a mask, and that was because a staff member put one on my child. The school quickly realized the mistake they made, we received an apology, and it has not happened again. I appreciate that.

I want to be perfectly clear. We were not granted an exemption or exception, nor did the school district make a decision to allow our child to not wear a mask. We as parents made the decision for our child and the school district had no choice other than to honor our decision. I thank them for that.

I think this community is under the impression that the school district has the authority to require masks. That is simply false as my wife and I have shown.

Perhaps the school board should address the public and clarify that a mandate is not what is being voted on. What is being voted on is nothing more than a suggestion that parents make the decision to have their children wear masks.

Feel free to discuss why my child hasn't worn a mask all year.

Heather Callahan, 5 King Henry Court (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

Plenty of well-informed parents in Merrimack believe masks on our children cause harm - physically, socially, and emotionally - and that they do more harm than good. Studies show that using masks in a school setting does not reduce transmission of Covid-19, and so many countries in Europe and around the world have stopped recommending their use for children.

A few meetings ago, Bill Olsen said that going forward, he would not be making any recommendations for a stricter mask policy. Nothing has changed to warrant him going back on his word.

Please take a stand for medical freedom and for parental rights.

Laura Millar, Essex Green Court (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I am a teacher in the school district of Nashua. I find it very telling that the reported positive rates in my work city of Nashua and my residence of Merrimack have been very similar within the last few weeks. Despite having one third the number of students, Merrimack is seeing very similar numbers to the students in Nashua.

Nashua is observing masking by policies within its schools. If Nashua is able to keep their numbers tied to a district 1/3 the size, clearly the masks are working. I encourage Merrimack to consider implementing mandatory masking as Covid numbers continue to surge, and will continue through the winter.

Taryn Swenson, 38 Marty Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
I sincerely hope this meeting is for you to remove the mask mandate all together and get back to focusing on the quality of education you are providing this community, instead of how to keep them masked two years later. It's time to admit that the doctors and epidemiologist don't know how to stop Covid, and we've reached the point of insanity to continue to do the same thing. The masks and vaccines aren't stopping it at all. Ever think that making the kids wear masks is also making them more vulnerable to catching Covid? There are 3 times as many cases than this time last year with 64% of the state fully vaccinated! Time to switch up the approach and take the masks off.

Our kids are going to get sick. The sooner parents and school board accept it the better. My kids had it in March and they may get it again. I will not live in fear of a illness that they have a 0% chance of becoming seriously ill or dying. I'm glad that my kids have natural antibodies (tested). I'm actually terrified of what's in that vaccine and growing on the masks on. I'd like to see the data that the only kids affected by the case increases are those unvaccinated and unmasked.

We will no longer subject our children to this abuse. We settled on wearing them when outside of the classroom and that is where we firmly stand until the mandate is removed.

Jennifer McInnis, 8 Evergreen Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
I'm reaching out to express my support for a universal masking policy in the district for the duration of the current wave of covid transmission in the schools and the community.

The CDC has found that masking reduced outbreaks in schools, and a recent meta-analysis of global research being reported on today in The Guardian shows masking to be the most effective non-pharmaceutical intervention in reducing covid spread.

Bonnie Dunham, 16 Wren Court (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
As COVID numbers continue to increase, we are no longer talking about a potential threat to our children's health and safety, the threat isnt even imminent. It is here now and now is when we have to come together as a community to do whatever is necessary to protect our children and staff. Please implement a mask mandate in our schools until the data demonstrates that the crisis has passed.

I appreciate that you are facing extreme pressure from people who don't "want" their children to have to wear masks, but many vulnerable children need universal masking to be safe. Needs should always carry more weight than wants (or don't wants).

Jenilee Brown, 10 Danbury Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)  
I will keep this very simple because I can not believe we continue to have this conversation:

I have 2 young children in the school system and we have opted out of masks.

1. Masking my children or not is MY choice, not yours.
2. Parents who are concerned can get their children vaccinated.
3. Masks for young children are not sanitary, they suck on them, they touch them, they drop them on the floor. It's gross.

4. Psychologically for children, masking in school does not sense. Children do not need to wear masks anywhere else, not stores, not amusement parks, not friend's houses, not at sports outside of school such as dance, gymnastics, karate, etc. they don't understand why only the school is forcing them to do this.

Let's talk about important things like how we plan to get all of the kids up to speed who are behind because of the mess over the last few years. Let parents make their own medical decisions for their children.

Nicole Arp, DW Highway (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I would like to thank the school board for all that you do for our community. I know it's not easy and there are a lot of opinions out there, especially concerning masking our children in school.

I have some concerns about your consideration in eliminating the mask opt out option for parents. I feel like the opt out is an ok compromise to appease everyone about mask wearing, however, I believe that the only ones that should be making the decision should be the students' parents. A mask is medical device and parents should be able to decide if their child requires wearing one. It specifically says on a box of masks that they will not provide any protection against Covid-19 or other viruses. Masks are known to harbor harmful bacteria, other viruses, and cause headaches, difficulty breathing, skin irritation, and impaired cognition. Covid-19 is never going away and is over 99% survivable. People that are vaccinated or unvaccinated can spread and contract the virus. Why are we trying to stop a virus that cannot be stopped?

We need to consider how masks are negatively affecting children's learning environment and that they may be more detrimental than helpful. Will kids recover from the loss of social experiences, lack of in classroom structure, and inconsistent academic curriculum? Masks are hindering children's social and emotional development, especially younger children in elementary school. Interacting with adults and peers in this early time of their lives is so important. It sets the foundation of reading emotions and social interaction for the rest of their lives. Everyone wearing masks makes it difficult for them to see other people's expressions, learn from them, discern their emotions, and distinguish one face from another.

All the restrictions and arbitrary rules in place to try and prevent Covid are not working because you cannot stop a virus. Kids that have the opt out are told to wear a mask in music class while singing and are allowed to remove it when they are done. Does singing spread Covid more than just talking or breathing? Fourth graders playing the recorder in class were given a "special" mask that had a hole in it so they could be wearing a mask but also able to play the recorder. Does blowing through a recorder somehow make Covid disappear? You can't wear a mask while you eat or drink; does Covid not exist in the lunchroom or in classrooms during snack? I truly believe that from the time students arrive at school until dismissal, that masking should be at the discretion of parents, not the school board. You can't possibly choose one masking procedure that is best for every single student in the district. Everyone has different needs and making one medical decision by enforcing masks will affect everyone differently. Parents should be in control of their own children's health and decide if wearing a mask is what's best for them.

There is no one size fits all solution regarding masking students, Covid-19 is never going away, and everyone is at risk of contracting or spreading the virus regardless of mask use or vaccination status. It is very concerning that you are considering taking away the parents right to decide what's best for their own children. Keeping the mask opt out option allows parents to make medical decisions for their own children, give them opportunity to make changes to their decision as needed, and eliminate the accountability of the school board dictating what they think is best for each student. Everyone has their own opinion; however, no one knows a child better than their parents. I believe each parent deserves the right to choose if their child should wear a mask at school. The mask opt out should never be eliminated but rather, it should be rewritten to allow parents full discretion on masking their children. Eliminate special masking situations in hallways, while singing, and other arbitrary rules and allow parents to decide if their child should wear a mask the entire day of school and let kids be kids.

Michael Drouin, 5 Vanderbilt Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud into the record)

I am a substitute teacher, and I enjoy it. Like you said, there is a severe shortage of subs. I would like you to consider waiving the 4 day per week limit. I do sometimes have 5 days a week to be a sub. Also, to raise the number of subs might I suggest a reward program of sorts. One example being: work 30 days, get a bonus. Or, raise the pay for all subs to \$150.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen announced there will be a vaccination clinic for children 5 years and older from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on November 20 at the Elm Street Middle School, 117 Elm Street, Nashua. A similar clinic for the second does will be scheduled in December.

## **5. ADJOURNMENT TO NON-PUBLIC SESSION**

**MOTION:** At approximately 9:26 p.m. Board Member Hardy made a motion to enter into non-public session. Vice Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

**The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0 on roll call vote.**

**MOTION:** At 10:32 p.m. Board Member Hardy made a motion to adjourn the public meeting. Board Member Barnes seconded the motion.

**The motion passed 5-0-0.**