

**Merrimack School Board Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Merrimack High School – Cafeteria
January 18, 2022**

6:30 p.m. – Non-Public Session pursuant to RSA 91-A:3, II (a) (b) (c) – Merrimack High School Main Office Conference Room

- **Student Welfare**

Present: Chair Guagliumi, Vice Chair Rothhaus, Board Member Hardy, Board Member Peters, and Board Member Barnes and Student Representative Vadney. Also present were Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Yarlott, and 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 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.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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

As you know, the numbers of positive COVID are rising with the Omicron variant and the hospitals are being overwhelmed with patients. That is the reason we started the remote school and masking in the beginning.....to lower the curve and reduce the burden on the ER and ICU's. We are now seeing that play out even worse than last year. I see that several Merrimack schools are over 5% and have been required to use masks to try and reduce the spread. My own kids have both had emails that someone in each of their classes has tested positive and exposed my child. My kids have told me that several students in their classes have opted out so this makes me nervous. I think we should continue to require masks while the school is over 5% and not cave to pressure that "the pandemic is over". It is not over and to stop attempting to prevent the spread only serves to further strain our hospitals and health care system.

Do NOT roll back the measures put in place and if anything strengthens them to protect our children.

I also did support the idea of hooking up the video system in the classrooms so that children remote with COVID or absent could still at least watch the lessons. I get that to try and teach both would be hard but I don't think we're asking for that, but rather to simply turn on the camera and let it stream or record the normal lesson. That should not be that much more effort. Not every lesson will work well but at least there might be SOME value in watching it and not falling farther behind. We owe it to our kids to do whatever it takes to ensure their success. We invested in the technology and we are foolish to not use it to any degree we can.

Ms. Lindsay Thibeault, 19 Pleasant Street (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

I wanted to start by saying, I know this subject is tiring to continue. I'm tired. I know all of you are tired. But I will never be tired enough to not fight for my kids. Honestly, I just want you guys to be able to focus on the education of our kids, something that has been put on the back burner for two years, and to then allow us as parents to now decide how to best protect our children. During one of the meetings in November, when the 5% rule was implemented regarding masking, it was brought up that by the end of January/early February all kids 5 and up will have had the chance to be fully vaccinated. The school board then discussed that at that point, the masks should go to optional from there on out. I am asking for that to be put on the table and voted on. The CDC has even updated their guidance to say that cloth masks are ineffective. So why are we continuing this charade at our kids expense? When is our end date? When can you all refocus your attention on education? We have the tools we need to move forward. There is no reason why it should be treated differently than the flu. The flu is actually more detrimental to children, yet has no mandate surrounding it. I could have one child home with the flu, while my other child can go to school. I could have one child home with Covid and my perfectly healthy other child is being forced to stay home and not receive an education. This has to stop. I understand following the guidance of DHHS or the CDC but at some point I think it's important to use our own brains and decide whether some of these rules just don't make sense. To allow a vaccinated child to go to school with Covid in their household, and force an unvaccinated child to stay home is literally mind-boggling to me. BOTH can get Covid and spread Covid so why on earth are we treating them any differently? Dr. Fauci said, and I quote "what we learned, that's new is, that when you look at the level of virus in the nasopharynx, of people who are vaccinated, it's really quite high and equivalent to the level of virus in the nasopharynx of unvaccinated people who are infected." So again, I ask, why are we separating vaccinated vs. unvaccinated? Why are we treating healthy kids like unhealthy kids? Why are we keeping kids out of school and parents home, away from their jobs and unable to provide for their families? When are we going to stop sacrificing SO MUCH for this one virus? Education, mental health, social activities, sports, jobs, family...At what point do we allow parents to make judgements just as we would for any other illness? Our educators, nurses, and administrators are spending way too much time away from what they meant to be doing focusing on something that is the job of a parent. We need to refocus. Test scores are plummeting, children are struggling. My daughter who has already had Covid, is being forced to wear a mask, and feels like she's suffocating all day when her mask is doing absolutely nothing for her or anyone else because she has natural immunity. It's a façade, just to make people feel safer when in reality they are not in fact safer. When are we going to recognize natural immunity and encourage healthy living vs. suppressing our immune systems further with these masks? I am asking, again for some things to be reconsidered here. This morning, my 5-year old, who is dealing with anxiety was crying at the bus stop...do you know what I had to do? Put a mask on her face. Something needs to change.

Ms. Sheana DeBourke, Belmont Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

I am writing tonight to ask what data you used when you created the current mask policy. Two weeks seems like an extremely arbitrary number, which only continues to hurt our children. As of today, the high school has been well under 5% for 6 days, JMUS 6 days, TFS 6 days, and Masticola Elementary 8 days. Is it really necessary to continue to force innocent children to wear a mask for hours a day, against the wishes of parents? What power gives you the right to force my child to wear a medical device, regardless of whether it's in the halls or in the classrooms? When do you decide to use that power to force other medical devices on my child? Where is the off-ramp with masks and quarantining?

How does it make any sense to quarantine a child, who is not vaccinated, if exposed to a household contact, but not a child who is “up-to-date” with vaccination? It is well known that someone who is vaccinated can still catch and spread COVID-19. Even getting a booster has little to no effect on catching, and therefore spreading, COVID, especially OMICRON. If you cared so much about the spread of COVID, you would continue to quarantine everyone who is exposed to a household contact. But it seems we are just continuing on the course of making illogical decisions. Kids can take their masks off to eat, when they are sitting with each other for a period of time, but not passing each other in the hallway. Again, it just doesn’t make sense. But why don’t we continue with the virtue signaling to make people feel better?

Also, how does it make sense to require residents to wear masks inside the high school for the school board meeting when we can opt our children out of wearing them while inside the high school. Again... arbitrary rules.

Thank you all for your time, and I look forward to your answers regarding the data that led to the mask policy.

Ms. Sara Locke, Cota Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

I would love to assume that the data speaks for itself, but unfortunately, I am well aware that the presence at this evening’s meeting will be loud, present “alternative facts,” and make the same data-averse statements as we have all heard at meetings past.

The state is averaging 2,700 new cases of Covid daily.

Test positivity in NH is now 22.2% — more than a 10 point increase over the worst peak previously.

All of our schools have teetered on the 5% threshold since Christmas break, and 4 out of 6 are currently under mask mandates.

Our hospitals are strained and healthcare providers are very literally begging us to help them help us, because they’re running out of both hands and beds.

These are facts that are not open to interpretation or opinion. It is inexcusable to argue in favor of any action that would contribute to worsening this crisis. At minimum, our current plans for targeted mandatory masking need to stay in place. To do better, the opt-out at all schools should be revoked for a minimum period until this crisis subsides.

3. RECOGNITIONS

There were none.

4. INFORMATIONAL UPDATES

a. Superintendent Update

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen the leadership had discussed how best to recognize some of the great things that were going on in the school system. He said the team came up with the idea of having a website where parents and others could make positive comments about the staff.

He also said they currently had over fifty very positive comments from parents and community members.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen shared some of the other things they were working on the district's vision that would ultimately lead to a strategic plan.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the School Safety Committee and had redrafted the crisis management plan and were reviewing their processes and procedures. He added that the current student handbooks were being reviewed by legal counsel to make sure they were in compliance with any federal and state statutes. He also said they were looking at administrative evaluation instruments and were in the process of reviewing a draft of such document. Further, Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said they were reviewing the student discipline policy and had met with the Labor Council and General Civil Rights Counsel and he would present the Board with a draft of that policy in the near future.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said they were also looking at updating existing job descriptions, creating job descriptions, and making sure they were in ADA compliance. He also said they were looking at the school calendars so they were more consistent with the calendars in the CTE so no student would miss school.

b. Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Update

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Yarlott commented at the last school board meeting it was said there was concern surrounding student's readiness for the mid-terms. She said the leadership teams met and they had a very comprehensive outline for parents/students/teachers about what the teacher would do if a student had missed a lot of school, what the student needed to do, and what the parent needed to do. She said she would put the list on the website as well as on Facebook.

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Yarlott said they were looking at a software package that could house their curriculum and update their curriculum.

c. Assistant Superintendent for Business Update

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell said the automation and publication of the curriculum online was going to be a major step forward in terms of getting things out to the public and the staff.

d. School Board Update

There were no new updates.

e. School Representative Update

Student Representative Vadney said the high school juniors were having a fundraiser with Chipotle on Tuesday, January 25th from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

5. OLD BUSINESS

a. Health and Safety Task Force Update

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the antigen and PCR test positivity rate over seven days for Merrimack was about 32% which was about ten times what it was several months ago.

He said on a positive note, all of their schools were under the 5% benchmark. He said he wanted to use a two-week trend before he changed anything regarding the mask policy.

b. Board's Response to COVID Data and Recommendation

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said his recommendation was to continue with the current mask policy for the month of February including opting out but with the provision that if any school reached a 5% positivity rate or more they would go back to mandatory masking until there was a two-week consecutive period of under 5%.

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to continue with the current mask policy for the month of February. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Board Member Peters said she was hopeful, according to the experts, that they would start to see a decrease in cases but she felt it was not the right time to make changes to the policy.

Board Member Barnes said she wanted to make it clear that the Board was basing their decisions based on the data and not based on a certain date.

Chair Guagliumi stated she agreed with keeping the policy where it was to keep students and teachers in school.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

c. Proposal for Visioning Task Force – Next Steps

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Yarlott said the purpose of the community visioning process was to engage with a broad range of stakeholders in Merrimack to develop a common understanding of the vision for learning for the Merrimack schools, the values, priorities, opportunities, and challenges. She said the work would support district and school staff to plan for the future and lay the foundation for launching a strategic planning process. She said the first phase would include making sure persons on the task force would be updated on common trends, work on the vision (Vision of a Learner from pre-K through grade 12) from April to June of 2022.

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Yarlott recommended Bill Wilmot to be the potential facilitator. She said Mr. Wilmot worked with the schools helping to implement Universal Design for Learning Program (UDL) and worked for the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST).

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to accept the proposal for Visioning Task Force as presented. Board Member Peters seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

6. NEW BUSINESS

a. Substitute Pay Rates

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen proposed that the district increase the rate for substitute teachers to remain competitive. He said the overall increase would be approximately \$30,000 and he said he felt the budget could absorb the cost given the fact that there had been a surplus in the substitute account over the last two to three years.

Board Member Barnes said the proposed rate of \$100.00 would just put them on par with surrounding communities. She said she felt the rate should be \$125.00 for substitute teachers, and \$250 for nurses. (per day)

Board Member Hardy said she felt it was critical to have people who were familiar with the schools and the curriculum. She said she was in support of the proposed changes.

Board Member Barnes said she also felt the building-based floater needed to be moved up to \$150.00.

Vice Chair Rothhaus said although she agreed with the proposed rate increase, she felt the district needed to take a look at the resources they did have.

Board Member Barnes said the district needed to do some work in the future to recruit and retain substitute teachers.

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to accept the proposed substitute pay scale for the balance of 2021 – 2022, with the following adjustments:

Full day substitute:	\$125.00
Half day substitute:	\$ 62.50
Building-based floating substitute:	\$150.00
Nurse:	\$250.00

Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

b. Other

There was no other new business.

7. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. November 18, 2022, Non-Public Minutes (9:34 p.m.) & January 11, 2022, Non-Public Minutes

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve the November 18, 2022, and January 11, 2020, non-public minutes as presented. Board Member Peters seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

b. January 3, 2022, Public Minutes

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve the January 3, 2022, public minutes as amended. Board Member Peters seconded the motion.

Edits:

Page 3 – Further discussion was needed regarding putting the Thorntons Ferry Roof in a Warrant Article in that it would provide some transparency to the public. – Chair Guagliumi

Page 1 – “Chair Barnes” was changed to “Board Member Barnes” – Board Member Barnes

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

c. January 4, 2022, Public Minutes

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve the January 4, 2022, minutes as presented. Vice Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

8. CONSENT AGENDA

a. Educator Nominations

- Mr. Mitchell Bull – One-year Language Arts Teacher, Merrimack Middle School
- Ms. Elyse Komitzsky – One-year Special Education Teacher, JMES

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda as presented. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

9. OTHER

a. Committee Reports

There were no reports to share.

b. Correspondence

Chair Guagliumi said the Board received one correspondence from a Merrimack resident expressing concerns surrounding CRT (Critical Race Theory). She said she also received a few emails regarding masking versus not masking.

c. Comments

There were no comments made.

10. PUBLIC COMMENTS ON AGENDA ITEMS

Ms. Cindy Parente, Shady Lane (Board Member Barnes read allowed the following email into the record)

I want to thank the Board members for the incredible amount of time and professionalism they give to our town.

I am writing in support of our mask policy. Thank you for your consistency in trying to keep our students, teachers, staff, and community safe and healthy.

Ms. Becky Statz, 11 Bradford Drive (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

Let's just drop the masks please. Masks do not make a difference in transmission, and neither do vaccines. Many places in Europe have now recognized that masks produce measurable IQ and social deficits in children, and therefore, have dropped them. At this point, we are doing more harm than good and instilling fear in our children. Let's give our children the gift of their childhood

back please. Covid is endemic, it will never be leaving. Time to foreswear fear tactics and get back to living.

Forgive my forgetfulness, but with all due respect, statistics and numbers used in these meetings should ONLY be those which pertain to the town of Merrimack. 3,000 cases for the day is pertinent to the state, not to our schools or town. Of approximately 12,000 residents, if we had a new infection rate of 3,000 per day, THAT would be cause for panic and health and safety considerations. Thank God we are not there. Let's compare apples to apples please.

Jamie Gibson, Island Drive (Board Member Barnes read the following email into the record)

I'm going to try to keep this short before you make any major decision. Please consider, that we're coming up to the two-year mark on Covid and we need to move from trying to "prevent exposure" to "living with it". There are vaccines for all school-aged children (if the parent deems it necessary), boosters, masks, delivery services and even a free Charter School in town requiring masks on those children. With all these options for someone to feel safe, Merrimack Public School should compromise and leave it up to the parents. It's no longer a preventable situation, we need to just live with it.

With that said, it's time to move past all these mandates and move forward to bringing our community together in a positive way. The only way we can do that is to compromise. The compromise of letting people/parents live how they want to live. Please consider removing any type of mandate and leave it up to the parents, the ones who know their own child best.

Ms. Jennifer Jobin, Merrymeeting Drive (Board Member Barnes read the following email into the record)

I'm concerned with the way that parents were chosen for the task force. With such an important mission, it may have been a better choice to have this made public so that interested parents with diverse backgrounds could have applied.

Ms. Karen Brown, Four Winds Road (Board Member Barnes read the following email into the record)

Thank you for continuing to serve our community. It has been informative watching recent School Board meetings as you discuss the 2022 – 2023 district budget. For anyone watching or attending it has become clear that Thorntons Ferry urgently needs a new roof. I fully support increasing the rate of pay for substitute teachers, paraprofessional's, and nurses. Taking a creative approach is critical in attracting and retaining substitutes for the remainder of the school year and beyond. School districts in other areas have created an innovative approach to staff their schools during the Omicron surge. These districts offer a premium for mid-term substitutes. Mid-term substitutes commit to working four or five consecutive days. In return, they receive a rate between the day rate and the long-term rate. It creates continuity for the children in the event their teacher or specialist, or paraprofessional is in quarantine. It also lessens the pressure on school district personnel by streamlining the process. One substitute is easier to find and manage than four or five.

At approximately 8:00 p.m. Board Member Barnes made a motion to adjourn. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.