

**Merrimack School Board Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Merrimack Town Hall – Matthew Thornton Room
February 7, 2022**

**6:30 p.m. – Non-Public Session pursuant to RSA 91-A:3, II (a) (b) (c)
Merrimack TV Training Classroom**

- **Staff Welfare**

Present: Chair Guagliumi, Vice-Chair Rothhaus, Board Member Hardy, Board Member Peters, and Board Member Barnes. Also present were Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell, Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen, and Student Representative Vadney.

Not Present: Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Yarlott - Excused

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. Ken Martin, Woodward Road, addressed the Board and said he was grateful that Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen's contract was extended as he felt he had a professional, calm demeanor.

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

I am writing in to ask for the mask policy once again to be changed to completely optional, and for normal practices to be reinstated. There are surrounding towns changing their masks policies to optional for students and staff. We are at a point where we have the tools to combat Covid and we need to return to normal for the sake of our children, in all aspects. The Litchfield superintendent stated just last week that masks would now be optional and that they are moving to "a greater degree of normalcy and learning to live with the virus" I would really hope that Merrimack can do the same. It is time.

Ms. Nicole Arp, 329 DW Highway (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

After doing a lot of research and speaking with school administrators, other parents, and the Interim Chief Educational Officer, I would like to know if the mask policy is even legally enforceable. I have asked in an email to show me what legal authority the School Board has over me to make this medical decision for my children. The response was, "I ask that you please work with us and help us get through a virus that is spreading very rapidly." That sounds like a request

to wear a mask, not a requirement and they refused to show me any laws that give anyone else more authority over parents. I also asked about the legitimacy and legality of requiring a doctor's note to exempt children from wearing a mask and again, was not answered. I am finding it very difficult to understand why I need anyone's permission to make this decision for my children. Even the legal references listed on the mask policy do not show how this is enforceable. The State of New Hampshire has not been in a state of emergency since June of 2021 and there are not any federal, state, local mandates, or laws regarding mask use. I also asked what the disciplinary action was for students refusing to wear a mask and was ignored by some, however, the principal said that the student would be spoken to, and the parents would be called, but they could not tell me about any further discipline beyond that.

On the mask opt-out form, the school board made sure they could not be held responsible for any harm by opting your child out of wearing a mask, but what about the reverse? Is the School Board going to be held responsible for any mental or physical harm done to children by making a policy that requires students to wear a mask?

The CDC has finally announced that cloth and medical masks are not effective against preventing Covid. Even the N95 masks need to be professionally fitted to the wearer to provide some protection. Also, the NH Department of Health and Human Services specifically states on their school and childcare toolkit that they "recommend" face mask use for individuals that desire more protection. Nowhere does it say that schools can require students to wear a mask, even if community or school transmission increases. It only mentions the mask requirement for buses because it is a federal mandate.

After speaking with other parents, lack of response from school leaders, and no clear disciplinary action explained, I really hope that I am wrong, but it seems like the only way a child can go to school without having to wear a mask is if they are sent to school without one and/or refuse to listen to the teacher if they are asked to put one on. Are children, as young as 5 years old, responsible for standing up for themselves if they do not want to wear a mask at school? Why cannot parents advocate for their own children's health and spare them the harassment from teachers and administrators telling them to put their masks on? Children will listen to the teachers even if the rule they must follow may not be justifiable or make them feel uncomfortable. I really do not understand how any of this is ok, ethical, or even legal. No one is answering any of my questions and all parents deserve to know what gives the School Board the power to make this policy and enforce it, especially when so many people oppose it and feel it is harmful to their children.

After repeated attempts requesting questions to be answered, the school board needs to provide actual legal references that prove that the mask policy is legally and ethically enforceable regardless of the School Board member's personal views.

Ms. Sheana DeBourke, 89 Belmont Drive, (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

Bret Weinstein has said, "No healthy society takes health from young people to protect the old and infirm...not an acceptable and ethical trade." But that is what we have been doing, sacrificing our children's mental and physical health so that adults can "feel" safe, regardless of whether they actually are any safer. We all know cloth masks do not prevent the spread of COVID-19. The CDC even finally admitted it. I do not know why we have to continue to repeat ourselves, but we will. Current hospitalizations are down. 244 today, three weeks ago it was at 426, a month prior to that there were 475. We have fewer hospitalizations today than on November 16th, when there were 260. COVID-19 is a seasonal virus, and masks in the school setting do not stop

transmission. There is no data that shows conclusively that masks make any difference, yet you continue to force our children to wear them. Fortunately, all of the schools are well below the 5% mark for cases, and that is on-trend. I sent the superintendent an email on January 25th but received no response. I still expect an answer, and the community deserves an answer, as to why the decision was made to use a 2-week timeframe once a school has hit one single day of 5%. Bill stated at the January 18th meeting that “2 to 3 days does not constitute a valid trend.” If that is the case, why would we use a single day at 5% to constitute the removal of the opt-out? So, I ask you to remove the mask mandate completely. It is time to unmask the children. Parents who wish their children to continue to wear a mask can certainly do so, but there is no need for required masks in the classroom or in the hallways. It is also time to unmask the teachers if they wish to do so. If not now, then when? When will kids get to actually see their teachers’ faces? How can anyone minimize the importance of that? Masking is a barrier to communication. Even Dr. Leana Wen, a medical analyst for CNN, has stated that “cloth masks are little more than facial decorations.”

If you need more data, South Korea is 99% masked, 85% fully vaxxed, and they use vaccine passports. The number of daily new cases was still higher than they have ever been in January. Washington State has a mask mandate, yet daily new cases per 1M a couple of weeks ago were 7 times higher than when mandates were reinstated in August of 2021. You cannot mask your way out of COVID cases.

Again, I will also ask you to review the policy you’ve implemented in which a child who is “up-to-date” with vaccination can go to school if in close contact with a sick family member, but a child who has not been vaccinated, or is not up to date, regardless of whether or not he’s had COVID, has to be quarantined. Please explain to me how that makes any kind of sense. If it did, you would not allow a grace period. So where is the off-ramp? When does it end? When do you finally admit that masking children has no bearing or impact on cases in the schools?

Ms. Rebecca Statz, 11 Bradford Drive, addressed the Board and said she did not think the School Board should request children to wear a piece of medical equipment, such as an N95 mask, on their faces.

Mr. Alan Beebe, 81 Wire Road (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

End the mask requirements. You are creating a mental health crisis in the community. Thank you.

3. RECOGNITIONS

There were no recognitions.

4. NEW BUSINESS

- a. Update on Concession Stand at Merrimack High School

Dr. Ralph Wolf was present on behalf of a small Merrimack charity called Laura’s World Fund. He said the previous year the Board gave the charity permission to upgrade the concession stand at the high school football field. He said he was before the Board to ask permission to let students place personalized bricks on the walkway around the concession stand.

Dr. Wolf said he would like permission to send out a mailing to students and alumni and then perhaps put flyers in the cafeteria when it came closer to laying the bricks.

Vice-Chair Rothhaus commented she felt it was a wonderful idea, but she felt the Planning & Building Committee should also have some input. Board Member Barnes replied she did not feel the Planning & Building Committee needed to weigh in on the proposed project.

Board Member Barnes, regarding the proposed mailing, said she was concerned with student confidentiality. She said there was something called "Shared Mail" that might be helpful as it was a zip code targeted mailing service.

Chair Guagliumi noted Dr. Wolf was welcome to put flyers in the cafeteria and they could send a document out districtwide.

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve that the Laura's World Fund communications be promoted through the district's email notification system as well as the district's website for the brick walkway. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

5. INFORMATIONAL UPDATES

a. Superintendent's Update

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen thanked the Board for increasing the rate of pay for substitutes. He said there were 40 recent applications.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen thanked the Board for their confidence and said he very much enjoyed working with the entire team.

b. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Yarlott Update

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said they had a great discussion with Mr. Jay McTighe regarding "Understanding by Design." He said the district was working with Mr. McTighe to implement the Understanding by Design model.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the first "Visioning" meeting would be held on February 17th, and the "School Calendar" meeting would be held later in the week and hoped to make the calendar a little bit more user-friendly.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen added he would be distributing a document that he developed that came primarily from the University of Missouri to staff regarding a Guide to Cultural and Religious Observances. He said it provided staff with some insight as to what students and their families experience when they celebrated different occasions.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen shared that there would be a vaccine clinic on February 16th and February 17th from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the Merrimack High School cafeteria.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said each year Operation Homefront presented the Military Child of the Year Award to one outstanding young person from each military branch. He said of the nearly 2 million military children who served the nation alongside their parents, Alexis Possion was selected as a semi-finalist from the air force branch. He also said the National High School Academic Squad was announced and he noted that the list included several Tomahawks and wished them congratulations.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen added that two times defending Granite State Challenge team won its first match the previous Saturday and would move on to the next round, the girls' Varsity basketball team finished the season at 10 – 8 and would host the first round of the playoff games the following evening against Dover, and two music students had attended the New Hampshire All-State Jazz Festival on February 4th.

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said Thorntons Ferry had raised over \$6,500 in one week for a new playground.

c. School Board Update

Chair Guagliumi said she was happy to share that Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen's contract had been extended by one year.

d. Student Representative Update

There was no update.

6. OLD BUSINESS

a. Health & Safety Task Force Update

Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the Covid numbers were dropping, although the state still identified Merrimack as an area of high transmission. He said moving forward the school nurses would make recommendations to him instead of the task force.

b. Board's Response to Covid Data

Chair Guagliumi noted that the data was available to School Board members, but a vote was not needed at this meeting.

c. Board's Response to 2022 – 2023 Warrant Articles – Budget Committee Recommendations

Chair Guagliumi stated Vice-Chair Rothhaus was not present at the last meeting where the Board discussed the Warrant Articles. She further stated that Vice-Chair Rothhaus would like to add her vote to the items.

Vice-Chair Rothhaus said she felt it was critical to get the teacher's contract passed.

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to approve the recommendation of Article 2: regarding the Acceptance of Gifts. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve the recommendation of Article 3: regarding the Collective Bargaining Agreement reached between the Merrimack School Board and the Merrimack Teacher’s Association. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

MOTION: Board Member Hardy made a motion to approve the recommendation of Article 4: “if Article 3 were defeated the School Board would be allowed to call one special meeting to address it.” Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to approve the recommendation of Article 5: regarding “Shall the school district approve the cost items included in the Collective Bargaining Agreement reached between the School Board and the Merrimack Teacher’s Association which results in net changes in salaries and benefits.” Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to approve the recommendation of the Special Warrant Article, Article 6, regarding “Shall the school district raise and appropriate the sum of \$1,600,500 for the purpose of a roof replacement at the Thorntons Ferry Elementary School. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

MOTION: Board Member Hardy made a motion to approve the recommendation of Article 7: regarding “Shall the school district vote to authorize the School Board indefinitely, until specific rescission, the authority to retain unassigned funds in an amount not-to-exceed 5% of the current fiscal year’s net assessment.”

The motion passed 4 – 1 – 0. (Nay – Vice-Chair Rothhaus)

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve the recommendation of Article 8: regarding the operating budget in the amount of \$84,439,166 with a default budget of \$83,174,461. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell stated that the Budget Committee had voted to increase the operating budget by \$10.00 for the razing of the Brentwood building as a ceremonial placeholder. He said the new total operating budget was \$83,439,166.

Board Member Barnes pointed out that the Budget Committee could add a dollar amount to the bottom line, but they could not money to a specific line item. Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell replied that was correct.

The motion passed 4 – 1 – 0. (Nay – Vice-Chair Rothhaus)

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to repeat the vote. Board Member Barnes seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

7. POLICIES

- a. Annual Review of Investment Policy (DFA)

There being no comments on the policy, Chair Guagliumi stated it would be on the next meeting's Consent Agenda.

- b. First Reading of Revised Drug-Free Workplace/Drug-Free Schools Policy (GBEC)

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell read aloud the Revised Drug-Free Workplace/Drug-Free School Policy into the record.

Board Member Barnes said she felt criminal activity should also be reported after the date of hire. Chair Guagliumi asked Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell to bring that issue to the attorney's attention.

- c. First Reading of Employment References & Verification (Prohibiting the Aiding & Abetting of Sexual Abuse (GADA)

Board Member Hardy read aloud the First Reading of the Employment References & Verification (Prohibiting the Aiding & Abetting of Sexual Abuse) into the record.

Vice-Chair Rothhaus stated, regarding the Student Discipline Policy, she did not feel that participating in high school graduation should be used as student discipline. Interim Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the policy was currently being reviewed with the leadership team.

Board Member Peters said graduation was the culmination of a student's entire school career and did not feel a student should be defined by one moment as it pertained to level one through four offenses.

8. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. December 6, 2021 – Non-Public Minutes (9:00 p.m.)

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to approve the minutes from the December 6, 2021, non-Public meeting. Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

- b. January 11, 2022 – Public Minutes

MOTION: Board Member Vice-Chair Rothhaus made a motion to approve the minutes from the January 11, 2022, public meeting. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

c. January 18, 2022 – Non-Public Minutes (6:30 p.m.) & Public Minutes

MOTION: Board Member Vice-Chair Rothhaus made a motion to approve the minutes from the January 18, 2022, non-public and public meetings. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 4 – 0 – 1. (Abstained – Vice-Chair Rothhaus)

9. CONSENT AGENDA

Educator and Administrator Nominations

- Ms. Athena Tsourvakas, Tech Ed Teacher, Merrimack Middle School
- Ms. Alice Kerr, Special Ed Teacher, James Mastricola Elementary School
- Mr. Kyle Masson, Social Studies Teacher, Merrimack High School
- Mr. John Mullen, III, Science Teacher, Merrimack High School
- Mr. Stephen Claire, Principal, Merrimack High School

MOTION: Board Member Barnes made a motion to accept the Consent Agenda as presented. Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

10. ACCEPTANCE OF GIFTS/GRANTS UNDER \$5,000

- Nancy A. Miller Trustee to Merrimack High School for \$2,500 to purchase Lacrosse equipment for the players.
- The Alex Bronchuk Memorial Foundation to Merrimack High School for \$3,000 to purchase Lacrosse equipment for the players.

MOTION: Vice-Chair Rothhaus made a motion to accept the donations with the School Board's sincere appreciation. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

11. OTHER

a. Committee Reports

Board Member Peters said the Budget Advisory Committee had met and discussed razing the Brentwood building. She said the Budget Advisory Committee wanted to send a very strong message that they would like to see the Brentwood building gone.

Board Member Peters said the other item that came up was regarding the request from the Technology Director's to look for a lease option for some important technology equipment that needed to be replaced versus a purchase option.

Board Member Peters requested a comparison of teachers that had resigned the current year versus in the previous years, especially as it pertained to teachers leaving to work for other school districts with a larger salary. She added there was a public hearing scheduled for February 8, 2022.

Board Member Hardy said there was a Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment Committee meeting on January 20th and one of the items on the agenda was the update for the NEASC (New England Association of Schools & Colleges) visit to be held May 15th through May 18th. She said they also discussed the Health Curriculum update (K through 12).

Vice-Chair Rothhaus said the Parks & Recreation Committee met on January 26th and the updates were:

- Looking for summer camp counselors.
- The Annual Winter Carnival to be held on Saturday, February 26th.
- Working with the school district regarding the shortage of field space.

b. Correspondence

- The Board received correspondence regarding a non-affiliated school group that wanted access to the Merrimack Middle School for cheerleading.
- A parent had concerns about the accuracy of the dashboard.
- Received multiple emails that were “for” or “against” masking.
- Communication received regarding being able to bid on an afterschool program.

c. Comments

Vice-Chair Rothhaus commented she was having hearing issues and noted some members of the Board had been taking their masks down while they spoke so she could read their lips.

Board Member Hardy requested that a presentation on the CTE Program be added as a future agenda item.

12. PUBLIC COMMENTS ON AGENDA ITEMS

Ms. Kathy Komar, Belmont Drive, asked who would vet what was written on the bricks regarding the proposed project at the concession stand at the high school. She also asked if the donation given for Lacrosse was for both male and female teams. Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell replied he would find out.

Ms. Michelle Karakaedos, Swift Lane (Board Member Barnes read aloud the following email into the record)

I recently pulled my youngest from Thornton’s Ferry after one day of the mask mandate. She was anxious, had stomach pains, a headache, and said she hates school and never wants to go back. This is not like her. She had compromised all fall with before and aftercare and hallway masking and we went to the eye doctor, regular doctor, and could not figure out why she had headaches. That day it hit me, the masking is causing issues for my child and now as a first grader she wanted nothing to do with school. As a school counselor and former preschool teacher for years, this broke

my heart. I pulled her because her safety is my priority. My oldest is in middle school and wants to start to be with her friends. I am asking you to drop this mandate before I pull another child. We are seeing even schools in Massachusetts that were stricter than NH starting to allow kids to be mask-free. Everyone who wants to be vaccinated has had the chance now. We need to be done with this madness and abuse.

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

Thank you all for your patience, and for still showing up to do your jobs. I know it is not easy to be on a School Board these days, and your dedication has not gone unnoticed.

Tonight, I just want to say thank you: there were no recognitions earlier, but I have recognized so much good lately.

Thank you to Julie DeLuca and Michaela Champlin, for being champions for the kids in so many ways, and in every way necessary regardless of it being “their job” or not.

Thank you to the DPW and district facilities employees for their work in super annoying weather conditions to keep our school properties safe, and accessible.

Thank you to Hailey Fallon, the school counselor at TFS, for her relationship-building with the kids — and killer dedication shown when teaching boring things like parts of the brain when they have way cooler things happening, like camping day.

Thank you to Bill Olsen for stepping in when necessary and playing mediator to ensure the best interests of the kids is on record.

Thank you to the PTF for your incredible dedication to TFS and aggressive goals to create the most inclusive school we can have.

May we all remember to say thank you and remember that our kids are our future, and they deserve all of this.

Mr. Alan Beebe, 81 Wire Road (Board Member Barnes read the following email into the record)

It is absolutely insane to me that this school board meeting will end with the mask mandate STILL in place.

To pass the buck and put this on the school nurses is a total lack of leadership.

I fully support every single parent that sends their kids to school without a mask starting tomorrow. I will be joining you as I always have. This whole debate is over, and it is incredibly sad that you are continuing it.

At approximately 8:35 p.m. Vice-Chair Rothhaus made a motion to adjourn. Board Member Barnes seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.