

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
MARCH 24, 2020

Present: Ms. Susan Burgess-Cox, Chair
Ms. Andrea Prestwich, Secretary
Ms. Kate Bowen
Ms. Amy Checkoway
Mr. Michael Crowley
Ms. Tara Donner
Mr. John Phelan, Superintendent
Ms. Janice Darias, Assistant Superintendent
Mr. Anthony DiCologero, Director of Finance, Business and Operations

Also Present: Mr. Michael McAllister, Chenery Middle School Principal

1. OPENING BUSINESS

1.1 Call to order

Susan Burgess-Cox called the meeting to order at 7:18 p.m.

Susan Burgess-Cox explained the School Committee would be taking questions and comments from the public regarding topics listed on the agenda following the presentation and discussion of the School Committee.

Ms. Burgess-Cox provided an opportunity for the public comment on topics not listed on the agenda. No comments were made.

1.2 Adjustments to the Agenda

The 3.1 – Student Opportunity Act Vote was removed from the agenda due to an extension granted by the state on reporting this plan.

The School Committee viewed a presentation on the plan at the last meeting and it is available on the Belmont Public Schools website.

1.5 Chair's Report

Susan Burgess-Cox acknowledged the work of Superintendent Phelan and his leadership team in cooperation with staff and the Town administration. Much time has been put into this work and hopefully people are understanding of the work and circumstances.

1.6 Student Representative Report

There was no student representative in attendance.

1.7 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Phelan stated he would go right into his school closure update.

2. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

There was no unfinished business.

3. MAJOR BUSINESS

3.1 School Closure Update

Superintendent Phelan thanked Belmont Media for facilitating this remote meeting acknowledging the Committee will be improving steps for remote participation as time goes on.

In making decisions regarding school closure, remote learning and working with families who take part in special education, Belmont has been working with state and local agencies and organizations including: Massachusetts Department of Elementary Education (DESE), Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) and Massachusetts Association School Superintendents (MASS).

As a result of delays in state guidance, several area districts decided to partner regionally to make decisions such as the closure of area schools prior to the state-wide closure. These partner communities include: Arlington, Bedford, Belmont, Burlington, Lexington, Stoneham, Watertown, Winchester and Woburn. Superintendent Phelan read a joint statement from the partner communities regarding the vision of education during the time students are away from the classroom. The statement will be sent to families in each community in the coming week.

Superintendent Phelan provided an update on the plans for remote learning. Teachers are being asked to provide hours of in-face time working with their colleagues for the planning and engagement of students and five to ten hours of outward-facing time per week with students and families. Teachers are expected to provide support, re-teaching and enrichment opportunities to their students. Teachers are exploring podcasts and other online resources. Some of these programs are being piloted now and further guidance will be provided to educators moving forward.

All area superintendents are taking part in conference calls with MASS and DESE about the technical pieces of the educational model moving forward. A plan for a more instructional model is being worked on in the event that it becomes the recommendation of DESE or the governor to close schools beyond April 7th. There are also discussions regarding access for special education learners and English learners. Superintendent Phelan noted that K-12 teaching does not lend itself to online learning and it is felt that introducing new material with the expectation of grades may not be in the best interest of students at this time. Most districts are approaching this work in a similar fashion with guidance from MASS and DESE.

It is important that any instruction moved forward for some students must move forward for all students. Ken Kramer, Director of Student Services has sent a letter to his staff and parents of students on IEPs outlining ways to help support their students.

The district is collecting names of students who need devices to support an online platform in remote learning. Support will be provided to families who do not have at least one device in their home.

The Food Service Program has been in partnership with the Belmont Housing Authority and Belmont Food Pantry to provide meals intermittently and food throughout the week.

Superintendent Phelan thanked Dustin O'Brien and Gail Mulani from the Belmont Public Schools Food Service Department as well as the many volunteers who have helped with this effort.

Superintendent Phelan acknowledged the stress to students and parents this situation has caused. The district will provide support and continue relationships with students during this time. The district will seek further guidance from the state on remote learning if school closure continues beyond the expected time. Questions that cannot be answered at this time, including those related to MCAS and grades, will be addressed in the near future. The major concern right now is the safety and security of all students and families and knowing how to support them. Superintendent Phelan thanked all of the Belmont Town departments for their collaborative work during this crisis.

Susan Burgess-Cox invited the School Committee members to provide comments or ask any questions they had.

School Committee member Tara Donner explained the difficulty as a parent in not knowing day to day what is happening with her child's education and when contact would be coming from the teachers. She also went on to explain as a teacher herself, the difficulty in having to provide teaching to students in new ways with little or no training for staff or students.

School Committee member Amy Checkoway expressed thanks to the district leadership, teachers, fellow School Committee members, as well as parents who have been asking very good questions.

School Committee member Michael Crowley expressed his thanks to Superintendent Phelan, teachers and School Committee members noting everyone has been working very hard

School Committee member Kate Bowen also expressed appreciation to the School Committee, school leadership and town leadership. Ms. Bowen was grateful for the dialogue going on in the community to support connections.

School Committee member Andrea Prestwich thanked the administration and teachers for doing a great job in difficult times.

Superintendent Phelan explained that the district has paced out communications to families regarding the Covid-19 virus as information changes so rapidly. The administration wants to keep families informed but not overwhelmed.

Susan Burgess-Cox explained Belmont is trying to coordinate with area towns as well as the state to ensure equity in planning and implementing changes.

Superintendent Phelan stated school administrators have been working closely with the Belmont Education Association who have been very supportive.

School Committee member Andrea Prestwich noted Belmont schools are not funded at the same level other towns causing teachers to have a heavy load with limited resources. When a major crisis such as this occurs, staff are even more stretched than they are normally.

School Committee member Amy Checkowich stated we will figure out ways to listen to and reflect community feedback and move forward creatively even with the limited resources available.

Susan Burgess-Cox opened the discussion to comments from community members. She asked comments be beyond those already made or addressed in the meeting. Ms. Burgess-Cox noted that it is not the general practice of the School Committee to respond to comments or questions presented at a meeting. The Committee and Administration will collect comments to address topics raised at another meeting or time.

Questions and comments from community members:

- Paul Roberts – parent of two high school students. Mr. Roberts suggested a timeline on what the district will offer in terms of instruction going forward. In addition to meeting minutes and the website, Mr. Roberts would like the School Committee and administration to think about communicating on social media.
- David Sena – parent of high school freshman. Mr. Sena thanked the administration for helping the community work through this crisis. He questioned whether the Belmont Public Schools is able to pursue a strategy that may differ from other communities. What preparations are being made now in the event the schools stay closed longer than expected?
- Ann Ozawa – parent of grade 8 student. Ms. Ozawa offered compliments to teachers with their communications to students this past week.
- Andy Porter – Mr. Porter would like to better understand the plan in the event students out of school longer than is expected.
- Leah asked the question: What is the plan for graduation?
- Kai – parent of high school student noted concern about students achieving goals for this year.

Superintendent Phelan stated he will provide answers to questions as part of a FAQ or summary in the next Superintendent's newsletter.

- Seem Shavoz – Mr. Shavoz asked the following question: Would Belmont High School consider making all work pass/fail?
- Jeff Liberty – Mr. Liberty thanked everyone for work being done to support students. Mr. Liberty was interested in hearing what the School Committee and administration values as a community and wants to accomplish for students.
- A Wellington parent asked the following question: Will Belmont High School be opting out of student testing?
- Simon Rockhopper – Mr. Rockhopper asked the following question: Belmont has highly educated parents who will further their education if Belmont does not – how does this provide equity?
- Dane Joseph McCarthy - Mr. McCarthy thanked the administration for their efforts during this difficult time and asked: Will the high school pivot to an instructional mode sooner than the younger grades so students feel they are progressing?
- Natasha asked the following question: Are you considering the stress to children since they will be experiencing new learning formats?

4. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)

4.1 Finance Subcommittee

There was no report.

4.2 Policy and Procedure Subcommittee

There was no report.

4.3 Curriculum and Instruction Subcommittee

There was no report.

4.4 Capital Budget Committee

There was no report.

4.5 Warrant Committee

The Town is working on a plan to have meetings take place remotely.

4.6 Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee

The Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee will meet remotely on Thursday morning. There was a conference call today to prepare the agenda. The meeting has been posted with the information to join remotely.

4.7 Community Path Committee

There is a new website for updates. Students or community members can consider submitting artwork for Community Path Project Committee local contest that is taking place now.

Members are waiting to hear from meetings done with the MBTA and design team.

4.8 Financial Task Force II

There was no report.

4.9 High School Traffic Working Group

5. OTHER BUSINESS

5.1 Consent Agenda

5.2 Personnel Items - None

5.3 Business Items – None

5.4 Approval of Minutes

March 10, 2020

On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Amy Checkoway, it was VOTED 4-0-1 to approve the minutes of March 10, 2020.

6. FUTURE BUSINESS

April 14, 2020

School Committee Meeting

Susan Burgess-Cox stated it is to be determined how the meeting will be conducted. Public notice will include information on meeting accessibility or location.


7. ENCLOSURES

Strategic Plan

School Committee Goals

8. ADJOURN

On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Michael Crowley it was **VOTED** unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:15 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by 
Andrea Prestwich, Secretary