

**BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES**  
**REMOTE MEETING**  
**SEPTEMBER 22, 2020**

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

**1. OPENING BUSINESS**

1.1 Call to Order

Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m.

1.2 Citizens' Concerns

Julie Congress: parent of a 7th grader, expressed concern on the amount of homework children are receiving after being on screens all day.

Danielle Lemack: Belmont is one of 16 towns who received a letter from Commissioner Riley expressing concern on not opening in hybrid. Relayed the position provided to DESE from the American Academy of Pediatrics, and asked about expedited plans and resources an audit would demand.

Lars: expressed concern with the technology form of learning. Students have devices with infinite supply of music and videos during the day. Are there technical solutions in place to manage this?

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda

Major Business item 3.4 is switched with 3.5.

1.4 Chair's Report

Chair Andrea Prestwich thanked everyone for his or her emails with constructive suggestions.

1.5 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Phelan expressed thanks to all teachers and staff who worked over the summer preparing for the opening of schools. Preschools students began school last week, it was a joyful beginning and is going well.

**3. MAJOR BUSINESS**

3.1 Curriculum and Professional Development Update; Best Practices in Remote Learning

Superintendent Phelan explained the Curriculum Directors are here to present what they have been doing with professional development over the summer.

The Belmont Public Schools Curriculum Directors provided an update on the Professional Development they have been working on over the summer. They began by assessing what worked and did not work with remote learning in the spring. The Directors started this work using a book titled “Best Practices in Remote Learning” by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey and John Hattie. Hattie specializes in meta-analyses, with over 95,000 studies reviewed, to quantify the effect of different teacher practices. The book guides educators to choose instructional learning strategies that have the most powerful effects on student learning. Distance learning is not an accelerator of learning but it does not necessarily have a negative impact either.

The teachers used the first ten days of school to develop tool kits. They learned from their experiences in the spring and worked many hours to develop six hours of professional development that modeled their own best practices. No significant learning takes place without a positive relationship between teacher and student. Teachers use a wide range of strategies to build trust with students. They want their learning to be focused on standards. All Belmont Public Schools staff were able to join a Professional Development workshop with Kim Thomas who provided training on how to help all students feel a sense of community.

School Committee members asked questions on student assessment. It is more difficult to assess students in a remote setting, some practices have been made easier by the technology. Teachers are inviting students to come in person using social distancing in order for assessments to be done. Teachers are also relying on technology such as flip grid and adobe spark for assessments. Members discussed differentiation for students with presenters, and the barriers of large student cohorts and potential benefits of technological support. Educators shared they observed benefits of more student “voice and choice” in media learning formats at the upper grade levels. Supt. Phelan noted the shared learning resources being utilized across departmental divisions as a “silver lining”. Member Gomez suggested utilizing “screen share” technology which would enable educators to work in a students screen space simultaneously, while remotely with students.

Laura Jansen, Belmont High School senior stated the beginning of the year is going well. Teachers are understanding and show they care about the well-being of the students. There have been some drawbacks with technology difficulties but everyone has been patient and the rate of issues by email has dropped significantly.

### 3.2 COVID Testing Discussion

Chair Andrea Prestwich introduced Dr. Kate Jeffrey, Mass. General Hospital Immunologist. Dr. Jeffrey provided an overview of surveillance testing methods, which look for infection within a population. Dr. Jeffrey declared for the record that she has no financial ties to any of the companies that she would talk about this evening. Dr. Jeffrey discussed different methods of collecting testing samples; explained the differences between diagnostic and surveillance approaches to infection spread control. The scientific community largely recognizes the importance of surveillance testing to reduce the risk of virus spread; the CDC is not actively promoting this approach to infection control. She proposed getting baseline tests for all students and teachers to provide additional data to support return to in-person learning. Once schools open in hybrid, she suggests weekly testing of all teachers and ten percent student sampling weekly, similar to local private schools and institutions. The initial cost for surveillance testing is approximately \$80,000. This could be offset by funding from the CARES Act or future Covid

relief for K-12 schools, additional support could come from private fund-raising contributions. An ongoing model of surveillance testing, similar to nearby organizations, is proposed on 100% staff and 10% random student sampling weekly, resulting in an estimated cost of \$0.5M over the year. Proposed testing would be aimed at increasing confidence in low transmission and support increased in-person school hours.

Chair Andrea Prestwich provided a brief description of wastewater surveillance, as provided by Dr. Kate Rodriguez Clark who could not be in attendance. COVID-19 virus is present in wastewater of facilities used by infected individuals, and is a low cost method for detecting viral spread – approximately \$8500 per week for all schools. Wastewater sewage would be collected from each building each week and tested. Viral detection at any one school would then necessitate additional actions.

School Committee members discussed the pros and cons of the testing proposal and potential ways to fund it. Members expressed a desire for State and Federal leadership to take a more proactive role on the issue, and the pros and cons of utilizing the COVID funds to support testing. Members expressed support of testing, questioned the details of data collection, privacy, and contact tracing plans. Members discussed the timeline for potential testing and that it may happen at any point in the year and provide a benefit. Members Bowen and Crowley expressed support that testing would not preclude the opening. Supt. Phelan indicated the model had potential to be scaled up across the state, that the funding source can be looked into further, that additional Chapter 70 funds anticipated have not come through to municipalities yet.

*On a motion offered by Andrea Prestwich and seconded by Catherine Bowen, it was **VOTED** unanimously on a roll call vote to enable the school administration to look at the feasibility and logistics of surveillance testing, both saliva and wastewater testing as presented.*

### 3.3 Start of School Report Out

Superintendent Phelan provided a report on the start of school explaining the priorities for the opening of schools have always been health and safety, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and academic engagement. (“2020-9-22 - 2 SchoolCommittee\_FINAL.pdf”)

The air exchange assessments have produced an initial summary of results that were presented to School Committee at the last meeting. The district is waiting for the final data. Air purifiers have arrived and have been distributed in accordance with the Bala report of rooms in need.

Sports for boys and girls began yesterday. Co-curricular clubs have begun as well. High School Principal Isaac Taylor has submitted a report to the Belmont Health Department to host SAT testing at Belmont High School – more information to follow.

Superintendent Phelan, Health Department Director Wesley Chin and Director of Nursing Beth have been working with the Aftercare Directors to support opening the program in outdoor sessions at their schools. The district will provide space free at this time, and will provide PPE at a reduced cost along with medical protocol training. Each director will review the health protocol with the Director of Nursing and the Board of Health is reviewing each plan.

Superintendent Phelan thanked the Technology staff for all the work they have been doing to get remote learning up and running. There were 400 requests for support on the first days of school but the number has now dropped significantly.

Superintendent Phelan provided a context of hybrid learning. Each level has prioritized instructional time with teachers and students. Although hybrid learning will allow students to return to some in person instruction, it will also decrease the instructional time compared to remote learning. School Committee members reviewed the schedule for a typical hybrid week. Director McAllister explained the functionality of the Elementary School (k-4) hybrid and remote schedules interchange.

The deadline for families to submit a decision to choose hybrid or remote was September 17, 2020. As of today, the parent/guardian selections break down as follows: 73% hybrid, 13% remote only, 14% unsubmitted. The district is following up individually to determine the outstanding submissions. The district is in the process of reviewing data to develop cohorts based on siblings, class balance and transportation factors.

### 3.4 Elementary Hybrid Model Vote

The rationale for moving to hybrid (phase 2) is based on the positive health metrics in Belmont. The Facilities Department is in the process of addressing issues related to the HVAC systems.

Phase 1 began on September 16 with K-12 remote learning and in-person learning for “high needs and complex” students K-12 per DESE guidelines.

Phase 2 would begin the week of October 5 with K-4 hybrid learning and 5-12 continuing remote.

Phase 3 would begin no sooner than October 22 with 5-12 hybrid.

Committee members acknowledged the development of the models over the summer and responsiveness to community feedback. Supt. Phelan articulated the “base model” is used throughout most districts, and has room to grow in areas that are best for children. Lunch period presents constraints between the phases, and a later start for middle school would impact lunch period. Discussion of how families have been impacted by COVID in multiple ways, ensure food security and support as a priority. Schedule provide the best current staff and to bring on anyone new; keeping children with that teacher.

*On a motion offered by Michael Crowley and seconded by Amy Checkoway, it was **VOTED** unanimously on a roll call vote to accept the elementary hybrid as presented tonight with the contingency that there will be improvements as we move forward.*

### 3.5 Review of Phase Change Version 1 and 2

Superintendent Phelan provided more information on the hybrid model based on request from families. The air exchange data and classroom capacity will be reviewed later this week. It was decided to move towards hybrid based on the positive Covid numbers being low in the area. School Committee members discussed the pros and cons of opening in hybrid earlier. The Committee agreed to re-visit the timeline for grades 5-12 at the next meeting, noting some potential for the flipped model to alleviate hallway “traffic” at the high school level, aspects of live-streaming, market availability of professionals being limited, and constraints of maintaining transportation and start times at pre-existing levels.

*On a motion offered by Catherine Bowen and seconded by Amy Checkoway, it was **VOTED** unanimously on a roll vote to accept the updated “Accelerated Phased Plan” as presented this evening.*

*On a motion offered by Michael Crowley and seconded by Catherine Bowen, it was **VOTED** unanimously to re-examine the phasing of 5-12 return to school next week with the goal of making that return as soon as possible.*

*On a motion offered by Evelyn Gomez and seconded by Tara Donner, it was **VOTED** unanimously on a roll call vote to ask the district to re-examine the feasibility to in-person learning for federally recognized students categorized by high needs.*

**4. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES (as needed)**

4.1 Finance Subcommittee

The Finance Subcommittee will meet on September 29 at 8:00 a.m.

4.2 Policy and Procedure Subcommittee

The Policy and Procedure Subcommittee met yesterday (9/21). They reviewed the Health Department protocols and MASC policies and recommendations. They will revisit the draft policy after information is received from the Nursing Department. They also discussed the formation of an Equity Subcommittee.

4.3 Curriculum and Instruction Subcommittee

There was no report from the Curriculum and Instruction Subcommittee.

4.4 Capital Budget Committee

The Capital Budget Committee met on September 17 and voted on Town Meeting articles.

4.5 Warrant Committee

The Warrant Committee met on September 16 and voted on Town Meeting articles.

4.6 Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee

The Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee will meet tomorrow (9/23) at 8:00 a.m.

4.7 Community Path Committee

There was no report from the Community Path Committee.

4.8 Financial Task Force II

The Financial Task Force II will meet in two weeks. They recently reviewed a draft of a Structural Reform Committee the Select Board would like to create. They are looking at ways the Town might re-organize some revenue.

4.9 Rink Working Group

The Rink Working Group will meet on October 1.

4.10 EDCO

EDCO met last week. The Executive Director has submitted a letter of resignation. EDCO members discussed the transition and the choosing of someone to act until she is replaced.

5. **OTHER BUSINESS**

5.1 Consent Agenda

Vote on Donation of Piano

*On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Catherine Bowen, it was **VOTED** unanimously on a roll call vote to approve the acceptance of a Yamaha Piano donated by Alan and Nevart Asadoorian.*

5.2 Minutes – There were no minutes to be voted on.

6. **ADJOURN**

*On a motion offered by Michael Crowley and seconded by Tara Donner, it was **VOTED** unanimously on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 10:16 p.m.*

Respectfully Submitted by

  
Catherine Bowen, Secretary