

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES

REMOTE MEETING

JANUARY 11, 2022

**RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: February 2, 2022
TIME: 9:06 AM

Present: Ms. Amy Checkoway, Chair
Ms. Meghan Moriarty, Secretary
Ms. Kate Bowen
Mr. Mike Crowley
Mr. Ralph Jones
Mr. Jamal Saeh
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

Committee Chair Amy Checkoway called the meeting to order at 6:33 pm

1.2 Citizens' Concerns

These meeting minutes may include statements by members of the public. Although the School Committee tries to reproduce these statements faithfully, the School Committee does not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed in these statements and cannot guarantee that the information contained in these statements is accurate.

4. MAJOR BUSINESS

4.1 Health Update

In light of the dramatic increase in COVID cases, the SC and BPS administration added an SC meeting to discuss health and safety protocols (current and updates) with the community.

Superintendent Phelan indicated the overarching goal is to hold school in-person and allow students to engage with teachers and interact with coaches/extracurricular instructors. Mr. Phelan understands many families welcome this goal, and also acknowledges Belmont has families with concerns due to medical circumstances. In addition to last week's communication regarding the Board of Health and DESE recommendations, this conversation will center on what is best for Belmont Public Schools.

In his presentation, the Supt indicated that the CDC recently provided guidance on shortening the isolation period of individuals testing positive for COVID-19 from 10 days to 5 days. If symptoms are severe, an individual should isolate for 10+ days until symptoms subside. The CDC guidance dictates additional layered mitigations: symptoms must be resolved or resolving; individuals must be fever free without the aid of fever-reducing meds, individuals must continue to mask at all times in school for an additional 5 days. The CDC does not recommend antigen testing. Mr. Phelan noted the Town held two vaccine clinics recently and will host three more.

Given the Town of Belmont and BPS have among the highest vaccination rate in MA, along with scientific evidence that unvaccinated individuals are more likely to transmit the virus, have more severe symptoms, and have generally longer infectious period than vaccinated individuals, Superintendent Phelan proposed BPS follows DESE/DPH guidance AND adopt an additional mitigation: unvaccinated students shall be required to complete a 10-day isolation before returning to school.

Mr. Phelan also noted, at a recent meeting, the Board of Health made two recommendations that they recognize may be a challenge for the schools:

1. Negative antigen test as a condition to come back to school between day 6-10 days, tested at school prior to entering school
2. Distancing of 6 feet for those returning from isolation, at a separate lunch tables from others

With no evidence to substantiate in-school transmission and a positivity rate lower than State/Middlesex levels, the district needs to balance providing adequate education and student mental health with the residual COVID risk and will not include these two additional recommendations.

Lunchtime will be reviewed and may be adjusted to use volunteers. The plan will be reassessed, if there is evidence of in-school transmission.

The School Committee discussed the proposal on isolation guidelines.

Most SC members voiced their support of the recommendation to follow DESE/DPH guidance on 5-day isolation with a return to school on day six with no fever, and improving symptoms, along with the additional mitigation of a 10-day isolation for unvaccinated individuals. The SC was also supportive of vaccine clinics and expressed a common desire to maintain student academic continuity and social emotional- mental health.

The group expressed their concerns with lunch protocols, especially at the elementary level. Many SC members did not support isolating students to one table similar to an “allergy” strategy and questioned if this would be a HIPAA privacy violation. Mr. Phelan reported the high school and middle school students have the opportunity to take their lunches outside or other breakout spaces (high school) but this poses a supervision issue with elementary students. The district will look to use volunteers including PTA/Os to help.

Discussion arose on the efficacy of antigen tests as an index of transmission. Member Crowley expressed there is value in antigen testing and the purchase of test kits and subsequent use should be explored. Superintendent Phelan reported on a discussion with the Town Administrator regarding purchasing antigen test kits for BPS teachers and staff. Still to be determined is if antigen tests are the correct tool to use and a necessary expenditure (\$1M on tests for three weeks or put the funds to use for district positions). Member Moriarty reported the Select Board approved the purchase of test kits for when staff return from February break.

Chair Checkoway allowed for questions and comments from the community.

Mary Lewis- Endorsed the SC proposal and asked if it is possible to require vaccination similar to measles, etc. Ms. Lewis questioned the enforcement of table restrictions at CMS and thought the same difficulty would occur with lunch process.

Mariola Magovcevic – Voiced concern that the district is not doing contact tracing and asked how it is known whether there is in-school transmission. Ms. Magovcevic highlighted the BoH recommendation of 6ft distancing at lunch and thought 10-day isolation for all would be better.

Elshad Kasumov – Was concerned about many COVID related topics and complained about conflicting information.

Danielle Lemack –Encouraged the SC to weigh overall risks of prolonged isolation to children, indicating keeping them out of school is detrimental.

Jane MacKinnon – Stated she works in Lexington schools and lunch has not been a problem, indicating from her experience, children are very aware of when to keep masks on.

Kathrine Wall – Identified herself as the individual who made a comment at the BoH meeting that families may not be truthful with the symptom checker, but is pleased with the 5-day isolation guidance and possible use of volunteers.

Chair Checkoway asked for a motion to vote.

On a motion offered by Jamal Saeh and seconded by Amy Checkoway, the SC voted (5-1-0) that BPS will follow DESE guidance and adopt the following additional mitigation: all unvaccinated students shall be required to complete a 10 day isolation to return to school. (Vaccinated= someone who has completed two shots of Pfizer and Moderna vaccine and one shot of J and J vaccine) Crowley - nay

Member Crowley moved “The district will explore purchasing in conjunction with the Town, the cost and feasibility to supply antigen tests as a screening tool for students who have tested positive after their 5-day isolation period has expired during the surge period [end of February].” Kate Bowen seconded the motion and it was approved unanimously (6-0-0).

Member Saeh began the discussion on a proposal for a student vaccine mandate, reminding all that on October 4, 2021, the Belmont BoH passed a motion by a vote of 3-0, “To recommend to the school committee a vaccine mandate for eligible students following FDA approval.” Chair Checkoway was in support of moving forward to confirm the legality of a local strategy. Member Bowen recommended if SC would like to explore this option the BoH and legal counsel should be involved and suggested the motion also include advocacy to the Governor’s Office for such a mandate. Chair Checkoway will follow up to letter that was previously sent to the State Representatives on this topic.

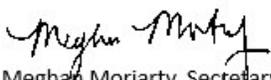
Member Bowen asked the SD for an update on compliance with the Extracurricular Vaccine Mandate at an upcoming SC meeting.

On a motion by Jamal Saeh and seconded by Mike Crowley, the SC voted unanimously (6-0-0) that the Policy Subcommittee develop a vaccine mandate policy to be completed and voted on by the SC no later than June.

6. ADJOURN

On a motion offered by Amy Checkoway and seconded by Meg Moriarty, it was VOTED unanimously (6-0-0) on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 8:48 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:


Meghan Moriarty, Secretary