

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
MARCH 8, 2022

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TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA

DATE: March 28, 2022
TIME: 9:10 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

Mr. Xuetao Wu, Student Advisor

1. OPENING BUSINESS

1.1 Call to Order

Committee Chair Amy Checkoway called the meeting to order at 6:31 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.

David Palmer –Shared news regarding the success of the MS MATHCOUNTS team and the Belmont High School math team. Mr. Palmer also voiced concern about increasing elimination of math offerings which allow for flexibility of course taking at the High School.

Heather Rubeski – Indicated there was confusion over the pool testing numbers presented at the Board of Health meeting. Ms. Rubeski also reported the email from Nursing Department also caused confusion.

Emily Westover – Offered a personal example of a lack of flexibility in math course taking with her own daughter.

1.3 Adjustments to the Agenda – The SC will not vote on isolation guidance due to the timing of the revised public posting of that agenda item.

1.4 Chair's Report

- Chair Checkoway reflected on the SC's 2021-22 school year goals for health and safety and the recent lifting of the mask mandate
- Thanked Superintendent Phelan for communications to families/school community over the past week
- Recognized the current focus of the SC on budget work, with a key priority to focus on equity and supporting the audit
- Announced the launch of the new DEI website

1.5 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Phelan highlighted:

- BMHS Topping Off Ceremony
- Chenery Solar Project as completed and generating electricity
- Boys Hockey Team in the MIAA Division 1 State Tournament
- Academic Success with MATHCOUNTS team and students taking the AMC8, AMC10 and AMC12
- Visual and Performing Arts Department with 24 students selected for Scholastic Art Awards, 74 students performed in MMEA Northeastern District ensembles, and 14 BHS students accepted to All State Festival with performances at Symphony Hall.

2. UNFINISHED BUSINESS - none

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- School Committee minutes of February 1, 2022
- School Committee minutes of February 15, 2022
- Executive Session Open session minutes of January – March 2022
- Equity Subcommittee minutes of June 11, 2021

On a motion offered by Mike Crowley and seconded by Jamal Saeh, it was VOTED unanimously, on a roll call vote (6-0-0) to accept the School Committee minutes of February 1, 2022, February 15, 2022 and the open session portion from Executive Sessions of January 5, January 28, February 18 and March 4, 2022.

On a motion offered by Jamal Saeh and seconded by Mike Crowley it was VOTED, on a roll call vote (3-0-0) to accept the Equity Subcommittee minutes of June 11, 2021.

4. MAJOR BUSINESS

4.1 MIT Audit Team Presentation of Results

Superintendent Phelan introduced Elizabeth Borneman and Belicia Smith of the MIT Equity Team who presented their audit findings in the Belmont Public Schools District-wide Equity Audit. (*SC Document: BPS_Equity_Audit_Presentation_Slides_3_8_2022*) Mr. Phelan reported Smith and Borneman were hired, last summer, to conduct an equity audit of the district. The findings represent the beginning of informed, strategic work related to equity and inclusion in Belmont Public Schools with BPS Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Chon'tel Washington.

The audit utilized the Analytical Framework for Equitable Educator Mindsets and Consequences, which include demographics, culture, socio-economic status, and social context tenants. In their presentation, the auditors covered main takeaways from climate surveys/district policies, staff interviews, student interviews, family focus groups, CMS/BHS school cultures, and the METCO program. The overarching Takeaways are:

Climate Surveys and District Policies

Across the board, staff scored highly to comparative districts on equity mindset indicators. Across the board, black and Native Indian and Multiracial students report the lowest sense of belonging, inclusion and sense that their school has cultural awareness and action.

Teacher, Staff, District Leaders Interviews

Many teachers across BPS schools demonstrate equitable mindsets in their thinking and pedagogy, but may struggle with translating their beliefs in practice for multiple reasons. Some teachers and staff don't believe there are inequities in BPS. Special Education teachers at Chenery Middle and Belmont High demonstrate

strong equitable mindsets in practice and describe how equity is at the center of their daily actions and interactions with students, staff, and families.

Student Interviews

White, Asian, International and LGBTQ+ students are mostly satisfied with their experiences at BPS with teachers and classmates. LGBTQ+ and Black students don't always feel included in conversations and initiatives centering around equity. Most students think teachers take racism, homophobia, and xenophobia seriously when hate incidents occur but don't delve deeply into these concepts and topics. Most Black and Brown students have experienced racism and/or micro aggressions from teachers and/or classmates at some point of their experience at BPS.

Family Focus Groups

Most families are satisfied with their children's academic progress, but wish to see more transparency via communication with school and district leaders during sensitive times such as hate incidents in the BPS/Belmont community. Many families are concerned with racism, homophobia, and xenophobia perpetuating in BPS culture. Families with children in Special Education are satisfied with special education teachers but wish to see general education teachers understanding and properly addressing specific needs. Experiences with SPED leadership are not always positive during the evaluation process. Families express communication with SPED leadership can be confusing and question whether their best interests are centered.

CMS/BHS Culture

Hate incidents are a major concern to families and students. Some families do not completely trust educators and school leaders when communicating about incidents and/or conflicts. Families are not always notified when students are struggling academically. There is a lack of representation in teachers and staff. Hiring Black teachers and teachers of color is a top priority for BPS leaders. The auditors suggested that it is essential the hiring process includes candidates who demonstrate an understanding and history of implementing Equitable Mindsets in practice.

METCO Program

There are barriers that METCO families and students face, impacting student academic and social experiences. The auditors suggested, that to improve equity, asset, and context-centered mindsets, there should be a clear distinction between high standards and potentially unrealistic expectations for METCO families and students. The auditors suggested that structures and consistent advocacy from district leaders should be put in place to address transportation and social opportunities barriers.

Student Surveys were administered to middle and high school students and focused on three categories: Sense of Belonging, Cultural Awareness and Action, Diversity and Inclusion. The auditors' intent was to gain a sense of 1. How much students feel they are valued members of the school community, 2. How often students learn about, discuss, and confront issues of race, ethnicity, and culture in school, and 3. How diverse, integrated, and fair school is for students from different races, ethnicities, or cultures. Response rates were high for both groups (75%/87%) and gender and race demographics were recorded. Overall survey trends were reported on the three categories.

Borneman and Smith reported on individual student interviews at the high school level conducted to understand students' experiences at BPS, their perception of school culture and adults' equitable mindsets and practices. Black, African American and/or Hispanic students participated in Targeted Group interviews. Questions were based on the Equitable Educator Mindset and Consequences Framework.

Staff surveys and interviews were also conducted, with 60% of BPS staff taking part in the surveys. Despite high Mindset scores overall, BPS staff scored lower than public school staff in MA, the Northeast and US for the following specific equity tenets and associated topics: Deficit mindsets about traditional school rules and student support; and Avoidant mindsets about school curriculum. The climate survey showed differing results in two areas based on race: 1. Faculty share a common vision of quality teaching and learning.

2. School leaders do not treat faculty as professionals. Smith and Borneman gave examples of question topics and findings categorized by the four mindsets (Equity v. Equity, Aware v. Avoidant, Asset v. Deficit, Context-Centered v. Context-Neutral).

Family focus groups rounded out the audit consisting of families of Color/METCO families, families with Children in Special Education and an open call for all families. A summary of findings and quotes were provided for each group. Limitations of the audit and next steps were reported.

Superintendent Phelan recognized some results were hard to hear, but stated the audit results provide an opportunity to identify areas of focus and to utilize Director of DEI, Washington.

Chair Checkoway took comments and questions from School Committee members. Members acknowledged there is a lot of equity work ahead and some were interested in seeing the raw data.

Member Crowley recognized there are issues of concern involving Black/African American staff and students and LGBTQ students. Member Moriarty is interested to hear how the district can strategically move forward and would like to see what other districts have done strategically and in regards to hiring and policy. Member Jones inquired to the comment that some “CMS/BHS black students indicated they were not in class with other races”, and asked if there was any evidence of segregation? Mr. Jones is in support of transportation needs. Member Saeh asked if structural inequities in METCO included other things besides transportation. Mr. Saeh acknowledged math and special education need to be unpacked.

The MIT team clarified math program avoidance vs. inequity. Parents saying their kids are not being challenged in school due to having outside tutors is not the same as kids struggling and not receiving supports. Member Saeh encouraged the district to have a strategy in place by June, and review SC/district policies. Member Bowen welcomed guidance on policy changes and would like to ask follow up questions of the team at a future meeting.

Chair Checkoway took comments and questions from community members.

Margaret Callanan - Voiced concerns about the Special Education evaluation process and realizes Belmont only has two team chairs. She hopes the team chair role is understood. She stated Special Education has many regulations with not as much flexibility and it would be helpful to see change with the State Legislature.

Tim Flood- Appreciate terminology “alarming” used in the presentation context. Mr. Flood had four questions: 1. How many educators were on the call 2. How many METCO students of color who participated in separate discussion groups crossed over into SPED? 3. How many respondents were within each group? 4. Why was just Wellington School selected and not a segment from elementary each school?

Jennifer Burgess- Indicated the audit results did not surprise her but paint a worse picture of the schools than when she attended school in Belmont. Ms. Burgess preferred the SC think of next steps like policy to move the community forward, instead of asking for more data.

Director of DEI Chon'tel Washington stated the full audit would be posted to new DEI website.

4.2 Safe Routes to School

Chair Checkoway introduced Judith Crocker, Senior Outreach Coordinator of the Massachusetts Safe Routes to School program. Ms. Crocker explained the federally funded Safe Routes to School program combines health and transportation and tailors programs to meet local needs of schools using the six “E”s. Evaluation Encouragement; Engineering; Engagement; Education and Equity. (SC Document: *Safe_Routes_to_School_SCPresentation_3_8_22*)

Upcoming events were highlighted (annual yard sign contest & crossing guard appreciation day) as well as available infrastructure project funding programs for sidewalk improvements, traffic calming. Belmont schools have collaborated with Safe Routes since 2007-2008 SY, and Ms. Crocker encouraged the district to continue with the following Sustainable next steps:

- Jump-start Town-wide Safe Routes Task Force
- Adopt MASC-partnered Wellness Policy, active transportation amendment
- Offer DESE-accredited Professional Development to Health & Wellness faculty for pedestrian and bicycle safety curriculum
- Enlist Safe Routes to review new middle school circulation plan
- Enlist Safe Routes to observe and plan for arrival, dismissal at Chenery using the parent travel survey with Park & Walk mapping
- 2022 Student Walking/Biking Route Mapping

Superintendent Phelan thanked Ms. Crocker for her continued partnership and member Bowen appreciated the expansion of the program.

4.3 FY23 Budget Planning

Superintendent Phelan reported on recent meetings, which included Finance Subcommittee members and Warrant Committee members in the attempt to answer questions regarding the FY23 budget. The meetings also allowed the Finance Subcommittee to identify possible areas for reduction. Superintendent Phelan reviewed FY23 General Fund Budget Reductions, which were presented at an earlier joint Finance Subcommittee/ Warrant Subcommittee for Education meeting. *(SD Document: Draft_Reductions_FY23_School_General_Fund_Budget_3_8_22)*

Reduction in SPED contract services	\$50,000
Reduce restoration of supplies cut for FY22	\$150,000
Use of anticipated FY23 staff exchange savings	\$400,000
Reduce GF SPED tuition, charge additional expenses to Circuit Breaker reimbursement	\$1,300,000
Est. amount of LABBB Collaborative credit to be issued for, and used in, FY23 for Sped tuitions	\$100,000
Total	\$2,000,000

School Committee members ask questions and provided comments.

Member Crowley commented that the reductions eased WC concerns of the School Department budget growth. Member Bowen clarified the reductions are not in the budget book yet and would like to see more details on supply items.

In the interest of time, two agenda items were moved to a future meeting:

- 4.4 Transportation Policy Update (Vote)
- 4.5 School Choice Discussion

5. SUBCOMMITTEE/LIAISON UPDATES – as needed

Curriculum & Instruction Subcommittee – Met to speak on math scores and program

6. OTHER BUSINESS

- 6.1 Consent Agenda
 - Vote on Acceptance of Surplus Items CMS Music Department

On a motion offered by Amy Checkoway and seconded by Mike Crowley, it was VOTED unanimously (6-0-0) on a roll call vote to accept the items listed as surplus.

Member Jones asked about isolation information that was sent out in an email. Superintendent Phelan indicated he will meet with the Director of Nursing to update the communication with correct guidelines for the 10 day isolation period for unvaccinated individuals.

7. ADJOURN

On a motion offered by Jamal Saeh and seconded by Ralph Jones, it was VOTED unanimously (6-0-0) on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 9:43 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:


Meghan Moriarty, Secretary