

PLAINVILLE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Special Meeting Minutes

Special Meeting Title: Order of Business
--Discussion Regarding Reopening of School Plan
--Answering of Questions or Concerns
--Other

Date: Thursday, August 19, 2021

Time: 6:00 PM

Place: Zoom Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Deborah Hardy, Rebecca Martinez, Nicole Palmieri, Crystal St. Lawrence, Vice Chair, Becky Tyrrell, Chair, and Foster White

Members Absent: Brent Davenport, Laurie Peterson and Kathy Wells

Early Departures: None

Also Present: Steven LePage, Superintendent of Schools
David Levenduski, Assistant Superintendent of Schools
Sam Adlerstein, Director of Business and Operations
Stacy Buden, Director of Human Resources
Christina Kiley, Supervisor of Special Services
Alicia Atterrato, Principal of Toffolon School
Andrew Batchelder, Principal of Wheeler School
Jeff Wallowitz, Principal of Linden Street School
Carl Johnson, Principal of Plainville High School
Lily Cornielle, ELL, Equity and Student Support Specialist

Chair Becky Tyrrell called the meeting to order at 6:01 PM.

DISCUSSION REGARDING REOPENING OF SCHOOL PLAN:

Mr. LePage stated that in the beginning of the summer he had shared the June 26th Opening of School Plan with members of the district and Board Members. However, a few items have changed over the summer. New guidance has come to light concerning the Governor's Executive Order 13A as well as the orders from the Commissioner of Public Health requiring that everyone must wear a mask regardless of vaccination status while inside all school buildings. This order shall take effect immediately and remain in effect through September 30, 2021 unless earlier modified or terminated. Mr. LePage noted that masks were also required for all summer school programs but that all of the mitigation strategies remained in place. Mr. LePage stated that these new orders were a bit ambiguous and at one point unclear. With that said, he sent Board Members correspondence from the law offices of Shipman and Goodwin LLP. Atty. Thomas Mooney wrote an explanation of what the new orders mean for Board of Education members' personal liability as well as Board Members throughout the country who have taken a stand against mask wearing and refusing to go in that direction. Atty. Mooney is one of the most renowned attorneys in the area of education law for the State. ***He laid out the fact that education law Executive Orders are as enforceable as state law, therefore, violation of an Executive Order by the Governor is violating a State law.*** Mr. LePage stated that he continually receives letters and emails from parents, basically holding him responsible for the mask mandate. He explained that as an appointed official of the school system, he is obligated to follow all State laws and has no power to change them. He stated that he understands the multiple perspectives on this issue and for the most part discourse has been civil, appropriate and polite and he does respect differences opinions, but he cannot change the order.

He then went on to say that he and Mr. Levenduski, the district's Assistant Superintendent, have created a blue and white table which was sent to all families, staff and Board members, as a quick reference guide. They also updated the June 26th plan to be more current to the latest guidelines based on some items that changed over the summer, i.e., the three feet (3') in classroom requirement and the removal of plexiglass as a mitigation strategy. (There is no evidence that shows that plexiglass is effective). He is pleased that the district didn't expend an exorbitant amount of money on plexiglass as other towns did. Mr. LePage stated that all district schools are within 4-5'+ spacing between students and hasn't heard of any major concerns. This amount of spacing reduces the perimeter/diameter around the student being the epicenter from 6' to 3' in the classroom setting. In all other settings, the district remains 6' apart for contact tracing purposes, i.e., lunchrooms. (This is for close proximity in other locations for approximately 15 minutes over the course of 24 hours). There is less emphasis on one-way hallways and stairwells. Passing each other quickly in a hallway with a mask on causes very little risk.

Mr. LePage stated that all five Principals have done a great job with the guidance sent to them. Information has also been shared with families. Some reactions have been positive and some are very critical, which is to be expected (many of these correspondences have been shared with the BOE).

Mr. LePage stated that he will re-implement the Board of Education's email address online. Because he sends out the majority of information, the public tends to email him back directly. Also, there is a new mandate regarding vaccinations for school and State employees, i.e., those contracted to work in school buildings repeatedly (volunteers, substitutes). In the latest State Opening of School Plan, mitigation requires and spells out a number of things. Interestingly, the masking of teachers who are at the front of the classroom, separated from students, are able to remove their masks when teaching, should the district allow it (which is a potentially good thing for teachers who want to do that for upper level age 12+ students who are vaccinated, but for students who are not vaccinated, he can see the push back).

He also wanted to update the Board on all of the changes and strategies, for example, instituting four lunch waves at Plainville High School to reduce the number of students in the lunchroom at one time. Mr. LePage said his ultimate goal is to hold a Parent Forum next Thursday, August 26th at 6:30 PM inviting the public and BOE together, so they can understand the reasoning behind the decisions being made and coming to a unified front when addressing mixed controversial opinions and decisions he and the Board will be forced to make. Some of the hot topics will include universal testing of anyone who signs a waiver for asymptomatic students, non-vaccinated staff, and seeking guidance from local Health Departments regarding the use of local health centers and/or colleagues in the area for weekly testing.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS:

Rebecca Martinez asked if the school district has been looking into a State plan for testing of those who do not want to be vaccinated?

Mr. LePage stated that there are many concerns with the loss of instructional time, lost learning time, and disruption of the school environment. A full screening would take a few hours to complete.

Ms. Martinez said that this might be a good idea for students who are playing sports.

Mr. LePage stated that he also doesn't know what the rate of parent approval would be. He also stated that he doubts the district will do another vaccine clinic as there are a number of places throughout the area with an abundance of vaccine available.

Mr. LePage also commented that Shane Lockwood, Director of the Plainville/Southington Health Department will be leaving his position on September 18th.

Nicole Palmieri asked if the Parent Forum would be virtual or in-person? She stated that this is a heated and controversial topic and the meeting should be done in-person. Board members should be able to look people in the eye when they are speaking.

Mr. LePage stated that he is willing to do whatever the Board requires but pointed out that there is a health risk now that the Delta variant is here and we don't want to go by way of Bristol where many people did not wear masks in the building which then caused the meeting to be canceled.

Foster White stated that everyone should be masked for a safe in-person meeting but that it would be wiser to be virtual.

Rebecca Martinez stated that there are people on the Board who are at greater risk. There should be public meetings but they have to be done safely.

She also asked if there will be assigned seating on buses or during lunch for students?

Mr. Johnson, PHS Principal stated that students will be spaced appropriately at tables and there will be cameras in the High School cafeteria which will be used for contact tracing.

Mr. LePage stated that students will be spaced approximately 3' to 4' apart, adhering to State mitigation guidelines.

Andrew Batchelder, Wheeler Principal stated that elementary seating charts were created and are imperative. Each table in Wheeler's cafeteria will be numbered and seating will be done with alphabetized letters. Students will be assigned their seats and no one can change their seat without the teacher's approval. Students will be spaced 4' apart, some will be spaced 5' to 6' apart depending on table size.

Alicia Atterato, Toffolon Principal stated that because the tables are different in the Toffolon cafeteria, there will be less students seated at each table. Spacing is consistent with the other elementary schools.

Jeff Wallowitz, Linden Principal stated that over the summer, adult staff with yardsticks seated themselves at each table in the cafeteria and mapped out spacing. He stated that spacing will not be a problem at Linden. Students will be more than the recommended 3' apart.

Steven LePage stated that the Middle School has additional outside seating but that they are also adding indoor seating as well. Both Principal Aimee Roberts and Mrs. Simard have inspected the area and they are also in good shape.

Carl Johnson stated that the High School has taken photos of the tables. There will be five students seated at the long tables and four students seated at the round tables. The closest students sitting side by side would be 5' apart at a long table. Students will all be well spaced apart.

Rebecca Martinez asked how recess will be handled?

Andrew Batchelder stated that during wellness breaks and mask breaks, kids will travel in cohorts. Diagrams were made to show areas where kids will be playing during recess. He stated that this process will more than likely continue well after COVID is gone as it is a more orderly, safe situation for kids.

Steve LePage stated that there will be 20 minutes per day designated for mask breaks. He does recommend mask wearing if students are close together.

Andrew Batchelder stated that when doing read-a-louds, students can be placed 6' apart.

Nicole Palmieri stated that she has seen no information on either religious or medical exemptions of the vaccine.

Steven LePage stated that Superintendent's haven't been provided enough information yet with regard to exemptions.

He explained that this is not easy work. This team is great at dealing with all problems that come their way. He also explained that administrators do not make decisions on a whim. They confer with advisors and do what they need to do to get the job done. He stated that the district had a great year last year. Plainville did a great job during the pandemic. A lot of sacrifice was made. The team sticks together, even if they disagree.

Convocation will be in-person on August 30th. The theme is "Family Reunion".

He stated that there is so much controversy around the country with regard to re-opening of school plans. Our goal is to get all kids in-school and to keep them safe.

Rebecca Martinez thanked the team for all the work they do. It is greatly appreciated.

Becky Tyrrell stated that if a couple of Districts' are doing COVID testing, it would be good to know what their experience is, how time consuming it is and the participation rate. She stated that she is very conflicted as there are many ways to get testing throughout the area.

With regard to holding meetings in public session, she stated that she has watched several meetings on TV. People have every right to attend and voice their opinions. However, first the Board has to do what is safe for everyone. Unfortunately, people do come in without masks and not a lot can be done dealing with that issue. Part of her thinks the Board should hold an in-person meeting. The question is, when do they want to do it and where?

Mr. LePage stated that he will do an outside meeting or whatever the Board thinks is best. However, his concern is that when he is following the Governor's Executive Orders, and the district is bound to those orders, there's an unwillingness to accept that from people who have a disbelief that he doesn't have control over these issues or a refusal to acknowledge it. He stated that he is bound by State law to follow that law when it comes to educating children and keeping them safe. He is obligated to do so. He stated that Atty. Mooney laid out the great concerns about not following the law, and its liability to both the individual or collectively as a Board of Education. If concern is about the instruction we provide or the mitigation strategies being used, things that we have control over, he is very open to amending those items or perhaps at looking at other ways of doing things. If it is all about things he himself can't control, the better forum is to contact the Governor's office as he sets the laws. Mr. LePage stated that neither he or the Board of Education can change the Governor's orders. He would like to hear more about the planthings that will be good for kids. If the Board so chooses, he is open to hearing from parents with a respectful safe meeting.

Rebecca Martinez stated that it is important to give parents enough notice for the meeting.

Steven LePage stated that he will send out a SchoolMessenger message regarding the meeting. Also, the State, in conjunction with doctors from CCMC will host a virtual house call on Monday, August 30th for a safe and successful return to school. A flyer with more details will also be sent out.

Becky Tyrrell stated that as a Board member and parent, you can always make a decision for our own child, but it is very difficult when making a decision can hurt someone else's child. The Board has to make decisions for 2,200 children and it's not always easy. The Board must do what is safe and reasonable for all kids.

Nicole Palmieri stated that this is a pet peeve of hers, Executive Orders are not a law. What is best, is for parents to do what is best for their own children.

Rebecca Martinez stated that her thought process is to have a healthy meeting. Everyone knows where their strengths lie, where education lies, what the Governor's Orders are and what the CDC recommends. All districts are following the orders.

Becky Tyrrell stated that the Board doesn't make a decision for just one child. They must look at the big picture and try to do what is best for all children. It's an impossible situation and unfortunate that this has been politicized. There is mistrust on many fronts. The Board won't be able to please everyone. They must determine what facts are and the decision that must be made. It's a very sad situation.

No matter what the Board does, she hopes everyone is respectful and realizes that every person working in the public schools are doing the best that they can for kids. The Board must make sure that the district has a school year as normal as possible and that people can disagree respectfully. When it breaks down the blame game begins. No one has ulterior motives.

Steve LePage thanked his team for coming this evening. He said it will be an outstanding year. "Kids will have amazing experiences. We are adding staff to fill holes, we're adding supports, as well as mental health and academic supports, and are putting plans, programs and projects together. We are going to do great things for our schools. This is yet another obstacle we will need to overcome, and we always do!" He thanked the Board for their support.

A MOTION WAS MADE BY REBECCA MARTINEZ TO ADJOURN THE MEETING. FOSTER WHITE SECONDED THE MOTION. THE MOTION UNANIMOUSLY CARRIED. The meeting ended at 6:58 PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Joan Calistro

Recorder of Minutes