



COLCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION

Colchester, Connecticut

SPECIAL MEETING

February 24, 2022 6:30PM

Zoom

MINUTES

MEMBERS PRESENT: Alexander Oliphant, Mary Tomasi, Jessica Morozowich, Margo Gignac, Rosemary Gignac, Donna Antonacci, Christopher Rivers

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT: Superintendent Jeffrey Burt, Director of Teaching and Learning Charles Hewes, Principal of Bacon Academy Matthew Peel, Principal of Colchester Elementary School Judy O'Meara, Principal of William J. Johnston Middle School Christopher Bennett

OTHERS PRESENT: Dr. Ann Milanese Medical Advisor, Director of Chatham Health District Russell Melmed

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Alexander Oliphant called the meeting to order at 6:32PM.

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

Olivia Duksa: Ms. Duksa stated she is a parent with children at CES and WJMS and strongly supports the immediate lifting of all COVID restrictions on the schools and extracurricular activities.

Ryan Goodine: Mr. Goodine stated he has children in middle and high school and supports mask choice. Mr. Goodine said that he does not understand while children are still masked when adults are not required. Mr. Goodine said it is time to get things back to normal.

Lynn Dickey: Ms. Dickey stated she supported lifting COVID restrictions in the schools as well as after school activities. Ms. Dickey said she would like to have a choice for our children and as adults.

Tracey Bruni: Ms. Bruni thanked the board and Superintendent for the difficult decisions that have had to be made throughout the pandemic. Ms. Bruni stated she supports lifting the mask mandate in schools. Ms. Bruni stated it would benefit the students both socially and emotionally.

Jennifer Cox: Ms. Cox stated she is a parent with three children in the school system. Ms. Cox said the opinions of the students and teachers are most important. Ms. Cox stated that she supports mask choice. Ms. Cox said she works with children with hearing loss and mask choice will give them more access in the classroom.

Karen Schoell: Ms. Schoell said she is a parent with children in JJIS. Ms. Schoell said she hopes to see this many families come out for the budget and to vote as well. Ms. Schoell said she supports the extension of the mask mandate to keep families and students safe. Ms. Schoell said that this will help keep students in school.

Jason Lachapelle: Mr. Lachapelle stated he is in support of mask choice. Mr. Lachapelle urged the Board of Education to express that it is not the teachers' responsibility to put a mask on children and should not be responsible for this.

Mark : Mark stated he would defer to the medical experts. Mark said he did not understand the masks for children playing instruments. Mark said he is a parent with children in the school and his young daughter really wants masks removed and to be able to hug her teacher.

TJ, Kinsley and Kelly Crowell: Ms. Crowell stated that her concern is that she has a child with disabilities and a child too young to get vaccinated and she is concerned for their health. Ms. Crowell said that children with disabilities should have a choice as it may lead to a better quality of learning; however, thinks it will not hurt to have masks for a few more months. TJ said he would like masks to stay on so that COVID cases do not dramatically increase.

Kristen Norige: Ms. Norige stated she is a parent with two children in the Colchester school district. Ms. Norige stated she is strongly in favor of removing the mask mandate. Ms. Norige stated she is in support as vaccines, new data and testing are widely available.

Lea Poresky (27 Settlers Lane): Ms. Poresky said she is speaking on behalf of her three children and also as a teacher in a neighboring school district. Ms. Poresky said it is difficult for hearing and speaking and that masks are not being worn properly by children and are not offering any protection. Ms. Poresky said she supports optional masks.

Rachel and Jeremy Ames (41 Skinner Road): Ms. Ames said she is a staff member at CES and also a parent of a child at CES. Ms. Ames stated that she spends her day speaking social, emotional learning to children and masks have made it tremendously harder.

James (Deer Run Drive): James stated he is in favor of lifting the mask mandate. James said he has a child with autoimmune disease and understands the fears but that it still needs to be a choice. James said he works in HVAC and wondered if there are any plans for HVAC improvements in the schools as there is federal funding available for this.

Jennifer Goodine (40 Cirillo Drive): Ms. Goodine stated she has two children in Colchester Public Schools and is in favor of mask choice. Ms. Goodine stated she agreed with Mr. Lachappelle that teachers should not be responsible for enforcing masks in schools.

Mike Lizotte (Heatherwood Drive): Mr. Lizotte said he is a parent of a child at JJIS and he is in favor of mask choice. Mr. Lizotte said that masks are often seen falling off children's faces so the efficacy of masks would have to be questioned.

Paula Semino: Ms. Semino stated she believes masks should be mandated until April. Ms. Semino asked that parents speak to their children about respecting their peers' choices.

Beverly: Beverly stated she is a parent with children at CES and JJIS. Beverly stated that she believes masks should be a parent choice. Beverly stated that vaccinations are also personal choices and should not be required. Beverly said as an educator she cannot hear children in her classroom and other students in the classroom are not getting the rich discussion they need.

Jennifer Perham (92 Reservoir Road): Ms. Perham stated that parent choice is very important in regard to masks. Ms. Perham is concerned about bullying and hopes it is addressed in the school system.

Robert Lengel (30 Mountain Road): Mr. Lengel stated that he supports mask choice as ultimately the decision is very personal and families need to make the right decisions for their family.

Michael Dubreuil (180 Woodbine Road): Mr. Dubreuil made reference to comments he previously sent to board members. Mr. Dubreuil stated that in the past, the board ignored the experts and continued with in-person learning and he commends the board for that. Mr. Dubreuil said that there is no data that shows masks control the pandemic. Mr. Dubreuil stated he supports mask choice.

Lauren Miller (New London Road): Ms. Miller stated that she supports mask choice at school. Ms. Miller stated that if you check the CDC website, the percentage of children being hospitalized is .01%. Ms. Miller said masks impact learning. Ms. Miller stated that natural immunity helps fight COVID as well.

Riki Falconi (135 West Road): Ms. Falconi said she is a parent of a child at CES. Ms. Falconi said she believes masks should be optional and disagrees that there should be a waiting period. Ms. Falconi asked the board to consider the feelings of the parents.

Joshua (West Road): Joshua said that he has four children in the school system and stated that he is for keeping masks until all quarantine processes are eliminated. Joshua said his pediatrician strongly supports masks.

Natalie Culver (45 Old Pond Road): Ms. Culver stated she is very much in support of keeping masks on students. Ms. Culver said that the schools do not have desks three feet apart and social distancing is not occurring in the classrooms. Ms. Culver stated preschool students are not eligible for the vaccine and it is not safe for them to be around students with no masks on.

Zachary Carr (99 Old Hebron Road): Mr. Carr asked the board to watch kids play outside with no masks versus them in school. Mr. Carr said we have a mental health crisis and we are doing a disservice to our children. Mr. Carr asked the board to put politics aside and remember what it is like to be a kid.

Greg Van Zilen (Brindlewood Path): Mr. Van Zilen stated the only thing that changed in the last few weeks is the election cycle. Mr. Van Zilen said that the choice the board makes should be for the good of the community and kids. Mr. Van Zilen stated that he is very much in favor of mask choice.

Ashley LaParre and daughter, Lola (74 McDonald Road): Ms. LaParre stated she wrote a letter and email to the Board of Education. Ms. LaParre stated she believes masks should be a choice. Lola stated that she really wants the mask mandate to be lifted.

Jen Caplet (25 Daniel Drive): Ms. Caplet said the mask policy should be based on expert science and advice. Ms. Caplet said she doesn't know what the right answer is, but it should be based on data and not politics. Ms. Caplet thanked the board for all their hard work.

Brandy Ryan (25 Foxridge Drive): Ms. Ryan stated she is in favor of mask choice. Ms. Ryan said she is a registered nurse and has been on the front lines since 2020. Ms. Ryan stated she respects others' choices but it should be a choice.

Shannon Cuadro: Ms. Cuadro stated she would like the mask mandate to be lifted for kids and the school system.

Chelsea Johnson (76 James Street): Ms. Johnson stated that she is concerned about bullying. Ms. Johnson said that no one should be forced to do anything. Ms. Johnson said she would like to hear from the parents if it is being left up to parent choice and not hear from children.

Stacey and Joshua Czepiel (24 West Ridge Road): Ms. Czepiel said they have four children across the school district and they are wholly in favor of mask choice. Ms. Czepiel said she is an ER nurse and the way children are wearing masks is ineffective. Ms. Czepiel said the mental health and anxiety that we are seeing in children is concerning and if lifting the mask mandate can help even a little then it should be done.

Robert Durnik (234 Chestnut Hill Road): Mr. Durnik said that masks affect children and he is completely pro choice. Mr. Durnik said it is not the teachers' job to police the masks.

Sarah Croucher (168 Woodbine Road): Ms. Croucher said she is strongly in favor of keeping masks as she has an unvaccinated child at home who will be attending preschool. Ms. Croucher said the numbers of COVID went up dramatically with Omicron and saw the most hospitalizations of children during that time. Ms. Croucher said we should be thinking of this as a community decision. Ms. Croucher said children need to be in school and masks help do that.

Jeff Koonankeil (14 Pennee Lane): Mr. Koonankeil said that the micron level of the Omicron variant goes through masks and COVID is killing elderly and people with comorbidities. Mr. Koonankeil stated he is in favor of mask choice.

Jodi Friberg (81 Bigelow Road): Ms. Friberg said she is a pro choice family. Ms. Friberg said her son comes home every day with a headache. Ms. Friberg asked that they consider children and what bodes well for them.

Kim Carlone (36 Waterhole Road): Ms. Carlone said she is the parent of an immunocompromised child and also has a young child who cannot be vaccinated. Ms. Carlone said it is scary as a parent to put their child at risk. Ms. Carlone said that it would not hurt to go a little longer.

Gina Civardi (71 Ventura Drive): Ms. Civardi stated that parents are in charge of medical decisions for their child and this does need to be a choice.

Krista Kardys (71 Hi Lea Farm Road): Ms. Kardys stated that this discussion is of risk benefit. Ms. Kardys said we get data from Chatham Health District and would like to see the Superintendent and Board to commit to collaborating with Chatham Health District as they move forward.

3. *PRIORITY DISCUSSION/ACTION ITEMS

3.1 *Discussion and Possible Action on COVID-19 Mitigation Strategies (masks)

Russell Melmed said it was so nice to see such a strong indicator of civic engagement tonight. Mr. Melmed stated that his overarching message right now is that we are in a period of some uncertainty. Colchester is finally out of the red zone and cases have been trending down over the last five weeks.

The case rates that are reported do not include any at home tests. Omicron is more highly transmissible; however, it has been demonstrated to be more mild than previous variants. Colchester vaccination rates are at 76% which is good. In addition to vaccination, there is an unclear amount of population immunity in the community right now from those who have had COVID. Monoclonal antibodies are available now and for people who are immunocompromised this is a good option. If you are high risk, Mr. Melmed said you should speak to your physician about these options as we come down off this peak. Mr. Melmed stated they have learned that it tends to be a seasonal virus and he expects seasonality of the virus to continue perhaps next winter. Mr. Melmed also stated that KN95 and N95 masks are most effective if properly fitted. If the school district decides to go with a mask optional policy, families should discuss these mask options with their pediatricians if they so choose.

Mr. Melmed said that public health policy should include a consideration of public health recommendation; however, whether or not the recommendations become policy should take into account public sentiment. Mr. Melmed said they are still recommending masks and to use the least restrictive means possible to reach goals. Mr. Melmed said quarantines, distance learning and school closures are much more restrictive. His recommendation for Board of Education would be to look at when masks might be appropriate (i.e. outbreak, high case numbers).

Vice-chair Tomasi stated that the Colchester School District has worked very well with Chatham over the pandemic and is thankful for that.

Jessica Morozowich asked about COVID vaccines for children under 5 years old. Mr. Melmed said it is still unclear on when the Pfizer vaccine might be available for children under 5 years of age.

Dr. Ann Milanese shared the pandemic is not over but entering a transition phase so that is reassuring. Dr. Milanese would like to postpone making masks optional but does not see that it is possible. She stated Colchester's numbers have been encouraging and she said she would support making masks optional but not reducing all COVID mitigation strategies. Dr. Milanese said it is her opinion that the right step is probably to go with making masks optional while keeping an eye on the data moving forward.

Superintendent Burt shared a presentation based on the updated guidance from the CSDE. The presentation will be posted online as well as with the minutes. Superintendent Burt shared written parent communications; some which were edited for student confidentiality.

Superintendent Burt shared the results of the survey to families on masks. Superintendent Burt stated that it should be noted that the survey was open so could have been forwarded to others so that should be kept in mind. Survey results will also be posted online as well as part of the minutes.

Superintendent Burt said the options for the board are 1) take no action and the mandate is lifted as of 2/28/22 making masks optional, or 2) the board can vote to continue to mandate masks for a short period of time or through the end of the school year.

Christopher Rivers asked if the board could make masks optional but reinstate them based on certain conditions. Superintendent Burt stated they could do that based on metrics but would defer that to Dr. Milanese and Mr. Melmed or the board could authorize the Office of the Superintendent to work with the medical advisor and Chatham Health going forward if we see things spiking and look for additional mitigation strategies.

Jessica Morozowich asked if there is a timeline that if things need to happen in the schools (i.e. shifting of desks) or are teachers already prepared starting Monday.

Matthew Peel said Bacon Academy will follow all bullying guidelines and continue to reiterate treating people with respect and tolerance. Mr. Peel said there will be support for students as needed.

Judy O'Meara said they have asked families to talk to their child(ren) on what their expectations are for their child as the teachers will not know what those expectations are.

Mr. Bennett said that sending out a district message will be helpful as well so parents are prepared for Monday morning.

Superintendent Burt said no matter what the decision is, a district message will go out tomorrow which he will create in collaboration with the administrators.

Motion by: Donna Antonacci

To make mask use optional starting Monday, February 28, 2022

Second by: Margo Gignac

Vote: Unanimous

Roll Call: Margo Gignac, Christopher Rivers, Mary Tomasi, Jessica Morozowich, Rosemary Gignac, Donna Antonacci, Alexander Oliphant

Motion by: Christopher Rivers

To authorize the Superintendent to make minor mitigation strategies but anything that would be system-wide or mask-related would come to the board.

Second by: Jessica Morozowich

Vote: Unanimous

Roll Call: Mary Tomasi, Donna Antonacci, Margo Gignac, Rosemary Gignac, Jessica Morozowich, Christopher Rivers, Alexander Oliphant

3.2 Discussion and Possible Action on Removal of COVID-19 Temporary Policies

Donna Antonacci spoke to the possibility of removing all of the temporary COVID policies. Superintendent Burt stated that given that the temporary policies were based on the executive orders which are expiring, the recommendation is to remove the temporary policies and revert back to the original board policies.

Motion by: Donna Antonacci

To remove all temporary COVID policies (4000.2T, 5000.1T, 5000.2T, 5000.4T, 5005.5T, 5000.6T and 6000.1T)

Second by: Margo Gignac

Vote: Unanimous

Roll Call: Christopher Rivers, Mary Tomasi, Jessica Morozowich, Donna Antonacci, Rosemary Gignac, Margo Gignac, Alexander Oliphant

The board thanked Dr. Milanese and Mr. Melmed for coming to the meeting and answering their questions.

Jessica Morozowich stated for the record that at this time, masks are still required on school buses.

Mr. Melmed said that it may be a requirement that students wear masks while in the nurse's office.

4. *PUBLIC COMMENT

Seth Breitmaier (32 Farmgate Road): Mr. Breitmaier stated he appreciated the thoughtfulness that went into the board's decision. Mr. Breitmaier said that a good number of board members saw that the masks were a useful tool and more aligned with keeping kids in the classroom. He stated the timeliness of information to parents is imperative if the Superintendent is not able to make temporary mask decisions.

Superintendent Burt said this would be part of considerations moving forward and they would be watching it and that it would be part of the mitigation strategies if needed. Superintendent Burt said he appreciated the comment and clarity.

Michael: Michael asked for clarification about the school reopening plan and whether or not it is still applicable. Michael wished Rosemary Gignac all the best as she is leaving Curley's Daycare to pursue other endeavors.

Ryan: Ryan thanked everyone for all the time they spent on this and stated his children are very excited about the mask decision.

Superintendent Burt stated that they will be doing their best to mitigate anxieties that come with this decision and that they are hearing all of the concerns

5. EXECUTIVE SESSION

None.

6. *POSSIBLE ACTION ON EXECUTIVE SESSION

None.

7. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Alexander Oliphant adjourned the Special Meeting at 9:47PM.