

The Board of Education Town of Vernon

30 Park Street – PO Box 600
Vernon, Connecticut 06066

Anne Fischer, Chairperson
Mark Kalina, Vice Chairperson
Stephen Linton, Secretary
Patricia Buxton, Treasurer
Michele Arn
Kevin Brown
Latasha Hyatt
Deborah Rodriguez

August 12, 2020

APPROVED MINUTES

BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL MEETING

A special meeting of the Vernon Board of Education was held via Zoom Meeting on Wednesday, August 12, 2020.

1.0 Call to Order

Chairperson Fischer called the meeting to order at 7 PM.

Present (via Zoom Meeting) when the meeting was called to order were: Mr. Linton, Dr. Buxton, Mrs. Rodriguez, Ms. Arn, Mr. Brown, Ms. Hyatt, and Mr. Kalina

Administration present: Superintendent Dr. Joseph Macary, Assistant Superintendent Robert Testa. Director of Business and Finance Angela Wang (all via Zoom Meeting)

2.0 Community Forum

Opportunity for comments on agenda items, potential future agenda items, or general information provided to the Board from citizens and community organizations (limited to 15 minutes)

Maureen Kennedy addressed the Board. She shared her concerns with the Board. We are having the Board meeting via Zoom. She understands that, but we are talking about kids and staff going to school and yet the Board is still not meeting in person. If it's not safe for the Board to meet in community forum, how is it safe for kids?

Victoria Boyajan addressed the Board. She echoed what Maureen Kennedy shared. It's concerning that we are still in the technological stage yet we are sending kids to school. She is concerned it is a week and a half out from the beginning of school and there is no clear plan. She doesn't know how to prepare her kindergartener for school. She is nervous she can't drop her off for the first day and her older sister can't walk her to class. She is not going to see someone's face; there will be no facial recognition due to masks. She is concerned about protection that the teachers and students are going to have. Teachers are meant to teach and not police kids with mask etiquette. It's not conducive to learning the way it should be.

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A Board member noted that in the chat screen ABPFT70 asked whether there was a limit of how many people can meet in public. Dr. Macary noted that in social gatherings there is a limit. The Board meetings are public and we don't know how many people you could get attending if you meet in person. Also, you can't limit the public from attending a public meeting. You would be limiting them from freedom of information.

Katie DeBiase addressed the Board. She was wondering about the ventilation in the basement of Maple Street School. Mrs. Fischer noted that this will be addressed later in the meeting.

Janice Litwinas addressed the Board. When kids go back to school it's going to be really hot and kids will be taking masks breaks, but she wears hers at work with students and it's hot. It's going to be hard for them to focus when it's very humid. If we are doing the hybrid model, how will that work with sports? That would mean everyone would be going into school for that. She hoped the Superintendent would talk about that.

It was noted that there were many questions in chat. Dr. Macary called a point of order that we cannot use questions in chat under Freedom of Information laws. If you wanted to ask a question now is the time to ask a question; say your name and address and ask the question.

Dot Tedeschi addressed the Board. Her concern is are her questions pertinent if she doesn't know the plan. She would love to hear that we are having a delayed start and wait to see what the other towns are doing and what happens after two weeks. It would be nice to collect data and see what has happened in the other districts.

Maureen Kennedy addressed the Board again. She knows that there are other Boards of Education meeting in person; it's feasible because it's happening in other communities. She gets the fact that you don't know who is coming, but it is possible.

Andrea Herzog addressed the Board. The major concern with a lot of parents is that there has been no plan released yet so they can't come up with a plan A and B. Many families in Vernon have two working parents. We need to know Plan A and B. We don't know what the hybrid plan is and why nobody has put a plan out yet. Parents need to find coverage. It's very difficult to be two weeks out before school and there is no clue what it's going to look like for a two person working family. Waiting until the 15th is not acceptable and is disrespectful. She doesn't envy this decision and Dr. Macary has a hard decision to make. No choice is a good choice. Giving parents as much information as possible ahead of time would have been much better. As two working parents, this is disrespectful to us to have no choice. No choice is going to be the right choice.

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Raychel Wishart addressed the Board. To Dot's point, it's very difficult to have Community Forum in the beginning of the meeting when it's this close to school and the topics are making changes to the calendar and reopening plans. We won't have the opportunity to speak on the issues and decisions and this is causing people to feel anxiety and stress. It's unfortunate we won't have the opportunity to ask these questions after the discussions.

Debbie Mitchell addressed the Board. She is the parent of a high schooler and she has a college student also. She asked if any part of the learning is remote learning and if so are we are taking into account the student's needs. Her personal feeling is that the spring was a lost cause. High schoolers need their foundation. She is concerned about them moving along to the next stage of their life. We need to make the best possible choice for students.

2.0 Review of 2020-2021 Professional Development Schedule (BOE Goal #2)

Assistant Superintendent Mr. Testa reviewed the 2020-2021 Professional Development Schedule with the Board. For the week of August 24th you will see learning spread out all week. For the 2020-2021 school year there are three themes:

- 1) Educational Equity in Opportunities for Learning
- 2) Trauma Informed Instruction
- 3) Teaching & Learning in a Blended/Hybrid Learning Environment

All the professional development will be aligned to these three themes. Some teachers will be presenters. Teachers will be able to make selections on certain dates. The learning is job embedded. There is a COVID-19 staff training being held for all employees. There are options for virtual and in-person staff learning. Some consultants aren't able to travel. Convocation this year will be held virtually as we need to follow state and government guidelines.

3.0 Revision to Vernon Public Schools 2020- 2021 District Calendar (BOE Goal #1, #2, #3)

The Board was asked to review and revise the 2020-2021 Vernon Public Schools District Calendar for 2020-2021 and change the first day of school for students from Wednesday, August 26, 2020 to Monday, August 31, 2020. The Connecticut State Board of Education passed a waiver for up to three days of the school year to provide staff and families with additional time to build capacity to safely transition back to in-person classes. Therefore, the current requirement is for 177 days/900 hours for the upcoming 2020-2021 year.

Dr. Macary is recommending August 24, 2020 through August 28, 2020 for professional development and move the first day of school to Monday, August 31, 2020. There are no other additional changes requested in the calendar.

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MOTION: Mr. Kalina moved that the Vernon Board of Education revise the Vernon Public Schools 2020-2021 District Calendar by changing the first day of school for students from Wednesday, August 26, 2020 to Monday, August 31, 2020.

SECOND: Mr. Linton

Mr. Brown asked about the two extra days and what harm would it be to push the start date back. Dr. Macary shared that he has been observing the safety guidelines and data and our area is at the lowest point known for the virus and there is no need to wait two extra days.

VOTE: Mr. Kalina, Mr. Linton, Dr. Buxton, Ms. Arn, Ms. Hyatt, and Mrs. Rodriguez voted in favor of the motion. Mr. Brown opposed the motion. The motion carried.

4.0 Discussion Regarding Vernon Public Schools Reopening Plan 2020-2021 (BOE Goal #2)

Dr. Macary reviewed and discussed the Vernon Public Schools Reopening Plan 2020-2021 with the Board. Tomorrow he will be sending an email to all parents and staff detailing the district's Hybrid Plan for reopening. The State has asked for three plans and the district submitted the following plans: In person; Hybrid, and Distance. Vernon Public Schools will be using "Plan B-Hybrid Plan". This plan is a blended or mixed mode and is a combination of face-to-face and online experiences. This model would establish a 50% capacity plan for school buildings and classrooms. This plan mitigates transmission. In addition to the Hybrid Model, all parents will have the option to choose the "Distance Learning" model. For this option, parents will need to notify that principal of the school by August 18, 2020. Dr. Macary shared that parents are not locked in for the entire school year if they choose this plan for their child and then change their mind. A survey was sent to parents and 18% to 20% of parents will not be sending their students to school. Dr. Macary will be sending an email which will give parents exact details of the plan. The plan states that students with last names A thru L will attend school on Mondays and Tuesdays. Students with last names M through Z will attend School on Thursdays and Fridays. All students will participate in remote learning on Wednesdays due to the buildings being deep cleaned.

Board members questioned and discussed the following:

Mr. Kalina asked if the plan was vetted by the State. No; it's approved by the Superintendent. Changes can be made at the district level if the positivity rate goes up. It can then be changed to virtual learning.

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Mr. Kalina asked about what students will do on the other days they are not attending school in the building. Dr. Macary shared that teachers will be using swivel iPads for classrooms so all students will be learning the same simultaneously.

Mr. Kalina asked if there was a procedure in place for students and staff that have contracted COVID and have subsequently recovered and are eligible to return to school. Dr. Macary noted the response is that we are following the DPH guidelines and if staff or students have passed quarantine then they can return to school.

Mr. Kalina asked about students with 1:1 IEPs and other special programs. Dr. Macary noted that students with severe IEPs will attend school four days a week and will not come in on Wednesdays. Preschool students will also attend school four days a week.

Mr. Kalina asked about at-risk teachers. Dr. Macary met with the Board's attorney and an email will be sent to staff by Mr. Testa and, if necessary, then accommodations will be made for them.

Mr. Kalina asked about heavy backpacks. Dr. Macary shared that accommodations will be made in classrooms to store books.

Mr. Kalina asked about cleaning products. Dr. Macary shared that there is not a problem with supplies and the district is stocked up good through October. Every classroom will have hand sanitizer.

Mr. Kalina asked about transportation and if any provisions were being made about being separated on the bus. Dr. Macary shared that students will wear masks on the bus and there will be one child (or siblings together) per seat. Buses will be sanitized.

Mr. Kalina asked about protocols when symptoms or questionable symptoms are presented. Dr. Macary reported that every school will have a designated isolation room.

Mr. Brown asked for clarification about special education. Dr. Macary shared that those students in most need with alternate programs will attend school four days a week.

Mr. Brown asked about bus transportation and how students will be following the rules and if there will be bus monitors. Dr. Macary responded that the bus drivers will be enforcing the rules.

Ms. Arn asked for an explanation about mask breaks. Dr. Macary shared that, depending on grade levels and if the weather was good enough to go outside, students will either go outside for mask breaks or the gym. He is asking the health department if students are six feet apart, are they allowed to remove their masks.

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Ms. Arn noted that this is dependent on behaviors. This will cause a lot of responsibility and disruption for the teachers. The safety depends on students following the restrictions. Dr. Macary noted that there will be less kids in the classroom and that the teachers can control them.

Ms. Arn noted that transmission of the virus can spread via micro-droplets and she doesn't think it's safe. Also, parents have the responsibility to take temperatures of the students. There are too many things that cannot be answered. She would like more information.

Ms. Hyatt is glad to hear about the virtual option. She asked about the average size of classes for the middle and high school. Dr. Macary shared that some classes have been as low as 12 or high as 26. The average size classroom is 18.

Ms. Hyatt asked about lunches and if they are bagged and what will happen for students doing virtual learning and those that may be quarantined. Dr. Macary shared that lunches, both hot and cold, are Grab n' Go. Students who want to receive lunch will be able to pick up their meal at the school. The café will need a head count of how many meals. Also, students who are quarantined can have meals delivered to them; this will be determined on a case by case basis.

Ms. Hyatt asked about the bathroom breaks for students in middle and high school. Dr. Macary shared that students will be allowed to use the bathrooms when they need to. Also, they will have a mask break every 50-55 minutes.

Dr. Buxton asked that if parents choose to keep students home for distance learning will the students receive the same content as students learning in the classroom. Dr. Macary shared that it will be synchronous learning.

Dr. Buxton asked about orientation for parents prior to school reopening. Dr. Macary shared that he is holding a Superintendent's Open House via Zoom on August 17th and the building principals will also hold an open house and the family liaisons too. The format will be virtual.

Dr. Buxton asked about clubs, sports and activities. Dr. Macary shared the schools will have these.

Ms. Arn asked about breakfasts. Dr. Macary shared that students will take off masks to eat.

Ms. Arn asked about the questions and concerns and if Dr. Macary could send an attachment with the email. Dr. Macary shared that he will be sending the plan and a one page synopsis for elementary, middle and high school. He will also share COVID-19 signs. It will be easily readable. He also noted that parents will need to notify the principal by August 18th if they choose to do distance learning.

Mrs. Fischer asked if the principals were scheduling their open houses for next week.

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Mr. Kalina asked if classes could be conducted outside. Dr. Macary shared that classrooms would be allowed to go outside and hold class.

Mr. Brown asked if students will be cohorting in the middle and high school. Dr. Macary shared that students will go to other classes by teams and will move in alternate times and cohorted by class.

Mr. Brown echoed Ms. Arn that they are putting expectations on all students. He asked what will happen if students don't comply. Dr. Macary shared that all teachers and paras will monitor the students. If students don't comply they will be sent to the isolation room and if they will not put on their mask a parent will be called to pick them up. There will be zero tolerance.

Mrs. Rodriguez inquired about grading and assessments and if decisions have been made yet. Dr. Macary shared that we are going back to standard assessments and regular grades like we used to.

Ms. Arn asked what criteria will be used when a cohort will be quarantined. Dr. Macary shared that according to state guidelines, they will not be quarantined unless they show symptoms.

Ms. Arn asked about decorative masks and asked about providing masks. Dr. Macary shared that masks have to follow CDC guidelines and must cover the nose and mouth and that the district can also provide masks.

Ms. Arn asked what happens to cohorts when a student tests positive. Dr. Macary shared that everyone in the cohort is alerted.

Ms. Arn asked about sports and Dr. Macary shared decisions are being made based on the metrics.

Ms. Arn asked about the plan to implement new students to adapt quickly. Dr. Macary shared that through the Dalio Foundation the district received laptops for grades 9, 10, and 11. We almost have 1:1 technology. We are in great shape and are working with Comcast, etc. for Wi-Fi at home.

Dr. Buxton asked Dr. Macary to confirm:

- Vernon is following state guidelines.
- The State left the plan up to the towns.
- Vernon Public Schools learn best in the classroom.
- Students learning at home will receive the same instruction as in-person classroom students.
- We are covering all our bases.

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- Vernon Public Schools have the best interest of children.

Dr. Buxton thanked everyone who worked on the plan.

Dr. Macary commended the Health & Safety Committee who met throughout the summer. He shared that his job is to do the best for all children.

Dr. Buxton shared she liked that Dr. Macary has invited people to call and/or email the superintendent and principals.

Ms. Hyatt asked about the positivity rate for COVID-19. Dr. Macary shared that it is .6% of the people tested.

Ms. Hyatt shared her main concern was how parents will know about the county counts of positivity. Dr. Macary shared that the DPH has a data tracker and he will share the link via email.

Ms. Hyatt asked how parents will be notified if something happened at the school. Dr. Macary shared that a health statistic can be sent; however, that cohort details cannot be shared due to FERPA.

Ms. Hyatt asked if the school counselors are ready and if anyone will be monitoring students and looking for signs. Dr. Macary shared that they are having training and student assistance teams will be watching for red flags.

Mr. Kalina shared that effort has been put into the plan and that this is equitable. He asked about additional costs for sanitizers, face masks, in-kind health, etc. and if the state was giving assistance. Dr. Macary shared that, yes, he is communicating with the state all the time and the CARES act and other funding has provided technology and PPE. There has been a lot of communication among cohorts.

Ms. Hyatt asked about cleaning while cohorts are moving. Dr. Macary shared that there is cleaning in-between classes and continuous spraying by teachers and students.

Ms. Arn noted that PK doesn't include wearing masks and that the CDC says if you are under two you don't need masks. She asked how we will distance PK students. Dr. Macary shared that he has had conversations with early childhood and there will be no masks for ages 3 & 4. The class size is 8 or 9 students.

Ms. Arn asked Dr. Macary to promise that this is safety first. He shared that is correct.

Mr. Linton asked about the school buildings. Dr. Macary shared that the buildings will be deep cleaned and sanitized by two custodians per building during the day using existing staff. They will wash the floors, whiteboards, etc.

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Mr. Linton asked who will be in the buildings. Dr. Macary shared that café workers will be doing their own clearing and will be serving Grab n' Go meals.

Mrs. Fischer asked how long it would be before an assessment will be made. Dr. Macary shared that he will be looking at the data on a daily basis.

Mrs. Fischer reiterated that parents can call Dr. Macary and the building principals. Parents have the option for the Hybrid Plan or virtual learning. It's totally up to the parents. Mrs. Fischer thanked everyone.

Dr. Macary thanked the Board for their continued support and encouragement. He encouraged parents to call him. He let parents know that we here to support them.

Ms. Arn asked Dr. Macary if he received any staff resignations. Dr. Macary noted that one resignation was received due to COVID.

6.0 Adjournment

MOTION: Mr. Linton moved to adjourn at 8:54 p.m.
SECOND: Mrs. Rodriguez.
VOTE: Unanimous

Respectfully submitted,



Stephen Linton, Board Secretary