

MINUTES OF THE WORK SESSION OF THE MARSHALL BOARD OF EDUCATION HELD ON MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2021 AT 7:00 PM IN-PERSON IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL MEDIA CENTER / LRC AND VIRTUALLY @ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo_Dw2K8ptX5eFKauouPJZQ/

PRESENT: LINDSEY, NICHOLSON, MIDDLETON, M. DAVIS, GAMBLE, LANKERD, R. DAVIS

ABSENT: WILLIAMS

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by President Lindsey. A moment of silence was observed.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The pledge of allegiance was led by Trustee Matt Davis.

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Moved by M. Davis, supported by Middleton, that the agenda be approved as presented. A roll-call vote unanimously carried the motion.

PUBLIC COMMENT

President Lindsey called for any members in-person audience and from the virtual audience to address the Board on agenda items only.

Joanna Johnson asked the Board to not reconfirm the district's learning plan before considering returning students to the classroom in-person at least four days a week if not five. She indicated survey results were clear, parents want their children attending school in-person. She requested increased in-person instruction begin immediately. She asked for Board transparency, specifically that the entire board packet be available online; that a clear communication plan be created in a manner that everyone has access and make sure all platforms are communicating the same way; and that results are shared immediately after the surveys close.

Megan Vandeboss shared how she has watched her senior suffer because of the pandemic; cherished senior memories are non-existent. She has heard from countless teachers and members of the school board that school will be in-person next year. She indicated that is not soon enough, kids need to be back in-person now. She does not believe upper classman will be prepared for what follows graduation because of the change in delivery of education; and that videos and communication with teachers is not an education. She ended with a quote from Aung San Suu Kyi – “The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear.”

BREAK DUE TO TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

Moved by LankerD, supported by Middleton, that the Board take a short break to allow time to address technical difficulties. The virtual audience was unable to hear anything.

MEETING RESUMED

The Board returned from the break at 7:20 p.m. as the sound issue was resolved.

PUBLIC COMMENT CONTINUED

Ms. Johnson and Ms. Vandeboss graciously repeated their public comments to allow for the virtual audience to hear what they had said.

Holly Irish shared that her family chooses to attend MPS through school of choice; that they started the school year with no internet service; and while they finally purchased a hotspot at \$50 per month the connection was still not good. Sitting in front of a chromebook all day is not a good feeling. She has watched her children struggle; one went from a 4.16 GPA to barely passing. She knows it is going to be hard for teachers to have students back in-person; everyone needs to push through this and salvage what is left of the school year; and she respectfully requested the Board to make the right decision and open up in-person instruction at least four days if not five days a week.

Mindy Saunders stated her family attend MPS through school of choice as well. She asked if there had been any plan to update the learning plan. She shared that it should not take parents or students complaining to get kids back in school in-person; that one year behind a computer screen does not equate to a year of education; and that kids need to be attending school in-person full time.

Kristin Finch stated that when the return to learn survey was put out most parents wanted their students to be in school full time and she trusted the district with its plan. She hopes that time was spent looking at what could be changed. She asked for help in understanding why other schools have returned their students to full time. She added that students need to feel that they matter and that their voices are heard. She realizes the sacrifice everyone has endured and that it has been difficult.

Paige Williams, a teacher at the middle school, shared that she became a teacher to help students and do what is best for them. She shared concerns with going from six feet social distancing to three feet; that MMS is at capacity right now it's not possible to have more as it would cause rescheduling all students and that class sizes would increase to 30 which would make it impossible to social distance three feet. She added that it is really only one month of instruction; that teachers will not be fully vaccinated until March 19 then there is a two week period before immunity reaches capacity; the year has been exhausting for everyone; and wants to see the year finished out as it currently is with plans to start the school year fresh in the fall.

Brian Stetler shared concerns for his high school student. He hopes the district will consider bringing middle and high school students back in-person a minimum of four days a week starting after spring break. He added that other schools have students in-person so it can be done; and he is okay going to three foot for social distancing rather than six feet.

Renee Shaum, a teacher at the middle school, shared that she has seen firsthand the level of work that teachers have put into connecting with students despite all of the challenges. She is concerned about bringing students back full time in-person as it would be difficult

on staff and students; that distancing for more students would be problematic; class sizes would increase; and the fear that virtual students would be put on the back burner and they might not receive adequate learning. She added there is just one-quarter of the year left, students would have to go through yet another change.

Troy Cates hears what other parents are saying, their anger and sadness and it is disheartening. He wants kids back in school and questions if they will be able to recover; he understands where teachers are coming from; but he feels the needs of the children outweigh those of the staff. He asked that students be returned to school in-person.

Miriam Wisniewski, a teacher at the middle school, loves the idea of getting students back in school; unfortunately, she does not believe it should happen this current school year. She shared that students are in a routine; it would be unfair to upend student schedules again; staff would have to reinvent education delivery again; and returning students to in-person would disrupt their education once more.

Superintendent Davis thanked everyone for taking the time to share their comments. He too is concerned about the social and emotional mental health of students. It is a stressful time trying to figure out the best steps forward. He added efforts will be put into see what can be done to create flexibility.

President Lindsey indicated members of the Board have received many messages from parents about returning students to in-person learning full time and there is not a clear choice.

BOARD TOPICS

COVID CURRENT IMPACTS: Superintendent Davis reviewed the eight-week COVID trend for Calhoun County and for the district. He consults with the county health department every week to get information about where the county is statistically. There is concern about the plateau that is being experienced; it is too early to predict what may happen; there has always been a spike in cases following a plateau. The health department is most concerned about reducing social distancing from six to three feet. A number of small districts have been able to maintain in-person learning because of fewer students in classrooms; there are schools that have classrooms that are larger than MPSs so they are able to have more students; and because they have practice three foot distancing. He reminded everyone the cases of COVID transfer for students is happening outside the school; and that middle and high school students cases of COVID are higher, because they are more social in the clubs and groups, than elementary students

Vice President Nicholson reminded everyone that predictions since the beginning of the pandemic have surpassed the expected numbers of cases. She cautioned using predicted numbers when making decisions as the numbers have not been the reality of what has occurred.

RETURN TO LEARN: Superintendent Davis shared information contained in the State of Michigan Guidelines for Operating School Safely which replaces school roadmap dated June 20, 2020. Specifically, the section on Safety Protocols that included:

- Designated COVID-19 point of contact – the district’s is School Nurse Danielle Siebert
- Cohorting – this has been the practice for grades 6-12; plastic dividers are not being used.
- Personal Protective Equipment – staff and students are wearing masks.
- Hand Hygiene – hand washing and use of hand sanitizer has been practiced.
- Spacing and Movement – six feet distancing is the district’s practice.
- Ventilation – filters are being changed more often and teachers are encouraged to open classroom windows to ventilate rooms when possible.

Superintendent Davis indicated if the Board gives him direction and approval to relax the six-foot standard for distancing and agree to class sizes the district could move forward with different options for students to attend school in-person. It is always the parent’s decision based on what they feel is best for their children when deciding the best delivery for their education. He indicated some time would be needed to work out logistically how in-person attendance four days a week would work. He understands the angst that folks are feeling. He wants the vaccination cycle completed before expanding in-person instruction; the earliest would be March 29, 2021.

Vice President Nicholson shared that 85% immunity is achieved following 14 days after the first vaccination and that the second vaccination increases immunity by 10% more following the second dose within 10-14 days.

Secretary Middleton asked if elementary students would return to the classroom five days a week; to which Superintendent Davis replied that is not his recommendation.

Superintendent Davis indicated it is up to the Board to make the recommendation in order for him to move forward.

President Lindsey stated “so I think Superintendent Davis is asking us if we want to move in this direction and then have a motion to relax the standards, distance from six foot to three as much as possible under the circumstances.” He asked if someone would like to make that motion and the Board can have a discussion about that. A motion was made, moved by M. Davis, and supported by Middleton.

President Lindsey asked board members to comment on the motion before the vote would occur. Following are comments, thoughts and or concerns among the Board members:

- If the state experiences and uptick in cases of COVID the district may need to go back to six-foot distancing.
- Three-foot distancing is a reasonable option. It is favorable.
- Didn’t realize class size, square foot, was a factor in bringing kids back in-person.
- A bit more normalcy is needed in our schools.
- Believe reducing distancing to three-foot will be okay with all other protocols in place.
- Need to do what is best for kids.
- Giving parents options is good.

- While five-days a week would be ideal for in-person it is understood that teachers need Wednesday to be virtual.
- Heartbroken parents are being heard and understand what children are going through as well as the concerns of students.
- Not sure there is enough information to make a decision right now.
- Students having to change schedules is difficult for them to adjust to.
- With spring break coming up students will come back to school with potential exposure that is not known.
- What does this mean for individual classrooms?
- Would like to see a timeline. Dates of what and when need to be established for the rest of the year.
- Need to work to achieve balance.
- The pandemic was not expected to last a year and that students would be out of school so much.
- It was always the plan to bring students back for in-person learning.
- It is time for students to know they are being heard.
- Owe it to families to try.
- Provide long term plans with dates for the return of school in the fall.

Superintendent Davis shared a list of things that will need to occur before bringing students back in-person four days a week.

- Survey parents over 5-6 business days to find out what parents' plan to do:
 1. Provide movement for students in grades K-5 between full time virtual or the current hybrid of in-person four days a week with Wednesdays being virtual school days.
 2. Continue having their child attend virtual full-time grades 6-12.
 3. Continue to have their child attend current hybrid for grades 6-12 attending in-person two days a week with the remaining three days as virtual school days.
 4. Change to the new hybrid for grades 6-12 attending in-person four days a week with Wednesdays being virtual school days.
- Meet with all administrators and support staff to determine what relaxing social distancing to three-foot will look like.
- March 22, 2021 the Board will consider taking action to implement a new hybrid learning option.
- March 29, 2021 is the target date, if feasible, for students to begin the selected lane they will be a part of for the remainder of the school year.

Trustee Gamble said she, “wants to clarify what it is you are asking us to do. Lisa mentioned the importance of giving families dates so that we so that they can plan and so what I heard us saying that we’re voting on is a date, we wanna do this by this date so but when Lisa is talking I am hearing her say that uh we’re looking at what that looks like if we go down to the three feet what does that look like with all of the people involved with all of the moving pieces involved which one is the case.”

Trustee M. Davis said “Superintendent Davis recommendation is six feet to three feet. And maybe what I said is that may have confused people is that would allow schools to open up and Randy’s recommendation is 3/29 if minimally 3 ft in classrooms.”

Superintendent Davis said, “if this gets approved that we are going to minimally have three-foot distance in the classroom and up to six foot depending on the class size but to understand class size and to the point about limited space.”

The Board voted on the motion. The motion carried with Lindsey, Nicholson, Middleton, M. Davis and Lankerd in favor, Gamble opposed.

Following is a compilation of comments that were made after the vote:

- Specials for elementary will have to be changed.
- Teachers rely heavily on Wednesdays for planning time and for district professional development.
- There has been an increase in behavioral issues in the elementary schools as in-person students are required to stay at their desks. Wednesdays give these students a chance to reset and come back in-person on Thursday.
- 50% of teacher absences go uncovered with a sub.
- Most days the district experiences 10-15 employees being absent due to close contacts.
- The district should consider long-term subs or floaters.
- It is difficult to find subs.
- Elementary children have expressed they want to come to school on Wednesdays as it gives them another chance to see their friends.
- It could be difficult for the middle school depending on how many students select coming back in-person five days a week.
- Depending on the responses for high school students it may not be as difficult to get them scheduled.
- It sounds like most of the struggling students are in grades 6-12.
- Elementary education is critical for the development of skills that will carry students forward; the district should consider offering in-person five days a week.

STUDENT ADVOCACY AT MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL: Superintendent Davis reviewed excerpts from Board Policies 5720 – Student Activism, 5722 – School – Sponsored Publications and Productions, 5730 – Equal Access for Nondistrict-Sponsored, Student Clubs and Activities, 5780 – Student/Parent Rights, and 5840 – Student Groups. He stated that from the expression of the District-approved NAACP Youth Group, He does not believe board policy was violated since it occurred during Black History Month, which is nationally, state and locally recognized in the district’s school activities and curriculum.

Trustee Lankerd believes the Black Lives Matter comments that have been made are a symptom of something deeper that may be happening in the district. She hopes the equity audit brings to light what it might be.

Superintendent Davis addressed students expressing their freedom of speech through things they may wear such as shirts or masks that contain words or artwork. Students are allowed to do so providing the content on the wearable is not a major distraction to the educational process. He added there has been only one complaint that about a student wearing a Trump mask and the video of the happening was viewed; the parent has been invited in to view the video as well. It was handled appropriately. He indicated that students are allowed to wear things that support a candidate as long as the wearable is not a major distraction to the educational process.

PUBLIC COMMENT

President Lindsey called for any members of the virtual audience to address the Board.

Joanna Johnson spoke in support of the discussed plans for an option for increased in-person learning and she looks forward to changes being implemented on March 29, 2021 as discussed. She believes the outcome will end positively; and that it is up to the superintendent to lead the teachers and staff and hold accountable the board's policy and plans. She applauded and appreciated the positiveness. She asked what in-person learning is going to look like and indicated it should not be looking at a chromebook. She encouraged social functions such as sporting events, get kids to cheer their teams on. She indicated the COVID vaccine is a medical health related issue and that it should remain private whether a teacher chooses or does not chose to get it, information about it should not enter the classroom As a parent she would never be reckless with the safety of her child let alone that of a teacher. She added another survey needs to get it out quickly and results should be shared immediately rather than waiting until the desired results come in; and suggested that when looking at 2021-22 it should be done with anticipating a full return to school five days a week in-person.

Holly Irish asked what was known about a House Bill she heard about that is connected to school funding.

Superintendent Davis confirmed there is a House Bill that could provide an additional \$450 per pupil if 20 hours a week of teaching can be verified. He indicated MPS already has reached the its allotment through title dollars and that the district does not have to meet this for stop gap.

Gordon Elementary Principal Kelly Fitzpatrick shared a message from her colleagues. She apologized that she has not communicated the effort, time and sacrifices the staff has put in to teach 1,100 students in-person through a pandemic. She did not believe their efforts were represented.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS

There were none.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Moved M. Davis, supported by Lanker, that the Board move into executive session under Section 8 (a) of the Open Meetings Act to consider a periodic personnel evaluation of the superintendent as the superintendent requested it be done in executive session. A roll-call vote unanimously carried the motion.

The Board entered into closed session at 9:45 p.m.

RETURN TO OPEN SESSION

The Board returned to open session at 9:55 p.m. Consensus was to adjourn for the night and return on March 11, 2021 at 5:00 p.m. to conduct the Superintendent's Evaluation.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:55 p.m.

LISA MIDDLETON, SECRETARY

KIMBERLY VANWORMER, RECORDING SECRETARY