

WESTWOOD SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Westwood, Massachusetts

MEETING MINUTES

September 17, 2020

Attendance and Call to Order

The meeting, held remotely¹, was called to order at 7:01pm by Chair Carol Lewis. Also present were: Maya Plotkin, Vice Chairperson; Charles Donahue, Clerk; Anthony Mullin; and Amanda Phillips. Superintendent Emily Parks; Assistant Superintendent Allison Borchers; Director of Business and Finance Lemma Jn-baptiste; and Director of Student Services Abby Hanscom were present on behalf of the District. John Cianciarulo recorded the minutes.

Mrs. Lewis recognized the live stream of the meeting, which was provided for real-time, public access to the activities of the School Committee. Members of the public were able to view a live stream of the meeting via the Internet at www.westwood.k12.ma.us/live and via Westwood Media Center's platforms.

Mrs. Lewis thanked the Committee members for the work they are doing and the time dedicated to serving the families of Westwood throughout the pandemic.

Superintendent's Report

Fall Reopening

Ms. Parks reported that schools reopened on Monday and that it was great to see students arriving at schools. She thanked families for their patience as new routines have been implemented.

Ms. Parks asked Steve Ouellette, Director of Technology, Learning, and Innovation, to update the Committee.

- An additional 2,000 devices have been issued to staff and students over the past two weeks. Another 2,000 devices were previously deployed to staff and students.
- Awaiting delivery of speaker microphones for classrooms; although teachers have found work-arounds.
- Setup telephone and email support which goes directly to individual schools for quicker response times for families.
- A "Zoom bomb" incident occurred Tuesday morning. The individual or individuals, using fabricated names, left their camera off, but typed obscenities in the chat and projected images as their virtual background. The teacher acted quickly, removed the perpetrators and shutdown the meeting. Teachers are now using the waiting room feature to deny admittance to unknown users and the setting has now been locked throughout the district, requiring the use of the waiting room feature. In addition, user authentication is now required, allowing only those with valid district email address into Zoom sessions. All district staff and families were notified about the incident shortly after it occurred.

Mrs. Hanscom provided an update on student services.

- In-person services have resumed for students.
- Working to fill Speech and Language Pathologist vacancies

¹ Remote meeting held in accordance with Executive Order of Massachusetts Governor, March 12, 2020

- Continue to receive requests for services. The goal is to update families by the end of the day on Friday.

Ms. Parks announced that this would likely be Lemma Jn-baptiste's last School Committee meeting before taking maternity leave. She will update the Committee soon regarding an Acting Director of Business and Finance.

Ms. Parks then updated the Committee on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's guidance regarding children of Massachusetts public educators. The School Committee voted to follow the recommendation for students in kindergarten through grade 6, allowing them to participate in a four-day cohort, based on the assumption that the numbers would work within the parameters of the hybrid model. Ms. Parks stated that the district was able to accommodate most. Some particular grades in schools were too high and, therefore, unable to keep the cohort small enough.

Ms. Parks then introduced Karen Poreda, who is heading up the district's COVID-19 Team. Mrs. Poreda stated that her team, which includes Athletic Director Matt Gillis and Athletic Trainer Paul Lilla, is charged with preventing and responding to potential and actual cases of COVID-19 in the school community by providing clear, easy-to-follow action steps and timelines; and facilitating communication for all members of the school community in the event a member becomes symptomatic or tests positive for COVID-19. The COVID-19 webpage on the district website includes guides for parents and staff.

To date, the team has worked with families through student illnesses. So far, all have received negative tests. Some are still pending and remain in quarantine. The Team is helping to educate parents. Mrs. Poreda and her team are also working with staff members. Five remain in quarantine as someone in close contact (usually someone that they live with) is symptomatic. All had to be tested and received negative results.

School Committee Chair Update/Liaison Reports

Mrs. Lewis thanked Ms. Parks for the letter she sent to families pertaining to student gatherings and captain's practices. She stressed that, if we want to keep schools open, everyone needs to follow protocols: masks up and staying six feet apart.

Building Project Update

Mrs. Plotkin provided an update. The project is continuing to move forward and is currently in the schematic design phase. This involves taking the design that the School Building Committee selected in June and fleshing it out by looking at various spaces in terms of the aesthetics, design, and layout. In addition, preliminary investigative work is taking place at the site to allow the architects and engineers to gather information.

A virtual community forum on the project will be held on Tuesday, October 13.

Public Participation

Members of the public were able to comment during public participation via Zoom.

Donna Morrison of 303 Oak Street, expressed thanks for the hard work being done. She asked if a determination on the number of positive cases of COVID-19 necessary to shut a school or district has been determine. She would also like to see an updated dashboard of cases.

Jackie Keaveney of 22 Redwood Road wondered what the numbers would need to be in order to have all students back in classrooms full-time.

Discussion Items

Public Health Metrics and Monitoring

Jared Orsini, Westwood's Director of Public Health, shared that his role is to help the COVID-19 Team in their work.

Mrs. Poreda shared that if/when cases are positive, she will be in consultation with Mr. Orsini. The partnership is beneficial if there is a need to isolate and advise consultation with a physician.

Ms. Parks shared a possible draft of metrics as a basis for discussion during the meeting. These were based upon things learned in conversations with other Superintendents, reading guidance documents, and consulting with Mrs. Poreda and Mr. Orsini.

There are two guiding questions:

1. What metrics are being monitored on a weekly basis in order to assess which model the district is using?
2. Having identified those metrics, what are the associated thresholds for each metric that would signal something about the model?

The metric matrix is based upon:

- Westwood's confirmed cases per 100K; and
- Westwood's positivity rate; and
- Commonwealth's positivity rate

Thresholds for such are:

- Full in-person
 - Westwood's confirmed cases per 100K (0-1.99); and
 - Westwood's positivity rate (0-1%); and
 - Commonwealth's positivity rate (0-1%)
- Hybrid
 - Westwood's confirmed cases per 100K (2.00-7.99); and
 - Westwood positivity rate (1.01-3.99%); and
 - Commonwealth's positivity rate (1.01-3.99%)
- Remote
 - Westwood's confirmed cases per 100K (8+); and
 - Westwood's positivity rate (4%+); and
 - Commonwealth's positivity rate (4%+)

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has also implemented learning model expectations which relate to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's color-coding system:

- Red (Average daily cases per 100K is greater than 8): Remote
- Yellow (Average daily cases per 100K is between 4-8): Hybrid or Remote
- Green (Average daily cases per 100K is less than 4): Hybrid or full in-person
- White (Less than five total cases in past 15 days): Hybrid or full in-person

The Committee discussed forming an advisory group to review the metrics and advise the School Committee. The advisory group will include Ms. Parks; Mr. Mullin; Dr. Henry D'Angelo, the school physician; Mr. Orsini; Mrs. Poreda; and a member of the Board of Health. The Committee would also like to include someone who has experience with infectious diseases.

Report from Testing COVID-19 Working Group

Mr. Donahue and Mr. Mullin reported on their findings regarding COVID-19 testing for staff and students.

What was learned:

- Many communities are moving toward assurance testing, including Wellesley and Brookline
- Collaborative formed across districts to share best practices and to potentially collaborate
- Testing is rapidly evolving

“Testing” definition is important:

- Testing school staff or children with some COVID-19 symptoms?
- Testing to address a population to address a positive COVID-19 test by a student/staff member?
- Regular assurance testing of students and staff (e.g., weekly testing)

Recommendations:

- Form appropriate advisory groups (e.g., COVID-19 Health Task Advisory Group; Operations?)
- Look for testing partners that can guarantee 24 hour turn-around for COVID-19 symptoms for staff/students and potential partnership (“as needed”) approach to COVID-19 case/cohort

School Committee and school leadership input will be necessary

The Committee asked Mr. Donahue and Mr. Mullin to continue investigating and working with the Town of Wellesley to learn more about their program.

FY'21 Budget and Hiring Update

Ms. Parks and Mrs. Jn-baptiste reported.

Ms. Parks reported that the budget landscape has many unknown variables.

- The district's operating budget includes about \$1.5M in federal funding (including grants and “circuit breaker” reimbursement), plus revenue from other revolving accounts. This revenue is included as offsets in the operating budget.
 - There is a significant concern that this funding will be substantially decreased
 - Circuit Breaker is currently reimbursed at 75%; during prior economic downturn in 2009, was cut to 30%
- Uncertainty about revenue generated through revolving accounts during a disrupted year.
- The district's costs have changed as a result of the unprecedented and unanticipated world situation since the FY'21 budget was developed

The strategy last spring included:

- Implementing a hiring freeze
 - Examine educational impact of not filling positions that are vacant due to retirements, resignations, non-renewals, or are new
 - Hire only those positions where the impact is untenable
 - Create a master schedule and make teaching assignments based on this assumption
- Continue to make projections about next year's needs and costs by engaging in planning for various reopening scenarios and structures
- Work collaboratively with bargaining units who were currently in negotiations

The cuts approved last spring included:

- Tier 1: 8.0 FTE professional positions and 2.5 FTE paraprofessionals
- Tier 2: 3.0 FTE teaching positions
 - Total approximately \$1M

The Tier 1 cuts were implemented:

- 1.4 FTE High School English (\$77,073)
- 1.0 FTE High School Social Studies (\$95,322)
- 1.0 FTE High School Science (\$81,923)
- 1.0 FTE High School Spanish (\$65,072)
- 0.6 FTE High School Drama (\$35,384)
- 0.2 FTE High School Music (\$12,267)
- 1.0 FTE Middle School Social Studies (\$108,632)
- 1.0 FTE Elementary Library (\$108,632)
- 0.4 FTE K-12 Library Director (\$47,988)
- 0.4 FTE Director of Safety and Security (\$40,000)
- 2.5 FTE Instructional Assistants (\$66,250)
 - Total: \$738,543

The elementary cuts in Tier 2 were not able to be implemented. In the FY'21 approved budget, there were 66 elementary classroom teachers. The proposed cut in the spring was to 63. This fall, there are 75 elementary classroom teachers. This is the result of:

- Enrollment increase at Deerfield in singletons
- 4-days of in-person instruction in Kindergarten and Grade 1
- Number of students who opted for fully remote in Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2

The nine additional elementary classroom teachers were the result of:

- Reallocation of staff from library, math specialist, and literacy specialist (4.5 FTE; cost neutral)
- Elimination of Kindergarten assistants (-\$218k), allowed for the creation of 4.0 FTE teaching positions (nearly cost neutral)
- Applying turnover savings for the remaining 0.5 FTE (\$48,839)

In addition, a 1.0 FTE preschool teacher was added in order to offer in-person instruction in 4- and 5-day programs. (Turnover in the amount of \$69,849.)

The savings from turnover is important for two reasons:

1. Savings can be applied to unanticipated costs during a given fiscal year (e.g., paid medical leaves, providing SPED services, etc.)

2. Important foundation for FY'22 budget which can be applied to cost of level services increase

Turnover savings is the result of:

- Retirements, resignations, and non-renewals (carry forward to FY'22 budget development)--\$248,718
- Leaves of absence (limited to the FY'21 budget)--\$330,836
 - Turnover that has already been applied to 1.5 FTE teaching positions described earlier was already deducted
 - Most of the turnover in leaves of absence is due to the leaves requested during the summer and are unique to this year's circumstances

Other revenue includes:

- Coronavirus Reopening Funds (\$225/student) and CARES Act: \$690k
- The Town's Special Education Reserve Account: \$558k

Revenue remains uncertain. Steps taken include closing the Extended Day Program and reducing Food Service staff from twenty to nine.

Additional risks include:

- Food Services risk between \$150k and \$200k due to significantly reduced sales
- Bus fee offset risk of \$107k as ridership dropped from 1,580 to 690 in response to need for physical distancing measures
- Building Use risk of \$62k as there is no revenue being generated which serves as a salary offset
- Circuit Breaker with an estimated risk of \$500k because there is limited insight into what the Circuit Breaker reimbursement for Special Education will be this year and anticipate it could be much lower than prior years.

COVID expenses for FY'21 to date:

- \$900k for technology, software applications, personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilation, and equipment costs to reopen
- \$120k which will be paid next month, particularly for ventilation (e.g., filters, repairs)

There are anticipated expenses and/or potential risk for COVID expenses:

- Continuing PPE and ventilation costs: estimated \$750k
- Special Education compensatory services: estimated \$250k
- Additional staffing to support grades 2 and 3: \$150k

Mrs. Jn-baptiste summarized the financial picture:

- Available funds: \$2,566,097 (Tier 1 budget cuts, turnover, Coronavirus reopening and CARES Act funds, Special Education reserve account)
- Revenue uncertainly: (-\$869,000) (Circuit breaker, food services, bus offset, building use)
- COVID Costs, either incurred or committed (-\$1,020,000) (Technology, PPE, ventilation, software, equipment, etc.)
- Anticipated or potential COVID costs: (+\$1,150,000) (Additional grade 2 and 3 staffing, PPE, ventilation, SPED compensatory)

The total potential shortfall is (-\$472,903).

Mrs. Plotkin asked for regular updates on the budget situation at School Committee meetings throughout the year.

Action Items

Approval of August 27, 2020 Meeting Minutes

Mr. Mullin made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of August 27, 2020. Mr. Donahue seconded.

Roll-call vote:

Mrs. Lewis	Yes
Mrs. Plotkin	Yes
Mr. Donahue	Yes
Mr. Mullin	Yes
Mrs. Phillips	Yes

Result: 5-0-0 (Unanimous approval)

Approval of September 1, 2020 Meeting Minutes

Mrs. Plotkin made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of September 1, 2020. Mr. Mullin seconded.

Roll-call vote:

Mrs. Lewis	Yes
Mrs. Plotkin	Yes
Mr. Donahue	Yes
Mr. Mullin	Yes
Mrs. Phillips	Yes

Result: 5-0-0 (Unanimous approval)

New Business

Mr. Mullin asked Ms. Parks to update the Committee on district goals next month.

Adjournment

Mrs. Phillips made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Donahue seconded.

Roll call vote:

Mrs. Lewis	Yes
Mrs. Plotkin	Yes
Mr. Donahue	Yes
Mr. Mullin	Yes
Mrs. Phillips	Yes

Result: 5-0-0 (Unanimous)

The meeting adjourned at 9:38pm.

Documents/Exhibits Used at Meeting

- COVID-19 Working Group update slide
- District's COVID-19 Weekly Case Analysis draft for September 16, 2020
- Draft meeting minutes of August 27, 2020
- Draft meeting minutes of September 1, 2020
- Memo to School Committee from Emily Parks dated September 16, 2020, regarding FY'21 hiring, staffing, and budget
- Presentation slides for FY'21 hiring and budget update