

WESTWOOD SCHOOL COMMITTEE
Westwood, Massachusetts

MEETING MINUTES
March 11, 2021

Attendance and Call to Order

The meeting, held remotely¹, was called to order at 7:01pm by Chairperson 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 Abigail Hanscom were present on behalf of the district. John Cianciarulo recorded the minutes.

Charles Donahue arrived at 7:04pm. Although present, he experienced technical issues during the meeting and was unable to use his microphone.

Mrs. Lewis also 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. Westwood Media Center also recorded the meeting for later broadcast on its platforms.

Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Parks updated the Committee.

A letter was sent to district families on Monday where the proposal to change learning models was announced. The Committee will be discussing at this meeting.

A group of parents has offered to help schedule vaccination appointments for school staff. The district is grateful for their assistance.

WPS COVID-19 Data

The presentation began with a chart showing the COVID-19 case count, the average daily incidence rate, and the percent positivity over time.

Data was shared:

- 217 positive cases (students and staff) to date this school year
- 1,871 students and staff tracked by the team (positive cases, close contact, travel, symptomatic)
- 512 consultations

Positive student cases to date by grade-level were shared.

Student positive cases by month:

- September: 0.5%
- October: 4.3%
- November: 8.6%
- December: 19.9%
- January: 51.1%
- February: 12.9%
- March (to date): 2.7%

The district's COVID-19 Monitoring and Response Team has determined that the vast majority of cases are due to household transmission or indoor, maskless gatherings.

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

Quarantines by month:

- period of October 8: 30 students; 20 staff
- period of November 12: 49 students; 20 staff
- period of December 10: 32 students; 14 staff
- period of January 14: 103 students; 16 staff
- period of February 11: 36 students; 6 staff
- period of March 11: 9 students; 4 staff

Of all of the students and staff who have been designated close contacts as a result of possible in-school exposure:

- No elementary or high school students or staff have subsequently tested positive.
- There was one case at the Preschool where a class was quarantined after a student tested positive. One of the other students subsequently tested positive.
- There was one case at Thurston Middle School where a teacher and student worked one-on-one (at less than six feet) for an extended period of time both tested positive.

This analysis includes specialized programs and the Preschool, where maintaining six feet of physical distance is not possible.

The district's safety mitigation measures have included:

- Masks
- Handwashing
- Staying home when symptomatic
- Contact tracing
- Physical distancing (three feet minimum during instructional time, six feet during lunch, snack, and mask breaks)
- Weekly COVID-19 testing

Plans for Full In-person Return

A study of Massachusetts data indicates no substantial difference in cases among students or staff with three versus six feet of distance since schools have re-opened.

Superintendent Parks spoke with two Superintendents of schools that have been functioning at three feet of distance:

- King-Philip Regional (Grades 7-12)
 - Have had students in-person at three feet since Columbus Day
 - Given their large class sizes and small physical classroom sizes, they could not even do hybrid at greater than three feet (e.g., High School classes of 34)
 - The teacher has six feet of space at front of classroom
 - They have had a school go remote twice due to gatherings in the community and a need to do contact tracing
 - Of the 2,280 students and staff, they have had 78 positive COVID cases.
 - Of the 78 cases, there are two cases that they think might have been in-school transmission.
- Shawsheen Technical High School
 - Have had students in person since the start of the school year at three feet
 - Three feet is the distance both in the classrooms and in the shops
 - Of the 1,300 students and 250 staff, they have had 42 positive cases
 - They do not have evidence of in-school transmission:

- None of their close contacts have test positive

In mid-February, the Centers for Disease Control issued updated guidance for schools. They strongly recommend three feet of physical distance. In addition, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) received a letter signed by over 300 doctors supporting in-person learning with mitigation measures, including three feet of distance between students when masked.

Superintendent Parks shared her recommendation on the spring learning model with the Committee:

- Students in all grades attend school in-person 5 days per week beginning April 5
- Student desks spaced at least three feet apart
- Students spaced six feet apart when eating or taking a mask break
- To the extent possible, eating and mask breaks outdoors
- In grades 4-12, students will be able to “zoom” into class when quarantined or home for COVID-related reasons, with the approval of the WPS COVID-19 Monitoring and Response Team.
- Grades K-3 will continue to have access to a remote learning coach when in quarantine or home for COVID-related reasons
- Students in the fully remote model may remain fully remote for the remainder of the year.

School Hours:

- The premise of the Fall Reopening Plan was to create schedules that worked for all three possible models. This plan was approved by DESE.
- DESE announced on Tuesday that it would be transitioning away from the “emergency” provisions created prior to the start of the school year and meet the State’s requirements for full-time learning:
 - Kindergarten-Grade 8: average of 5 hours per day
 - Grades 9-12: average of 5.5 hours per day
- This requirement goes into effect:
 - Kindergarten-Grade 5: April 5
 - Grades 6-8: April 28
 - Grades 9-12: To be determined sometime in April with two weeks of lead time provided
- The district anticipated this possibility during collective bargaining and planned and created new schedules to meet the requirement.

The district’s revised school hours were presented:

- Elementary
 - 8:45am-2:30pm (includes lunch) / Wednesday: 8:45am-12:45pm (no lunch)
- Middle School
 - 7:45am-1:45pm (includes lunch) / Wednesday: 7:45am-12:10pm (no lunch)
- High School
 - 7:25am-1:15pm (no lunch) / Wednesday: 7:25am-12:55pm (no lunch)

Adjustments to the school calendar were presented:

- The March 10 professional development day has been rescheduled for April 28
 - There will be no school for students
 - At the elementary level, the day will be used for parent-teacher conferences
- The professional development day scheduled for May 12 will be a school day for students

- This day will serve as the makeup for the February 2 snow day
- The last day of school for students will, therefore, be Wednesday, June 16 as originally scheduled

More details on the plan will be forthcoming:

- Principals will send information home tomorrow and will be available to answer questions.
 - Elementary: Contact building principal
 - Middle School: Parent Q&A on Thursday, March 18, 11am-Noon (will be recorded)
 - High School: Parent Q&A on Tuesday, March 16, 6pm-7pm (will be recorded)
- Concerns people have asked about:
 - There will be ample time for students at the middle and high school to safely snack during the day.
 - High School students will still be able to leave the building during unscheduled periods (unless their parents opt them out).
 - There will be a change to high school science labs, which will be done within the long class block (i.e., no double-lab periods)
 - Middle School blocks will be shortened by eleven minutes, and a support block (formerly “X-block”) will be reinstated as a time for intervention, small group work, individual support, etc.
 - There will be a large tent at the middle school and at Sheehan School for use during lunch.
 - Students in Kindergarten-Grade 4 will remain at six feet of distance if at all possible.

The Committee discussed the spring learning model and agreed that it makes sense to have students return in-person five days per week. They expressed gratitude for the school community which has come together to support all students.

Mrs. Plotkin stated that she does not want to diminish the concerns of parents, but reiterated that the district will be able to adjust as needed.

Student COVID Testing Program

Superintendent Parks shared that the student COVID-19 testing program has started.

Percentage of students registered:

- Preschool: 34%
- Elementary: 29%
 - Deerfield: 34%
 - Downey: 20%
 - Hanlon: 24%
 - Martha Jones: 32%
 - Sheehan: 35%
- Middle School: 35%
- High School: 34%

The district’s COVID-19 Advisory Group has indicated that, ideally, they would like to see 70% of students participating in the program.

Amanda Phillips asked at what threshold there is little benefit of conducting student assurance testing. Public health officials state that 70% is needed. The CDC has indicated that surveillance testing with a random sample of 20% is effective. However, the student testing is not a random sample.

Charles Donahue, via text communication to the Chair, conveyed a question asking how the participation rate compares to other districts. Superintendent Parks responded that Westwood's rate is lower. In speaking with other Superintendents, they have reported participation rates between 60-74%.

Planning for Extended Day 2021-2022

Superintendent Parks expressed thanks for the Extended Day staff which assisted in operating the after-school program remotely last spring. The district was able to continue to pay individuals even when revenue was not coming into the program. When the program was not able to open this year, all of the full-time employees were offered other full-time employment in the district. These staff members continue to work with students everyday.

Assistant Superintendent Borchers presented on plans for Extended Day for 2021-2022.

Extended Day 2020-2021

- In-person program closed when school closed in March 2020
- Extended Day staff pivoted to providing remote services:
 - Dedicated Extended Day website
 - Create asynchronous activities for families to access as needed
 - Scheduled synchronous sessions after school hours
- Staff laid off in August 2020
- Program Coordinator/Site Coordinators offered alternative positions.

Building Use

- No external building use since March 2020
 - Student, staff, and visitor health and safety
- Summer 2021
 - Westwood Recreation
 - Westwood Public Schools' Extended School Year and Intervention
- SY 2021-2022 Gradual opening for more use
 - Extended Day
 - Other events to support Westwood children
 - Programs/events that support the broader community
- Considerations for Restarting an Extended Day Program
 - Protocols and communication around COVID-19
 - Outreach, registration, training on an extremely tight deadline
 - Determination of school building sites
 - Staffing challenges
 - Opportunities created by break in programming

Recommendation: Seek an outside vendor to run the Extended Day Program.

Assurances Sought with an Outside Vendor

- Health and safety protocols that have been tested
- Streamlined registration and responsive communication

- Access to a wide pool of potential staff and strong recruitment strategy
- Administrative bandwidth to launch the program
- Affordable rates for families and reduced tuition for low-income threshold
- Clear policy on withdrawal and refunds for families who enroll
- Possibility of priority enrollment for former Extended Day families
- Interviewing of former Extended Day staff
- Strong, collaborative approach in working with school administration

Estimated Timeline

March

- Parent survey: Participation interest, qualitative feedback
- Request for proposals with three weeks of advertising
- Selection Committee formed

April

- Vendor selection and contract
- Initiation of enrollment

May-June

- Complete enrollment
- Site selection
- Staff recruitment

July-August

- Site setup
- Staff selection and training
- Planning with district team

Outcomes

- Before and after-school care aligned with the district's mission, vision, and values
- Safe and healthy after-care environment
- Clear, easy to navigate process (sign-up, billing, etc.)
- Reasonable rates with supports available for low income households
- Timely and professional communication with families
- Fun, enriching programming for WPS students

Carol Lewis asked about other districts' models for their after-school program. Allison Borchers responded that it varies. Some outsource their programs. Others took a homegrown program and incorporated it into a separate entity on its own.

Amanda Phillips volunteered to be on the selection committee. Carol Lewis and Maya Plotkin will help and review the request for proposals and provide feedback before it is issued.

Maya Plotkin asked if someone from the district would have oversight of the vendor. Allison Borchers responded that it would likely fall to a group of people in the district, perhaps split between the Assistant Superintendent and Business Offices.

Director of Business and Finance Lemma Jn-baptiste stated that she is working to structure the request for proposals in such a way that the rates are determined by the district.

Anthony Mullin asked about the impact to budget offsets. Lemma Jn-baptiste responded that the impact would not be known until the provider is determined.

The current staff members, which have taken other positions in the district, have been informed of this plan.

Amanda Phillips expressed concern about delays to the process and ensuring equal access for high-needs students. Anthony Mullin expressed concern about the process overall.

Public Comment

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

Kate Wynne of Cedar Hill Drive expressed her opposition to outsourcing the Extended Day Program.

Donna Morrison of Oak Street urged teachers to take advantage of the opportunity to be vaccinated. She asked for more information on how students currently in the remote model would be affected by the change in learning model. She also stated that outsourcing the Extended Day Program is problematic.

Sandra Castaldini of Birch Street is excited about having all grades return to in-person instruction in April. She expressed concern regarding high school students not having a scheduled lunch.

Dan Feingold of Whipporwill Drive indicated his surprise with the district's approach to the Extended Day Program. He urged the Committee to consider a parallel process of issuing an RFP and exploring reopening a district-run program.

Kayla Klosi of Beacon Street is pleased about having the in-person learning model. She also spoke in support of the district's in-house Extended Day Program.

School Committee Chair Update/Liaison Reports

Building Projects Update

Maya Plotkin provided an update.

March 18 Community Forum

Next Thursday, the School Committee will be hosting a community forum on the building project which will include a review of the entire project from its inception to the current status.

Bridge Funding and Fall Special Town Meeting

The project schedule was reviewed:

- Town Vote – May 2021 for bridge funding
 - Design documents worked on
- Town Votes – October/November 2021
 - Bid documents worked on
- Start Construction – July 2022
 - Phases 1 and 2 of building and site construction

- Phase 3 – Move-in February 2024
- Phase 4 – Site construction
- Project Completion – August 2024

There is an increased cost associated with a schedule shift. Extending the construction schedule would have a cost impact to the project of approximately \$720k.

- Escalation (3% annually) for five month delayed construction start (from July 2022 to December 2022)
- Additional contingency costs to address potential winter conditions at construction start (December 2022)

The bridge funding was reviewed:

- Design Development (Summer 2021-Fall 2021)
 - Compass...\$120k (Six months at \$20k per month)
 - Compass' fee for cost estimating...\$17k
 - Dore and Whittier design development basic services...\$1,232,260
 - Dore and Whittier extra services...\$86k
 - Total Design Development Fees...\$1,455,260

The bridge funding request is, therefore, for \$1,455,260. The bridge funding does not add to the project cost. It is an upfront portion of the total project cost. This borrowing would not impact residents' taxes in FY'22.

The School Building Committee vetted this plan and took a vote to take action. The next step is to ask the Select Board to place the article on the Town Warrant. This has been reviewed by the Finance and Warrant Commission as well.

COVID-19 Advisory Group Update

Anthony Mullin reported. He stated that the update was incorporated into the Superintendent's presentation. He stressed that an increase in the student testing rate is important in forming a baseline and encouraged everyone to be tested. The Group will continue to meet bi-weekly, which is important when moving to a full, in-person learning model.

Other Liaison Reports

Maya Plotkin reminded everyone of the Foundation for Westwood Education's talent show fundraiser.

Discussion Items

Spring Learning Model

The presentation and discussion on the spring learning model was incorporated into the Superintendent's report.

First Reading of Revised Policy JFB – Intra-District Transfer Policy

Superintendent Parks stated that no substantive changes have been made to the policy. Parenthetical references to class size are recommended to be removed as the School Committee's guideline has since been updated

Action Items

Charles Donahue experienced technical issues during the meeting and was unable to use his microphone. He was able to convey his vote on action items to the Chair via text message. While Mr. Donahue's votes are noted for the record, they are not tallied in the resulting total.

Vote on Spring Learning Model

MOTION made by Anthony Mullin to return to a full, in-person five days per week [learning model] on April 5 for all grade levels. Seconded by Maya Plotkin.

Roll-call vote:

Carol Lewis: Yes
Maya Plotkin: Yes
Charles Donahue: Yes
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 4-0-0 – Approved

Vote to Approve Revised WTA Memorandum of Agreement

MOTION made by Maya Plotkin to ratify the memorandum of agreement between the Westwood School Committee and the Westwood Teachers' Association for 2020-2021, as revised on March 5, 2021. Seconded by Amanda Phillips.

Roll-call vote:

Carol Lewis: Yes
Maya Plotkin: Yes
Charles Donahue: Yes
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 4-0-0 – Approved

Vote to Approve Elementary Building Project Article

MOTION made by Maya Plotkin for the School Committee to ask the Select Board to include an article in the Warrant Articles for submission to the Spring 2021 Town Meeting requesting that the Town appropriate bridge funding in an amount not to exceed \$1.46M to pay the costs of design and site work associated with the construction of a new Hanlon Elementary School. Seconded by Anthony Mullin.

Superintendent Parks clarified that, although only Hanlon is mentioned in the motion, this is for the Hanlon and Deerfield. The language is stipulated by the Massachusetts School Building Authority, which refers to Westwood's project as the "Hanlon" project.

Roll-call vote:

Carol Lewis: Yes
Maya Plotkin: Yes

Charles Donahue: Yes
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 4-0-0 – Approved

Vote to Request Special Town Meeting, Fall 2021

MOTION made by Maya Plotkin for the School Committee to ask the Select Board to schedule a special Town Meeting and special ballot in the fall of 2021 for the purpose of putting an article to fund the elementary school building project before residents. Further, the School Committee proposes Monday, October 18, 2021 for the special Town Meeting and Tuesday, October 26, 2021 for the special town ballot. Seconded by Anthony Mullin.

Roll-call vote:

Carol Lewis: Yes
Maya Plotkin: Yes
Charles Donahue: Yes
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 4-0-0 – Approved

Approval of Revised 2021-2022 School Calendar

MOTION made by Anthony Mullin to approve the revised 2021-2022 school calendar. Seconded by Amanda Phillips.

Roll-call vote:

Carol Lewis: Yes
Maya Plotkin: Yes
Charles Donahue: Yes
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 4-0-0 – Approved

Approval of February 11, 2021 Meeting Minutes

MOTION made by Amanda Phillips to approve the February 11, 2021 meeting minutes. Seconded by Anthony Mullin.

Roll-call vote:

Carol Lewis: Yes
Maya Plotkin: Yes
Charles Donahue: Yes
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 4-0-0 – Approved

New Business

There was no new business.

Amanda Phillips asked for clarification on the action-steps related to the Extended Day Program. The district will be issuing a request for proposals, which Carol Lewis and Maya Plotkin will review. The district's leadership team will process the comments heard at tonight's meeting. Anthony Mullin reminded the Committee and the district's leadership team that if it results in a change, it must go before the School Committee for a vote as there are budgetary impacts.

Adjournment

MOTION made by Anthony Mullin to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by Maya Plotkin.

Roll-call vote:

Carol Lewis: Yes
Maya Plotkin: Yes
Charles Donahue: Unable to cast vote
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 4-0-0 – Approved

The meeting adjourned at 9:25pm.

Documents/Exhibits Used at Meeting

- 2021-2022 School calendar, revised February 17, 2021 for the Committee's review and approval
- Building Project funding presentation slides
- COVID-19 Monitoring and Response Team Data and Spring Learning Model presentation slides
- Documents related to Spring Learning Model (March 2021)
 - Letter to families dated March 8, 2021
 - Draft High School bell/block schedule
 - Draft Middle School bell/block schedule
 - Draft elementary bell schedule
- Draft meeting minutes of February 11, 2021 for the Committee's review and approval
- Extended Day 2021-2022 presentation slides
- Memorandum of Agreement between the Westwood School Committee and the Westwood Teachers Association, revised on March 5, 2021
- Memorandum to E. Parks from A. Borchers and L. Jn-baptiste, regarding Reopening Extended Day in Fall 2021, dated March 5, 2021
- Memorandum to School Committee from E. Parks, regarding bridge funding request for building project, dated March 8, 2021
- Memorandum to School Committee from E. Parks, regarding building project – scheduling special town meeting, dated March 6, 2021
- Policy JFB – Intra-District Transfer Policy