

WESTWOOD SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Westwood, Massachusetts

MEETING MINUTES

April 8, 2021

Attendance and Call to Order

The meeting, held remotely¹, was called to order at 7:00pm 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.

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 reported.

Transition to Full In-Person Learning

The district pivoted from the hybrid learning model to in-person on Monday.

Parents have asked questions regarding the length of the school day and wondering why schools did not revert to last year's hours. Superintendent Parks stated that the district is on track for the required instructional minutes. Although the day is shorter, core instructional learning time has not been impacted.

This has been achieved through:

- Shorter elementary specialist class (i.e., art, music, library, physical education) time; 25 versus previous 45 minutes due to increased general class sections
- Thirty minutes of combined lunch and recess at elementary versus thirty minutes each previously
- Middle and high school has fewer and longer blocks with not as much time transitioning between classes

The middle and high school work on schedules has continued. Initial work predates the pandemic. Middle School Principal Mike Redmon and High School Principal Amy Davenport will be contacting families about an information night.

Work continues on launching a robust extended school year program for eligible students with both in-person and remote options. Additional intervention programming at elementary, middle, and the grade 8/9 transition for literacy and math will also be implemented. Eligible students will be identified through assessment data in the spring.

Additionally, the district has collaborated with the Town's Recreation Department to run their programming this summer.

Anthony Mullin asked if school start and end times would be the same for next year as they were previously. Superintendent Parks responded that it would be. At the elementary level, she is investigating the possibility of consistent times across all five schools.

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

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:

- 245 positive cases (students and staff) to date this school year
- 2,115 students and staff tracked by the team (positive cases, close contact, travel, symptomatic)
- 523 consultations

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

Student positive cases by month:

- September: 0.4%
- October: 3.9%
- November: 7.7%
- December: 17.9%
- January: 45.9%
- February: 11.6%
- March: 9.2%
- April (to date): 3.4%

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
- period of April 8: 64 students; 7 staff

Student COVID-19 testing program data was shared. The percent of students registered by level:

- Preschool
 - period of March 12: 34%
 - period of April 8: 50%
- Elementary
 - period of March 12: 29%
 - Deerfield: 34%
 - Downey: 20%
 - Hanlon: 24%
 - Martha Jones: 32%
 - Sheehan: 35%
 - period of April 8: 50%
 - Deerfield: 49%
 - Downey: 40%
 - Hanlon: 49%
 - Martha Jones: 55%
 - Sheehan: 59%
- Middle School

- period of March 12: 35%
- period of April 8: 48%
- High School
 - period of March 12: 34%
 - period of April 8: 50%

The State has indicated that it will continue to fund the student pool testing program through the remainder of the school year. Similarly, the district indicated it would implement staff pool testing from Mirimus through the April vacation. Superintendent Parks is recommending that the staff testing program through Mirimus continue through the remainder of the school year.

While the staff testing participation rate has decreased, it is believed that this is due to the increase in the number of staff that has been vaccinated.

Q3 Financial Report

Director of Business and Finance Lemma Jn-baptiste reported. She stated that she is projecting that the district will be able to close the fiscal year without significant reliance on the Special Education Reserve accounts or unbudgeted offsets in order to absorb excess operating expenses due to COVID-19.

With the exception of contracted services and supplies, which are impacted by pandemic-related spending, FY'21 spending is at or below FY'20 levels.

Update on Extended Day

The district considered options for before and after-school programs for families next year. This included pursuing outside vendors. After receiving feedback from the public and reviewing survey data from families, the district has chosen to restart the Extended Day Program and have it run and managed internally. An Interim Director is being hired who will be contacting families soon to begin the registration process for the fall.

District Priority: Meaningful Learning Experiences

The pandemic has been a challenging environment for teachers, but they have been quite creative in their approach. Superintendent Parks showed a video that High School science teacher Greg Schwanbeck made to share with the School Committee about Slooh, a robotic telescope service used in his astronomy course.

Public Comment

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

Diane Hayes of Magnolia Drive asked about ethnicity data of remote students and the potential of academic regression for medically vulnerable students.

Steph Finegold and her son, both of Whippoorwill Drive, spoke in support of the Extended Day program.

Donna Morrison of Oak Street asked about the percentage of students participating in the remote option. She also indicated her disappointment in the decreased number of teachers participating in staff COVID testing. She advocated for moving funding from staff testing to other shortfalls that need to be addressed.

Mandy Taft-Pearman of Gay Street spoke in support of work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Thomas and Doris Forteith of Oak Street spoke in support of work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Christina Martin of Brookfield Road spoke in support of work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Megan Brenk of Briar Lane is also Co-Chair of the Westwood Special Education Parent Advisory Committee. She spoke in support of providing a remote learning model for vulnerable special education students and in support of work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Mike DiBenedetto of Tamarack Road spoke in support of work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

School Committee Chair Update/Liaison Reports

Building Projects Update

Maya Plotkin reviewed the project schedule.

- 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.

COVID-19 Advisory Group Update

Charles Donahue and Anthony Mullin reported.

- Testing trends have been good. The group would like to see continued, increased testing participation rates.
- Metrics need to be monitored. At the State level, there has been a higher percentage of positive cases of those under eighteen relative to two months ago.
- It is likely that people aged 16 and 17 will be eligible for the vaccine in a couple of weeks.
- The District's Student COVID Testing Coordinator, Amanda Fairbanks, is participating in the Collaborative.
- The Collaborative is exploring incentives for testing.

Other Liaison Reports

Amanda Phillips reported on the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee, which will be holding a meeting next week. Parents are volunteering to help expand the Same and Different Like Me program, and also working with the Town's Recreation Department to incorporate inclusion into their programs. They are also working with school principals to expand work with the Special Olympics on becoming a unified school district. The high school is already part of this program.

Discussion Items

Strategic Priority: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – Curriculum

Assistant Superintendent Allison Borchers presented.

In 2018, the district identified a strategic priority to implement programs and instructional practices that recognize and support the needs of students and families in an increasingly diverse community.

Recap from January

- Brief updates: Curriculum and instruction; School and district culture; Recruiting, hiring, and retention
- Shifting gears: Moving from intentional to strategic; Data-focused; Research-backed programs and practices

Diversity, Equity, and Integration Efforts

- Curriculum and Instruction
 - School/classroom library updated
 - Core text updates
 - Professional development on culturally responsive practices and classroom discussion with dignity
- School and District Culture
 - LTARCE group at high school
 - Welcome Club at middle school
 - Parent series on talking with kids about race
 - Guest speakers and events
 - Antic-racist educator groups
 - Book talk and book groups
- Recruiting, Hiring, and Retention
 - GBSHRN (Greater Boston School Human Resources Network)

- MPDE (Massachusetts Partnership for Diversity in Education)
- Diversity Network
- Job fairs
- Affinity group

The Work Ahead: Shift from Intentional to Strategic

- Leadership team training
- Data-driven efforts
 - DESE Diversity Network - Data-informed planning for diversifying staff
 - Beloved Equity Audit: Online tool for assessing growth areas
 - Harvard RIDES: Strategic, cyclic approach to improvement

Curriculum Update: English Language Arts/Literacy and Social Studies

Westwood High School English

- Text diversification across all grades
- Updated essential questions for courses
 - e.g., “Considering racial and social inequities, how does American education either empower or stifle personal growth?”
- Grade 10 shift to world literature (Fall 2021)
- New senior elective offerings
 - Hidden Voices: Race and Culture in Literature
 - Hidden Voices: Gender and Orientation in Literature
- Summer Reading 2021

High School Social Studies

- Updating guiding questions and content in grades 9 and 10
 - Grade 9 (World History) - How do diverse societies respond to common problems?
 - African kingdoms
 - Columbian exchange and Transatlantic trade
 - Racism in America
 - Grade 10 (Modern History) - Has modernization created a more just world?
 - Haitian revolution
 - National identity in Latin America
 - Rwandan genocide
 - Grade 11 (US History) updating essential question and course content
 - e.g., Reframing civil rights struggle; Boston bussing crisis

Middle School Language Arts

- Text diversification across all grades
 - Why do writers write?
 - Short stories and poems
- Plan for summer reading 2021
 - Student selects from options
 - PTO-sponsored book group for adults
- Grade 8 holocaust literature study
- Focus on democratic discussions (not debates) in classrooms

Middle School Social Studies

- Grades 6 and 7 (World History)

- How has the past helped to shape the present?
 - African kingdoms
 - Western Asia (The Middle East)
 - Impacts of colonization
 - Greece and Rome
 - Medieval and Renaissance Europe
 - East Asian regions
 - Trade and climate in Oceania
- Grade 8 (Civics)
 - How do we understand our role as citizens in protecting the promises of a democratic society?
 - Primary Source: Democracy Lab program
 - Civic action project

Elementary

- Literacy
 - Units of Study in Reading and Writing
 - Updated anchor texts and text sets from Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
 - District additions
- Social Studies
 - Review in progress
 - Curriculum resources used this year
 - Newsela
 - Kids Discover
 - History's Mysteries

Co-Curricular Work

- LTARaCE: Let's Talk About Race, Culture, and Ethnicity
 - Build and foster an inclusive and welcoming community
 - Learn and use correct language when talking about race
 - Become comfortable having conversations about identity
- 60 students, grades 9-12
- Created Instagram account
- Facilitated Anthony Valentine visit
- Roundtable discussions in response to events
- Formed affinity groups
- Launching a middle school group

Professional Development

- School-based professional development sessions
 - Democratic discussions
 - Difficult Conversations: Talking About Race
- IDEAS membership courses
 - Anti-racist School Practices
 - Anti-racist Decision making
- District-created courses
 - Exploring Self and Social Awareness to Create an Anti-Bias Curriculum for Students

- Finding Common Ground in History: Understanding the Context for Today's Current Events
- Creating a More Culturally Inclusive Curriculum

Important Work Ahead

- Community outreach
 - School-based listening tours
 - Partner with Westwood Youth and Family Services
 - Work with Human Rights Task Force
- Participation in equity audit
 - Beloved
 - MAEC (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium)
- Complete social studies curriculum review
- Engage all staff in ongoing training
 - Examining curriculum for bias/stereotype
 - Culturally responsive practice

Amanda Phillips volunteered to serve on the Town's Human Rights Task Force. Charlie recommended a teacher exchange program.

Second Reading of Revised Policy IFB – Intra-District Transfer Policy

Superintendent Parks reminded the Committee that there were no substantive changes made to the policy. Parenthetical references are recommended for removal as the Committee's guideline has since been updated.

Action Items

Approval of March 11, 2021 meeting minutes

MOTION made by Maya Plotkin to approve the meeting minutes of March 11, 2021. Seconded by Charles Donahue.

Roll-call vote:

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

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

Approval of March 18, 2021 meeting minutes

MOTION made by Maya Plotkin to approve the meeting minutes of March 18, 2021. Seconded by Charles Donahue.

Roll-call vote:

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

Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

Acceptance of Scholarships

MOTION made by Charles Donahue to accept a gift of \$2,020 from the Westwood High School Class of 2020. Seconded by Maya Plotkin.

Roll-call vote:

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

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

MOTION made by Charles Donahue to accept a gift of \$4,000 from the Billy Varkas Scholarship Foundation. Seconded by Maya Plotkin.

Roll-call vote:

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

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

New Business

There was no new business.

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: Yes
Anthony Mullin: Yes
Amanda Phillips: Yes

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

The meeting adjourned at 9:21pm.

Documents/Exhibits Used at Meeting

- Building Project funding presentation slides
- COVID-19 Monitoring and Response Team Data presentation slides
- Draft meeting minutes of March 11, 2021 for the Committee's review and approval
- Draft meeting minutes of March 18, 2021 for the Committee's review and approval
- Memo to E. Parks from A. Borchers dated April 1, 2021, regarding DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) Update – Curriculum Changes
- Memo to E. Parks from A. Davenport dated March 17, 2021, regarding Class of 2020 and Billy Varkas Scholarship Awards
- Memo to E. Parks from L. Jn-baptiste dated April 8, 2021, regarding Operating Budget Report for period ending March 31, 2021
- Policy JFB – Intra-District Transfer Policy
- Slideshow presentation on Curriculum Updates Supporting Diversity, Equity, and Integration, dated April 8, 2021