

WESTWOOD SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Westwood, Massachusetts

MEETING MINUTES

August 17, 2021

Attendance and Call to Order

The meeting, held remotely¹, was called to order at 5:03pm by Chair Maya Plotkin. Also present were: Vice Chair Charles Donahue, Clerk Anthony Mullin, Carol Lewis, 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.

Maya Plotkin 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 available online at www.westwood.k12.ma.us/live. It was also recorded for later broadcast on Westwood Media Center's platforms.

Superintendent's Report

School Opening Logistics

Superintendent Parks reported that it has been a busy hiring season. More than fifty new teachers/administrators across the district, in addition to many support staff, will be welcomed for the new school year.

More than 200 students are participating in summer programs. Programs remain in session for another week.

Westwood's State Champion Girls Lacrosse Team was honored at Fenway Park. They have been invited to attend September's School Committee meeting for recognition as well.

All employee associations have partnered with the administration to ensure a smooth opening. Collective bargaining and memorandums of agreement are not anticipated.

There are goals for the year ahead as the district continues to address the challenges associated with COVID-19:

- Have students learning in-person without extended interruption.
- Working back to a sense of "normal" school.
 - How to work towards having students able to work again in groups.
 - Resume lunch at the high school.
 - Restore full elementary specials.
- These cannot be achieved if enforcing strict physical guidelines as was done last year.

Mitigation measures were reviewed. Last year's included:

- Physical distancing at six feet, which was then reduced to three feet in April for grades 5-12; and remained at six for Pre-K through grade 4
- Cohorting at elementary and middle schools
- Masking (by the end of the year, the policy was for indoors only)
- Improving ventilation in school buildings
- Concentration on frequent handwashing
- Required daily symptom checks
- Implementation of COVID-19 Monitoring and Response Team for contact tracing
- Enhanced cleaning and disinfection practices
- Routine pool testing
- Vaccines available for many by end of last school year

¹ Remote meeting held in accordance with an Act relative to extending certain COVID-19 measures adopted during the State of Emergency.

This year, all public health partners and medical officials have emphasized that widespread vaccination is the most important mitigation measure for the community. While the vaccination does not prevent infection or transmission, it does substantially reduce the risk of significant illness, requiring hospitalization or death.

Vaccination rates in Westwood are comparatively high, but are not 100%. To support vaccination efforts, the district will host vaccination clinics in partnership with public health. More information will be forthcoming.

The district will continue to provide routine weekly pool testing for students whose parents register them for the program. The State has contracted to provide pool testing free of cost to districts. However, they are changing vendors. This will mean that families will need to setup a new account and to provide consent.

The district will also continue its ventilation strategies, including the use of MERV-13 filters, changing filters quarterly, encouraging opening windows when possible, maximizing fresh air through mechanical HVAC and HEPA filters, frequent handwashing, and hand sanitizers throughout classrooms. Additionally, families will still be required to check children for symptoms daily and, if symptomatic, to stay home and get tested.

Students will not be in cohorts this year and strict physical distancing will not be possible in the same manner as last year. Plans for lunch are still being developed, and lunch will be held outdoors as much as possible. Outdoor tents are being sought for schools, but the supply chain is next to impossible.

The most significant change has been with the Department of Public Health's (DPH) protocols around contact tracing and quarantining. Last year, DPH protocols offered two options to someone designated as a close contact:

1. Quarantine for at least seven days from the date of exposure, with an option to test on day five;
or
2. If choose not to test, quarantine for at least ten days.

This year, DPH has added another option called "Test and Stay," which is available to districts that opt to participate in the State's testing program. The protocol supports the district's goal of keeping students in school, learning as much as possible.

- Fully vaccinated close contacts are exempt under new protocols, as long as they are asymptomatic
- Unvaccinated close contacts that are asymptomatic must, for seven days from the date of exposure:
 - Wear a mask
 - Maintain three feet of distance to the degree possible
 - Undergo a rapid antigen test every school day and quarantine on weekends
 - Can remain in school if asymptomatic
 - Monitor for active symptoms for fourteen days

The district is still in the process of collecting information on vaccine status of employees. The vaccination rate is very high. For those unvaccinated, they will need to be tested twice per week.

The district's COVID-19 Monitoring and Response Team will remain intact. Additional nurse staffing will also be in place, which is particularly necessary for the "Test and Stay" program.

Public Participation

Members of the public were invited to participate via Zoom. Maya Plotkin advised that the Committee has received a large amount of correspondence from the community regarding masking. The Committee has reviewed all of it ahead of the meeting, including those sent just to the Superintendent, who forwarded them to the Committee.

Tina Collins of Bonney Street advocated for parents' choice for children to choose whether or not to wear facemasks.

Justin Obey of Briarwood Drive supports parents having the option for children to not wear masks.

Kara Buckley spoke in support of children wearing masks indoors.

Dr. Wael Asaad of Fox Meadow Drive spoke in support of wearing masks.

Heather Morrison of Magnolia Drive is happy about some of the return to normalcy, including specials and scheduling. She is in support of all DESE guidance that has been issued and does not believe that a mask mandate should be issued.

Dr. Carlo Rosen of Partridge Drive, an emergency physician, spoke in support of masking.

JoAnna French of Cranston Avenue spoke in support of a layered approach: vaccinations, mandatory mask policy indoors, and regular testing.

Marianne Miller of Hooper Street advocated against masks.

Meggan Flaherty of School Street spoke in support of students with vulnerable health conditions and believes that masking should continue.

Karin Albers of Edgewood Road hopes that safety measures from last year continue in the upcoming school year. She also asked that the mask mandate continue.

Public participation reached the thirty minute limit.

MOTION made by Anthony Mullin to continue public participation with the caveat that it be limited the four people in the queue, plus Brian. Motion seconded by Carol Lewis.

Roll-call vote:

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

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

Public participation continued.

Danielle Kaplan of Skyline Drive spoke in support of masking students.

Jared Jones of Adams Street spoke in support of masking.

Brian Gorman of School Street spoke in support of a mask mandate.

Gang Xiong of Lull Street asked the Committee to explore a fully remote option.

Sandra Yoon of Brookfield Road spoke in support of masking students and staff.

Dr. Henry D'Angelo, the school physician, fully recommends masking.

School Committee Chair Update/Liaison Reports

School Building Project Update

The design development phase is nearly complete. A Special Town Meeting is scheduled for Monday, October 18, with a ballot vote scheduled for Tuesday, October 26. If both votes pass, the project then moves to construction.

COVID-19 Advisory Group Update

Anthony Mullin updated. The group recommends continuing the successful strategies in place last year. They also recommend requiring facemasks for all ages and grades, acknowledging a hope to return to more normalcy by spring.

The establishment of metrics to guide the mask policy among unvaccinated individuals was also recommended.

Other Liaison Reports

There were none.

Discussion Item

Face Covering Policy (EBCFA)

The School Committee's current policy is in effect, requiring universal masking indoors in all school buildings. The Committee's intent is to discuss whether or not to modify. The Committee asked Superintendent Parks to put together information for discussion, which she presented to the Committee.

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

Town of Westwood

From August 1-13, there were twenty-seven new cases of COVID-19 in Westwood. Twelve were of unvaccinated individuals (five of which were under the age of 12, ineligible for vaccination). Fifteen were of vaccinated individuals.

Westwood Public Schools' Summer Programs

There were 181 students participating in the district's summer programs.

- Masks continued to be required.
- Pool testing continued. All pools were negative.
- There was one case of a positive staff member, plus a student close contact who subsequently turned positive. (This was likely an in-school transmission.)

A chart comparing the transmission of the Delta variant versus the ancestral strain and other infectious diseases was shown.

Vaccines still provide a high level of protection from the Delta variant. A chart showing national estimates on the greater risk of disease, hospitalization, and death among unvaccinated versus vaccinated people was shown.

Staff Vaccination Rates

- We know the vaccination status of 95% of our employees. (We continue to track down the remaining five-percent.)
- Of those who have responded:
 - 97% are fully vaccinated
 - An additional 1% will be vaccinated by the time school starts
 - There is 2% of staff that do not intend to be vaccinated

A chart showing community vaccination rates as of August 12 and vaccination rates by grade were shown.

A chart showing Centers for Disease Control transmission levels was shown.

Public Health/Medical Guidance on masking for Fall 2021:

- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education/Department of Public Health: Masking for PreK-Grade 6 and for unvaccinated students and staff; Vaccinated students and staff who want to wear a mask should be supported in that choice; All students and staff must wear masks in school health offices.
- Centers for Disease Control: Masking in all grades regardless of vaccination status.
- American Academy of Pediatrics: Masking in all grades, regardless of vaccination status.

The Committee discussed, and agreed, that the layered mitigation strategies, including masking, is important in protecting the health of all students, faculty and staff.

At its September meeting, the Committee will work on developing metrics for the mask policy. The current policy will remain in place.

Action Items

Approval of Superintendent as District Representative to The Education Collaborative Board of Directors

MOTION made by Carol Lewis to appoint Superintendent Emily Parks as the district's representative to the TEC Board of Directors. Motion seconded by Amanda Phillips.

Roll-call vote:

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

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

Approval of July 22, 2021 Meeting Minutes

MOTION made by Amanda Phillips to approve the meeting minutes of July 22, 2021. Motion seconded by Charles Donahue.

Roll-call vote:

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

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

Approval of August 2, 2021 Meeting Minutes

MOTION made by Carol Lewis to approve the meeting minutes of August 2, 2021. Motion seconded by Charles Donahue.

Roll-call vote:

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

Result: 5-0-0 – Approved

New Business

There was no new business.

Adjournment

MOTION made by Charles Donahue to adjourn the meeting. Motion seconded by Amanda Phillips.

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 6:46pm.

Documents/Exhibits Used at Meeting

- Draft meeting minutes of July 22, 2021 for the Committee's review and approval
- Draft meeting minutes of August 2, 2021 for the Committee's review and approval
- Memo from J. Cianciarulo to School Committee dated August 11, 2021, regarding Representative to TEC Board of Directors
- Slideshow presentation on COVID data and masking