

**DRAFT
Minutes
Board of Education Meeting
October 5, 2020
7:00 p.m.**

Board Members Present: James Chakulski, Jr., Linette Dooley, Chairman Christopher Lent, Michael Maziarz and Christine Sposito

Joseph Napolitano joined the executive session meeting at 7:10 p.m.

Others Present, as listed on Zoom:

Jenn B, Danielle Brown, KC, Karen Caputo, Amy Cordone, Shawn Dousis, LG, Christine Gamache, Alyssa Gwinnell, Heather, Jack Jarvis, Marnie Kagerer, Rachel Koerner, Jessica LeBrun, Melissa Malingu, Brenda Morey, Mrs. Neumuth, Mehera Ortiz, Jessica Rafala, Nelisa Reagan, Rachcel Riendeau, Amanda S, Fayne Sears, Melinda Tarbell and Barbara Wilson

I. Call to Order

Chairman Lent called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.

II. Executive Session

a) Columbia Association of School Administrators Contract Negotiations Update

Chairman Lent thanked all for attending. The Board will vote to go into executive session to receive an update on the negotiations with the Columbia Association of School Administrators. This will be a separate private Zoom link. We will reconvene into the public meeting immediately following.

Mr. Maziarz MOVED and Ms. Sposito SECONDED to go into executive session for the purpose of receiving an update on the Columbia Association of School Administrators contract negotiations.

MOTION CARRIES 5:0

The Board entered Executive Session at 7:07 p.m.

The Board returned from Executive Session at 7:33 p.m.

III. Pledge of Allegiance

IV. Special Recognition

a) Kathy Tolsdorf, Former Board of Education Member

Chairman Lent said Ms. Tolsdorf had a conflict in her schedule. She will be able to attend the next meeting, which is scheduled for November 2. He reminded attendees Ms. Tolsdorf gave a lot of her time during her work on the Board.

V. Comments from the Audience

Time allotted for public participation is twenty (20) minutes; time allotted for an individual speaker is three (3) minutes.

For public comments during the meeting, please add your comments through the "Chat" feature in Zoom Meeting or use the "Raise Hand" function feature located at the bottom of your screen on the tool ribbon to let the host know you would like to speak. Please identify yourself by providing your name and address.

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Chairman Lent said there has been a high number of comments these past couple of weeks. The goal is to have children, teachers and staff safe. He thanks everyone in advance for constructive and helpful dialogue.

Heather Fowler, One Pine Street raised a concern, feeling Columbia is struggling with communication. E-mails are great, but we are having difficulty finding information. Superintendent Geryk responded that during the summer we did a lot of Zoom meetings. Most communication has now been between teachers and families. The re-open site has a lot of information. If particular information should be added, she asks that families e-mail suggestions to her.

Nelisa Reagan said she would like to know why the middle school students are not having their 4 core classes every day. Superintendent Geryk said the schedule is currently a block schedule, which means a couple of academic classes are held daily for longer periods of time. Ms. Gwinnell said that the number of minutes are the same, whether meeting daily or every other day. The tradeoff is the number of exposures. This is the same at the high school. We would be increasing face-time with teachers, not the minutes of core classes.

Gina Jarvis, 12A Russmar Trail, asked when we will find out more about the elementary school kids returning four days per week. Should we assume next Thursday A group will be in person? She said the e-mail sent made it feel not concrete since it started with a decision but ended with a survey. Superintendent Geryk said we will be providing some details today. Some parents whose children will be changing teacher or classroom will receive a call. Principal Gwinnell said October 15 is the first day all children will be attending. A clarifying letter will be sent out. Calls to parents of A group students changing classroom have been made. Calls to parents of B group students changing classrooms will be made tomorrow. Superintendent Geryk said the survey was to let parents inform her of their concerns, etc.

Amanda Strong, 70 Erdoni Road, said the last e-mail did not seem like the “final say.” Superintendent Geryk confirmed that yes, they are to start on October 15.

Jack Jarvis asked why kids are being moved around when administration said they planned for all models. Superintendent Geryk responded, saying that if we are bringing all students back, we have to spread them across the school. A lot depends on how many families choose to remain remote. A finite number of students can fit in a classroom. We have planned for every model. We have to look at space. Ms. Gwinnell said it was shared at the very beginning that class lists would change if we change models.

Amanda, following up on Gina’s question, said group size can legally be 16, depending on the size of the room. Superintendent Geryk said the class size of 16 might be coming from when they came out with regulations for preschool. Administration made the decision of being conservative, saying we will have students six feet apart.

Chairman Lent said there would be opportunity to hear more comments or questions again later in the meeting.

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VI. Action Items

(Consent) A consent agenda is presented by the Chairman at the beginning of a meeting. Items may be removed from the consent agenda on the request of any one member. Items not removed may be adopted by general consent without debate. Removed items may be taken up either immediately after the consent agenda or placed later on the agenda at the discretion of the assembly.

- a) Approval of Special Meeting Minutes, September 14, 2020
- b) Payment of Bills
- c) Approval of Year End Transfers, 2019-2020
- d) Approval of the Revised C19 Face Covering Policy

Mr. Chakulski, Jr. MOVED and Ms. Sposito SECONDED to approve a) Approval of Special Meeting Minutes, September 14, 2020; b) Payment of Bills; c) Approval of Year End Transfers, 2019-2020; and d) Approval of the Revised C19 Face Covering Policy.
MOTION CARRIES 6:0

VII. Action Items (Discussion and Action)

VIII. Correspondence/Communications

- a) Amy Lapsis, Tenure Congratulations
- b) Alexis Stolarun, Tenure Congratulations

Ms. Wilson congratulated Amy Lapsis, a speech/language pathologist who is a great addition to the special education and regular education teams. Her knowledge is paramount for grades PK – 8. In addition to her expertise, she is a nice person to have on our team. We are very fortunate to have her.

Ms. Gwinnell congratulated Alexis Stolarun, a music teacher who goes above and beyond to assist her colleagues. She is very helpful with expertise in technology, creating tutorials, using many tools new to us. She is a great resource for us, thinking outside the box.

IX. Board of Education Upcoming Meetings

- Monday, November 2, 2020, 6:30 p.m., BOE Subcommittee Meeting
- Monday, November 2, 2020, 7:30 p.m., BOE Regular Meeting

Chairman Lent discussed the subcommittees that will meet on November 2. It will most likely be budget and policy subcommittees.

Mr. Chakulski, Jr., asked if we will transition from Zoom to in-person meetings in November. Following brief discussion, including the fact that voting is to happen the following day, it was determined an alternative location will be sought. If one is not found, the November meeting will again be via Zoom. The location for the November meetings will be determined in the near future.

X. Superintendent's Report

- a) Legislative Update

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b) Superintendent's Update

Superintendent Geryk said the generator is installed and will be up and running soon. The truck has arrived, which is great news. The new Director of Public Works just started. Superintendent Geryk is looking forward to working with her.

Superintendent Geryk said staff have been doing amazing work. They have demonstrated an ability to be flexible while every aspect of their day has changed. Their commitment to our students and families of Columbia has not wavered one bit. 100% of our staff returned to work with students. She acknowledged it is not easy for families to be so flexible while juggling all their responsibilities. We are all ready to return to our sense of normalcy in work and home lives.

Staff and students are doing a great job in their efforts to adhere to our mitigation strategies. At the same time, we are now in our second year of implementing our new mathematics program (Ready Mathematics), and are launching a new ELA program (Wit and Wisdom), a new middle school health curriculum, and a new social emotional learning curriculum (Mind Up).

Superintendent Geryk said decision making includes mitigating risk to stay as safe and healthy as possible. We decided to bring back K-4 students at this point. We feel comfortable numbers in our county are still within the designation of low.

As of this week, 22% of schools in CT are operating fully in-person, 63% are operating in a hybrid model and 13% are fully remote. There is some risk of spread by putting people together.

Students in grades K-4 are learning to read and other very basic skills. There is great demand on families when children are home and families have to work. However, it was an educational decision to return students to in-person learning. Parents of 32 students, 14%, chose to continue remote instruction.

We will maintain classroom numbers so that we can have students 6 ft. apart. Our class sizes will range around 8-15 students per class. Cohorts remain in place as do all other mitigation strategies. Given the need to distribute students across teachers, some students will need to move to a new class/teacher. These decisions will be based on needs, class composition, and maintaining classroom friendships. We will create a Remote Team who will continue to provide classroom instruction to remote students only K-4, but this will require many remote students to move to a new teacher(s). We are able to maintain morning care.

Ms. Caputo said arrival in the morning has become smoother. Initially there were long traffic lines, which have been reduced. We are using a variety of doors with sanitizing at each. Staff are inside and outside. Buses have low ridership, with more riding in the afternoon than morning. Masks are being kept on, following a small number of incidents that were addressed.

We would like to have a month or so with this population back in the building before we look at the middle school.

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Ms. Dooley asked about the 22% of schools back full time – have they compromised to return full time? Ms. Caputo said that, according to families who go to some of these schools, yes. Ms. Dooley said families need to know this, and not just look at the stats. Ms. Caputo said we are not willing to compromise.

Superintendent Geryk said the health reporting is substantial and intense. Many situations have to be followed up on. This is a part of everyone’s daily work now, and she thanked Ms. Sears for her work in this area.

Ms. Sposito raised her concern that fifth grade is considered middle school. She believes they are not developmentally prepared to remain remote. She believes fifth grade was originally part of the middle school for scheduling purposes. She would like to see that revisited in the future. We have families moving in to town, perhaps increasing these numbers to make it something to be looked at again.

Mr. Chakulski, Jr., sees that a benefit of Zoom meetings is increased audience participation at meetings. Superintendent Geryk confirmed parent forums had approximately 100 people attending. It is a nice option for parents to be able to meet without concern of childcare, etc.

Ms. Dooley said she appreciates receiving feedback as we are transitioning elementary back four days. She knows there are concerns about middle school, which is a different dynamic.

XI. Comments from the Audience

Time allotted for public participation is twenty (20) minutes; time allotted for an individual speaker is three (3) minutes.

Zoom Chat questions/comments are now being addressed.

Jessica LaBrun confirmed it will be mid-November when it is re-evaluated when the middle school can return to in-person 4 days a week as the rest of the school is starting to on October 14.

Jessica Rafala congratulated Amy Lapsis for achieving tenure. Amy said she is honored to be a part of the Porter community.

Heather asked when we may be able to have in-person events at the school (within Covid guidelines). Jack Jarvis added to the question – even if the events are outside 6 ft. part, especially since the town Rec Dept. is doing events. Superintendent Geryk said she does not know since we are not at the point of having in-school events yet.

Heather asked when after school care will become available again. It was clarified she meant clubs. Ms. Gwinnell is working on that right now and they will be virtual. A flyer regarding after school care went out, but no responses have been received to date.

Jenn said she is pretty sure some of Lebanon’s students are only 4 ft. apart and they returned back to school today. Superintendent Geryk said different districts are following different approaches, many of them phased in.

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Heather asked if the kids will have to bring all materials back and forth to school. Only devices will have to be brought home daily, just in case we have to close for a period of time with minimal notice.

Jessica Rafala asked about the possibility of recorded lessons, etc., to take the place of cancelled classes. This will be particularly helpful since the fully remote middle school academic classes are twice a week. Superintendent Geryk said they just had a conversation about middle school classes and they are looking into what options can be put in place.

Amy Cordone, 89 Pine Street and Marnie Kagerer both agree with Ms. Spósito's believe fifth graders should be considered part of the elementary levels rather than middle school.

Heather said the Zoom meetings are helpful for her.

Jessica LeBrun asked about preschool hours coinciding better with K-8 school hours. The 45 minute difference in the morning and 1 hour difference in the afternoon is very difficult when you have others at home that need to be on Zoom meetings at the same time as drop-off. Ms. Wilson has been exploring options. Right now there is no plan to change the schedule, but families affected by the 9:00 a.m. drop-off may bring their child at 9:15-or-so. The hours of the program are being explored as other aspects of the school year are.

Rachel Riendeau, 310 Route 66, referenced the reassessment for sending middle school students back would be made mid-November. The State Department of Education suggestions regarding return-to-school have denoted a 7-day calculation of Covid spread (regionally). Is it possible to re-evaluate weekly? She does not think anyone would disagree that it would be beneficial to get middle schoolers back in school sooner rather than later. Superintendent Geryk said we would need more than a week's period of time to implement a change as we work to keep people safe. She wouldn't say we would do it sooner than a month's time, but you never know. She acknowledged it is hard for middle schoolers to not be in the building with their teachers and friends.

Nelisa Reagan, 4 Szegda Road, asked about the middle schoolers entering through the gym entrance. Why can they not be dropped off at that crosswalk? Ms. Caputo said it is because of safety.

Heather asked if on remote days for hybrid, can the teachers do video lessons. It really helps her daughter understand the lesson. Superintendent Geryk said Wit and Wisdom has some pre-recorded lessons and they can have a conversation with staff to see what can be done. Ms. Gwinnell said they heard concerns and feedback and there may be changes to Wednesday hybrid.

Jack Jarvis said that surveys were helpful before school started. He would suggest continuing to solicit feedback on a regular basis (maybe through a standard monthly e-mailed survey) in a standardized way, even to give the board some insight into how families are feeling the school is doing through all this. Superintendent Geryk said communication is a great thing. She said it is complicated now, but we will do our best to get feedback. She also said they would appreciate the help from anyone who would like to help generate questions or surveys.

Superintendent Geryk said she received over 20 e-mails from families with very thoughtful questions and suggestions. It is always helpful to get information to think through next steps. Chairman Lent said we are all advocates for our kids. We are all parents and aiming toward the same end goal. We appreciate feedback, comments and criticism. The team is learning as we go along.

Heather asked if a contact list could be sent to parents, allowing them to reach the right person within the school, helping with communication. A communication flowchart will be provided, showing which administrator holds which responsibilities. School-wide issues could be sent to all administrators.

Mr. Chakulski, Jr. asked about the grade levels of the 22% of schools attending full-time. Superintendent Geryk believes this is the percentage of districts in the state. He asked about students working remotely on snow days, eliminating the need to extend the year in June. Superintendent Geryk said this is a legislative issue.

Superintendent Geryk thanked everyone for their comments, questions and great ideas.

XII. Columbia Board of Education Member Remarks

a) Discuss creating a letter from the Board to Staff

Chairman Lent believes this would be a nice gesture from the Board to take time, creating an ad hoc team, to draft a letter to teachers, staff and administrators to demonstrate appreciation for all they have been doing. There was discussion of this letter and/or an article being published in area periodicals, which allows community members to become more familiar with what has been happening in the school. The ad hoc committee will include Mike Maziarz, Christine Sposito and Joseph Napolitano.

Chairman Lent said this is a good Segway to improving communications. He asked if members would be interested in having an ad hoc committee, inviting those from the town or community at large join. Perhaps Nick Carusso, or a colleague of his, from Eastconn could facilitate a Zoom session. We want to hear from a broad audience - their thoughts on how we can improve communication, how it is posted, insight from those with concerns or ideas of how communication can flow better, etc. We want to work collectively to improve communication. All agreed this is a great idea.

Chairman Lent congratulated Amy and Alexis for achieving tenure. He is very proud of them and all they do.

Ms. Dooley congratulated Amy and Alexis. She thanked staff for the incredibly hard work they are doing. This is not easy for parents either. She asks for kindness if anyone takes to social media. Everyone is trying to accomplish the same goals.

Mr. Napolitano thanked everyone for their hard work.

Mr. Chakulski, Jr. congratulated Amy and Alexis. He thanked Chris, Mike and Christine for their work on the negotiating team.

Ms. Sposito congratulated Amy and Alexis. Alexis is very detailed and organized. She heard great things about Amy. She is glad Porter gets to benefit from their experience.

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Mr. Maziarz also congratulated Amy and Alexis. It is a big feat to make tenure in a field where approximately 40% leave in the first few years. These are not easy times. It is being done differently everywhere. Everyone has questions or concerns, but also compassion for what we are all going through.

XIII. Adjournment

Mr. Maziarz MOVED and Mr. Napolitano SECONDED to adjourn.
MOTION CARRIES 6:0

The Board adjourned at 9:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Christopher Lent, Chairman

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