

HOLYOKE SCHOOL COMMITTEE  
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2020  
TIME: 6:00 PM  
VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM

School Committee Vice Chair Mildred Lefebvre called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Ms. Lefebvre announced that, pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, s. 20, all attendees are hereby informed that a video and audio recording is being made of the meeting and the meeting is being live-streamed and run live on the City's community TV channel. Spanish interpretation is available through the globe icon at the bottom of the screen.

### **ROLL CALL**

Present: Mayor Alex Morse, Mildred Lefebvre, Devin Sheehan, Erin Brunelle (arriving at 6:45 p.m.), Rosalee Tensley Williams, Rebecca Birks, John G. Whelihan, William Collamore (unable to unmute), Nyles Courchesne, and Dr. Alberto Vázquez Matos, Superintendent/Receiver. Irene Feliciano-Sims was absent.

Dr. Vázquez Matos introduced Kara McGinnis, Holyoke High School Senior who was the recipient of one of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents' Certificate of Excellence in Academics, who was not able to attend the last meeting because she was working.

Kara McGinnis is a scholar, artist, performs in school musicals and participates in drama productions, she is a muralist and has taken multiple AP classes as well as early college and dual enrollment classes. She is the High School's #1 ranked student. She helps with organizing and conducting tours of the High School North Campus for rising freshmen and talks about all of the opportunities available to students at the High School, including the many she has participated in.

Ms. McGinnis thanked the Superintendent and said she was honored to receive the award.

### **Student Representative Introductions:**

Lori McKenna, North Campus Principal, introduced Samantha Brennan, the North Campus student representative. Ms. Brennan is a global studies student who is an active athlete and active in student government. Ms. Brennan advocates for things to happen within the school.

Al Gates, Dean Campus Principal, introduced Shadi Mole Puello. Ms. Puello is a student who questions everything and pushes so that Dean Campus will be the very best it can be. Ms. Puello is a programming and web design student and is a budding star in her field.

Devin Sheehan stressed the importance of the role of the student representatives. Both Mr. Sheehan and Mayor Morse were student representatives when they attended Holyoke High School. Massachusetts General Laws include language mandating student representatives on school committees. Student Representatives are truly a voice for students at the schools. Representatives should freely bring up issues, concerns, and questions at the Committee table. Holyoke has had some dynamic representatives in the past that have had a real impact on the work of the Committee.

Ms. Brennan told members that the North Campus has a Squadlympics during G block where teachers and students go head to head with trivia, to add a bit of fun into the day.

Ms. Puello reported that Dean Campus is working on after school support for students. There are 50 students who can attend, but they are hoping to be able to get more students to attend in person because many students have difficulty accessing work remotely.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

None

#### **COMMUNICAITONS AND REPORTS**

##### **MCAS and ACCESS Testing 20-21 Update**

Dr. Vázquez explained that DESE shared guidance with school districts related to MCAS and ACCESS testing. The plan is for in-person assessment administration for both MCAS and ACCESS. The district has begun planning a testing schedule for in-person testing.

Valerie Annear, Chief of Academics, talked about the planning that is underway. The High School window is fast-approaching. Dr. Mahoney and his team are planning what the schedule will look like. It's important that grades 11 & 12 come in first so that they have the opportunity to earn their competency determination.

There is planning underway to ensure that all accommodations are implemented for assessment.

The Grades 3-8 assessment schedule will be in April and May, and the hope is that schools are back in person by then.

Currently, all EL students in grade K-12 have to take the ACCESS assessment in person. The District's ESL Director will work with schools to help develop a plan to meet students' needs and to maintain appropriate social distancing and other protocols.

Health and safety are being considered first, and foremost. All safety protocols will be in place.

Transportation will be provided to students who are eligible, including bus passes for High School students.

Devin Sheehan asked that a copy of the presentation be sent to the members of the School Committee as it was not included in the packet.

He questioned the use of bus passes for High School students and whether that would be safe for students. PVTA does not require any sort of distancing or safety protocols on their buses. He expressed concern about the safety of students who have to go into school to complete state-mandated assessments being on public bussing as a method of school-sponsored transportation. If those same students were on district-contracted vehicles, at least there is the possibility of conducting contact tracing, should that be necessary, which would not be possible on PVTA buses.

Dr. Mahoney agreed with the concerns. The High School team has not yet met with Anthony Soto and his team to think through the transportation piece.

Dr. Vázquez said it is challenging to fund transportation and staffing to get students back into schools for this testing and this concern is the same for a hybrid schedule for getting students back into school.

Mrs. Birks said adding this kind of stress to students, families and teachers around taking a test is unconscionable in the middle of a global pandemic. Holyoke's data around Covid is not conducive to bringing students and staff back into schools. Families should be informed that they have the right to opt out of these tests.

Mr. Whelihan said transportation has been coming up as a planning concern for months. Everyone knows busses will need to be provided. He was not in favor of the district sponsoring PVTA usage for students at this time.

Mr. Sheehan noted that DESE is moving forward with testing because they are required to by accountability standards from the USDOE; no change can be made in those requirements until the federal government acts.

Erin Brunelle joined the meeting at 6:45 p.m.

Ms. Brunelle expressed concern about asking, and certainly about expecting, families to send their children into school buildings to take a state assessment. This is absurd. The buildings are not safe for children. It is unfair to put this kind of pressure on families, on staff, and on students. Doing this would set students up for failure and set families up for serious illness.

The time of folks at central office could be better spent planning other things than planning for something that will very likely not happen, and especially not safely, in January.

MOTION: Ms. Brunelle made a motion, seconded by Mr. Whelihan, to send a communication to local legislative representatives, and DESE, urging them to delay MCAS testing for 2021. The motion carried on a roll call vote. (Mayor Morse-yes, Ms. Lefebvre-yes, Mr. Sheehan-yes, Ms. Brunelle, Ms. Tensley Williams-yes, Mrs. Birks-yes, Mr. Whelihan-yes, Mr. Collamore [unable to unmute], Mr. Courchesne-yes.)

Ms. Brunelle thanked district administration for their efforts in attempting to comply with mandates coming from the state.

Mr. Sheehan said that to offer these tests in the height of Covid season is wrong. If a child misses ACCESS testing this year, that child will not be tested again until next year, and so would remain in EL programming, whether or not that child belonged there. There should be a push to at least offer a second sitting of ACCESS later in the spring.

### **School Food Program Update**

Dr. Vázquez told the Committee that the district continues to provide meals at 6 different sites, from 12:00-2:00 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner are offered to all families. Meal participation is at about 20%

At the last school committee meeting there was significant feedback on the quality and portion size of meals. The district quickly started to strategize and respond to those concerns. Mr. Soto and his team created a project plan to increase participation and quality of food while operating under the remote model.

Anthony Soto talked about not having the opportunity to gather student and parent input this year around the food program. He and his team are committed to strategize this year to find ways to make the menus more appealing while staying within USDA guidelines.

Principals have been tasked with identifying students that would want to participate in an advisory group that would meet a few times this year to discuss and consider menus for the upcoming year.

There is also consideration of tapping into the parent groups that are established. There is intention to meet with them to get feedback.

There is a bi-weekly meeting with a group that focuses on food insecurities and resources in Holyoke. That group has provided feedback on the project plan, such as partnering with the Housing Authority in order to reach groups of

students in specific locations, and other ways to reach families who can't get to food distribution sites.

Mrs. Birks said that nothing has changed in the meals students and families are receiving. Students are still getting beef jerky as a protein. Two days ago, families received fish tacos which consisted of frozen fish sticks in a taco shell, and that was the meal. That is the food going home to families. As a parent, she finds that impossible to accept. That food is not being eaten; it's being thrown away. The district is spending money on food that is not being eaten. Essentially, money is being spent on food that is inedible. Everyone agreed at the last meeting that no one at the table would feed their children beef jerky, yet Holyoke's children and families are still getting beef jerky as a dinner protein. She has seen the food going home from Sodexo to families in Springfield and they are getting real food. The food Holyoke is sending home does not come close to what families in Springfield are getting.

Progress is just not happening fast enough. The district cannot continue to give families such low quality food. It is time to look at what money is being spent on. Money is being wasted on the food that has been and is being purchased. She knows the district is trying, but people need to try harder.

Ms. Brunelle said it is not okay to send this kind of food home for Holyoke students and families. This district has a contract with a vendor and that vendor needs to provide families with food that is edible, at the very least. That vendor, its nutritionist, and meal planners need to be held accountable. Everyone is dealing with the same pandemic. It's time to stop making excuses and start doing better for Holyoke families. Today is the day to do better.

Mr. Sheehan said this conversation with Sodexo has been ongoing for some time. The conversation last month was not a new conversation. Some districts seem to get some things and Holyoke gets something different. He applauds Sodexo for some of the capital investments and other efforts they have undertaken over time. However, this conversation about providing food that children will eat is not new.

Ms. Lefebvre said she has not heard that other communities are serving beef jerky because that's all they could get and so they ordered enough to last nearly a year. The beef jerky could be offered as a snack, but not as a dinner meal protein. She asked if the profit being made on food service could be reinvested in higher quality food for students (first), and families (if possible), rather than investing in equipment purchases. Mr. Soto responded that he is putting together a plan to do just that and Ms. Lefebvre asked how long it would take to put that plan together. This has been an ongoing conversation for over two years. She asked if it would take another two years to see that kind of plan implemented. Ms. Lefebvre wants to be sure that Holyoke's children are treated equitably and not differently, and not just being given food that will have to do because they are black and brown children living in poverty.

Mr. Sheehan said he reached out to a number of districts and was not able to find another one that had similar supply chain issues that Holyoke had or one that switched out proteins the way Holyoke did.

Mrs. Birks said the contract needs to be looked at. Sodexo provides food services to other districts and those districts are not facing the same issues that Holyoke is facing.

Ms. Brunelle said the district should be able to ask Sodexo if there were the same issues in other districts and how it was handled there so that the question about whether Holyoke children are getting served equitably or not can be considered. She asked if the Committee could get that kind of report from Sodexo prior to the next meeting.

Mrs. Birks made suggested a motion so that the committee could receive weekly updates on the progress being made in efforts to get better food in the homes for students and families. This will allow committee members to have appropriate information to update families when they get calls or emails asking what's happening with the food services in the district.

Dr. Vazquez replied that is not within the purview of the School Committee. After clarification, he suggested that Ms. Lefebvre communicate with him directly as to what the Committee would like to receive so he can work with his staff on providing information.

Mr. Sheehan said he is not typically in favor of updating administration with requirements to provide reports. Sam Garcia sends updates up from the superintendent routinely so updates could be included as available.

Mrs. Birks said she would like the committee to be updated on a regular basis, without taking up half a school committee meeting. The updates do not need to be information or data heavy, but should provide information on progress that has been made.

### **COVID Update**

Dr. Vazquez reported that, with the new matrix developed by DESE, last week, including Holyoke, there were 40 communities in the red and this week there are 63 communities in the red.

As of 10-14-20 Holyoke's average daily incidence rate was 13 per 100,000 (8 per 100,000 would put a community in red status.)

Total number of cases in Holyoke is 1,221.

The school district has had 75 cases over the past 14 days.

Holyoke's test positivity is 2.58%.

As of 10-14-20 there has been an increase in positive cases since school resumed. The majority of cases are remote student learners. There is no evidence of transmission of in-person cases.

Districts are expected to prioritize in-person learning across all color-coded categories unless there is a suspected in-school transmission, in accordance with DESE guidance.

Cynthia Carbone, Nursing Supervisor, said that the district will have in-school testing available. BynaxNOW is an antigen test. It is a nostril swab. Within 15 minutes the school nurse will be able to give the family or employee an idea if the test is positive or not. School nurses will be trained on testing and communication protocols. There is additional COVID related information on the Nursing and Wellness page on the HPS website.

Mr. Courchesne asked what the participation rate is currently for remote learners. He has heard from a number of parents about different concerns.

Dr. Vázquez said remote learners have approximately 88% attendance rate at this time. Certainly, both parents and students are challenged with remote learning. There are parents who want in-person learning and parents who do not want in-person learning for their children.

There was a lengthy discussion about COVID safety protocols both within the district, and generally.

### **Superintendent's Communications**

Dr. Vázquez told the Committee that the DPAC will be at 6:00 p.m. on November 17<sup>th</sup>. Link to meeting can be found on the Holyoke Update or on the HPS website.

SEPAC will meet on November 18<sup>th</sup> at 6:00 p.m. and the link can also be found in the Holyoke Update and on the website.

### **NEW BUSINESS**

#### **Minutes of Meetings**

##### Regular Meeting of August 17, 2020

MOTION: Mr. Sheehan made a motion, seconded by Mr. Courchesne, to adjourn. The motion carried on a roll call vote. (Lefebvre-yes, Sheehan-yes, Brunelle-yes, Tensley Williams-yes, Birks-yes, Whelihan-yes, Collamore-yes, Courchesne-yes.)

#### **ONGOING BUSINESS**

None

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Mr. Sheehan announced that Ms. Lefebvre was recently elected to the Secretary Treasurer of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees with the position beginning in 2021.

MOTION: Ms. Tensley Williams made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Birks, to adjourn. The motion carried on a roll call vote. (Lefebvre-yes, Sheehan-yes, Brunelle-yes, Tensley Williams-yes, Birks-yes, Whelihan-yes, Collamore-yes, Courchesne-yes.)

The November 16, 2020 meeting of the Holyoke School Committee adjourned at 9:05 p.m.