

CITY OF HOLYOKE
SCHOOL COMMITTEE

REGULAR MEETING OF THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE
MONDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2020
TIME: 6:00 P.M.
VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM

CALL TO ORDER

School Committee member Devin Sheehan called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m.

Mr. Sheehan 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.

ROLL CALL

Present: Mayor Alex Morse, Devin Sheehan, Rosalee Tensley Williams, Rebecca Birks, Irene Feliciano Sims, John Whelihan, Nyles Courchesne, Superintendent/Receiver Dr. Alberto Vázquez Matos, Mildred Lefebvre (arriving at 6:38 p.m.) Absent Erin Brunelle and William Collamore.

STUDENT SHOWCASE – MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Marcus Tenasaka, Holyoke High School Dean Campus Senior, is a holding midfielder on the HHS Soccer Team. He is with his teammates playing against Agawam tonight. Marcus is a clear leader on the Dean Campus. He is a key member of Mr. Gates' Student Ambassador Team, a team that has seen quadruple the amount of 8th graders applying to Dean. Mr. Tenasaka has been instrumental in designing and implementing that program. Marcus has a job delivering pizzas on nights and weekends and he is waiting on a co-op placement with Easthampton Electrical to begin. Despite having a GPA of 4.3, Marcus is intent on going into the working world when he graduates from Dean in the spring, and he looks forward to someday owning and managing his own electrical company.

Kara McGinnis, Holyoke High School North Campus senior, was represented by her mom, Andrea McGinnis, because she was working. Kara speaks to incoming 8th and 9th graders about all of the opportunities available to students on the North Campus. Kara is currently taking 3 AP classes and 2 DE classes. She is a member of the HHS Student Government Association and a core member of the HHS Theater Company. Kara has been working on a 4X8' mural of the Holyoke Knight with Mr. Bill Greaney and her AP art teacher, Mr. Durran. Kara is a student who speaks softly, but carries a big stick. She will not be the flashiest student in the room, but she is not only number 1 on the North Campus in terms of academic average, but she is a behind-the-scenes leader who makes things happen without anyone realizing how much work she puts in.

Mrs. McGinnis explained that Kara just received a promotion at work and is training for her new position, which is why she couldn't be present. She is honored and thankful to receive the award tonight.

MOMENT OF REFLECTION FOR THE COLLAMORE FAMILY

Mr. Sheehan asked for everyone to take a moment to reflect on the Collamore family and Mr. Collamore, who recently lost his son.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. Sheehan asked if student representatives has been identified yet.

Steve Mahoney told committee members that the Student Government was a little late getting organized. Student representatives would be ready for the November meeting.

COMMUNICAITONS AND REPORTS

Update on Food Distribution

HPS continues to provide meals at 6 different sites from 12:00 – 2:00 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Breakfast, lunch and dinner, for 7 days, is being served to all families that go to the sites to pick up food. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the district has served approximately 88,000 breakfast, 89,000 lunches, 44,000 dinners, 60,000 snacks, with about 3,200 vanpool deliveries to 7 shelters across the city. HPS has provided 980 backpacks to families. HPS provided 47,000 holiday meals to city families last year.

Christin Morello, Sodexo District Manager for the Northeast Region, Diana St Pierre Interim General Manager, Ashley Plant, former General Manager, and Alyssa Dawn, Regional Dietician were present for Sodexo.

Ms. Morello gave the HPS food service staff a shout-out - It is amazing what they have been able to accomplish. Food service workers show up every day for families and there has been no interruption of service.

A power point was shown that talked about nutrition, options available for students, USDA requirements, summer food service meal patterns running through the remainder of the school year, adult care food service program.

There were challenges procuring products during this Covid pandemic. There were limitations from sources for dinner options. There was a freezer capacity

issue which limited storage of frozen meal kits. Shelf-stable meal kit options were purchased for dinner meals. Staffing has been a challenge, with regard to turnover. In addition, only a limited number of staff could be in each building to prepare meals on a daily basis. Individually packaged items are being purchased as much as possible, in the interest of safety.

The fresh fruit and vegetable program was a great partnership with DESE. Fresh fruits and vegetables were distributed to families when they picked up meals.

The backpack program is an area of success. Shelf-stable meals and items are packaged and backpacks are filled for families.

Last year Holiday Baskets were provided to families in need. Those baskets were provided during Thanksgiving and Christmas. Baskets consisted of either a ham or turkey and fixings for a meal. A special senior celebration lunch was held at HHS.

Student focus groups were held last year at HHS North and Dean, Veritas and Peck. Staff worked hard to get students what they wanted to eat. Student focus groups will be picked up again next year when students return.

Ms. Lefebvre took over the chair.

Mrs. Birks appreciated the presentation and indicated that Sodexo had done very good work in the district. The situation now is, indeed, very difficult. She has concerns about some of the food going out to students now. She prepared a slide show with photographs of food students are receiving.

USDA guidelines are not being met with the current lunches served to adult age students. Those students are receiving meals based on requirements for much younger students. Adult students are still hungry after eating such a small meal.

Holyoke is not a wealthy community. Children and families have food insecurities.

A main complaint of students is that breakfasts are arriving frozen and students have no way to warm up the breakfasts.

Dinners are not what Mrs. Birks would consider edible.

Children with dairy issues are receiving meals with dairy in them.

She understands trying to provide healthy food for kids, but consideration needs to be given to what kids actually eat as well. Students will most often not eat foods they are not familiar with. She worries that children are not eating.

She is concerned when she hears from a teacher, after that teacher hands students food on Tuesday, and students say, “This is all I’m going to get until Thursday.”, because those students won’t eat again until they come back to school. Students are most often not eating the meals they are presented for dinner.

Students cannot be prepared to learn on an empty stomach. That is a reality. Students need to be getting good food, in appropriate portions, for all 3 meals each day. She understands the prepackaging of food, but the district can do better than what is happening now. It is unrealistic to think that anyone would eat beef jerky for dinner and beef jerky is part of a dinner packet that goes out to families.

Mr. Soto replied to some of the questions: meals shown in the Sodexo presentation were stock photos and other slides showed ways the program wants to improve when students return to schools. Frozen meals are designed to be taken home and served the next day. Sodexo has worked hard with the Transitions Program to ensure food is not arriving frozen. If that is happening, that is a challenge that needs to be resolved.

Diana St Pierre said Sodexo has been able to purchase a freezer with the intention of getting better supplies so that better meals can be provided. There are still problems with the supply chain.

Dr. Vázquez Matos agreed that there is area for improvement. The focus of the work needs to be equitable access for families. Holyoke families are experiencing financial insecurity. The main concern is that students have access to meals. The district is committed to continuing to provide food to families.

Ashley Plant said Sodexo appreciates the feedback. Communication is important and must be both ways. Sodexo and school food service staff want to hear from families about any concerns, issues, or special needs families have.

Mr. Sheehan pointed out that the committee understands that there will always be levels of need for improvement with food service. That’s not the issue. When the district transitioned to Sodexo, there were conversations similar to some pieces of the presentation by Sodexo here. There was talk about student meetings and family engagement so that students would be provided with food that they will eat. He does not want to see food purchased and sent home that will only be thrown away. It makes no sense to purchase food that will not be eaten. He suggested that perhaps incentives could be used to increase not only participation, but feedback. An incentive could be provided for feedback from families on the food they are receiving. Text-a-tip is something that could be used. It would be helpful to think creatively around how to engage families to encourage communication. The district had to fight to get the federal government

to allow Holyoke to continue feeding families. Thankfully, Holyoke is able to continue to do that.

Mr. Courchesne expressed concern over what is being served to families as meals and about children with food allergies being served the very food they have difficulties with. The school committee should be able to get photos of what students are being served. He suggested that perhaps that is something that can happen for a week, for example.

Dr. Vázquez told the school committee that he did do some things after he saw the photos Mrs. Birks showed. He visited prep kitchens to see what was happening. The district needs to do more to meet the needs of the families in Holyoke, including being culturally responsive to the food needs. Beef jerky is not something that should be on a family's dinner table.

Mrs. Birks' main concern is that there are children in Holyoke who are not fed adequately at home. Those children and families need to be feed meals that are both nutritional and palatable. She appreciates the work Sodexo and food service staff have done, but the bar needs to be raised much, much higher.

Mr. Sheehan questioned whether food supply chain issues are being experienced by all school food service providers. This is not something that has been on the news or shared in any way that would indicate it's a big problem. If national big box vendors are not coming through, perhaps sourcing through smaller, local vendors would be more advantageous. Small businesses are truly struggling and need customers.

Update on Athletics

Dr. Vázquez reported that the High School has been able to provide all MIAA approved fall sports to students in grades 9-12 in addition to training seasons for football and cheerleading.

Steve Mahoney explained that MIAA and DESE worked together to determine what sports they would sanction for the fall season and left it to local school districts to determine whether or not students would participate in athletics.

Holyoke believed that providing students with the opportunity to participate on athletic teams was critical. The Athletic Director is a former trainer and looked at all sports and related safety procedures with a critical eye.

Boys Soccer 27 members

Girls Soccer 33 members

Field Hockey 17 members

Golf 10 members

Girls Volleyball 29 members

Girls Cross Country 3 members
Boys Cross Country 5 members

Holyoke has had to re-league and, in many cases, was able to minimize distance traveled. There have been rule changes for all sports in the name of safety. Students and coaches are being really conscious about the rule changes.

Teams are working to continue the proud tradition of Holyoke High School.

Ms. Lefebvre asked if student athletes are being Covid tested to play sports.

Dr. Mahoney explained that kids have to certify that they have no symptoms and have not been in close contact with anyone who has been infected. Families and students are being required to certify that they are Covid free and symptom free before starting the program. The programs are following a full set of protocols in terms of symptoms or close contact.

Update on Covid & District Response

Dr. Vázquez explained that communities are classified by State health offices in a three tiered system (High-Red; Moderate-Yellow; Low-Green) which is based on average daily cases of 100,000 residents. Holyoke and 39 other communities were in the red and this week, Holyoke and 62 other communities are in the red. As of October 14, Holyoke's average daily incidence rate is 13 of 100,000 over the past 14 days. A rate over 8 of 100,000 would put communities in the red. Holyoke has had 75 cases in the first 14 days of the month of October.

HPS have had 17 positive cases, 13 of which have been remote learners, since school resumed on September 14th. All schools have followed proper safety protocols in response to positive Covid cases.

HPS works closely with the Board of Health, including deep dives into the data.

The district is in conversation about having in-house testing for students and faculty.

Educational materials continue to be pushed out for families around Covid safety and flu vaccines.

Cynthia Carbone, Director of Nursing, explained that a lot of time is being spent on connecting with folks around reinforcing mitigation strategies, such as staying 6' apart, wearing proper face coverings, and properly washing hands and using hand sanitizer. That has been a district focus. The nursing department works closely with building leaders, supervisors, and HR. There is a multidisciplinary approach when someone has symptoms, if there is a known contact with symptoms, or a positive diagnosis. Reactions are always consistent with specific protocols in place. There has been

increased communication between departments, including between the facilities and nursing teams.

Nurses have taken on additional training through Boston Children's' Hospital, which offered a 4 part training on Covid in the schools. Informational health materials, including a social media presence, have been developed and shared across the district related to mitigation strategies and proper usage of PPE. A series of flu clinics have been arranged across the district and city, including clinics to be held at food pick up sites.

Strong relationships have been developed with the Board of Health. There are constant conversations going on between departments and that collaboration allows the district to rapidly assist families. HPS is grateful for the hard work and collaboration with the BoH.

Mrs. Birks expressed her belief that it is important to share positive results with the school community. Parents need to be able to make decisions about their children, whether the results are remote or in person staff or students. It is also important to know if any remote students who have tested positive have accessed schools for any reasons, including sports, food pick up, tutoring, etc.

Ms. Carbone indicated that there is tracking for those kinds of situations. Protocols, systems, and structures are taken very seriously in all buildings across the district.

MOTION: Mr. Sheehan made a motion, seconded by Ms. Feliciano Sims, to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of July 20, 2020 and the Special Meeting of August 7, 2020. The motion carried unanimously on a roll call vote. (Lefebvre-yes, Sheehan-yes, Brunelle-yes, Tensley-Williams-yes, Birks-yes, Feliciano Sims-yes, Whelihan-yes, Courchesne-yes.)

ONGOING BUSINESS

None

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mr. Sheehan reminded members and the public that early voting has started at Holyoke City Hall. Voting is happening on the first floor and the schedule is on the City Clerk's website. Voting is happening during normal business hours and on weekends. Ballots by mail are available from the City Clerk's office and can be returned to a drop box at City Hall. Voter registration is open until October 24th.

Mrs. Birks announced a fundraiser by the Field Hockey Team, which is selling Holyoke hats online. Support for the Field Hockey team, or other teams holding fundraisers, is encouraged and very much appreciated by the students and families.

Mrs. Birks reminded members and the public that the Special Education PAC would hold a meeting, virtually, on Zoom. The District Parent Advisory Group will meet Tuesday, virtually.

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

The October 19, 2020 meeting of the Holyoke School Committee adjourned at 8:56 p.m.