

CITY OF HOLYOKE
SCHOOL COMMITTEE

REGULAR MEETING OF THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE
MONDAY, JANUARY 11, 2021
TIME: 6:00

CALL TO ORDER – ROLL CALL – PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

School Committee Vice Chair Mildred Lefebvre called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and announced that pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, s. 20, 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.

Present: Mayor Alex Morse, Mildred Lefebvre, Devin Sheehan, Erin Brunelle, Rosalee Tensley Williams, Rebecca Birks, Irene Feliciano Sims, John G. Whelihan, William Collamore, Nyles Courchesne and Superintendent/Receiver Dr. Alberto Vázquez Matos, and Holyoke High School Student Representative Samantha Brennan.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Molly Pinkney – parent - Dear Dr. Vázquez Matos and the members of the Holyoke School Committee, I am writing to express my concerns about the plan to return to school in the Hybrid model. I understand that remote learning is difficult for families, students, and teachers, but it is the model that guarantees everyone remain safe and healthy. With the positivity rate in Holyoke at 7.38%, it is not safe to put students and teachers in enclosed classrooms. As the rise in cases after Thanksgiving gatherings and Christmas gatherings have proven, putting students and teachers back in school will only cause more cases. I suggest waiting until teachers can be vaccinated. Teachers and students have become accustomed to working online. Rituals and routines have been put in place. Sending students back to school to only have to go back to the remote model, when cases surge, will be very disruptive to students' learning. I feel waiting another six to eight weeks would make the most sense for all involved. The health and safety of your students and your educators should be your number one priority. Sincerely, Molly Pinkney, Parent

Sasha Delgado – parent - Holyoke public school committee, I wanted to express some concerns I have with returning to school for hybrid learning. I fear we may be jumping in too quickly without evaluating the safety of the children. What guidelines are being followed; with the cases being 8% higher, is this not exposing the children more? I am concerned with the school hours. With no morning program, there aren't any options for working parents. What is the benefit of returning to school only two days a week, but still on the computer full time? There will also potentially be an increased exposure risk, as these children will be in alternate care environments for three days a week. Personally, I cannot be an hour late every day without running the risk of losing my job. I am sure that there are many other families in the

same position. I fear that having the kids sit separately in the cafeteria at desks will make them feel more isolated. Are there any plans for recess? I feel the kids need some type of normalcy during their school day. Finally, I want to express how upsetting it was to find out the survey we filled out was used to determine our child's schedule. A survey is gathering for opinions, not making decisions. I found this to be very misleading. I feel that plans to return our children to school have been very inconsistent, and I do not feel comfortable with my children returning to school without a solid and detailed plan in place.

Maria Brueshaber, Parent -I have two special needs children doing remote learning right now. One 6yr old with ADHD in 1st grade, and one 8 year old with high function autism. I also have a two year old I'm taking care of during their learning time. I have always tried to be involved in my child's education and supported their teachers to the best of my ability but it has been very challenging to do so this year! I'm pulled in three different directions all morning just trying to keep them both focused on their learning and at times my two year old has become extremely frustrated that he doesn't have my attention and can't play with his siblings. I don't feel that extending their school day in the middle of the year, in the middle of the pandemic is in their best interest. Granted when it is safe to go back to school again in person their days will be longer but they won't be at home with their toys, books, siblings. I have a feeling w the extended hour day I may have to pull them out and homeschool because it's just going to be too much time on a screen for our family between school, therapy sessions, leisure time etc.
Marissa Brueshaber

MOTION: Mr. Sheehan made a motion, seconded by Ms. Brunelle, to leave public comment in order to hear from Peter McAndrew when he joins the meeting. The motion carried on a roll call vote (Morse-yes, Lefebvre-yes, Sheehan-yes, Brunelle-yes, Tensley Williams-yes, Birks-yes, Feliciano Sims-yes, Whelihan-yes Collamore-yes, Courchesne-yes.)

COMMUNICATIONS & REPORTS

Student Reports

Samantha Brenna reported that the student government food drive was successful, even though it was cut short due to building closures. The music department held a holiday celebration, including a virtual holiday concert.

There will be a new schedule at HHS and across the district beginning in January. Students will now be on their computers from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Her previous schedule had her on her computer from 8:45 a.m. to 12:50 p.m. Students didn't have a say in this change, but are preparing for this change. The district is also implementing a screens-on requirement so students will have to keep their screens on from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. There will be a spirit week during the first week of these schedule changes.

Mid-term exams will be happening this year. Last year there were no mid-terms because of the onset of the pandemic

Superintendent Reports

Return to School Update

Dr. Vázquez explained that the proposed target date was January 21st to return students to school, but, due to the data, the start date had to be further delayed in the best interests of maintaining the health and safety of students, families, and staff. Target dates are not final dates, rather, are dates established with the understanding that shifts might be necessary based on ongoing review of current health data.

This revision has early learners beginning to transition to in-person learning in February. More details will be shared by the end of the week.

All families have been asked to complete a survey indicating whether their preference is full remote or hybrid learning. Approximately 46% of families have indicated they want in-person learning for their children.

The youngest students, in grades PreK and Kindergarten, who wish to attend in-person will be assigned to cohort C and will attend 4 days a week.

Students in grades 1-12 who wish to participate in in-person learning will be assigned to cohort A or B and attend in-person 2 days a week. They will join the class virtually on their remote days.

Students who are fully remote will be assigned to Cohort D and will join the class virtually with their in-person peers.

Wednesdays will be remote learning days for all students in all cohorts so that deep cleaning can take place in the schools.

New School Hours and Schedule:

In response to formal and informal feedback from parents, students, and teachers, and the updated DESE guidelines, the new hours and schedule would allow students to be more engaged with their peers and teachers. Small group instruction will be offered for additional support. There will be time for necessary breaks. There will be time for asynchronous and synchronous live instruction learning time. The change allows the district to increase synchronous live instruction to meet the needs of students, following the updated DESE guidelines.

Erin Brunelle expressed concern with the new hours and schedule, and particularly related to the cameras on requirement. There is a significant disparity between what families have and do not have in Holyoke. Some students may well be attending class in a situation they don't want to share and this district needs to show empathy. Families should not have to reach out to ask for exemptions. Other students will be the first to notice if another student's camera is not on, thereby making that student stand out. Camera on should not be required, nor should it affect a student's grade for participation.

She was also concerned about requiring teachers to be in buildings if their students are not in the buildings. She hopes the district delays teachers reporting to buildings along with the delay of the hybrid learning plan.

Also, there is concern about teachers who are unable to return to the school setting for medical reasons, but those teachers could still teach from home. She would not want to see classes end up with substitute teachers when they could have their own teacher teaching them from home.

Further, if it's so important for teachers and students to be back in school, teachers should be in phase one for vaccinations. Schools have been in remote learning mode since last March and certainly can remain in remote until it's safe for teachers, students, and all staff to return to buildings, and when staff have had the opportunity to be vaccinated.

Sean Gonçalves, Health Department Director, told the committee that the city has no say over the state-mandated vaccine timeline. He does understand the concern expressed about having teachers in phase one, but Holyoke does not have the choice to move groups in or out of the phases for vaccination.

Devin Sheehan informed the committee that he has been told that the gym at Dean Campus might be used as an isolation and recovery site or shelter for COVID positive adults by the state. He asked Dr. Vázquez if that were true?

Dr. Vázquez replied that is being considered and planned as an emergency temporary shelter for COVID impacted individuals. That could be those evicted from their homes and other scenarios. There would be criteria to participate, such as background screenings and COVID testing. COVID positive individuals would be sent to an alternate placement. There would be a capacity for 40 beds.

There would be retrofitting to make sure there is no access or interaction between students and adults. That will be provided by the state and managed by the city.

This will create no safety concerns for students in the building.

He is working on a strategic communication to update the community and the school committee.

Mr. Sheehan indicated that there are students receiving in-person instruction Dean currently, both in vocational programs and at STEM.

Dr. Vázquez explained that a divider would be built so that there would be no interaction between residents at the emergency shelter and the school campus. There would also be a security guard at that location.

Mr. Sheehan indicated that he understood the difficulties of people who get displaced, Holyoke has been given promises by the state for things in the past around situations that were supposed to be temporary, but did not turn out to be temporary. He is genuinely concerned about using a school site that currently has students engaged in in-person learning. There are other schools that do not have students in them that could be used. It's a challenge that an educational setting with in-person learning would be used as a temporary shelter.

In Holyoke, if a parent wants to volunteer in school that parent needs to be CORI'd. he asked if people would be CORI'd? This is a big concern for Holyoke. He also wanted to know what the definition of temporary is in this specific case.

It would be helpful to have all of the information to understand how Dean would have been selected as a site for a temporary shelter when there are other viable options in the city. This is a school site with students actively engaging in in-person learning. There are students from grade 6 to grade 12 in that building currently and that presents grave concerns.

Ms. Lefebvre asked for more information and expressed surprise that the school committee was not aware of these ongoing conversations.

Mayor Morse indicated that he updated the City Council's Public Safety Committee last week on this shelter. The Board of Health has been working directly with MEMA and the Dept. of Housing and Community Development on this.

There has been an uptick in homelessness in the area. Holyoke does not have a permanent shelter. The plan is to have a temporary homeless shelter between January and the end of March. There will be long term planning with the Friends of the Homeless and other agencies to create a more permanent shelter elsewhere in the city.

There is an MOU between the district and the city around dates so there is no risk or expectation that this would go beyond the dates in the MOU. Mayor Morse is 100% behind the idea. The state has stepped up to provide funds to make this happen and it's a good location. Concerns raised by BoH and HPS have been addressed. There is a

desire to prioritize families and children that have become homeless that are part of the HPS system.

Mrs. Birks found out about this temporary shelter earlier in the day and did some outreach to get background. She is very concerned because she does not feel that a school with active, in-person learning is an appropriate place for a homeless shelter. There are so many issues that are concerning about this, including students who might be in the shelter being seen by their peers at the school. That could be devastating to those students.

Mrs. Birks asked how many Binax rapid tests would be allotted to each school and if all schools would have them.

Each school will have a set of 10 kits. Nurses are completing training this week by a certified BinaxNOW trainer. Kits will be periodically reordered and supplied by the state.

All HPS staff and students are part of the Binax program and any staff or student who is symptomatic would be tested.

Mr. Courchesne expressed concern about Dean being used as a shelter site. This kind of situation presents many safety issues. The people sent to Dean might not even be Holyoke residents and he was unsure that people could be vetted to the degree that schools would want them to be. His experience with housing court locally is that they are not allowing evictions to take place until just about every means available has been exhausted. He is also concerned that this will be yet another temporary program put on Holyoke that will become permanent. Leaders need to think clearly about this before allowing it. Holyoke has always been very generous in terms of providing housing for those in need.

Mr. Whelihan echoed the concerns expressed by Mr. Courchesne and Mr. Sheehan. He is also concerned about associated costs that might or might not be covered by the state, including maintenance, facilities maintenance, and utilities.

Ms. Tensley Williams believes a better site can be found and that the temporary shelter should not be located at Dean.

Mr. Collamore was very concerned that no members of the school committee were involved in the conversations about a temporary shelter at a school site.

Ms. Brunelle expressed extreme frustration that this item had to be brought up by a school committee member and that it was not brought to the committee by the city or by the receiver. While Holyoke is in receivership, that is not a reason to keep this information from the school committee. This is an agreement to put a homeless shelter in a school building that is currently serving students with in-person learning for students in grades 6-12. The conversation sounds like planning for this has been ongoing for at least several weeks. It's wrong that the school

committee was left out of the conversations about this shelter. Members of the school committee were elected by the people of Holyoke to represent them and the voices of children in the schools, regardless of receivership.

Mr. Sheehan said he remained troubled about a shelter in a school that is actively providing in-person learning. He asked for a copy of the MOU so that he could better understand everything about the situation. This is particularly troubling, understanding that the shelter would not maintain the same level of safety protocols and requirements for staff and others in school buildings.

Dr. Vázquez indicated that he would provide an updated report to the school committee on the issues raised. If there are additional questions, members should email him so that the report can be as inclusive as possible.

There was a lengthy discussion with Sean Gonçalves about COVID rates, COVID testing, contract tracing, nursing services, and other COVID related matters and the schools.

Public Comment (Resumed)

Peter McAndrew, HTA President – Expressed concern, on behalf of the Holyoke Teachers Association, regarding the anticipated return to in-person instruction, potentially too soon.

He thanked Mayor Morse and School Committee members for their immediate response to the Holyoke teachers and look forward to continued support.

At no time, does he want to diminish the hard work on the part of district leaders as they have tried to create a return to school plan, and he understands how much change has occurred that they have had to respond to.

The district has announced the return of teachers and staff to buildings, to be followed by the gradual return of students. Since the request to address the school committee, those dates have been pushed back, out of an abundance of caution, as COVID-19 rates increase across the city.

The district has granted many requests for teachers to remain home and teach remotely. Of those teachers, some have medical documentation, others have extenuating circumstances, such as a household member that is medically compromised, and there is a group of teachers with young children who have concerns about safe and appropriate day care. The process around protecting students, families and staff has been thoughtful.

The stress of job security, for teachers who would be forced to decide whether or not to go back to work or care for their own personal health, or for a household member, has created great anxiety.

The HTA feels it is too risky, with COVID transmission rates being so high in the city. COVID-19 has impacted so many people in the community that leaders really need to think about all the people and families that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. The finish line is on the horizon. The district should not take the risk and fail to protect a vulnerable population of students, families and staff members.

There is a small group of teachers working with students. The best case would be a gradual reintroduction of staff and students to meet the need of students who need support.

Ms. Lefebvre explained that the committee members are rightly concerned. While this committee fully understands that in receivership the receiver has the authority to make final decisions, having open, transparent dialog with the committee, members of which were elected by citizens of Holyoke, would create a more trusting environment, both with committee members and with the community.

Mr. Courchesne asked if any statement had been made to the Dean and STEM communities about this issue, and did they have any input into the process.

Dr. Vázquez replied that there needed to be planning time to be able to incorporate all the feedback from the team before sharing out with the greater community. He met with Dr. Mahoney last Friday, along with the team from the city-side and cabinet members to brief him.

Ms. Brunelle noted a pattern of decisions being made before the community is involved. It would behoove decision-makers to get staff and community engagement and feedback before a final decision is made so that there is an understanding and potential for support before a decision is announced.

NEW BUSINESS

Minutes of Meetings

Regular Meeting of November 16, 2021

MOTION: Mr. Sheehan made a motion, seconded by Mr. Whelihan, to accept the minute of the Regular Meeting of November 16, 2021. The motion carried on a roll call vote. (Morse-yes, Lefebvre-yes, Sheehan-yes, Brunelle-yes, Tensley Williams-yes, Birks-yes, Feliciano Sims-yes, Whelihan-yes, Collamore-yes.)

ONGOING BUSINESS

None

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mr. Sheehan added a reminder – that families in Holyoke should have had their pandemic EBT card reloaded for the months of October and November. If there are families who don't believe they need the EBT, perhaps they can purchase healthy food and donate it to a Holyoke food pantry to pass on to communities in need.

ADJOURNMENT

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

The Regular Meeting of January 11, 2021 adjourned at approximately 8:54 p.m.