

MINUTES OF SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING – AUGUST 25, 2021

A regular School Committee meeting was held on Wednesday, August 25, 2021, in the Auditorium at Joseph Case High School.

Members Present: Sonya Barbosa, James Carvalho, Eric Graham, Scott Rowland, Thomas Rodrigues.

Superintendent of Schools John J. Robidoux and Assistant Superintendent Elizabeth White were present.

Several parents were in attendance.

Chairman Rowland opened the meeting at 6 p.m. He announced that, in accordance with M.G.L. Chapter 30A, Section 20(f), any person in attendance who wanted to record any portion of the meeting must notify the Chairman. School Committee meetings are broadcast live and also recorded for broadcast on Sunday at 12:30 p.m., Monday at 6 p.m., Tuesday at 2 p.m., Wednesday at 10 a.m., Thursday at 10 p.m., Friday at 10 a.m. and Saturday at 2 p.m. on Swansea Cable Access Channel 15. Meetings can also be accessed over the internet at swanseacabletv.com.

Mr. Graham led in the Pledge of Allegiance. Mr. Rodrigues offered a moment of silence in remembrance of those who passed away from COVID.

There was no executive session.

Consent Agenda

Chairman Rowland established a Consent Agenda consisting of #5 Personnel Items, #6 Correspondence, #7 Informational Items, #9 Approval of Minutes, and #10 Approval of Bills.

DISCUSSION ITEMS

Review Guidance in Regard to Opening of School

Supt. Robidoux provided an update on the mandates from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). He noted that DESE oversees every public school building in the Commonwealth. It is the governing body.

Last year it was the hybrid model and then in-person learning. Students were in the playground without masks. It went well. Swansea followed the guidance. Administrators and especially teachers did a great job to make sure students were getting what they needed. Parents also did a nice job. There were some students with health issues. He is proud of students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Supt. Robidoux pointed out that DESE changes mandates all the time. We cannot ignore that. Things happened before COVID and will happen after COVID. As of July 30, 2021, guidance from DESE was to strongly recommend mask wearing for students from K to 6 and any staff or students that are eligible but cannot get vaccinated. As of yesterday, August 24, Commissioner Riley went to his Board and recommended mask wearing for everyone in the schools. This is due to the huge increase in COVID in Massachusetts. Supt. Robidoux notified parents of the mandate to move forward with mask wearing at least until October 1. He received the mandate today at 3:26 p.m.

Supt. Robidoux has been accused of not sharing information. He shares and will continue to share information when it becomes available so that folks will understand.

There is a lot of misunderstanding out there. Swansea Public Schools is under the obligation to following through on mandates issued by DESE. The Superintendent and School Committee do not have a choice.

“Students Come First” and “We Are All Cardinals” is very important. That means they believe in it and they make sure things are in place.

Supt. Robidoux noted that last year students did not have a problem wearing masks. They want to be in schools.

We move forward and follow the mandates. It is not true that we do not have to follow mandates. Students need to understand the importance of wearing masks.

DESE has committed to look at it again on October 1.

Board members thanked Supt. Robidoux for the explanation. Chairman Rowland noted it is difficult but it is out of their hands.

Discuss Recommendations of Policy Sub-Committee

Mr. Graham and Mrs. Barbosa are on the sub-committee.

Mr. Graham explained the changes. He discussed with the attorney to make sure what was presented was fully legal. He had posted a version on Facebook. He clarified that the policy presented is in line with the DESE mandate that masks are not required outdoors.

Mr. Carvalho said he is not ready to vote on this tonight. He suggested they take it under advisement.

Chairman Rowland agreed.

Supt. Robidoux said there is a face covering policy in place in the policy manual. The sub-committee looked at recommendations from MASC regarding the pandemic.

Chairman Rowland suggested parents read the mandate from DESE

Discuss DocuSign for Warrants

Supt. Robidoux explained that this allows for remote signatures on documents. Documents will go out electronically. School Committee members will be able to review and sign the warrants. This will streamline the process. Some documents, such as payroll, require a “wet signature.”

Mr. Graham noted he had proposed this to Supt. Stanton. He would like to get agenda electronically as well. He applauded Supt Robidoux for moving forward with this.

Mrs. Barbosa asked if it can be done on any device.

Supt. Robidoux is 99% sure it can be done on cell phones.

Mrs. Barbosa asked if a School Committee member can go into the office and sign.

Supt. Robidoux will check with Mrs. Arruda if it can be done both ways.

Mr. Carvalho said he is often in the Administration Building.

School Committee members agreed it is a good idea.

Open Meeting Law Complaint Filed by Patrick Higgins and Associates

Supt. Robidoux read the complaint. Mr. Higgins & Associates allege that the handicapped door was locked during the Sub-Committee meeting of August 18, 2021. Further, it is problematic that the meeting was held at 3 p.m. and did not allow for people who work to attend. Mr. Higgins requested that the only handicapped access is unlocked and meetings are scheduled after the work day has ended.

Mr. Graham said the door was opened by Supt. Robidoux. The time of the meeting is not a violation and generally the public does not attend sub-committee meetings.

Mr. Carvalho explained sub-committee meetings are to bring recommendations to the full committee.

Mr. Graham said he did ask for comments although not required.

Supt. Robidoux noted the meeting was held during the day therefore all doors were accessible. He was in the office that day and the button to the handicapped door was not pressed. He felt there was no violation regarding accessibility to the building.

In response to the Chairman's question, Supt. Robidoux said accessibility is through the door and up the stairs or using the elevator. There is signage on the building.

Mr. Carvalho felt the Superintendent and attorney should be responsible for answering open meeting law complaints.

Public Input

Chairman Rowland allowed two minutes for each speaker. It is not a question and answer time and there should be no personal attacks and keep the language clean.

Lisa Pergola, 104 Puller Avenue, thanked the Committee for the opportunity to speak. She felt the Commissioner's mandate is unlawful. She said wearing a mask can be harmful. Mask wearing goes against some people's religious beliefs. Doctors in the State are refusing to write medical notes for fear of losing their license. Many parents have no exemption option available to them. Parents are funding school officials and staff salaries which she felt is unlawful.

She asked Committee members what they are going to do against the violation of children's rights. It is a violation of the Constitution. She kept hearing that there is no choice. Everybody has choice. She is sure there may be consequences of standing up for the rights of everybody. She doesn't know what that would be.

Mr. Mike Silva of 42 Kensington Ct. said that nobody has the right to tell him to put a mask on his child, especially since science does not support it. CDC has said that kids under 17 are more likely to die of the flu than COVID. He felt it was unacceptable that he did not hear back from any School Committee member. He quoted from a CDC study that children are not overly affected by COVID and cannot transmit it. He respects the rights of other parents. He does not support mask wearing for his children.

Mr. Peter Lincoln, 487 Gardners Neck Road, said he heard about the meeting today. A lot of people are being silenced by main stream media. He would like to see the numbers. He has not heard that children have issues with this disease. It is absolutely absurd to be vaccinated and that children have to wear a mask. It is a direct attack on the United States Constitution.

The School Committee has the choice to stand up and tell their superiors how Swansea feels. He noted only two people in the audience had masks.

At this point there was loud cheering. Chairman Rowland stated anyone disrupting the meeting will be removed.

Mrs. Patricia Freitas, thanked the Committee for standing up for students. She suggested parents who do not want their children in school should consider home schooling.

Colin Thibault said students were told “no mask, no school.” They are in a tough predicament.

Chloe Thibault, 197 Milford Road said she has asthma and it is difficult to breath with the mask. She heard that after two hours the mask builds up bacteria..

ACTION ITEMS

Vote to Utilize DocuSign for Warrants

A motion was made by Mr. Graham, seconded by Mr. Carvalho, and it was unanimously

VOTED: To utilize DocuSign for warrants.

Vote on Face Covering Policy for 2021-2022

A motion was made by Mr. Carvalho, seconded by Mrs. Barbosa, and it was unanimously

VOTED: To table the Face Covering Policy File: EBCFA for 2021-2022.

Vote to Respond to Open Meeting Law Complaint filed by Patrick Higgins & Associates

A motion was made to Mr. Graham, seconded by Mr. Carvalho, and it was unanimously

VOTED: That the Superintendent and School Committee attorney respond to the open meeting law complained filed by Patrick Higgins & Associates.

NEW BUSINESS; FUTURE DISCUSSIONS BY SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEMBERS, SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS, ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE

Chairman Rowland said he received a number of e-mails from parents in favor of the mask mandate. The small turnout in the audience does not represent the feedback he received.

Mr. Carvalho said he answered his e mails.

Supt. Robidoux said he answered all e-mails. From March 13, we have done everything possible to follow the guidance set forth by DESE. The bottom line is to keep students and staff safe.

Mr. Rodrigues appreciated the interest from the public. He answered all his e-mails .

Approval of Bills

. A motion was made by Mr. Graham, seconded by Mr. Carvalho, and it was unanimously

VOTED: To approve the bills.

NEXT MEETING

The next regular School Committee meeting was scheduled for Monday, September 13, 2021 AT 6 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Mr. Graham, seconded by Mr. Carvalho, and it was unanimously

VOTED: To adjourn at 7:13 p.m.

The vote: Mr. Graham – Aye; Mr. Carvalho – Aye; Mrs. Barbosa –Aye; Mr. Rodrigues – Aye; Chairman Rowland – Aye.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia Gamer
Secretary

Items Distributed at the August 25, 2021 Meeting

Recommendation of Policy Sub-Committee

Resignations: Beth Boie - Van Driver

Johanna Marcel – Paraeducator at Hoyle Elementary School

Justin Bartlett – Custodian at Joseph Case Junior High School

Pamela Arruda – Special Educator Teacher, Joseph Case Junior High School

Scott Orton – Computer Science Teacher, Joseph Case Junior High School