

IPSWICH SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2020
2:00 PM
VIA GOOGLE HANGOUT
MEETING MINUTES

I. OPEN SESSION

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Hopping called the meeting to order at 2:05pm.

Present: Mr. Nyen, Mr. Whitten, Mr. Stevens, Ms. Gilliam and Ms. Kneedler.

Also Present: Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools and Joanne Cuff, Director of Finance and Operations

CITIZENS' COMMENTS

There were no citizen comments.

COVID-19 UPDATE

Dr. Brian Blake gave an update on COVID-19 and how the district has been handling the ongoing situation. In his update, he stated:

- All Ipswich schools have been out since last Friday, March 13, 2020.
- On Monday, March 16th and Tuesday, March 17th, teachers worked with Tracy Wagner, the Director of Teaching and Learning and Amy Gregory, the Digital Learning Specialist, to create a resource webpage for extended learning. The webpage was launched on Wednesday, March 18th.
- Breakfast and lunches are being distributed for any student in the district that needs them during this closure. This service has been advertised via email, the district website and district social media pages. Notices were also distributed by each school. The Food Services staff are getting meals ready and along with building principals, are distributing them in designated areas throughout town. At this time, they anticipate that they are serving close to 100 meals per day.
- There is a leadership meeting on Monday to talk about next steps and to review the current resources available to families.
- The start of spring sports will be delayed until April 20, 2020 according to a vote taken by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA).
- The state is currently looking at waivers that could either delay or cancel MCAS testing for this year. At this time, no final determination has been made.
- Staff and teachers are continuing to check email daily. Teachers are working in google classrooms and touching base with parents as necessary.

- All educational resources provided to families at this time are not mandatory, instead, they are considered enrichment activities.
- All school buildings have been closed down as of today with the exception of the main offices. Office staff may come and go as necessary, however all other staff are not permitted into the buildings.
- Most Central Office staff are working remotely. The building is open only if people need files or to do work that cannot be done at home.
- Tony Marino, Town Manager, reported today the first positive covid-19 case in Ipswich. At this time, we do not know if there is a connection to the school.

Dr. Blake then opened the discussion to comments and questions from the School Committee.

Both Mr. Whitten and Mr. Hopping spoke highly of the messaging coming from the administrative team, along with the efforts made by teachers to reach out to students through various platforms. At this time, teachers have been asked to remain in contact with students and check and respond to emails in a timely manner.

Mr. Nysten first thanked Dr. Blake and the leadership team for their work so far. He then asked for clarification on the closing of the school buildings and wanted to know if staff could enter should they need additional materials or supplies. Dr. Blake explained that teachers and staff were given Monday and Tuesday of this week to enter the buildings. The custodians have been working diligently to sanitize each room in each building. Once classrooms are sanitized, they are closed and not to be entered until the closure ends.

Dr. Blake addressed questions around access to technology and devices for students who do not have it at home. Currently, principals are working with families to identify who needs access to technology. Chromebooks and Ipads were distributed to families who needed it and more are being prepped should the need increase.

Dr. Blake then provided an update from a conference call he had with the Department for Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). In his update, he stated:

- It is recommended that districts continue to pay employees and staff for the current three week closure.
- DESE is currently in the process of creating guidance around the payments of vendors and contracted employees This includes food service, transportation and out of district placements.
- The Commissioner of Education waived the 180 day requirement for schools.
- Federal and state grant programs are still operating. Grants will still be distributed throughout districts.
- There is an extension for the submission of the Student Opportunity Act submission.
- There is going to be relief from accountability around student attendance. DESE has made the decision to only look at data up to March 2, 2020. All other data through the end of the year will not be counted.

- More information and guidance is being created around out of district programs and circuit breaker funding.
- The state is currently looking at school nutrition programs and reimbursing districts for providing meals to students during the closure. According to current federal guidelines, districts would be reimbursed if 50% of students or higher are enrolled in the Free/Reduced Lunch Program. Ipswich, at this time, has 20% of the student population enrolled.

Mr. Nylen asked how the amount of lunches being dispersed during the closure compares to the number of lunches typically given out during regular school hours. Ms. Cuff, Director of Finance and Operations, said the number is much lower now that students are not in school. It is expected that the number of lunches provided to families will increase as the closure extends and more families become aware of the option.

Dr. Blake also explained that should there be a shelter in place order in the future, food services employees would be considered essential and could continue to provide this service.

Mr. Nylen asked if the low number of meals distributed was due to communication or a function of proximity to the need. Dr. Blake felt that it may be a combination of both. Most families receiving meals are from the areas where they are being distributed. He again stated that as more families become aware of this service, more will participate.

Dr. Blake continued with his update from his conference call with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). He stated:

- He is awaiting a letter from the Commissioner of Education to parents around the school/remote education issue. He is hopeful that districts will receive that in the upcoming days.
- The state has provided a list of educational resources for school districts to use along with resources the district has already provided to families.
- Educator Evaluations are considered a local issue and should be dealt with at the district level.
- They anticipate some flexibility surrounding the renewal of educator licensure.

Dr. Blake then opened the discussion to comments and questions from the School Committee.

Mr. Hopping asked about the frequency of conference calls with the Commissioner, as well as the Commissioner's efforts in coordinating with Governor Baker. Dr. Blake answered the questions, stating that at this time, conference calls with DESE are scheduled weekly, as are other conference calls with stakeholder groups including the leadership team and the local superintendents group. He also felt the DESE was working collaboratively with the Governor.

Dr. Blake also shared that the Commissioner did notify the group that although the state is not ready to make an announcement at this time, districts should begin to prepare for extended closures.

Mr. Nylan asked if the educator evaluation issue had already been addressed by the Ipswich Educators' Association and if so, is the district working with them. Dr. Blake responded, saying that at this time, those evaluations had not been discussed. He does, however, believe a conversation about the process and procedure will happen soon.

Dr. Blake then addressed several questions around what the district is doing in terms of long term contingency planning. He started by acknowledging the need to create such plans, prior to notice from the state of an extended closure. At this time, he felt that Ipswich is in better shape than most places in terms of access to technology and devices. Currently, the district is providing a list of resources for families to use as enrichment activities. While most teachers are engaging with their students, Dr. Blake did say that having teachers checking their emails and providing resources is very different than actual full time online learning. Due to the changing work environments, he does anticipate working with the Ipswich Educators' Association on an agreement about what learning will look like for teachers throughout this time.

Mr. Hopping discussed the accountability piece of online learning, saying that right now there is no way to hold students accountable for not logging on and participating in work. This will need to be a larger discussion going forward especially around special education and how or when those services are provided to those students who need them.

There was also acknowledgement that even once schools are open again, there should be plans in place should another closure need to happen.

Mr. Stevens shared that he felt the messaging from the administration has been great so far. He believed, though, that families are not taking the need for social distancing serious enough. As a parent, he has received multiple requests for play dates and kids are still grouping together. He also said that some parents do not see the enrichment activities as real "work" and therefore are not having their kids engage in the activities. Mr. Stevens feels that the district should craft a message to parents not only stressing the importance of social distancing, but also strongly encouraging the participation in the provided enrichment work.

There was also discussion about the use of the fields and the track during the school closures. Some committee members noted seeing large groups gathering and a lot of activities on the field and track. It was suggested that the track, like the local playgrounds, be closed for activities.

Dr. Blake talked about the building usage during the closure, once again stating that the buildings have been closed. The facilities director and assistant facilities director have been and will continue to monitor the buildings on a daily basis for any issues.

There was some discussion about the continuance to pay vendors such as Salter transportation during this time. Dr. Blake confirmed that these were discussions being held with the state. At this time, the general guidance is that districts need to refer to their individual contracts with

vendors. Ms. Cuff was working with legal to review the current contract to determine if payment is still necessary.

Both Dr. Blake and Ms. Cuff addressed what the district is doing around issuing refunds or reimbursements to families that have paid in advance for the extended day program (EDP), field trips and athletics. At this time, families should not be paying for the Tiger Tots program or EDP while schools are closed.

Vote of Staff Compensation for Temporary Closure

Mr. Hopping presented a motion to committee members to authorize payment for all school employees, excluding day subs, during the temporary school closure.

Mr. Hopping moved that during the period starting March 16, 2020 to April 3, 2020 inclusive or to such later date as the Governor of Massachusetts may determine for the continued closure of all public schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts due to COVID-19 in the 2019-2020 school year, hereinafter referred to as the "Closure Period", the Ipswich School Committee, subject to appropriation, shall pay the regular wages for work days during the Closure Period to each employee of the Ipswich Public Schools, excluding day substitutes, provided that each such employee to be paid performs work that may be requested or required by the employee's supervisor during each the work days to be paid in the Closure Period. Nothing in this motion limits any rights that any employee may have to take vacation, sick, or personal leave during the Closure Period. The motion was seconded by Ms. Gilliam and opened for discussion.

Mr. Stevens asked to clarify if the motion means that pay and benefits for staff will go uninterrupted through the closure and would it be subject to change should the closure date change. Mr. Hopping answered that he would like to vote on the dates provided and should the closure extend, the School Committee would revisit the motion at that time. Dr. Blake also added that the motion is only intended to cover the initial three week closure of schools.

There was some discussion about whether staff and students would work through April vacation should they return to school by that time. Dr. Blake said that he was doubtful schools will be operating before the vacation break. He has, however, been having conversations with area superintendents to discuss what going to school during vacation would look like and if it would be feasible. He also noted that he would expect some pushback from the union.

Before the vote on this motion took place, Ms. Cuff corrected Mr. Hopping on the beginning date of the motion. She stated that the motion should begin on Friday, March 13, 2020 and not Monday, March 16, 2020.

Mr. Nysten moved to amend the motion to read Friday, March 13, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Gilliam. The motion passed unanimously by a roll call vote:

Mr. Hopping-yes

Mr. Nysten-yes

Mr. Whitten-yes

Mr. Stevens-yes

Ms. Gilliam-yes

Ms. Kneeder-yes

Mr. Stevens moved to accept the amended motion, seconded by Ms. Kneeder. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote:

Mr. Hopping-yes

Mr. Whitten-yes

Mr. Nysten-yes

Mr. Stevens-yes

Ms. Gilliam-yes

Ms. Kneeder-yes

New Business:

Debrief of Finance Committee Budget Presentation

Dr. Blake discussed how the presentation went through both nights, stating that he felt the presentation went well. It was noted that there were some Finance Committee members who did not like the way the information was presented this year and hoped that next year, the administrators were able to present more of the information. They also expressed the need to break down the presentation and allow for committee members to ask questions throughout the presentation and not just at the end. Both Dr. Blake and Mr. Hopping agreed to take those comments into consideration for next year's budget presentation.

A longer discussion began about the importance of having the administrators share in the budget presentation as a way to reinforce the good that is being done at the building levels, while also telling the story of the district. Overall, the feeling was that the Finance Committee wanted to hear a "state of the schools" report from them. It was suggested by Mr. Nysten that other boards could adopt a model where they have a representative at future School Committee meetings, so they are informed throughout the year of what is happening in the district.

Email Issues

Over the past few weeks, several emails have been sent to the general School Committee email address. It seems that some people have not been receiving those emails or they have been bounced back all together. Dr. Blake had reached out to the Town technology department to address this issue. He asked that if an email is sent out to the group, they should respond that they have received it.

Tiered Focused Monitoring

Mr. Hopping congratulated Beverly Hegedus, Pupil Personnel Services Director, and her staff on the successful review of the Ipswich Special Education program by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The final report came back with no findings.

Future Meetings

Mr. Hopping asked the committee to schedule several subcommittee meetings in the upcoming weeks including the Budget Subcommittee, Policy Subcommittee and the Feoffee Policy Working Group.

Grant Committee Meetings

It was noted that the grant informational meetings previously scheduled cannot take place during the school closure. The committees will need to look at how these two grant programs will function during this time.

Bean Counting

At this time, there is no new information about a date for Bean Counting. Mr. Hopping is awaiting more information from the Town.

Warrant Articles

Warrant articles for Town Meeting will be voted on at the next scheduled School Committee meeting.

II. ADJOURNMENT

Ms. Gilliam moved to adjourn the meeting at 3:39 PM, seconded by Mr. Whitten. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote:

Mr. Hopping-yes

Mr. Whitten-yes

Ms. Kneedler-yes

Ms. Gilliam-yes

Mr. Stevens-yes

Mr. Nysten-yes