

Mission

Ipswich Public Schools aspires to empower *ALL* students to be global citizens who are effective communicators, analytical problem solvers and savvy consumers of information. We propose to do this through an emphasis on communication, critical thinking, creativity, self-management, perseverance and collaboration. Students will be active partners in authentic learning, offering voice and choice in demonstrating competency.

IPSWICH SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING THURSDAY, AUGUST 26, 2021 7:00 PM MIDDLE/HIGH ENSEMBLE ROOM

MINUTES

I. OPEN SESSION

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Stevens called the meeting to order at 7:01 PM.

Present: Mr. Stevens, Dr. O'Flynn, Ms. Kneeder, Ms. Cannon and Mr. Poirier.

Also Present: Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools and Cheryl Herrick-Stella, Director of Finance and Operations

READING OF DISTRICT MISSION STATEMENT

Ms. Kneeder read the mission statement.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, September 9, 2021.
- Opening Day for all district staff will be Monday, August 30th.
- The first day of school for students is Wednesday, September 1, 2021.
- There will be no school on Friday, September 3, 2021.

CITIZENS' COMMENTS-

David Alleva, Putnam Road, stated that he had moved to Ipswich two years ago and works as an immunologist and vaccinologist. Mr. Alleva referenced a letter sent to the School Committee and Dr. Blake regarding mask wearing for children in school. He said he did not appreciate the way the district has handled the issue of mask wearing and that the district must be receiving pressure from somewhere else. Mr. Alleva said that he cannot be mandated to wear a mask because masks were not effective from preventing COVID. He also stated that zero children age 0 through 17 have died as a direct result of COVID. He felt this mask mandate was pushed on the community without public discourse. Mr. Alleva asked the School Committee to prove that COVID is harmful to kids age 0-17 and that mask wearing is effective.

Kerry, Bush Hill Road, shared that as a mom she wants her kids to return to school safe. As a nurse she would like her kids back in school with masks so they can get back into a routine and socialize.

Jodi Stevens, Washington Street, shared that she is a mom of four and nurse practitioner. She is concerned about the safety of children. Ms. Stevens is asking for empathy for everyone in this difficult

situation and understands that families are doing their best to survive in this difficult time. She is worried about the implications of children wearing masks for upwards of seven hours a day. Kids are already anxious and stressed. She shared that mental health is at an all time high and the suicide rate is at all time high. With that, she is worried about the trajectory of things this year if students start the year in masks. Ms. Stevens said she believes in medical freedom and the choice to wear a mask or not should be left up to each individual family. She said that as it is, kids are not wearing masks properly and are taking them off and on throughout the day. She asked if the district would be providing masks to all children who cough or sneeze into theirs through the day. She finished by asking the School Committee to listen to concerned parents and allow for medical freedom and individual health choices.

Nicole Murdoch, Putnam Road, first talked about a testimonial from a senior industrial hygienist who trains medical experts how to properly wear masks. In this testimonial, the person compared wearing a mask to prevent COVID like throwing sand to wiring. Ms. Murdoch referenced various studies that associate mask wearing with harmful, adverse reactions to children. She asked the School Committee to explain how they plan to keep the students safe from these reactions. Ms. Murdoch referenced the Nuremberg Code when talking about mask wearing. She said that like vaccinations, masks as a prevention method were experimental. Ms. Murdoch then asked for clarification from the School Committee on who would be liable should her child have an adverse reaction to masks, how will families be notified of the potential adverse effects of mask wearing and how families could go about receiving an exemption from this mandate.

Kristin Z, Putnam Road, shared that she was a nurse on a COVID unit. She said that her child attended school last year, wearing a mask, and thrived. She was grateful for the educators in town and for the frontline workers.

Becky Slawson, president, Ipswich Educators' Association (IEA) started by sharing that she has worked in the district for 17 years as a high school English teacher. After reflecting on the past year, there are some things that teachers are excited to see coming back like outdoor learning spaces and kids interacting in-person with each other. She said she was addressing some concerns raised through public comment. The IEA had polled the teachers regarding an implementation of a mask mandate. Of the 130 participants, 89% were in support of a mandate. Many stated that it is the top priority of educators to be in class with their students every day. It is the IEA's belief that wearing a mask can keep people in school and safe. Ms. Slawson added that she was happy to hear the DESE Commissioner put out a mandate and that Dr. Blake was also in support.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There were none at this time.

II. SCHOOL COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS

A. DISCUSSION/VOTE ON MASK MANDATE

Mr. Stevens explained that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) had issued guidance mandating masks for all school staff and students in kindergarten through Grade 12 until at least October 1st.

Dr. Blake said that while he was prepared to recommend masking for all students and staff for the start of the year, DESE made that decision for districts.

Dr. O'Flynn thanked Dr. Blake for his courage through this decision making process. He added that he was happy to see that DESE had created a path forward where students and staff may not have to mask given that 80% of students and staff are vaccinated. Dr. Blake shared that the schools will be surveying staff and students regarding their vaccination status in September.

- *Motion to support the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner's mask mandate was made by Ms. Cannon and seconded by Dr. O'Flynn.*

The motion passed unanimously in favor.

B. SCHOOL COMMITTEE RETREAT RECAP

Mr. Stevens reviewed the agenda from the recent School Committee Retreat. The School Committee spent time drafting their goals for the 2021-2022 school year, as well as discussing Dr. Blake's goals as superintendent for the upcoming school year.

Members agreed that there was good discussion amongst the group. Goals will be discussed at the next School Committee meeting.

C. BUILDING INSPECTION REVIEW (MS/HS)

Mr. Poirier reviewed his walkthrough of the Middle/High School on August 19th. His tour included Jon Mitchell, Kathy McMahon and Facilities Director, Chris Rais. Both schools are ready to welcome students and staff back into the building. Highlights from the tour included:

- Painting and flooring was completed
- HEPA air filter systems are present in classrooms
- Furniture has been moved back into classrooms
- Outdoor tents will be available for the first day of school
- The upper gym had flooring was refinished
- The boys locker room at the high school was refinished

Mr. Stevens toured Winthrop School with Amy Sullivan. He noted the lack of clutter in the building, stating the school was "immaculate". Overall, the school is ready to welcome staff and students and is "about as good as it can get".

Ms. Cannon toured the Paul F. Doyon Memorial School with Sarah Goodale-O'Brien. She first shared that she was excited about Ms. O'Brien's vision for the school. Ms. Cannon highlighted a completed project where students from the high school made stools to be used in an outdoor space. In addition to the cleaning and improvements made to classrooms and indoor building space, Ms. O'Brien also talked about looking for more inclusive equipment on the playground, as well as additional sports equipment.

D. SUPERINTENDENT ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

Dr. Blake reported on the work he had done in the district in the weeks following the last School Committee meeting. His report included:

- A weeklong vacation with family
- A meeting with the administrative team to discuss the World Language program
- Attendance at a Tri-Board meeting to discuss the upcoming Special Town Meeting and support of the new Public Safety building
- A meeting to discuss the boiler feasibility study
- A review of the mandatory trainings that all staff must take including expanded offerings from the same group that provides ALICE training
- Continued negotiations with the Ipswich Educators' Association

- Beginning negotiations with all AFSCME collective bargaining units
- Meetings with the newest members of the administrative team
- Regularly scheduled meeting with the Facilities Director to track ongoing projects
- Attendance at the School Committee Retreat where 2021-2022 goals were discussed
- Regular communication with the North Shore Superintendents Round Table (NRSST) regarding the opening of schools
- A review of all opening plans at each building
- Attendance at New Hire Orientation

E. SCHOOL OPENING PLANS/UPDATE

Dr. Blake presented an update on the opening plans for the district. On Wednesday, August 25th, an updated Return to Learn document was published and sent out to the school community. The document includes guidance and new protocols from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) regarding positive COVID cases, close contacts, testing, quarantine and isolation periods.

The district will be participating in the Test and Stay program. This will allow for students to be tested in school. It is the expectation that students attend school five days a week. At this time, there is no remote option for students.

Mr. Poirier thanked Dr. Blake for reducing the Return to Learn document down to 17 pages. He suggested the nurses put together a reference sheet for families to use regarding symptoms and protocols.

Dr. Blake confirmed that his weekly messaging will continue on Friday afternoons and it will include a positive case coun, should there be one. Close contacts will be notified immediately.

Dr. Blake also confirmed that any student not wearing a mask will not be allowed to enter any school building. Exemptions to the mandate must be approved. Mask breaks will be provided throughout the day and students will not be required to wear masks when outdoors or at lunch.

F. FINANCE UPDATE

Ms. Herrick-Stella provided the School Committee with a Year-to-Date financial report and then reviewed the Student Activity Account balances for each school. A new account needed to be created for the Class of 2024.

- *Motion to create a Student Activity Account for the Class of 2023 was made by Dr. O'Flynn and seconded by Ms. Kneeder.*

The motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Herrick-Stella also clarified that staff salaries are encumbered thirty days into the new school year.

G. PUBLIC COMMENT

Becky Slawson, president, Ipswich Educators' Association, discussed a poll that was sent to educators regarding mandatory vaccinations for adults/teachers. The poll was taken prior to the Pfizer vaccine receiving full FDA approval. Of those that responded, 79% of teachers were in support of mandating vaccinations. Those who were not in favor of a mandate cited personal choice as their reason. Ms. Slawson also stated that both the Massachusetts Teachers' Association and the National Educators' Association are in support of mandatory vaccinations.

Dr. O'Flynn shared his appreciation of Ms. Slawson for bringing this information to the School Committee. He said that most hospitals have come out with a vaccine mandate. Both Ms. Cannon and Mr. Stevens also added that other employers and colleges and universities are requiring vaccines.

At this time, Dr. Blake said the district was not going to mandate vaccines for all employees. The district will be asking staff to report on their vaccination status, but will not require them to show their vaccination card.

Dr. Blake talked about the decision-making process that was used when determining whether the district should begin the year in masks. There are a number of reasons that students and staff are not vaccinated or are wearing masks. Is there concern for bullying when some are masked and others are not? Yes. Dr. Blake felt it was the best decision to have everyone masked from the start. He did acknowledge that at some point, the district would have to consider what schools, especially the middle school, would look like when the DESE mandate expires. At this time, sixth grade students are not eligible for a vaccine, but they will be together in a building with a number of grades where students can be vaccinated. Should Grade 6 then continue to wear masks? Dr. Blake did believe that elementary school students will continue to wear masks until there is a vaccine.

Ms. Cannon added that the job of the School Committee is to ensure that the environment the staff and students are in is conducive to learning. Dr. Blake shared that he was proud of the amount of teaching and learning that occurred last year and wants to continue that through this year.

III. SCHOOL COMMITTEE REPORTS

- A. **VOUCHERS/BILLS:** All were reviewed and signed.
- B. **SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS:** There were no subcommittee meetings to report on.
- C. **WORKING GROUP REPORTS:** There were no working group meetings to report on.
- D. **LIAISON REPORTS:** There were no liaison reports.
- E. **NEW BUSINESS***

Dr. O'Flynn requested the athletic numbers for the fall. Those will be presented at the next meeting.

Dr. Blake shared that he will be coming to the School Committee at an upcoming meeting to request an increase in substitute teacher rates.

IV. CONSENT

- A. **CONSENT AGENDA:** There was no consent agenda for this meeting.

V. ADJOURNMENT

- *Motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Dr. O'Flynn and seconded by Ms. Cannon.*

The motion passed unanimously in favor.

Meeting adjourned at 7:59 PM

***All business not reasonably anticipated 48 hours in advance of the meeting.**

Agenda items may be taken out of order to fill time gaps and/or to accommodate presenters when necessary. All times are approximate.