

The Rockbridge County School Board held a special meeting on Thursday, October 8, 2020. The meeting was held at Maury River Middle School.

Present: Chairman Wendy Lovell; Trustees Corey Berkstresser, Kathy Burant, Heather Hostetter, and Neil Whitmore; Superintendent Phillip Thompson; Clerk Rhonda Humphries.

Board of Supervisors Members Present: Leslie Ayers, R.W. Day, D.E. Lyons, and David McDaniel; Spencer Suter, County Administrator and Clerk to Board.

Absent: Supervisor A.J. Lewis, II

CALL TO ORDER

School Board Chairman Lovell called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m. and expressed her appreciation to the Board of Supervisors for the joint meeting.

Supervisor Lyons echoed his appreciation and stated that the Board of Supervisors knows that the School Board has been under tremendous pressure and stated that they are here to help however they can.

ADDITIONS TO THE AGENDA: None

Start of School Update

Superintendent Thompson reflected that at the previous Joint Meeting the school division was planning for a hybrid school opening which would involve nearly all of the students being back on different days of the week, with learning virtually on three of those days. A week later, for different reasons, the School Board decided to go with the 100% Modified Digital Learning Plan for the first nine weeks. He provided an overview of how the plan has gone including technology, transportation, and food service. He reported that 75,000 meals have been served on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday since March and, according to USDA guidelines, will continue through December 31, 2020, or until funding runs out. This program allows food to be provided for children up to age 18. The W & L Backpack Program continues to be delivered on Fridays utilizing the transportation of Rockbridge County Public Schools. In respects to COVID, Rockbridge County Public Schools has had three staff teachers and one student with a positive diagnosis of COVID. The administration feels that the mitigation strategies are in place and are working well (wearing of masks, social distancing, and hand washing). CARES Act Funding has helped to provide bi-polar ionization units, MERV 13 filters to be placed in HVAC units, and UV Lights. He stated that administration continue to worry about when students go home. According to the Virginia Department of Health, the buildings of Rockbridge County Public Schools are safe, along with staff being safe. The first nine weeks will end on November 6, 2020 and a decision for the second nine weeks will be made in the coming weeks.

- Supervisor McDaniel inquired if Superintendent Thompson had heard of other divisions utilizing synchronized learning where teachers are live with classroom instruction while some students are virtual.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that some synchronized teaching is being done but the school divisions he knows of have not chosen to go that route because there is an issue with bandwidth.
 - Supervisor McDaniel inquired if the bandwidth at schools is capable of this function.
 - Superintendent Thompson responded that it is extremely challenging if teachers are synchronously teaching and there would be streaming going on for the virtual students.
 - Jason Kirby, Director of Technology and Human Resources, stated that it depends on how many students are in the building. When there are more students in the building, it becomes more of an issue.
 - Trustee Burant stated that larger cities have more availability of internet, which allows for more capabilities.
 - Chairman Lovell also reminded that there may be situations when parents are working from home with all residents using internet.
 - Trustee Berkstresser stated his appreciation for the flexibility to watch recorded teacher segments according to student schedule.
 - Supervisor McDaniel stated that he feels the recorded segment would be very beneficial.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that he feels once the division is on a hybrid schedule, there will likely be a mixture of synchronized teaching as to best fit student situations.

- Supervisor McDaniel requested that the Board of Supervisors be informed of bandwidth restraints. He feels that beyond COVID, virtual learning may continue.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that the issue may arise if everyone is doing instruction at once.
- Supervisor Ayers inquired if the School Board has considered extending the school year into summer especially if the winter proves to be tough so that students can get outside of continue learning.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that all options are on the table.
 - Chairman Lovell stated her sentiment that if there was ever a year that a child needs to be retained, it would be done this year without stigma. She also reflected that extending instruction into the summer would cause teachers to continue without a break.
 - Trustee Berkstresser stated that there is a week of review at the beginning of the year, allowing teachers to develop a plan, and to provide information from the previous year.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that this is a requirement from the Virginia Department of Education this year as a way to measure what may have been lost from last year and fill in gaps. He also stated that typically summer school is run at RCHS, and on a more remedial level at the middle and elementary school levels. There may be some teachers who would be interested in continuing with summer instruction to gain more pay.
 - Chairman Lovell stated that the 21st Century Community Learning Centers are currently running virtually.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that they are trying to be innovative and create field trips to Boxerwood in a safe fashion.

Continued Discussion on RCPS Feasibility Plan

Chairman Lovell asked for input from the Board of Supervisors on the RCPS Feasibility Plan that was presented to them.

- Supervisor Ayers stated that the plan was exciting and she was pleased that it ensured outdoor space was maximized and utilized solar capabilities.
- Supervisor McDaniel stated that the School Board needs to decide what can and cannot be done. He reminded all that financial pressure just cannot be placed on citizens at this time. He requested that the School Board determine main issues / projects based on a two-year and five-year timeline and present the determinations to the Board of Supervisors.
- Supervisor Day stated that he feels there are too many unknowns right now because of COVID in regards to revenues, the student population. He echoed Supervisor McDaniel and requested that the School Board determine main issues / projects based on a two-year and five-year timeline. He offered caution to obligate funding because of unknown revenue.
- Supervisor Lyons stated that he felt it was a thorough study and that he does have concerns. There are currently three elementary schools at 50% with one at 90% capacity and inquired if there was a way to accommodate without additions. He expressed his sentiment of not knowing if school will ever return to a five-day week. He felt that the feasibility study reflected heavily on athletics and felt there should have been more on instruction. He also noted that the cost of construction while school is in session was not included. He requested that the School Board determine priorities in phases over the years as the Board of Supervisors cannot increase taxes.

Chairman Lovell stated that the goal is to work on understanding and to keep it in the conversation and when it may happen. The Capital Improvements Plan (CIP) will be discussed in coming months with a phased approach. She stated that a timeline from the Board of Supervisors would be helpful.

RCPS Cares Act / COVID Update / Needs

Chairman Lovell expressed appreciation for the \$450,000 provided by the Cares Act Funding.

- Superintendent Thompson expressed his appreciation to the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors for their tremendous help. The school division also received \$446,000 early on, which helped to purchase PPE, signage, sprays, disinfectants, glass shields, etc. Additional funding is expected in the amount of \$400,000 that will help to purchase bi-polar ionization units, which are now being installed. This has allowed funding to remain in place to use for bus funding. He expressed his sentiment that he feels the school division is in good shape for the current situation. The coronavirus funds allowed the Rockbridge County school division not to have to use general funds for items that were not expected. The hope is if more supplies are needed in the coming months there will be additional funding released again.

- Trustee Burant inquired if there is money left over from the Cares Act Funding.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that the funding has to be used for specific uses with a short turnaround time and that Rockbridge County Public Schools has plans for the entire amount of funding.

Board of Supervisors Budget Schedule

Spencer Suter, Rockbridge County Administrator, provided an overview of the Draft 2022 Budget Cycle Schedule for the Board of Supervisors. He stated that the schedule is subject to change based on COVID-related or not. He stated that the CIP discussion begins early in the process, with date to be determined, with the School Board seeking approval in January. The reason for this approval is that some of the CIP projects could influence the operating budget. The Board of Supervisors will need the Estimate of Need from the School Board by mid-March, following the standard schedule. The school division budget adoption due date is May 1, 2021, pending impact of General Assembly Session.

Additional Discussion

Supervisor McDaniel stated that after having served as a member of the Rockbridge County School Board for eight years, patrons still contact him regarding school issues. He shared the following communications from his constituents:

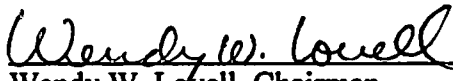
- There is a feeling that parents were not properly trained for the use of Chromebooks and that training should be developed.
- There is a feeling that teachers run the classrooms in the way that best works for their environment, citing that that homework is posted in different ways. Parents want continuity in the way homework is sent and collected in one place.
- There is a concern that there should be more frequent communication from teachers to parents on missing work, more on a weekly basis.
- There was a request for links for resources (i.e. video) to be posted within assignments.
- The amount of work seems like a lot of work and hours put in by students at home.
- Superintendent Thompson stated that the Technology Department is working hard to create opportunities and that they know what the issues are and are developing training tools and are answering questions which will allow things to get better. In regards to the amount of work, there is a learning curve of teaching methods taking place. He stated that conversations are on going and stated that teachers recognize that students are stressed because they want to do well and are working on the issues.
- Supervisor Lyons stated that the Board of Supervisors stand ready to help. He reflected that he feels students are struggling and with no testing taking place this year, he hopes there is a concentration on reading in the younger grades with periodic evaluations taking place.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that Mr. Tim Martino, Director of K12 Curriculum and Instruction, is working on assessments now to catch students who may need additional help.
- Supervisor Ayers inquired if the preschool at the YMCA program includes reading in their program. She also inquired if there is help for kids who are in the after school childcare program.
 - Mr. Martino stated that the curriculum for preschool students includes 95% interaction and play, noting that learning letters is a pre-requisite for reading. The preschool students are learning letter recognition, etc. which is in the “toolbox” for reading.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that schools are taking care of childcare for teachers. He stated that the Y childcare and 21st Century Community Learning Centers is educational and getting outside.
 - Mr. Haywood Hand, Assistant Superintendent, stated that there are 140 students registered for the 21st Century Community Learning Center at Maury River Middle School. He noted that the structure is highly supervised with tutorial help from outside of RCPS teachers. The program is evaluated daily with reflection on how to do things better. He stated that the school division is leaning heavily on other school divisions and leaders for results of their programs and hearing ideas from students for the next steps to become more beneficial for students. He commended the teachers for the hard work they are doing and for making themselves available to deliver a high quality instruction. He shared that he has heard the same comments shared by Supervisor McDaniel when he is out in the community talking with parents and students. He stated that he feels progress is being made and the next steps to be taken by the school division will further be beneficial.
 - Trustee Burant expressed her sentiment that the learning pods across the county are having an impact on social interaction as well as helping parents who cannot be home with their child.

- Trustee Berkstresser expressed his appreciation to the community for working with the development of the learning pods and sees a benefit of having someone there who is familiar with school applications and can be of help to students, as well as the social interaction with other students.
 - Supervisor McDaniel commended the school board members for visiting the learning pods. He inquired if administration or teachers have visited the sites.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that the administration is trying to accommodate requests and to offer help to the learning pods when requested. He shared that Mr. Rick Bain, Principal, Natural Bridge Elementary School, has provided guidance to the Natural Bridge learning pod staff in using the Chromebook, etc.
 - Mr. Hand stated that the Natural Bridge learning pod has created release forms for parents to sign so that they may communicate directly with teachers.
- Trustee Burant inquired if there is a way to identify students who attend the pods and how they are progressing.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that a majority of the students who attend the learning pods remain enrolled in Rockbridge County Public Schools, and receive their instruction virtually.

The next regularly scheduled Joint Meeting of the Rockbridge County School Board and Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors is scheduled for Thursday, November 19, 2020 with the time and location to be announced.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon motion by Trustee Hostetter, seconded by Trustee Whitmore and passed by 5-0 vote, the meeting was adjourned at 6:03 p.m.


Wendy W. Lovell, Chairman


Rhonda B. Humphries, Clerk of the Board