

The Rockbridge County School Board held a special meeting on Friday, October 16, 2020. The meeting was held using a virtual format.

Present: Remote participation from individual locations: Vice-Chairman Heather Hostetter; Chairman Wendy Lovell; Trustees Corey Berkstresser, Kathy Burant, and Neil Whitmore; Superintendent Phillip Thompson and Clerk Rhonda Humphries.

CALL TO ORDER

Vice-Chairman Hostetter called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m. and stated the purpose of the meeting was to determine the learning plan for the second nine weeks.

Superintendent Thompson expressed his appreciation for communication received over the past several weeks and months. He stated that there has been additional valuable input from community members since the school board meeting on October 13, 2020, reflecting many different perspectives and point of views. The communication was a huge factor in molding all of the decisions in respect to the pandemic.

He stated that currently grades PK, K, grade 1, ELL, special needs, and students who may not have any access to internet at all at home, are in our buildings. He stated that he feels the school buildings are relatively safe in regards to the coronavirus. There have been five cases involving schools, with no other transmission outbreaks taking place. The transmissions likely took place from outside of the schools. The mitigation strategies are working and school staff will continue to make our schools as safe as possible.

He offered the following overview:

- Mitigation Strategy Success
 - Cloth Face Covering
 - Social Distancing
 - Cleaning of Surfaces
 - Hand Washing
- Ultraviolet Lights
- MERV-13 Filters for HVAC units
- Bipolar Ionization on HVAC units

First Nine-Weeks Challenges Overview:

- Teachers are working harder than ever.
- Parents/Guardians/Students may be struggling with technology, academic workload, work/home/school balance.

Conversations and Planning:

- Most conversations and stories are unique. Most opinions, thoughts, and needs are unique.
- The challenges are absolutely real for everyone involved in this pandemic.

Superintendent Thompson explained the Three Distinct Learning Plan Options that he presented to the school board at their meeting of October 13, 2020:

- Option 1: Modified 100% Digital Learning Plan (current plan)
- Option 2: Staggered Hybrid Plan (cautious roll-out)
- Option 3: Full Hybrid Plan (bring all students back)

Superintendent Thompson stated that the majority of survey responses indicated Option 2, with students back in the building.

Superintendent Thompson made the following recommendation:

Staggered Hybrid Plan

- Pre-K, K, and 1 continue 4 days/week in-person
- Add Grades 2,3,6, and 9 at start of 2nd nine-weeks (November 10) in Hybrid (AABBV)
- If COVID situation allows, return all other grades to in-person on November 30, 2020 (AABBV) *Grade 3 was added to Dr. Thompson's recommendation due to input received from elementary teachers and principals after the school board presentation at the regular meeting of the Rockbridge County School Board on October 13, 2020.

- Virtual option will remain for all

"Must Haves" to be included in plan:

- Flexibility and grace for all by students/teachers/parents. Plan is subject to change; families are asked to have contingency plans in place.
- Consistently practice mitigation strategies by properly wearing a mask, proper social distance (6 feet, 15 minutes), and proper hand washing.
- Bringing students back will only work if everyone does their part at school and at home.

- Trustee Whitmore inquired if teachers would have the option to work from home on the virtual Friday, according to AABBV schedule. He expressed his sentiment that it would be a morale booster; provide teachers with more planning time, as well as the possibility for a more deeper cleaning day at the schools. This could potentially lessen the stress on teachers and make it more proficient for them to push out their virtual plans and then prepare for the in-person. Per comments that he and other board members have received, teachers are concerned about the workload and what they will need to do in order to continue to provide quality instruction. They are also concerned about the safety from COVID, the increased stress on everyone, in order to continue the quality of instruction. He reflected that the amount of dedication the teachers and staff have shown is incredible.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that if the principal does not need teachers in the building on that Friday, they may work from home. He agreed that the stress level is immense and that the school division wants to do anything that can be done to help teachers. Several items are being rolled back that would normally be done in a non-COVID year in respect to required professional development and also put a pause on “smart goals” for this year. The virtual day to alleviate stress is beneficial.
- Trustee Burant expressed her appreciation for the optimistic comments as well as realistic comments of uncertainty. She also echoed the appreciation for the AABBV schedule. She did inquire if thought could be given to how teachers will use the virtual day and not be made to feel like they have to film a lesson or give a lesson.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that the division does not have the bandwidth to do a totally synchronous model where teachers are standing in front of a camera to teach in-person and virtual at the same time; some students may not be able to “attend” at the same time. From the perspective of the division, teachers could record themselves while they are teaching in-person, not requiring them to have a separate time to record for the virtual lesson. It will not be a mandate for teachers to use this format.
 - Mr. Tim Martino, Director of K12 Curriculum and Instruction, stated that it would not be sustainable to have teachers do two videos or even fair to ask them to do that. One factor that will help teachers with the in-person format will be the contact points for the week. Teachers have been making parent contact via email and telephone calls during the pandemic and the hope is that in-person will reduce this necessity.
- Chairman Lovell inquired what the status will be for substitutes and availability.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that communication has been taking place with substitutes in respect to their comfort level in coming back into the buildings, with a mixture of responses. There may be concerns of cleanliness if someone has been in the classroom, but custodial staff can sanitize a room rather quickly. Large areas could lend to combining classes if there is a substitute issue. Work is being done now in trying to assess the comfort level of those currently on the substitute list.
 - Trustee Whitmore inquired if there is enough back-up for the custodial staff if there are more demands once students return.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that there is maintenance staff available to assist the custodians if needed, and that some of the schools already have contracted work situations.
 - Trustee Whitmore inquired if the custodians have access to a vapor respirator when using chemicals.
 - Mr. Randy Walters, Director of Transportation and Maintenance, stated that it has been left up to the custodians. The respirators are provided to custodians when summer cleaning is being done for the stripping and waxing. The respirators are provided to the custodial staff and can get more as needed.
- Trustee Burant inquired about class exchange in the hallways and the safety involved.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that social distancing is key and is the reason for the hybrid plan as opposed to bringing back all students every day. Students will not be allowed to congregate; teachers and administration are monitoring closely. The key is to be 6 feet apart and for no longer than 15 minutes. Class exchange is 4-5 minutes so as long as students are moving there should not be any issues.
- Vice-Chairman Hostetter stated that she has received communication from parents whose child has been successful with the virtual model and offered praise for the teachers. She inquired if there will be time for teachers to answer questions from virtual learners on the AABBV schedule.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated it will be more difficult when there are more students in the building. Teachers will need to set boundaries in their home life and grace will need to be afforded by parents and students for a response from teachers. The all virtual day is critical for factors such as this.

- Trustee Burant inquired about the resources and tools that the Shenandoah Valley Health District has available online.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that there are videos and online documentation. They are very good with answering any question that patrons have. Information will be available on the RCPS website and social media sites. He emphasized that the more we can educate our families, faculty, and staff, the safer it will be.
 - Trustee Whitmore stated that continued education on the mitigation strategies including mask wearing will be good as there were some concerns that teachers were not wearing masks, as they should be. Dr. Kornegay enforced the point that masks are an effective strategy when they are properly worn.
 - Superintendent Thompson reiterated that mask wearing in schools is not a choice. If there is a health condition that stresses that they should not wear a mask, it will be handled on an individual basis. In order for this to be successful, everyone has to wear a mask with mitigation strategies in place. He sent a communication to principals reinforcing his commitment and asking principals to reinforce their commitment in making sure that they are following up and enforcing the mask policy. There will be consequences if there are teachers or students who blatantly refuse to wear a mask. The mitigation must continue if we are to continue to have students in school and if we are successful, we can continue to bring more and more students back to the buildings.
 - Trustee Whitmore stated that, per comments he received, that he was heartened and pleased and proud to be a part of the division both seeing emails from teachers and the dedication they have as well as parents and grandparents who are working hard for their children.
 - Chairman Lovell stated that per comments she has received, patrons are appreciative of the expertise of our teachers and gave recognition of what a difference that makes to students having talented teachers supporting them. She expressed her appreciation for the comments received from constituents about virtual learning. She stated that the volume of emails has proven to be difficult to respond to each email communication.

ACTION ITEMS:

Upon recommendation by Superintendent Thompson, motion by Trustee Berkstresser, seconded by Trustee Whitmore, and passed by a 5-0 vote, the Board approved the Staggered Hybrid Plan as presented.

Trustee Burant expressed her appreciation to Superintendent Thompson and his staff for listening to the school board, to their constituents, and teachers to make sure a plan is developed to safely integrate students back into the schools. She also expressed appreciation to the teachers for all the amazing work they are doing.

Trustee Whitmore expressed his appreciation to teachers, bus drivers, and custodians, and all staff in this unprecedented crisis that is spanning the entire world, it just further illustrates what a great place Rockbridge County is, and what a great school division we have.

Trustee Berkstresser expressed his appreciation for progress made and that he is looking forward to getting students back in school.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon motion by Trustee Whitmore, seconded by Trustee Berkstresser, and passed by 5-0 vote, the meeting was adjourned at 11:37 a.m.



Heather C. Hostetter, Vice-Chairman



Rhonda B. Humphries, Clerk of the Board