

Ashford Board of Education
Special Meeting Minutes – February 10, 2022
7:00 pm

Meeting Held in Person and Electronically Via Zoom

Note: Per CGS 10-218, Board of Education Meeting Minutes are provided in a draft format within 48 hours of the date the meeting was held. With the exceptions of motions and votes recorded, the minutes are unofficial until they have been read and approved by a majority vote by the Board. Should edits be necessary, they will be made at a regularly scheduled meeting, noted in the meeting minutes, and so voted upon.

Call to Order

- Chair Jane Urban called the meeting to order at 7:08 p.m.
- Present were members Tess Grous, Kim Kouatly, Jon Laughlin, Jennifer Leszczynski, and Al Maccarone. Marian Matthews was absent.
- Also present was Superintendent Craig Creller and Zoom meeting host Scott Waddell. There were 4 members of the public present. There were approximately 30 members of the school staff and the public present via Zoom.

BOE Chair Remarks (Jane Urban)

- This is a special meeting, so there will be no changes to the agenda. The purpose of this meeting is to finalize our budget proposal for the Board of Finance. There will be a COVID update. There has been a lot of discussion regarding masking/unmasking in the news. The board will not be making a masking/unmasking decision tonight.

Awards and Recognition (Superintendent Craig Creller)

- Congratulations to girls' basketball team for their championship win.
- Congratulations to the staff who have participated in the hiring process. All teaching positions have been filled as of today.

Communications - None

Opportunity for Public Comment

- Meghan Dudas (Sand Hill Rd.): The governor's original statement said masking would be up to local towns as of 02/28/2022. There has been some backpedaling since. Even mainstream media is saying there is no reason to mask our children at this point. It is counter-intuitive to their social-emotional learning and their wellbeing. We deserve freedom of choice. She asked this to be addressed before the end of the month regardless of what the governor decides.
- Morgan Gerstenlauer (Kidder Brook Rd.): Yesterday was the 100th day of school. Her daughter has been in school this year with a mask on for 46,965 minutes. She cannot count the number of missed warm smiles, caring expressions, and ability to decipher another person's emotions. This has resulted in scars that we will have to deal with now and in the future. Masks are not working. She expects the board to stand up for the children.
- Ryan Barry (Westford Hill Rd.): He has worked the last two years without a mask. His kids are unmasked for daycare, playing with other kids, and karate. They hate wearing masks at school. If we are waiting for kids to be vaccinated before we unmask, his kids will not be coming back. He mentioned kids in Florida living in freedom now, being unmasked. He has two children in schools. He has lived here eight years. Enough is enough.
- Carolyn Trotta (Lakeside Dr.): Regarding masking/unmasking, who will the decision makers be? Will you look for community input? All summer kids were getting together without masks on. The masks are not going to stop the spread. It is something we are going to have to learn to live with. We need to get past the fear. England has had their masks off in schools for the last 6 weeks with no issues. This is happening in other parts of the country. We need a concerted effort to get our children unmasked. Give people a choice. Allow them to wear a mask if they want. This is the United States of America. Her kids are seeing the hypocrisy with some of our leaders having parties unmasked. We are teaching our kids it's good for you but not for us.
- Al Maccarone, as a parent: The governor has proposed looking at the mandate on February 28th. He would be happy to see the mask mandate lifted. Currently, we are still under the governor's mandate.
- Tess Grous, as a community member: She believes we should say the Pledge of Allegiance at every Board of Education meeting. We are proud of our town and our veterans. It will help instill patriotism in our children if we say the Pledge of Allegiance as well.

Approval of Minutes – These will be tabled until next meeting.

New Business

a. COVID Updates

- Jane Urban received an email from CABA. It is unclear at this point if there is a mask mandate in place, for how much longer it is in place, and what happens after that. CABA advised that until the legislative process is complete, school districts and schools must continue to comply with current masking requirements. CABA is preparing some guidance for when legislature completes their work. At this point there is not another meeting scheduled in February. If there is a masking discussion that needs to take place, there may be a special meeting scheduled.
- Superintendent Craig Creller reported there have been 34 COVID cases since 01/20/2022 with only about half occurring in school. Total for the school year is 151. The number of cases is decreasing dramatically. He agreed with all the sentiments that have been expressed regarding masking and stated we are going to move cautiously and smartly. Regardless of the decision on masking, we have other mitigation strategies that will remain in place including air purification, social distancing, and contact tracing. We are very interested in input on masking from staff, parents, and the community.
- Jane Urban said the mandate that is possibly being lifted 02/28/2022 does not apply to public transportation, which does include school buses.
- Jane Urban asked Superintendent Craig Creller to be proactively communicating with school staff and parents on how they are feeling about masking. If it becomes our decision to make, she wants it to be made with a lot of thought and care.
- Tess Grous asked when we will know who will decide on masking. Craig Creller thinks we will know a lot more on Monday.
- Jennifer Leszczynski wants us to get input from students on how they are feeling about masking, mentioning possible anxiety having masks on or off. Options decrease anxiety for a lot of people.
- Kim Kouatly said there are different groups within the school. There are groups that cannot get the vaccine. Different teachers may have different comfort levels based on that.
- Al Maccarone mentioned concern about returning to school after the February vacation and upticks that have occurred after the breaks.
- Tess Grous mentioned idea of therapy dogs helping to ease anxiety.
- Superintendent Craig Creller said the unions have asked for a mask mandate well beyond 02/28/2022.
- Jon Laughlin stated one of the reasons he got involved with the school board is to make decisions based on our community, not what happens in the legislature. He thinks politics play a large part in the decisions made by the legislature and that they are not always made in the best interest of the people. He looks forward to the meeting where we can vote on masks.

b. FY23 Budget Work Session

- Budget presentation to the Board of Finance will be 03/10/2022.
- Every town around us is looking at 6-7% increase just to maintain what they have.
- We have an insurance broker and are awaiting health insurance quotes as we cannot absorb an approximately 20% increase from United Healthcare.
- We are looking at a 50% increase in energy.
- We are looking at no change in transportation, maintenance and repairs, supplies and materials, and other.
- Employee benefits and energy are the two areas we are trying to negotiate.
- Biggest challenge for transportation is diesel fuel.
- Principal Troy Hopkins surveyed teachers in the fall to look at their needs/requests for the budget.
- Superintendent Craig Creller has been working on the budget since July, stating "It's always budget season."
- Jane Urban mentioned teacher's contract being negotiated by the board with legal review and how it was a positive experience. We could potentially save on legal fees with that approach in the future.
- Math interventionist is a priority. We also need to work on building math curriculum moving forward.
- "Status quo" budget would be 7.64% increase.
- Jane Urban would like to make sure there is no padding in our budget. Craig Creller said there is no padding. The only new ask is half of the math interventionist salary.
- Al Maccarone said this school has run on lean budgets for many years.
- Tess Grous asked about our number of paraprofessionals. We have 23 paraprofessionals. We are able to support students with paraprofessionals in house rather than outplace them.

c. Approval of FY23 Budget for Presentation to the Board of Finance

- ***MOTION made by Kim Kouatly to approve the superintendent's fiscal year 2023 budget with no more than a 7.64% increase based on final numbers. Motion seconded by Al Maccarone and carried unanimously.***

Next Meeting Date/Agenda Items

- The regular meeting 02/17/2022 has been cancelled. Next regular meeting will be 03/03/2022.
- Committees: Finance and Personnel; Curriculum
- Special Education Workshop
- Approval of Minutes: 01/20/2022; 02/03/2022
- Jane Urban will not be here for 03/17/2022 meeting.

Opportunity for Public Comment

- Jen Lindsay, speaking on benefit of AEA: They appreciated the opportunity to negotiate in person in 2019. They would like to do that again.
- Carolyn Trotta asked about our student enrollment. Craig Creller said our enrollment is very steady. We are going to hover just under 400 for many years. Carolyn suggested that we break out costs for special education versus regular education and explain that outplacements would cost even more when we present to the Board of Finance. She asked how much we are spending on SEL curriculum. Craig Creller said we will spend approximately \$10,600 over the next 3 years, and that is grant funded.
- Kim Kouatly has a question regarding E.O. Smith numbers. She has heard that many students are looking at going to Windham Tech. Craig Creller stated he does have real numbers for how many will be going to E.O. Smith.
- Jane Urban, as a parent, thanked the people who show up every day so kids can go to school. Her children always have good news to share.
- Kim Kouatly thanked the bus drivers.

Adjournment

MOTION made by Kim Kouatly to adjourn the meeting at 9:23 p.m. Motion seconded by Jon Laughlin and carried unanimously.

Sara Wilson
Recording Secretary