

Ashford Board of Education
Special Meeting Minutes – February 23, 2022
7:00 pm
Meeting Held 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 7:01 p.m.
- Present via Zoom were members Tess Grous, Kim Kouatly, Jon Laughlin, Jennifer Leszczynski, and ex-officio member First Selectman Bill Falletti. Al Maccarone joined via Zoom at 7:03 p.m. Marian Matthews joined via Zoom at 7:07 p.m.
- Also present were Superintendent Craig Creller and Zoom meeting host Scott Waddell. There were approximately 70 members of the school staff and the public present via Zoom.

BOE Chair Remarks (Jane Urban)

- This is a special meeting to discuss the status of mask mandates. People in attendance were asked to be respectful in the discussion of this topic. The board wants to make a thoughtful and careful decision for our community. Tonight's opportunity for public comment follows Superintendent Craig Creller's proposal so that people can comment/react with that in mind.
- On February 24, 2022 the Board of Education will be presenting their budget to the Board of Finance.

Al Maccarone joined the meeting via Zoom at 7:03 p.m. Marian Matthews joined the meeting via Zoom at 7:07 p.m.

COVID-19 Update, Masking/Unmasking (Superintendent Craig Creller)

- HB #5047 passed 02/14/2022 and was signed by Governor Lamont on 02/15/2022. If there is some sort of surge, the Department of Public Health reserves the right to reinstitute masking. Health districts always have that right.
- Other than masking/unmasking, all other COVID-19 mitigation strategies remain the same.
- Most Connecticut towns are considering making masks optional.
- The state is strongly recommending that before any unmasking that everyone take a COVID test. Ashford is scheduled to have 1080 tests delivered Friday, but that could be delayed because of the expected snowstorm.
- Staff, parents, and students (grades 5-8) were surveyed. The majority favored allowing mask choice (66% of staff, 60% of parents, and 88% of students in grades 5-8).
- Available data shows Ashford School has approximately 0-3 cases per day. Eastern CT is still in the red zone.
- Currently, 29% of students aged 5-11, 65% of students 12-17, and 95.41% of staff are fully vaccinated. The community vaccination rate is at 67%.
- Delaying transitioning to masks optional would allow for communication with staff and parents as well as distribution of masks and testing kits.
- Superintendent Craig Creller laid out proposed transition plan including obtaining recommended supplies from the state to allow for COVID-19 testing prior to any mask optional implementation, communicating with staff and families 02/28/2022 – 03/03/2022, BOE workshop meeting on 03/03/2022, BOE business meeting on 03/17/2022, last day of mask mandates in Ashford School 03/18/2022, and beginning of "mask optional" policy on 03/21/2022.
- The expiration of the federal mask mandate on buses is 03/18/2022.

Opportunity for Public Comment

- Chair Jane Urban received three emails regarding masking, two in favor of unmasking and one in favor of maintaining mask mandate.
- Amy Celli (Westford Rd.): What is the frequency of testing that Superintendent Craig Creller is suggested?
- Gary Gerstenlauer (Kidder Brook Rd.): The test is just valid for the moment when the test is being taken. Are we waiting a month to take the test to choose to not mask? Could those who want to now choose to?
- Jennifer Johnson (Westford Rd.): It should be the parents' choice/option.
- Meghan Dudas (Sand Hill Rd.): After 02/28/2022 is not an acceptable timeframe. The testing is not the right way to do it. We need to learn to live with the virus. If you are scared, protect yourself. Vaccination status should not matter. Our children deserve the right to live a normal life, and it should start now.

- Carolyn Trotta (Lakeside Dr.): What stood out the most from the presentation is the high percentage of students in grades 5-8 who voted for masks optional. They do not get mask breaks. They are in PE practicing for fitness tests with masks on, and that is inhumane. Why do we have to wait two weeks if the governor has lifted the mandate? If there is a surge or uptick in cases, the decision to reinstitute masking should be left up to the elected Board of Education, not the superintendent.
- Neil Gordon (Westford Dr.): The legislature has given us the ability to make masks optional. That ability should not be passed on to someone else. It should be the board's decision. His family wants the option to be maskless. His entire family is vaccinated, and a couple weeks ago they all got COVID. Vaccination does not matter. A lot of these mitigation measures are not necessarily effective. What is going to change between today and three weeks from today? Let us get back to a sense of normalcy.
- Stephanie West (FERENCE Rd.): Masks are detrimental to young learners. We are now seeing the data from that. Vaccination status should not be in the DPH criteria for going to mask optional. If you are considering vaccination status, you also need to consider students and staff who have already contracted the virus. A week after February break is more than enough time for staff.
- Doug and Michelle Lussier (Southworth Dr.): The 03/21/2022 date makes sense because of the bus mandate lifting, but this has taken way too long. Why has it taken 16 days for the Board of Education to talk with the public? Why do we need to wait to get tests if they are strongly recommended, not required? Vaccination status should not be a consideration. The fitted N95 masks have been the only masks that the CDC said keep COVID from transmitting. Our 6th grade student was not surveyed. Some teachers lower their masks to talk, but students are getting reprimanded for lowering their masks. This has affected our children, and enough is enough. It is time for everybody to have a choice.
- Ashley Landon (Waterfall Rd.): This has caused social-emotional issues for our children. Our 7th grader has not been allowed to take mask breaks. The at-home tests are not reliable. Respect us as parents, and let us make this choice. It is causing segregation.
- Glenn and Felicia Benoit (Turnpike Rd.): There have been a lot of tests distributed already. If we do a test today, why do we have to wait until 03/21/2022? Our son is licking his mask and getting cold sores. Parents should have an option right now, not in a month.
- Milton Whittaker (Union Dr.): Masking has taken a toll on my son. Why would we wait until 03/21/2022?

Board Discussion of New COVID-19 Policies

- Jon Laughlin thanked the parents for their feedback. This is an emotional topic, and it is gotten political. Ninety-five percent of the state of Connecticut is in the red zone; perhaps it is not a metric we should be looking at. The Office of Early Childhood has lifted their mask requirement. This has taken a toll on everyone. If we choose to postpone mask optional a month, we are putting a burden on the teachers. We are not waiting because we think the data is going to change. Waiting for tests is not reason enough to wait. Jon supports making masks optional on 02/28/2022 and giving the choice back to parents.
- Kim Kouatly is looking at this as a parent, a community member, a board member, and a teacher. She knows a 4-year-old child who is hospitalized with complications from COVID. She is concerned about younger children who cannot be vaccinated and whose parents want to continue masking. Kim would choose to continue to wear a mask.
- Al Maccarone said the board is empowered to make the final decision. The Ashford School has been pretty healthy because of the mitigation strategy the superintendent has put in place. He asked fellow board members to go along with the superintendent's position.
- Jennifer Leszczynski said all of the mitigation strategies have been amazing. We have gone above and beyond. Our School Nurse Martha Sibley-Jett has been incredible. She appreciated the comments and feedback from the community; she is glad the community is invested. There may have been students taking the survey multiple times. She is concerned about making sure we are not creating a situation where children are going to be bullied based on wearing a mask or not wearing a mask.
- Tess Grous said students, parents, staff, public, and the Board of Education work as a team. The board has been elected by the entire public, not just a portion of the public. There have been 16 days that we could have been planning and strategizing. Masks should be optional now.
- Jane Urban said the legislative process did not finish up until 02/16/2022. Craig Creller has been busy meeting with administration, with medical staff, with the local health district, and with local superintendents. Everybody is trying to do their best. The biggest takeaway from the CABA call this week was we are not public health experts; it is a

little bit stunning to have the decision come down to people without formal training in public health. The DPH guidance was issued late on Friday, 02/18/2022.

- Tess Grous thanked Craig Creller for all of his research. Stafford, Tolland, and Union were not mentioned in research about surrounding towns. She hopes we can come at this decision peacefully.
- Craig Creller said he has participated in four webinars and continues to receive information and guidance, even earlier today. He wants to move forward successfully.
- Jane Urban said there were some schools that had to close because of teacher illness. We have been fortunate to remain open.
- Kim Kouatly asked if the testing would be a one-time test. Craig Creller said the testing that DPH is recommending is a one-time test for everybody just before moving to mask optional. The weekly testing will continue for those who are choosing to participate. Kim mentioned the policy of 5 days of quarantine if you test positive, followed by 5 days of wearing a mask in school. She is in favor of the timeline Superintendent Craig Creller has recommended.
- Jon Laughlin disagrees with Craig Creller's opinion on start date. Disagreement does not mean we do not respect each other. We could test on a Sunday prior to coming back to school on Monday and get COVID that night. If people need tests, they either have some or could easily get some.
- Tess Grous asked if the testing is mandated and who decided that. Craig Creller said it is not mandated but is strongly recommended.
- Al Maccarone asked if we unmask and we have an outbreak at the school, how do we reinstitute the mask requirement? Jane Urban said the State Department of Health still has the authority to reinstitute a mask mandate if needed. Our local health district has that authority. Most other boards have given their superintendent the authority to enact enhanced mitigation measures, including masking, for a limited period of time if determined necessary in consultation with the district health staff and the local health district.
- Jennifer Leszczynski mentioned case numbers and red zone. Things have changed from the beginning, with recent Omicron variant. She is in favor of going mask optional 02/28/2022.
- Tess Grous said the superintendent and the board work together as a team.
- Jane Urban said we all are feeling a great deal of COVID fatigue. Her son has been playing hockey with a mask on. This has been a burden for the teachers, getting kids to keep their masks on. She thinks it has been worthwhile. We typically have a spike on Mondays and after long weekends. She would be most comfortable if we kept the masks on a little longer after the break, going mask optional on 03/07/2022.
- Marian Matthews agreed with the 03/07/2022 date proposed by Jane Urban. She appreciated the efforts to survey staff, parents, and students.
- Kim Kouatly thinks it will be difficult to continue masking on the buses through 03/18/2022 if we go mask optional beforehand.
- Al Maccarone said the question is not if but when are we going to go mask optional.
- Jennifer Leszczynski said if we are going to continue masking through 03/18/2022, there need to be mask breaks for upper grades.
- First Selectman Bill Falletti thanked everyone for their time spent to consider this. Personally, he is not a proponent of mandates. The parents who have had enough with masks probably outnumber the parents who want to keep them on 10 to 1. His personal recommendation would be to leave it up to the parents as soon as we can.
- Further discussion about when to go mask optional.

MOTION made by Marian Matthews to extend the universal mask mandate through 03/04/2022. Motion seconded by Al Maccarone. Discussion about giving superintendent authority to reinstitute masking if necessary. This can be discussed at 03/03/2022 meeting. Marian Matthews encouraged staff to allow upper grades to have mask breaks. Kim Kouatly expressed concern about continuing to mask on buses through 03/18/2022. Superintendent Craig Creller will address the request for mask breaks at the faculty meeting on 02/28/2022. ***Motion carried with 4 yes votes (M. Matthews, A. Maccarone, J. Urban, J. Leszczynski) and 3 no votes (K. Kouatly, T. Grous, J. Laughlin).***

Adjournment

MOTION made by Marian Matthews to adjourn the meeting at 9:11 p.m. Motion seconded by Al Maccarone and carried unanimously.