

SEYMOUR BOARD OF EDUCATION

SPECIAL MEETING AGENDA

Seymour Middle School

February 23, 2022

6:00 pm

MASKS ARE REQUIRED

BOARD MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Stephan Behuniak
Kristen Bruno 6:06 pm
Christopher Champagne
James Garofolo
Kristen Harmeling
Jay Hatfield
Shannon Levey
Beth Nesteriak

BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT:

Ed Strumello

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Dr. Susan Compton, Superintendent of Schools
Vonda Tencza, Associate Superintendent
Salvatore A. Bucci, Business Manager
Lee-Ann Dauerty, Board Clerk
Derrick Martin, Technology
Jodie Roden, Principal, SMS
Mary Sue Feige, Principal, BS
David Olechna, Principal, CLS
Kevin Pimpinelli, Security
Ronald Barnard, Security
Allison Brett
Stephanie Tomasheski
Meagan Krushinski
Elizabeth Vicidomino
Marlo Ruggiero
MKiana Machinicz
Cara Liposky
Olivia Nunez
John Nunez
Jessica Nunez
Ron Horowicz

I. CALL TO ORDER

A. Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. Champagne called the meeting to order with the Pledge of Allegiance at 6:02 p.m.

II. PUBLIC COMMENT

Public Comment provides the opportunity for the public to make a comment. It is not a dialogue between the Board and the public. Based upon what is heard during Public Comment, the Board may choose to add a topic to the agenda. If questions are posed that the Chairman is able to answer, those questions may be addressed under the Chairman's Comments portion of the agenda. The Board will not discuss personnel matters. Comments should be respectful and no longer than 3 minutes in length so that all who wish to comment may have the opportunity to do so. All public wanting to comment will need to state their name and address for the record prior to addressing the Board. Mr. Champagne read the above guidelines regarding Public Comment.

Kiana Machnicz, 214 Mountain Road – spoke about her preference to unmask our kids. Surrounding districts have already made this decision. Masks breaks have become minimal. Masks are difficult for kids. This is ridiculous, enough is enough. Education is declining, masks are distracting and cumbersome. Kids are not getting viruses, which is weakening their immune system. Kids are getting in trouble for not wearing masks. Kids are not getting social skills; this is a huge mental health crisis. Cara Liposky, 4th grade 12 Legion Road – You should be allowed to choose. Masks make it hard to breathe. It is also hard to keep it on the face it's itchy and it hurts my ears. I can't hear the teacher. It should be up to my mom and dad. Olivia Nunez, 26 Deerfield Drive – I think there should no masks. She said they cannot hear each other, can't tell if people are smiling or laughing. They are super hot and masks hurt my ears. I can't hear anybody. John Nunez, 26 Deerfield Drive – said he is not a scientist but he wants the opportunity to get back to normal. He told the Board he hopes they will vote the right way. We are at a point where we can get back to normal. Jessica Nunez, 26 Deerfield Drive – She said she has seen so many patients and she understands the fear. We listened to the government without questioning it. We need masks to be optional. Please follow the government this time. Kids cannot see or hear the teachers or see the smiles. Kids are having a hard time. Consider parents having the right to decide if the child should wear a mask. She wants her kids to experience school the way she did. Kids have been told to sing in their heads, cut holes in masks to play instruments. Let's get back to normal. Ron Horowitz, 65 Brookfield Road – Mirror what everyone else has been saying. We should be talking about the \$800,000 missing in the budget. He read an excerpt from his 3rd grade child's report. "In a happy classroom there are lots of smiling kids, telling us to wear masks has changed that. Masks don't do anything. You know it's wrong you just refuse to do anything. People should have a choice with masks, they can be vaccinated, and they can homeschool. Willing to bet just about everyone has gotten Covid already. You are taking their childhood from them. This is worse than the disease. Stop the nonsense now. Sadie Patrick, 46 Greenwood Circle – We have a mental health crisis, problems with communication. Kids are suffering from anxiety. Her son wrote an email that was very thoughtful and structured about some protocols and no one got back to him, radio silence. Her son is 14 and it took him two days to write the email and one day to correct it. She said she is proud of her son. She has spoken with counselors. This is affecting many kids. They are in a dark place. Her son tries to stay on straight and narrow. Guidelines are affecting our kids. Her younger child is in private and she loves it. They are a mask free, mandate free school. Drop the masks, masks should come off tonight. Liz Vicdomino, 7 Fawn Hollow Drive – Here to echo her remarks at the last meeting. Hoping a decision is made tonight. This is a social emotional issue. Counseling, speech, and special education referrals are all up. Government has lowered the developmental guidelines for the first time in decades. They did this quietly; they lowered the bar. It is important for Seymour not to follow suite. This is not your fault but continuing would be. She supports a move to normalcy. She is looking forward to February 28. Annmarie Drugonis, First Selectwoman of Seymour – Said she is bothered by the fact that a child wrote an email and did not get a response. She says her office strives to answer every email that is received no matter what time of day. You are elected to do this job. (Name unknown) said she would be remiss if she did not talk. Dr. Compton replied very quickly to my email but asked why the BOE did not respond to her email; discouraged by how things were handled. Very disappointed. Very discouraged by the way things have been handled for the last two years. Let parents decide what is best for their children.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION

A. Governor's Masks Mandate Expires February 28, 2022

Dr. Compton said the people have been heard whether they are for or against lifting the mask mandate in schools. 71% of those who responded to the survey were for mask choice. At the end of this meeting, a final decision will be made. This process was thought through very thoroughly. We will share the results. Our school physician supports mask choice. Dr. Compton said she will be sending a letter but wanted everyone to really listen; if Covid goes up, we will have to address the mask issue. She said some parents want masks. She wants everyone to respect everyone's choices and to be kind. No one should be bullied. We will not tolerate it. Dr. Compton introduced Head Nurse Bennett to discuss the survey sent regarding the wearing of masks. Mr. Behuniak asked what would happen if no action were made tonight. Mr. Champagne said he believed nothing would happen and the mask mandate would just disappear. Mr. Behuniak asked if there is a consensus among the Board members that we should continue to wear masks. Mr. Champagne said there was not. Mr. Behuniak said he felt having a meeting to authorize the Superintendent to do something she would have to do anyway was a waste of time and he will therefore be abstaining from this vote.

MOTION: (Mr. Hatfield/sec., Ms. Levey) to direct the Superintendent of the Seymour Public Schools to send a letter that starting February 28 the wearing of masks in schools will no longer be mandated.

SO VOTED

AFFIRMATIVE: Ms. Bruno, Mr. Champagne, Mr. Garofolo, Mr. Hatfield, Ms. Levey, Ms. Nesteriak

OPPOSED: Ms. Harmeling

ABSTAINED: Mr. Behuniak

MOTION PASSES: 6-1-1

Mr. Champagne reminded everyone that masks would continue to be required on buses. Ms. Harmeling said she would be more comfortable in four to six weeks when windows can be comfortably left open. She said this is about respect and saying enough is enough do the right thing is not respectful. Respect is validating everyone's opinions. She is sharing her view only. She believes there should be a little grace and kindness to all. Mr. Hatfield apologized to Nurse Bennett for cutting her off to make a motion. He said he felt the Board needed a focal point. Nurse Bennett continued, saying the district doctor supported masks being optional. The community survey received 1166 responses or 73%. She said looking at surrounding communities, they support masks optional but also support the wearing of masks for those who wish to. They are creating a social story regarding why some will wear masks. There has been a lot of thought put into this. Ms. Nesteriak asked about the positivity rate. Nurse Bennett said in January and February the positivity rate plummeted and decreased by more than half. 93% of staff are vaccinated which makes a difference for staff and students. However, there are no guarantees. We are concerned and aware of the mental health issues. The belief is these were not caused by masks; they were caused by the pandemic. Ms. Bruno said she encourages Dr. Compton to work with administration, as kids will need support as they transition to life without masks. Nurse Bennett said she is not making light of the situation but pointed out that half of the kids do not wear their masks properly and she reminded everyone that children are resilient and they adapt. Mr. Champagne asked Meagan Krushinski if she would like to speak. She responded by saying they did their own survey with three questions: 1. What is your current position on Seymour Schools staff and students /wearing face masks? 81% said move to optional masking, 19% responded to continue with universal masking indoors. 2. If the District moves to the optional masking and the

data metrics and recent trends indicate a spike in the community and district prevalence/transmission of COVID-19, would you agree with returning to universal masking indoors for all staff and students? 68% responded yes, 32% responded no. 3. Do you agree that, moving forward, the BOE should have a process in place for continuous risk assessment and prompt decision-making regarding masking decisions based on the current data metric and recent trends from the state/local public health agencies? 71% responded yes, 29% responded no. Ms. Harmeling said she feels there should be more firm guidelines on masking should it be necessary to bring masking back to the schools.

1. Next Steps

We have two choices A. give choice to wear masks or not and B. have to wear masks. Regardless of the decision, the Superintendent will send a letter. Please remember we will continue to monitor Covid cases. If it significantly increases, we will reconvene to reinstate the wearing of masks. We need to continue to protect our students and staff. She talked about the research and how it has changed over the last two years. Dr. Compton also took time to explain that although there are emails that go directly to the Board, they will often authorize her to answer them. The Board and the Superintendent work together.

MOTION: (Ms. Harmeling/sec., Mr. Hatfield) to grant the authority to the Superintendent to make the call to reinstate a mask mandate as she feels necessary.

SO VOTED

AFFIRMATIVE: Mr. Behuniak, Ms. Bruno, Mr. Champagne, Mr. Garofolo, Ms. Harmeling, Mr. Hatfield, Ms. Levey, Ms. Nesteriak

MOTION PASSES: 8-0

Ms. Bruno said she supports this because of Dr. Compton's record of communication with the community and the Board and knowing that this decision would be made with input from stakeholders.

2. Superintendent's Letter

Dr. Compton will send a letter to the community explaining the district stance on masking in schools and that as of February 28 masks will be optional.

B. Seymour Schools Budget Discussion

MOTION: (Mr. Harmeling/sec., Mr. Hatfield) to table the budget discussion until the next Finance Committee meeting or call a special Finance Committee meeting if there is a need to meet sooner.

SO VOTED

AFFIRMATIVE: Mr. Behuniak, Ms. Bruno, Mr. Champagne, Mr. Garofolo, Ms. Harmeling, Mr. Hatfield, Ms. Levey, Ms. Nesteriak

MOTION PASSES: 8-0

Dr. Compton supports the tabling of this item as we are still working on some things.

IV. BOARD OF EDUCATION and SUPERINTENDENT COMMENTS

A. Board of Education Comments

1. Chairman's Comments

None

2. Board Member Comments

None

B. Superintendent Comments

None

V. PUBLIC COMMENT

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Brooke Anderson, 210 Mountain Road – if there are spikes in hospitalizations, would cases or hospitalizations be considered. Dr. Compton said it would have to be an absolute emergency and a large percentage of cases. Dr. Compton said when we start to see large numbers of teachers unable to come to work; that would be when a decision would be made. We would seek guidance from our health care affiliates and everyone who is currently involved. She said we feel as though we are in a downward trend. She said she never thought a pandemic would shut down the world but we saw it. She said we are trying to get back to normal but we need to be careful. We want to get back. John Zelinski, 133 Great Hill Road – Will sports also be mask optional? Mr. Champagne said his interpretation is masks are off except for public transportation. As of February 28, masks can be removed.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: (Ms. Harmeling/sec., Mr. Behuniak) to adjourn

SO VOTED

AFFIRMATIVE: Mr. Behuniak, Ms. Bruno, Mr. Champagne, Mr. Garofolo, Ms. Harmeling, Mr. Hatfield, Ms. Levey, Ms. Nesteriak

MOTION PASSES: 8-0

The meeting adjourned at 7:01pm

NOTE: The next scheduled Regular Board of Education meeting is on Monday, March 7, 2022 at 7:30 pm at Seymour Middle School.

YouTube Link

https://youtu.be/Hfw7_HHQQnQ