

ROCKPORT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES OF August 17, 2020
Via Zoom

Chairperson Michael Kelley called the regular meeting of the Rockport School Committee to order at 7:00 p.m. via Zoom. Present were Nicole Altieri, Colleen Coogan, Richard Drost, Michael Kelley, and Cathy Reilly. Also, present were Superintendent Robert Liebow and Recording Secretary Ingrid Keating.

I. Opening of Regular Meeting

Opening statement from Chairperson Michael Kelley:

This is the third meeting in five days for the School Committee, so I thank those of you who have stuck it out with us so far, and for those of you who are new to this series of meetings, a quick recap of what has occurred and what we will be doing tonight.

On Wednesday of last week we had two meetings, both posted on the School Website, the town website, the School Committee website and social media. On Wednesday night, the meeting was a public forum, where the work of a 29 person taskforce was presented for the first time to the School Committee and the public, outlining what that team felt was the best choice for School re-opening. The School Committee let the public comment first and provide input; we stayed until every comment anyone wanted to make was heard and any question we could answer was responded to. On Thursday, the following night, we allowed anyone who had to leave before they had a chance to question/comment on Wednesday to provide input, before the School Committee then reacted in public. One member was unavoidably missing for that discussion but is here tonight.

Over the weekend, many of you have reached out to the School Committee and the superintendent, by phone, by email and indirectly through social media. These were often detailed, moving, well-thought out reactions to what you had heard or heard second-hand. Speaking for myself, I have heard from parents, grandparents, about-to-be parents, friends, teachers, administrators, community leaders. I have heard from nurses who are the last person to see a COVID patient alive and nurses who work in pediatric offices where the cases involving children are faint. I have heard from public health officials and union reps and school committee members from other towns, all with their own reasoning about what to do next. All of this feedback has been helpful and I am grateful for those who took the time to reach out.

As I've listened, patterns of thinking and common themes have emerged. In a time of uncertainty, it's not surprising that facts can be selectively chosen to support whatever case a person is trying to make. This is the result of the pandemic having a global impact, shutting down the world's economy for months and challenging us to change behaviors in the face of a poorly understood biological menace. For those of us in the School community, the challenge lies at the intersection of health and education, with the exponential accelerant of involving children. People have very strong opinions when kids are involved.

And since you have been so kind to share your reasoning, I am going to share mine as a way of potentially structuring tonight. Because the reality is with about a month to go before school reopening, we have a very short runway to land this plane on, and need to start focusing our educators not on DESE required paperwork, or an endless debate on hybrid versus remote, but on how to excel at whatever model we choose for school reopening.

As the weekend started, having been the recipient of so much passionate, conflicting information and reasoning, I decided the worst thing I could do was continue to try and reconcile everything I heard with what my gut feel was. I've been involved in many complex projects in my professional life, often serving as the intermediary between opposing groups with dramatically different opinions on how to use the short amount of time ahead of them, and the solution nearly always involved taking a fresh look at the problem, rather than trying to force the facts to agree with whatever solution I was favoring.

So I re-started with a blank slate.

Part of this process involves making a distinction between facts, beliefs and hopes.

Here's what we know as facts:

- As a country, our response to COVID-19 was one of staggering incompetence, making us the world leader in deaths and infection, with our rates a multiple of third world nations with triple our population.
- As a state -- a state that is home to some of the greatest medical schools and hospitals in the world -- we immediately face-planted, routinely posting numbers that trailed only New York and New Jersey -- the early epicenter of the disease in the US -- for months. Eventually we regained some control, but had to back off our tiered reopening a few weeks ago when we started to climb in infection rates again.
- As a state, as of yesterday we had 394 new cases, with a two week rolling average of 365 cases. The case count will never be zero, of course, but this does represent a general upward trend since our low this summer.
- As a county, as of yesterday Essex has had 11 cases per 100,000, an average roughly 30% above the single criteria the governor posted for declaring a school district needing to be in a remote mode.
- In Rockport, we have two active cases last week in a population of 7,282. If you look at the Governor's map, Essex County surrounds Rockport like PacMan, with Cape Ann and Rockport being a shiny white dot. Whether Pacman gets us or we escape entirely is subject to debate. Our town population, whose demographic sits largely in the most at-risk category, is 13.8 times smaller than the 100k average, meaning that the mathematical model doesn't necessarily do well at this different a scale. No one has really modeled at the village level.
- We know that COVID is not analogous to the flu, or the common cold in terms of the short and long term damage it causes, and are only now beginning to understand its long-term effects in adults.
- We have even less longitudinal data about how COVID-19 impacts children, with new information occurring in recent weeks and continuing to be gathered..
- Testing options are available for those traveling or working in hospitals and starting to improve generally, but is still not robust in availability.
- There is no consensus -- even on Cape Ann by Schools on what to do. Manchester Essex is fully remote, Hamilton Wenham, by a vote of 4-3 is hybrid. Gloucester has declared hybrid but is in a struggle with its teacher's union on how to actually realize that. On the Northshore, answers vary widely. Salem went from hybrid to fully remote last week, Masconomet, where I graduated from is fully remote, but in the three towns that feed into their regional high school, two are remote and one is fully operational. More than anything, this illustrates a lack of information to inform the decision making and a high degree of variability in risk assessment by school system.
- We also know that children learn better when the experience is one on one, not remote. We know that Zoom teaching this fall was not optimal; that children and parents had experiences that ranged from awful to okay.
- Many of you focused heavily on the social and emotional benefits of students in the school system and judge that that was worth the risk of having children come back into the building right now. Trust me, every single person involved in the district understands what role the school plays in the development of a child beyond intellectual, and realizes that the school is often a place of safe harbor for children in an emotional and physical sense. We can often be the place a child feels safest, eats regularly and gets encouragement.
- We also understand that by virtue of the hours a child is in school, we serve as an accidental, de facto day care for some. This is a real issue and need for many parents and if you were here at the last meeting you know we are trying to find resources to help.
- That hindsight is and will remain 20/20. Some of the recent discussion tries to make omniscience a requirement of the school administration. It's a sign of frustration to apply what we know now to past events and look for a villain, and it's not constructive. People are human, and are making the best decisions they can in an evolving situation. There will always be better decisions that could have been made, once we have the benefit of retrospect.

What we believe currently includes:

- Children of certain ages may be impacted less. They may be transmitters of the disease more than catastrophically impacted.
- Most health authorities, including our own board of health, are anticipating a resurgence this fall that may well close the schools again. Many of you feel that on this basis we should start live, to take advantage of the time we have should this occur.
- Many of you didn't hear in our long meetings the conversation that focuses on the school district being committed to being in hybrid mode as soon as we can. To clarify, whatever we decide tonight is not an all-or-nothing proposition. To get our goal of hybrid, the following needs to happen.

We need to know its safe to come back
 We need to know children will come
 We need to know teacher will be here to teach

- Some of you believe that the risk/reward ratio for your child is fine and want to send them right now.
- Some of you believe that the teacher's union is holding us captive. Our union has in fact been extremely collaborative and one doesn't have to look far to see what an adversarial relationship can do to impede progress. There are certainly teachers who want to come back right now and others who do not, the vast majority do want to return provided the environment is safe. The nature of a collective bargaining unit is to try and represent the majority of its members in a faithful way, which involves compromise. I don't believe our union is immune to the opinions of larger entities in their orbit, but in my personal experience they seem to speak independently and reflect the concerns of their membership.
- Some of you believe that the HVAC system is the only impediment to reentry.
- Some of you believe that the Governor's guidance, released a day before our meeting should be sufficient.
- And finally, some of you believe the fix is in, that our parent forum was pro forma. Not the case. I'm not sure how my fellow committees members will vote, and they have not seen these thoughts in advance.

What is being hoped for

- A return to normal. One on one teaching live.
- That children are not impacted permanently by COVID-19

In sorting through the facts, beliefs and hopes that were expressed over the last week, what became abundantly clear to me is that we are having many conversations simultaneously. Again, this is because this issue lies at the intersection of health and education. Our math instructors would tell you that to solve for multiple variables you need to simplify the equation (and that sound you just heard was my high school algebra teacher likely dropping dead that something he taught me was actually retained and used by me as an adult).

For me, right now, the way to simplify this equation is to focus on the fact that tonight our goal is to pick an approach for the start of school. The details will be worked out between now and the beginning of school and evolve for months until we are back to normal. To pick the right approach requires us to separate for a moment the health issues versus the educational issues. This is, after all, the School Committee, not the Board of Health. Our role is focus on how best to educate the children in our care.

That being the case, I considered the following.

- There will be some parents who -- regardless of our decision -- will not send their children to school until a vaccine is available. We are required by law to provide them with an on-line experience.
- Teaching children remotely cannot just be lecturing in front of a camera and posting it online, Sal Kahn, founder of Kahn Academy, had an op-ed piece this weekend about how on-line instruction works only by reconfiguring lesson

plans to engage the students, even to the extent of calling them daily. This is a skillset we don't have currently and need to quickly develop.

- We have a high risk population of students who require substantial support from their IEPs where the only effective teaching is likely in person
- We don't have a criteria for safe. We were expecting that from the Governor, but the guideline of rate per 100k doesn't cut it. At our last meeting, I suggested we create a group composed of health department members, union reps and others to quickly create what that should look like. It is in process.
- We are committed to opening in hybrid as soon as it is safe to do so.

All of this being the case, it seems clear to me that the school district cannot become immediately adept and hopefully moving towards mastery with two distinctly different forms of teaching at the same time when we do not have proficiency in currently. Introducing hybrid at the same time we are trying to master on-line fails children on two fronts. I think it makes much more sense to focus our attention right now on improving on-line for all, then migrate to hybrid model as soon as we meet the criteria for building safety. It follows the same pattern of staged, tiered progress that the state used for bars and restaurants and mirrors what some colleges are attempting. It also give us time to see what is occurring in those districts that have gone hybrid.

We have already mentioned October and November review dates to see if we can move to hybrid quickly. I do not think the world will end or children will be irrevocably impacted if we err on the side of caution and take four or eight more weeks to get this model right for all.

This would also allow us to focus on optimizing the re-entry experience. While the weather is good, I really think we need to explore what we can do outside to launch the school year and make a personal connection between students and teachers before we are in remote, for those parents/children who feel safe doing so.

And I think we need to focus on how we deliver an in-person experience to the children at risk.

What I'd like to do now is give the rest of the committee a chance to react to what they have heard and experienced over the last five days, then briefly open up for questions or comments from the public or staff if they have a viewpoint that is significantly different from what I've recapped, and then move to a vote if the committee feels it is ready.

A. Approval of Minutes N/A

B. Personnel Actions N/A

II. Community Participation

A. Student Advisory Representative N/A

B. Public Participation

II. Discussion and Recommended Action

A. Covid-10 Planning Update N/A

B. School Reopening Plan Vote

Cathy Reilly hears concerns from parents regarding social/emotional, extracurricular, IEP's and curriculum, and it is difficult to make decisions on how to offer support to those concerns without voting on a decision. Mrs. Reilly feels it would be very destabilizing if the board makes one vote and then has to come back and change it. It is very important to consider what is going on with students outside of the educational time.

Nicole Altieri appreciates all the people who reached out to the committee and wants them to know they have been heard and students deserve the best education in a safe environment. Mrs. Altieri does not want

to discard the recommendation that came from the Board of Health and the 29 member Re-opening committee. She has heard loud and clear that social/emotional issues are the biggest concerns. Once we decide on a model then we can think about connections between staff and students. Mrs. Altieri also stated that the school committee is committed to phasing in a hybrid model with data from the Matrix committee.

Richard Drost stated that the committee is looking at the start of the school year and at what point can we can start classes. He is thankful for the people who reached out to the school committee and has a firm belief that whatever model is voted on tonight the teachers and staff will work very hard and get the best education to the students.

RTA member Jodi Goodhue reported that the initial survey to faculty returned with 49% feeling comfortable or extremely comfortable returning to the building in a hybrid with 21% not comfortable. Once a hybrid model was presented and how it might look the percentage numbers have changed a couple of times ending at 71% wanting to go fully remote. Not knowing what the building air quality report will find makes the union members have concerns retuning to the buildings. Everyone wants to return but they are not comfortable until the clearer guidance.

Public comment: Alyssa Englis is in support of the hybrid, is ready to work in the building and ready to provide the best services to the children.

Rob Liebow answered a question that students can stay fully remote if we return to a hybrid or full in person to the schools. He also clarified that if a student is attending as school choice and they choose to be home schooled they would become enrolled in their hometown or city and would have to reapply for a school choice if they wanted to return.

Dave Perry Seagull is concerned about children in IEP's and feels that 4 months of school have been lost last year and feels that the same will happen this year. He would like a more definitive schedule for the air quality test. Michael Kelley stated that the students with higher needs are a main focus and the school committee is working with the teachers union to get those kids the services they need. Mr. Liebow says that the details are being worked out to accommodate getting those students back in the buildings as soon as it is safe to do so. The Director of Student Services will start regular communications with families to update them on timelines.

Elementary teacher Jenn Dahlgren said that remote teaching this spring was difficult. Her experience was that it did work well for Team 2, they work so hard to come together and had parental support. Team 2 is looking forward to this fall and that they are heartbroken to not see their students.

Motion: Nicole Altieri motioned to open the 2020-2021 school year in the fully remote model with the intent to reevaluate in October.

Seconded: Colleen Coogan seconded the motion.

Vote: The motion carried 5-0.

Roll call:

Nicole Altieri yes

Colleen Coogan yes

Richard Drost yes

Michael Kelley yes

Cathy Reilly yes

Vote: The motion carried 5-0

Colleen Coogan wanted to let participants know that from their correspondence the committee will be looking at or developing the following: air quality results, develop a metrics for going hybrid, meet the teacher in person, extracurricular and specials, in-person SPED services, supporting students applying to colleges, enhanced social/emotional supports and access, and hybrid offering of AP courses.

Helga M commented that people in private business have found best practices in using Zoom and is there a way to share those practices with the school. She offered to be part of a group to organize collecting ideas.

- C. Policy revise/review N/A
- D. Warrants and Payroll
- IV. Information and proposals
 - A. School Council Update N/A
 - B. Donations N/A
 - C. Updates N/A
 - D. Other Business N/A
- V. Correspondence N/A
- VI. Future Agenda Items
 - A. State Representatives (8/26)
 - B. Superintendent Proposed Goals (8/26)
 - C. School Committee Goals Review (8/26)
 - D. School Start Times Recommendation (TBD)
 - E. Superintendent's Report/FundFlow

VII. Calendar

- A. August 26, 2020, Regular Meeting
- B. September 9, 2020, Regular Meeting
- C. Executive Session

Motion: At 8:43pm Cathy Reilly motioned to adjourn the regular meeting and enter executive session to discuss strategy in respect to collective bargaining and will not return to open session.

Seconded: Nicole Altieri seconded the motion.

Vote: The motion carried 5-0.

Roll call: Nicole Altieri yes
 Colleen Coogan yes
 Richard Drost yes
 Michael Kelley yes
 Cathy Reilly yes

Vote: The motion carried 5-0

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Liebow
 Superintendent of Schools