

ROCKPORT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES OF July 27, 2020
Via Zoom

Chairperson Michael Kelley called the regular meeting of the Rockport School Committee to order at 7:15 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 an unusual School Committee meeting in many ways. We typically don't have them in July, but the Committee felt it important to give the public an update on COVID-19 planning and let you know how we will communicate going forward and how we will arrive at a decision for this fall. Because this issue is so unprecedented and because I know that many of you are here mostly for that, I am taking the liberty as chair of rearranging the order of tonight's meeting.

After my remarks, we will proceed directly to the COVID-19 update, after which we will have our usual public participation segment, allowing for any clarifying questions on what was just presented, than proceed to more typical activities including re-organization as this is our first meeting after the Town Election, policy review, graduation update and an executive session for the purposes of contract negotiation. We will be exiting the meeting from Executive Session -- there will not be any announcements following it so you should feel to leave Zoom once we go into it.

To be very clear, you will not be hearing tonight any final recommendation or plan for the opening of school, but an update on what we have been doing and how we will proceed to make one.

That's the order of events. Now some context.

From the close of school to this moment eight sub-committees and one steering committee have been hard at work, preparing for a decision about school reopening. They cover every aspect of school life and are populated by a range of subject matter experts in education, support services, administration and transportation and include members of the Board of Health and parents. School Committee members are in each group.

As a school system, our charter is clear. We are responsible for the social, emotional and intellectual development of students under our care, in a safe environment. While COVID-19 presents unprecedented challenges in all of those areas, safety for the children in the system and those who support that system is the first step in that evaluation process.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, under whose auspices we operate, has made and continues to make a number of requests over the summer, the most time-consuming of which was a request for three different plans, broadly surveying whether we could 1.) Open with all students in attendance. 2.) Open in a hybrid model with live and remote participation and 3.) Open fully remote. The purpose of this was to allow the commissioner of education to come up with either a common mandate or a common recommendation. He has required these reports from all school districts with a preliminary assessment of capability by July 31st and a final recommendation by August 10th.

These are extraordinarily tight deadlines, upending the summer for school community members. The logistics of measuring, scheduling, testing airflow, etc., required to simply respond to the requests have been time-consuming. They are further complicated by a request to be able to turn from whatever scenario is in operation to a fully remote model within a days' time should that be necessary. And while the commissioner has demanded that there be no sharing of the results of these studies prior to his August 10th announcement, a reasonably aware individual could likely eliminate some scenarios as likely.

We have chosen to review this initial request as necessary paperwork to continue to ensure coordination and federal funding related to our school district, in concert with the experience of other school districts. Ultimately unless the Governor ordered all schools closed in the state -- structurally the decision on what the reopening of schools will look like in the fall lies with the Superintendent. The Superintendent's plan, in turn can be rejected by the school committee, which must vote on its acceptance in keeping with its fiduciary and other responsibilities. Regardless of national trends, advice or emotional temperatures, the reopening of school, in whatever form it takes is a local decision and will be made with the best information we have and will evolve as circumstances dictate.

In my personal experience, I have found that people can adapt to anything. Who would have thought, for example that in our lifetime we would not only be encouraged but required to enter a bank wearing a mask? These are interesting times. But while people can adapt to anything, they have great difficulty with uncertainty. Uncertainty about the future generates anxiety and anxiety leads to poor decision making. Although the future is always uncertain, we can blunt the effects of anxiety with data and with good communication.

In terms of data, our Superintendent will be sharing with us the top-line results of two polls of our primary stakeholders in reopening the schools: Parents of the children attending and of the school staffs who support nurturing the social, emotional, and educational and safety goals of the district. This provides us with actionable information to help plan the logistics of what the re-opening of school can support and will be combined with current thinking from National and Local health authorities as we create a final plan.

In terms of communication, the very best sources relative to COVID-19 plans remain this meeting, the Superintendent's ED-line messages, the School Committee website and the School website. If you go to the school website right now, you will see the front page contains a summary every week of what is happening with every subcommittee and what will be happening the following week. It also contains an email address so you can ask any COVID related question you like, which will be used to generate a FAQ list to ensure your concerns are reflected in our planning in a manner that doesn't incapacitate the planners from completing their work.

The very worst place you can obtain information is on social media. While sites like Rockport Stuff have great value in allowing people to express themselves, they can quickly become dumpster fires when emotions run high. In general, the School Committee does not respond to these eruptions as they frequently deal with feelings rather than facts and usually devolve to bickering. We will occasionally weigh in if the content there so misrepresents reality that it is actually misleading the public in a manner harmful to the school. We also are legally obligated to protect the privacy of the minors under our care and thus will not respond to questions that would violate that. We serve the children, not town gossips.

We often make the reminder that the School Committee meeting is a meeting held in public in observance of state sunshine laws and not a public hearing, although we always take clarifying questions and will do so tonight. There will be a public hearing after we finalize our proposed plan and before August 10th to allow the public to react to the Superintendent's proposal. This will be posted publicly, on social media and the websites I've mentioned.

Last week several of us on the School Committee attended a meeting of almost 300 School Committees in Massachusetts to compare notes. You should know that the word that would best describe that meeting was pandemonium. Every school district, small or large, amply or minimally funded in Massachusetts is struggling with the decision for the Fall. None take the decision lightly. But unlike many school committees, Rockport's enjoys solid, candid relationships with both their Superintendent and its bargaining unit. Throughout this crisis, the spirit of "We are all in this together" has come first, with a focus on what is safe and supportive of our core mission. This isn't the case in many school districts, where anxiety about the future has manifested in adversarial relationships between school committee and those who are employed in the district. Rockport should be proud -- even in an anxiety-provoking time -- which the focus of those in the school district is clearly focused on doing what is safe for the children.

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A. Approval of Minutes

Motion:	Nicole Altieri motioned to approve the regular and executive minutes from June 17, 2020
Seconded:	Richard Drost seconded the motion.
Roll call:	Nicole Altieri yes
	Colleen Coogan yes
	Richard Drost yes
	Michael Kelley yes
	Cathy Reilly yes
Vote:	The motion carried 5-0.

B. Personnel Actions N/A

II. Community Participation

A. Student Advisory Representative N/A

B. Public Participation

Sean Lilly Kite Field Rd. has 4 children in the school system and both he and his wife have jobs that are outside of the home. They are encouraging the district to consider students coming back fulltime. Brett Hall, Ashbury St. South Hamilton asked about teachers with childcare needs. Mr. Liebow reported the commissioner is considering letting a child attend school all day if the parent is a teacher fulltime. Principal Simendinger clarified that it could happen if safe to do so and that he is working with local agencies to provide daycare options during the day. Union Rep Jodi Goodhue stated that there are governmental benefits through the Covid act that will be available to teachers and would pass that information along to staff. Jessica Spinelli, Sheehan Terrace ask what the hours will be if going with hybrid model. As of yet hours have not been set. Maureen Gebheart asked how grading will work if in a hybrid model. Directive from DESE says if in hybrid or full remote learning, there will be grades, accountability, feedback on work, as if you were fulltime in school. Ann Brady, Gifford Rd. So. Hamilton wants to know what the plan is if a student or staff member tests positive with Covid-19. Superintendent Liebow reported the DESE sent out a document stating their guidelines for those situations and we will put the link on our website.

III. Discussion and Recommended Action

A. Covid-10 Planning Update

Superintendent Liebow presented an Opening of School for the 2020-2021 School Year Report. His report introduced the Opening Committee members, and reviewed Special Considerations and “Specials”, bus, sports, field trips, building modifications, custodial issues, food services, PPE, nursing issues, and survey results.

Mr. Liebow presented 2 versions of a revised school calendar. He recommends the calendar that starts the teachers on August 31, 2020, all staff on September 1, and students return on September 16th.

Motion: Colleen Coogan motioned to revise and approve the recommended school calendar for 2020-2021 with the students starting on September 16, 2020.

Seconded: Cathy Reilly 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

B. School Committee Reorganization for FY21

Superintendent Liebow requested a nomination for the position of chairperson.

Motion: Colleen Coogan nominated Michael Kelley as Chairperson.

Seconded: Cathy Reilly 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

Chairperson Michael Kelley requested a nomination for the position of vice-chairperson.

Motion: Colleen Coogan nominated Nicole Altieri as Vice-Chairperson.
 Seconded: Cathy Reilly 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

Sub-committee appointments:

Budget: Mike Kelley/Cathy Reilly
 Policy: Richard Drost/Colleen Coogan
 Wellness/BOH Liaison: Nicole Altieri
 Student Adv. Liaison: Michael Kelley
 Communications/Adv/Tech/Website: Cathy Reilly/Colleen Coogan
 School Building/Facilities: N/A
 Negotiations: (RTA): Michael Kelley
 Negotiations: (Support): Nicole Altieri
 EL Council: Nicole Altieri
 MS Council: Rick Drost
 HS Council: Cathy Reilly
 Override: Nicole Altieri/Colleen Coogan

C. Policy revise/review

Second reading for policy File IJOB: Community Resource Persons/Speakers

Motion: Cathy Reilly motioned to approve the revised policy File IJOB: Community Resource Persons/Speakers as presented
 Seconded: Colleen Coogan seconded the motion.
 Roll call: Nicole Altieri yes
 Colleen Coogan yes
 Richard Drost yes
 Michael Kelley yes
 Cathy Reilly yes
 Vote: The motion carried 5-0.

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. TBD, Town Meet

Executive Session

Motion: At 10:51 pm Colleen Coogan motioned to go into executive session to discuss possible collective bargaining strategies and will not reconvene in Open Session.

Seconded: Nicole Altieri seconded the motion.

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