



**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

(Official Minutes)

Special Meeting

January 12, 2021

Called for 7:00 p.m. held in and broadcast from the Dr. Henrietta S. Attles Meeting Room, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, 459 Broadway, Cambridge, for the purpose of discussing the Superintendent's proposed plan for expanding in-person learning for February.

Members Present: Vice Chair Bowman, Member Fantini, Member Rachel, Member Rojas, Member Weinstein, Member Wilson, Mayor Siddiqui

Also Present: Dr. Salim, Superintendent of Schools
Dr. Turk, Deputy Superintendent of Schools

Mayor Siddiqui in the Chair

A quorum of the School Committee being present, the Chair called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

The Chair read the call of the meeting and explained that this meeting is being televised, votes will not be taken and there will be no public comment.

The meeting proceeded to the first order of business with the following roll call for the purpose of a sound check: Vice Chair Bowman ~~ABSENT~~; Member Fantini PRESENT; Member Rojas PRESENT; Member Rachel PRESENT; Member Weinstein PRESENT; Member Wilson PRESENT; Mayor Siddiqui PRESENT.

Mayor Siddiqui informed everyone that Dr. Salim has given notice of his resignation from the position of Superintendent of Schools for the district of Cambridge and will leave the district on June 30, 2021. The Chair turned the floor over to Dr. Salim.

Dr. Salim stated that the COVID toll has been extremely hard for everybody including him and his family. This was a very difficult decision that he and his family had to make. He wanted the School Committee to know in plenty of time to hire someone to take the district to the next level. He is deeply committed to this work and will continue to plan for reopening schools for more students and will do the best he can to support the community and the leadership transition.

Mayor Siddiqui let it be known that the School Committee is hearing from all walks of life in Cambridge, parents, students, educators, the EOCC, the Cambridge Coalition for Public Ed and all emails etc. are being taken into consideration. She asked for their patience and understanding. Mayor Siddiqui asked the Members to keep their comments, questions and concerns of the presentation terse.

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The presentation is available online on the School Committee webpage.

Dr. Salim framed the format of the PowerPoint presentation explaining there will be a pause in the slides to hear questions and also let it be known that joining the meeting tonight will be the following Elementary Principals: Ms. Genteen Jean-Michel, Cambridgeport; Dr. Chad Leith, Morse; Upper School Principals Daniel Coplon-Newfield, VLUS; Manual J. Fernandez, CSUS; and CRLS Principal Smith.

Principal Genteen Jean-Michel began speaking on two topics: Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic and Preparedness and Readiness. She began with Preparedness and Readiness - What they need to do to prepare for receiving more students in their buildings for grades four and five. Some educators have been discussing re-rostering or not, remote teaching, in-person teaching and asking for medical leaves. Staffing needs are essential. Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic - When it comes to three feet learning and six feet meals, it creates an obstacle. They are facing a challenge because they cannot fit all of the intended expansion of students in the cafeteria for lunch and going outside for lunch is not feasible.

Principal Leith expressed his appreciation for the educators and staff members. 127 children were welcomed to the Morse school yesterday. He also acknowledged the special education teachers and the custodial staff for supplying all of the necessary PPE materials. He is in favor of expanding in-person learning for all; and recognized that the remote educators have been wonderful. Moving the expanded learning date from February 8th to March 1st would give them the needed time to prepare. He respectfully asked the School Committee to accept the revised date from Dr. Salim.

Principal Daniel Coplon-Newfield spoke on middle school planning and how it is different from elementary planning. Middle school scheduling is remarkably complicated and requires time. Adding an extra month allows his team to be more inclusive in their work, be more practical and to hear the voices of all his staff.

Principal Smith spoke CRLS. He offered to speak in more detail about the CRLS schedule later on. He thanked the families and caregivers for all of their hard work during this delicate dance at this difficult time. There is a need for authentic collaboration at the table to decide the next steps to pathways for success. The timeline is the challenge to provide implementation for fidelity on the re-entry process. Extending the timeline is a welcome option to support moving forward.

Principal Fernandez addressed everyone that works in the school system, parents and caregivers, Mayor Siddiqui and the School Committee stating this work is very hard and thanked them. We are all in this together even though it does not always feel that way. He explained that he keeps talking and listening because to make sure all proposals that come before us will work. Everyone wants the same thing: to be safe. Many folks do not feel safe coming back on February 8th and they probably won't feel safe on March 1st either, but that is his job to make the educators feel safe. He is looking forward to a lot of heavy lifting and getting know his students. What kinds of plans can we put together to address all needs? He has confidence in the educators to work with administrators to make this work for everyone.

Dr. Lyndsay Pinkus Brown spoke on the Enrollment Form and the extreme need for information. The deadline is January 15th. The administration really needs this information so the district will know how to proceed. If any assistance is needed, please reach out to her.

Ms. Lisa Richardson spoke on educator leaves and accommodations. What was discovered after the first semester was that the generous and kind way they responded to requests for leaves created a very strong staffing problem. They have reached out to other cities and realize if they are going to successfully reach our goal of in person learning, we need to bring our current teachers back into the buildings because we do not have enough staff i.e. paraprofessionals, substitutes etc. to cover classes; which is why we have adjusted accommodations. We do not want to put anyone at danger, there are not any additional teaching and para staff out there at this time. As of today, we have 587 requests for accommodations. 272 of those requests are for personal reasons, 192 for childcare, 34 for medical reasons and 70 more for remote accommodations. She is happy to answer questions. Ms. Richardson walked the Members through slide 9 that explained the nine different categories for leaves and accommodations. The FMLA act is also available.

The presentation was paused for questions. Mayor Siddiqui asked for the pleasure of the Committee.

Vice Chair Bowman asked what the other districts leave policies are on this issue, along with the city.

Ms. Richardson stated that the districts she surveyed were Lexington, Brookline, Newton, Somerville and their status is the same way we are changing our accommodations; which means there will no longer be accommodations for staff that live with vulnerable family members. During the first semester our district made the decision to provide generous accommodations without knowing much about the virus. This was not in line with what the City was and is currently doing.

Member Rojas asked for clarification of what the actual change is going to be.

- Ms. Richardson answered that at first we allowed accommodations for staff to work remote if they have adult family members with life threatening situations; that is no longer being offered.

Member Rachel does not see how we can expect families to decide before we know what the staffing possibilities are.

- Dr. Salim answered that we need to know what families want before we will know how many staff are needed in the classrooms.
- Ms. Jean-Mitchel responded that they also need to know what the desires of the families are so the school can know what their staffing numbers need to be. There will be different scenarios at PTA meetings later this week.
- Dr. Leith replied they met with families last night and what drives their decision making is based on criteria of the students with the most-highest needs and are more vulnerable. There are many different factors and until we know which families are interested in sending their children to school, we will not know how much staff is needed.
- Mr. Newland-Cofield added that we need to consider remote learning along with all of this, there are going to be students that are not coming back regardless of what we say. The model is not the driver as to whether they send their kids back to in-person learning.

Member Rachel asked Ms. Richardson to explain the requirements for doctor notes for accommodations and leaves.

- Ms. Richardson answered if the condition does not warrant accommodations, you may be denied. She gave an example of rickets (bow leggedness) as one that does not meet the criteria.

Member Rachel mentioned a teacher contacted the virus, was quarantined, cured and returned to a classroom that had not been cleaned. This does not build trust.

- Dr. Salim responded that the infection control teams are cleaning classrooms as a daily routine. Reviews on this issue are being conducted for more information on that particular situation.

Member Weinstein asked if staff were informed at the beginning of the year that situations may change by the second semester.

- Ms. Richardson answered no.

Member Weinstein stated that we should make it clear in the beginning and continue to do so going forward. Can an increased level of fear be considered criteria?

- Ms. Richardson replied that there is medical information attached to anxiety that needs to be in the letter requesting accommodations.

Member Weinstein asked if you can get remote accommodations for a child.

- Ms. Richardson answered in the affirmative.

Member Wilson asked what the timeframe is for staff that have used all of their time away from work.

- Mr. Richardson responded that HR is using compassion and giving staff the time to figure out what they need to do without a timeline; there is also the availability of the sick bank.

Member Wilson also asked what amount of time do we give staff that contact COVID in school.

- Ms. Richardson answered that we have not had an issue of anyone needing more time because it has been proven that they have contacted the virus. She knows of no one that has run out of sick time, has gone unpaid or has struggled with sick time.

Member Wilson asked if the principals are honoring their staff members' requests for remote accommodations as much as possible.

- Principal Smith answered yes, they have a good relationship with their staff and they look for all options available for each circumstance.

- Principal Jean-Mitchel added that the staff all care deeply for each other and the teachers all come together to figure out staffing issues for each other as a team.
- Ms. Richardson responded there is a distinct difference between a remote position and a remote accommodation. HR may deny a remote accommodation however; the school may provide a remote position.

Member Fantini asked if they are calling substitutes to find those willing to come in.

- Ms. Richardson replied yes, they are looking for all qualified professionals willing to work in the schools. They are finding most want remote positions rather than in-person.

Member Fantini believes there will be a vaccine soon and our health department will push them out.

- Ms. Richardson stated that the vaccine will not change anything. The accommodations that have been promised or denied will not change because of the availability of the vaccine.

Mayor Siddiqui asked if we can get the breakdown of enrollment information of in-person

- Dr. Brown answered yes they can provide information after the 25th, which will be after schools finish their scheduling.

Mayor Siddiqui turned the floor back to the Superintendent and the PowerPoint Presentation resumed with School Based Planning.

Dr. Gittens spoke on the Upper School Model. She thanked the upper school principals for coming together to speak on the criteria needed. There have been quite a few roadblocks regarding lunches. At lunchtime, upper school students will be dismissed; outdoor grab and go lunch, return home and have remote learning for the rest of the day. Dr. Gittens stated that she cannot say enough about what it takes to have four upper schools up and running simultaneously. It is more complicated than anyone imagines.

Dr. Copeland-Newfield spoke on the challenge of students getting home, eating lunch and getting back to school for the rest of the school day. It turns out that advisory is complicated and they may have to re-roster the students which is a huge challenge both on paper and on ASPEN. The remote students are not going to be ignored, they will be getting the same education with the same teachers while they remain remote. They need to also pay a lot of attention to the IEP students. They are trying to create consistency for kids that are hybrid and remote; including consistency with our core values.

Dr. Gittens spoke on the fact that there are more students at CRLS than there are in all of the other schools combined. There has to be an avenue for these students to be in person also. How to make that happen is not going to be easy; but there are avenues to make it all happen. How do we invite our most vulnerable population back into the building and meet the DESE requirements, keep the building flowing in a way that makes sense? She turned the rest of the presentation to Principal Smith.

Principal Smith responded that Dr. Gitten laid out the problems at CRLS. He spoke on the intermingling of our cohorts and a model was developed based on academics i.e. students in tiers 2 and tiers 3; these are the students that need more of a prioritized in-person experience. They must maintain the integrity of our remote learning experience. Principal Smith also spoke on open campus and lunch, stating the first semester was closed campus and there was a very strong reaction to a closed campus during the first semester. CRLS is considering closing the school day at lunchtime. Based on the guidelines 40 hours over 10 days from DESE; we need to increase time, so there will be some synchronous time on Wednesdays for the second semester. Since the 9th graders have not been back in school since last March, they are trying to figure out how to get them back into the classroom.

Dr. Gittens stated that lunchtime is going to be considerably risky, overcrowding and socializing in Angelos is going to be the biggest issue.

Principal Smith explained that having lunch tents on the tennis courts was discussed and they decided on grab and go for dismissals at lunchtime.

Dr. Salim returned to the last section of the presentation with an update on COVID-19. He explained they will be posting on the Safety, Health and Facilities Working Group and the Buildings and Grounds Sub-Committee will continue to keep the manual updated.

Member Rojas asked about what concrete things are being done to improve remote learning? Member Rojas mentioned that headsets have not still been delivered to some students, or how to use them

- Mr. Smith explained the backorder and that they have been shipped to CPS today, they are long overdue and we should have them by the end of this week.
- Principal Smith responded that there is a great benefit to using collaborative time on Wednesdays as an area of providing improvements, they don't want to give that up; however, there is still a need for some class time on Wednesdays to meet the DESE requirements.

Member Rojas asked about lunch in the middle schools. We have guidelines for inclement weather, and he requested that the district encourages days for eating outside. He mentioned that skiers eat outside and it takes five minutes to eat a sandwich and then run around and have recess.

- Mr. Coplon-Newfield responded that staying six feet apart and eating quietly without a mask is not something that comes easily to adolescents. He noted that having recess and constantly moving around outside is not the same as being still and eating outside. They have limited access to the communal spaces because there are two schools in one building.
- Mr. Fernandez added that we may come up with other ideas down the road; however, right now space is currently and will always be a challenge at shared schools.
- Dr. Gittens stated that consistency is a key factor for success. School routines changing with the weather is not a sound approach. She made note of the fact that people who ski generally do not eat outside in the snow, they eat in snow lodges.

Member Rojas encouraged our staff to use high quality masks as we focus on bringing more students in.

Vice Chair Bowman acknowledged the principals evolution from the Roundtable to this meeting tonight. There has been so much hard work on our Level Up program; she is concerned about what is being set up for those cohorts going forward.

- Principal Smith responded that they are cautious of stigmatizing in-person learners vs. remote learners. We need to figure out how to prioritize cohorts and be mindful of our students' social, emotional and mental health as well. We don't want to shine a bright light on certain students and have our children be embarrassed of their learning style.

Vice Chair Bowman asked on the variation approach, how should we make the instruction district wide instead of school by school? She wants to see consistent quality in all schools.

- Dr. Salim answered that we have made a huge amount of progress on remote learning. As far as school based decisions, some classrooms at the K/Lo and the Kennedy Longfellow have been successful with the hybrid model of teaching; we will need to hire a lot more staff in many schools. We cannot build a safe from school to school. Assistant Supt. Dr. Madera will be working on this on the elementary level.
- Dr. Gittens stated that having Wednesdays for dept. mtgs. has helped and is important. Even if the structures across the schools are not the same, the curriculum across the schools will be the same.
- Dr. Madera agreed that the consistency will come with the standards whether in-person or remote. The changes in schools will be dependent on classroom space, family preferences and for students with high needs. The consistency will be in the curriculum.

Vice Chair Bowman asked about air exchange in each building. This meeting room does not have any windows and we have been meeting consistently during the pandemic using a hepa filter.

Student Member Killian asked about dismissal and lunch at CRLS. She stated that students are still going to go to stores and cafes when school is dismissed. How do we stop that from happening?

- Principal Smith answered that students will not be allowed to congregate on campus. In terms of the eateries, CPS will learn what eatery occupancy capacity rates are and making sure they are observed. Students may need to adopt a new set of experiences. One of the highlights of the day is to be with their peers and have lunch together.

Member Weinstein asked how CPS is working to support social solidarity. We cannot monitor anyone in our schools 24 hours per day; everyone needs to know how to keep themselves safe. Can we test the youngest kids on a weekly basis?

- Dr. Dobberteen answered that they are taking a look at what the state is offering for pool testing, however they are inclined to stay the testing they have now through the Broad Institute which offers rapid turnaround on high quality testing.
- Nurse Tracy-Tynes replied what we are offering is what other districts wish they could offer. She doesn't see the point in swabbing students twice by doing pool testing first and then again with individual testing.

Noting the time, on a motion by Mayor Siddiqui, seconded by Member Wilson, the Rules were suspended to vote on extending the meeting to 10:30 p.m. On the following roll call vote, the meeting was extended for the purpose stated: Vice Chair Bowman, YEA; Member Fantini YEA; Member Rojas YEA; Member Rachel YEA; Member Weinstein YEA; Member Wilson YEA; Mayor Siddiqui YEA.

The meeting returned to the normal order of business.

- Principal Mr. Coplan-Newfield stated that all obstacles can be resolved, and they are trying to figure out how to schedule testing at a school like the Tobin that does not have much hallway space.

Student Member Vera-Degraff stated CRLS government is working to find students that cannot participate in remote learning due to lack of equipment. He asked that there be more focus into getting the headsets.

- Principal Smith stated that the DESE requires that there needs to be a synchronous experience for students everyday. We are not offering a full day on Wednesday, but they have to offer some level whether it is a half day or one or two classes. We have a lunch block from 12-1:00 p.m. for students to have time to connect with each other. They cannot linger long, but there is a small window to get food and log in for their next block class.

Student Member Vera-Degrass asked how long is the concurrent model going to last and how much work has gone into preparing for it?

- Principal Smith answered that they are looking for the concurrent model to start when they move to expanded in-person learning. How much can the cohort expand during the semester? Can we always add more scholars into the in-person experience? What does that mean as far as disruptions are concerned? Putting a cap on the cohort might be the answer.
- Coplan-Newfield added that they do not plan on doing a concurrent model.
- Mr. Smith stated that during the fall, they have experimented with different set ups to see what works best for at home vs. in class. There is no one size fits all; it depends, in part, on the comfort level of the educator. There are mobile amplifiers, headphones, cameras and Chromebooks etc. to help the teacher feel confident. There are a variety of configurations for teachers to decide what works best in their classrooms.

Member Rachel stated that the teachers do not have the pedagogy to deliver the fluency of teaching to students. What makes remote learning work is small groups. How do we make sure the remote students do not get left in the dust?

- Dr. Salim answered that there are many schools that are looking at this closely and thinking about what the models are going to look like. The perspectives within a school vary. Educator skill-sets and level of comfort vary and we want to be sensitive and responsive to that as well. The high school is much more complicated.
- Principal Smith added that if we do not reach maximum numbers within a cohort group, we will continue to move forward until we reach that maximum. They will need to identify a remote cohort and an in-person cohort.
- Ms. Jean-Mitchel stated that the balance of supporting very high needs students is a concern and they compartmentalize. Understanding a new way of learning and teaching a new subject is too scary for some teachers to contemplate.

Member Rachel is curious to hear thoughts on the shuffling of cohorts at CRLS safely

- Dr. Dobberteen stated that the educational needs drive safety in one direction and the need for social contact drives safety the other way. One way to maximize safety is having one way hallways, staggering dismissal times without restricting classroom choices. There are going to be some decisions made about what the school day looks like which is why testing the CRLS students is primary.

Member Rachel asked if there will be monitors on the buses

Member Fantini was very impressed with the remote class at the FMA. He also recognized that there has been no parent voice represented. He suggested that the kids get to come to school just to congregate. Students feel punished for getting good grades and having good attendance and feel punished by being forced to learn remotely.

Member Wilson asked about the upper school model of two days on and two days off instead of one week on one week off and will there be more health aides in the buildings.

- Dr. Salim spoke to the irregularity and broken rhythm of one week on and one week off.
- Principal Coplan Finland stated there is more consistency with the models they are using, two days on and off make a lot of sense.
- Dr. Gittens stated that developmentally there is a difference in the upper and high schoolers
- Nurse Rose-Tynes responded she is trying hard to hire more health aides. It is a difficult time since many health aides have been redeployed back into the hospitals. It is a priority for her.

Member Wilson asked why there was no counseling for the loss of a member of our school community.

Mayor Siddiqui underscored Dr. Salim's point about everyone being in this together. Having discussions on working to improve remote learning should happen on the Sub-Committee level and then brought to the Committee of the Whole. We are not taking a vote on what is being proposed. This vote will be clarified further. The Regular Meeting on January 19th will clarify more questions.

Vice Chair Bowman mentioned all of the emails over the weekend, she suggested that there should be a way to centralize answers on the website. The community is very divided and we need to figure out a way to streamline information and answers.

Mayor Siddiqui agreed that communication is always crucial. There are a lot of open questions, she is sure the School Committee will continue to be emailed, we may not have all of the answers, we will figure out a process to get answers to everyone.

On a motion by Member Rachel, seconded by Vice Chair Bowman, on the following roll call vote, the meeting was adjourned at 10:30 p.m.: Vice Chair Bowman YEA; Member Fantini YEA; Member Rojas YEA; Member Rachel YEA; Member Weinstein YEA; Member Wilson YEA; Mayor Siddiqui YEA.
<Adjourned 10:30 p.m.>

Attest: 

Dosha Beard
Executive Secretary to the School Committee