



**WISCONSIN RAPIDS
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING MINUTES

John A. Krings, President
John Benbow, Jr.
Troy Bier
Larry Davis
Sandra K. Hett
Katie Medina
Mary Rayome

February 8, 2021

REGULAR BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING

LOCATION: East Jr. High School, 311 Lincoln Street, Wisc. Rapids, WI 54494
Cafeteria

TIME: 6:00 p.m.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: John Benbow, Troy Bier, Larry Davis, Sandra Hett, John Krings, Katie Medina

BOARD MEMBER EXCUSED: Mary Rayome

ADMINISTRATION PRESENT: Craig Broeren, Daniel Weigand, Aaron Nelson, Roxanne Filtz, Brian Oswald, Danielle Scott, Steve Hepp, Phil Bickelhaupt, Ronald Rasmussen, Tracy Ginter, Ed Allison, Elizabeth Messerli

President John Krings called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Pledge of Allegiance

Roll Call

Student Representative Report

Rachel Marten reported that there isn't a great deal happening by way of events; however, students have been discussing the potential return to 4 or 5 days of instruction. There are mixed feelings among students with some in favor while others are not. Seeing friends and enjoying interactive learning as well as having a full complement of classmates present for courses such as orchestra were cited as potential positives to the change. Other students who have jobs outside of school or who are enjoying the rhythm to work independently at their own pace are less supportive of a change.

Approval of Minutes

Motion by Sandra Hett, seconded by Larry Davis to approve regular Board of Education meeting minutes of January 11, 2021; and special open and closed session Board of Education meeting minutes of January 11, 2021. Motion carried unanimously.

Comments from Citizens and Delegations

President John Krings read submitted commentary from Wisconsin Rapids Education Association (WREA) Representative Paula Reaves as part of public comment. On behalf of WREA, Ms. Reaves expressed support for the District's efforts to return students to additional days of in-person learning, citing its numerous benefits both academically and socially for students. Ms. Reaves describes the mitigation efforts employed by the District and carried out by staff members this school year as being successful with only individual quarantines occurring rather than entire buildings having to close. In the interest of safety, Ms. Reaves requested that staff members be allowed the opportunity to receive at least one dose of the COVID vaccine prior to a return to full classrooms of 24-32 students. A delay would also allow the community to get more of its vulnerable population vaccinated. Depending upon the date teachers receive the first dose of vaccine, WREA would prefer that the District allow at least a week afterward before bringing students back for additional days.

Committee Reports

A. Educational Services Committee – February 1, 2021. Report given by John Krings.

Mr. Krings reviewed the following consent agenda items brought before the Board through the Educational Services Committee, and asked if there were any motions to be held:

ES-1 Approval of the 2021-22 Wisconsin Rapids Public Schools' Strategic Plan.

- ES-2 Approval of recommended changes to Board Policy 672 – Purchasing Procedures/Competitive Pricing for first reading.

Motion by John Krings, seconded by Larry Davis to approve consent agenda items ES 1-2. Motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Krings provided updates and reports on:

- Ms. Roxanne Filtz, Director of Curriculum & Instruction, presented 2020-21 Achievement Gap Reduction (AGR) mid-year information to the Committee. The report contains information on each school's implementation of the AGR contract requirements, performance objectives, and success in attaining the objectives. Additional information around Benchmark Level progress in Reading and math was shared. Ms. Filtz explained how timelines tied to AGR reporting impact progress measurement reporting when the District's first and second trimester schedules end in late November and early March but the State requires reporting at the end of a traditional semester, which is mid-January. With the COVID-19 shutdown beginning in March, 2020 and the pandemic continuing, student learning loss is a concern and focus for the administration and staff. Results from data collected at the end of the second trimester will be shared in a future meeting. Assessment data of students receiving virtual instruction is currently undergoing evaluation, and information about this group's performance will be shared at the Committee meeting in March, 2021.
- The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRRSA), was signed into law on December 27, 2020 and provides an additional \$54.3 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER II). ESSER II is a formula grant and will be awarded in the same proportion as each state received funds under Part A of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Ms. Filtz explained that the District's portion of ESSER II funds is estimated to be \$3,155,275.00. Unlike the first round where districts were required to manage the funding allocation for private/parochial schools, these schools are instead able to apply directly to the DPI for ESSER II funding in this second round which relieves the District from having to act as their fiscal agent. ESSER II funds can be used for the same items as CARES Act dollars; however, having Local Education Agencies (LEAs) address learning losses in marginalized groups is stressed, and new areas where expenditures can be covered include school facility upgrades to implement precautionary and viral transmission mitigation measures as well as costs dedicated to increase student engagement.
- Per the latest release from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, requirements for the 2020-2021 administration of statewide assessments remain unchanged under state and federal law. Therefore, plans are underway for in-person testing to occur to meet these state and federal requirements. This includes developing a plan to assess students who are receiving remote instruction. Off-campus virtual testing options without school district proctors are not allowed within the Wisconsin State Assessment guidelines, and logistics are being worked out to accommodate for in-person testing.
- The Gifted and Talented Educational Services Plan (GATES) document has been updated with minor modifications to revise names and contact information due to changes in personnel. The updated document can be found on the District webpage.
- Dani Scott, Director of Pupil Services, reported that in December of 2020 districts across the state were required to report seclusion and restraint data to DPI for the first time. Seclusion and/or restraint are viable response options when a student is in immediate danger of hurting themselves or others. Utilization of seclusion and/or restraint is always a last resort for staff, and the techniques are only used by staff trained in nonviolent crisis intervention. The data being reported may be artificially low due to the shutdown caused by the pandemic in March, 2020. Tom Crockett, School Psychologist, along with Betsy VanBerkel, Cross-Categorical Teacher and Steve Hepp, Assistant Director of Pupil Services, updated the Committee on the status of seclusion and restraint training initiatives involving staff.
- Ms. Filtz provided the Committee with updated student enrollment numbers for off-campus learners. Ms. Medina raised a question around parent notifications when students are not in attendance as required. Principal Rasmussen shared some details around the process involved if this occurs.
- Superintendent Broeren explained that the administration has been exploring the possibility of moving from the current A/B cohort schedule at the secondary level to a phased-in return to 4-day in person instruction with a goal of potentially being back to 5-day in person instruction by the end of the school year. As the pandemic continues, Mr. Broeren described a lack of leadership at the state and national

level to assist schools as they continue to navigate the pandemic under very difficult circumstances. Each district is left to collect and collate any available information and perform individual outreach and engagement with Public Health officials and medical professionals as they continue to make decisions based upon known data.

Based upon some recent studies conducted, and in learning about other similar-sized districts that have had success in implementing a 4- or 5-day in-person instructional model, there is evidence to support that moving in this direction at Lincoln High School (LHS) and at Wisconsin Rapids Area Middle School (WRAMS) is feasible and can be done safely. The social-emotional well-being and mental health of students is one compelling reason to consider getting students back to more in-person days as soon as possible as long as it can be done in a safe manner.

Mr. Broeren has been working closely with Wood County Health Department Director Sue Kunferman and the District's medical advisors, Dr. Amy Falk and Dr. Lisa Olson, to examine data and consider the feasibility of expanding the in-person day schedule. Information collected around COVID spread as it relates to schools indicates that the precautionary measures in effect are working as intended, and not exacerbating viral transmission in the community. Anecdotal evidence gathered from other schools who are meeting 4 or 5 days in person and employing the same precautionary measures, but allowing less than the 6' physical distancing as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reveal similar success to the District in mitigating viral spread as it operates under the A/B cohort model. Modifications to close contact and quarantine requirements for classroom settings (not lunchroom areas or when physical contact occurs such as in co-curricular/athletic activities) could potentially keep students in school even if they were in a classroom alongside a COVID positive peer as long as masks were worn properly for the entire time – only the COVID positive person would need to be excluded. The Department of Health Services (DHS) and Department of Public Instruction (DPI) continue to recommend that schools follow CDC guidelines; however, individual school districts have the ability to work with local Health Department officials and choose less distance than the guidelines recommend.

The Committee was updated on the fact that staff vaccinations will not likely be available until after March 1, 2021, and this will be based upon vaccine supply. This pushes staff member vaccination completion out to mid-April if shots get administered during the first part of March. In a recent survey of staff with 591 responding, 65.3% (386) indicated they intend to be vaccinated; 14.4% (85) do not intend to be vaccinated; 2.9% (17) have already been vaccinated; and 17.4% (103) are uncertain about whether or not they will get the vaccine. Clinical trials for vaccinations in children are on-going, and only the Pfizer variety is available to adolescents ages 16 and up. Vaccinating the younger population will likely not happen for at least another year, and only if the vaccine gets approved and parents choose to allow it. Precautionary measures with masking, physical distancing, frequent hand washing, etc. will likely continue well into the next school year.

Superintendent Broeren explained that the strategy to increase in-person instruction at the secondary level is being considered in a phased-in approach so that it can be monitored closely and adjusted as needed. He firmly believes that students need as much in-person time in school as possible for both their academic and social emotional well-being. Daily structure and supervision are important for student success. In speaking with Public Health and the medical consultants, one aspect being considered to return students in the safest manner possible is through the implementation of surveillance testing of both students and staff who are willing. The PCR test being considered would involve a non-intrusive nasal swab, with a certain number of tests being conducted each week. The test would only be administered to staff who consent, and to students whose parents have provided consent. Testing would provide a scientific baseline to measure the presence of COVID in school, and would begin a few weeks prior to bringing students in for more days under the 4- and 5-day approach. The cost is \$70 per test which typically provides results within 24 hours, and it is possible that ESSER II funding or a potential outside grant could help defray the expense. Details around what an acceptable threshold would be in terms of surveillance testing are still being determined. Mr. Broeren stated that working toward additional in-person days prior to the end of the school year, rather than waiting for September, will help to better inform decisions about school start-up in the fall. If the school year ends under the cohort schedule, it is likely the new year will begin under the same schedule. If necessary, a switch back to the A/B cohort schedule can occur fairly quickly this spring since both LHS and WRAMS are well-adjusted to and familiar with working under this model.

Committee members discussed the 4- and 5-day phased in approach. Commentary and concerns surfaced around:

- ♦ The importance of precautionary measures in schools continuing to be adhered to and followed even if the mask mandate from the State is removed
- ♦ Whether District funding could be impacted if CDC guidelines are slightly modified in the approach
- ♦ The potential for District liability to increase if state and federal guidelines are not followed
- ♦ How transportation might be impacted with additional students riding together – how full would the buses be?
- ♦ The social-emotional and academic benefits for students to be in-person more days
- ♦ Concerns around staff willing but unable to be vaccinated prior to additional days being implemented
- ♦ Consideration and concern around the variant strain of COVID which spreads more easily and quickly
- ♦ The stress and unrest students and families might endure if an abrupt reversal of the 4- or 5-day approach needs to take place
- ♦ The current approach has gone well to provide students with in-person instruction while maintaining healthy and safe school campuses – there are risks to changing the approach
- ♦ The logistics of maintaining proper physical distancing at certain times such as lunchtime with twice the number of students in the building will likely be difficult to adhere to
- ♦ Baseline surveillance testing sounds like a good idea if staff and students/parents are willing
- ♦ Consideration needs to be given toward whether the cost for surveillance testing is the best way to utilize dollars
- ♦ Who will be performing the surveillance testing, and how much will this cost in labor
- ♦ What gating metrics around surveillance testing would be appropriate – what threshold would make a return to the A/B cohort schedule necessary
- ♦ Concerns were expressed around contributing to community spread
- ♦ Staff member input and feedback is valued and should be considered where possible; Mr. Broeren explained that he does value staff input and feedback and has their safety in mind as decisions are made, however there are multiple meetings and information being gathered to keep things moving forward which occurs during times when staff members are already working with a full plate, doing the jobs that they were hired for; much of the information he has recently become aware of developed in rapid fashion. When staff members reach out to him, he does listen and does value what they have to say; ultimately he always has the best interest of students in mind when considering issues at hand – having students attending himself, he fully understands how kids are impacted by decisions being made and wouldn't put a plan forward that he feels is unsafe
- ♦ Staff and parents should be surveyed to ascertain the level of willingness to participate in surveillance testing
- ♦ Some students may not feel comfortable in scenarios like the lunchroom where they must remove their mask in order to eat around even more people – how would the needs of these students be addressed? Principal Rasmussen did mention that lunch period(s) would likely be added to the schedule to help alleviate concerns
- ♦ A great deal has been learned from the A/B cohort approach, and if safety procedures can be employed that will help a 4- or 5-day approach be successful, it should be given careful consideration
- ♦ The emotional well-being of students is a concern given the fact that the software filtering system used to detect unhealthy student communication has seen increased activity
- ♦ Could increasing the days of in-person instruction raise the number of requests for virtual instruction transfers, inflating program numbers
- ♦ Why do both LHS and WRAMS – would it be better to focus on one to begin – for a variety of reasons, this approach could add extra complicated layers for families
- ♦ With the highest level of precautions taken, it behooves the District to try something to move forward to increase in-person instructional hours for students
- ♦ Students needing in-person instruction in the worst way are suffering greatly – truancy is worsening in many of these cases and achievement gaps are widening – their success hinges on having as many in-person days as possible

Committee members would like additional information around surveillance testing and perhaps a survey of parents and staff members to gauge their willingness to consent to testing. Mixed feelings were expressed about moving toward a 4- and 5-day approach when things seem to be going well; some had strong feelings about staying the course with known factors since it seems to be going well, while others recognize the potential benefits in trying it.

Mr. Broeren reiterated that he understands the thought around leaving things as is because it has proven to be a safe approach; however, he also believes it is important for the District to position itself well for the start-up of school in September. He will survey staff members and parents by Monday, February 8th to get a feel for their inclinations about moving toward a 4- and 5-day in person approach, as well as their attitudes around surveillance testing. Mr. Broeren stated that Dr. Falk and Dr. Olson as well as Sue Kunferman from Public Health plan to be in attendance at the February 8, 2021 Board meeting to participate in the discussion and help answer any questions Board members may have.

Motion by John Krings, seconded by Larry Davis to approve the balance of the Educational Services Committee report and minutes of the February 1, 2021 Educational Services Committee meeting. Motion carried unanimously.

B. Business Services Committee – February 1, 2021. Report given by John Benbow.

Mr. Benbow reviewed the following consent agenda items brought before the Board through the Business Services Committee, and asked if there were any motions to be held:

- BS-1 Approval of the purchase of a 2021 UA80 First Products AeraVator from Horst Distributing at a cost of \$13,595.00, to be funded from the 2020-21 Buildings and Grounds budget.
- BS-2 Approval of the purchase of counseling curricula from the Committee for Children at a total cost of \$26,964.00, using carry over funds from the 2019-20 Behavior and Mental Wellness Grant.
- BS-3 Approval of the lease agreement with CESA 5 for use of the Vesper Community Academy School Building for the 2021-22 school year at an amount of \$23,000.00.

Motion by John Benbow, seconded by Troy Bier to approve consent agenda items BS 1-3. Motion carried unanimously on a roll call vote.

Mr. Benbow provided updates and reports on:

- Purchases of student laptop computers from Troxell Communications, and a combi-oven for Lincoln High School from Boelter LLC at a total cost of \$33,405.11.

Motion by John Benbow, seconded by Katie Medina to approve the balance of the Business Services Committee report and minutes of the February 1, 2021 Business Services Committee. Motion carried unanimously.

C. Personnel Services Committee – February 1, 2021. Report given by Sandra Hett.

Ms. Hett reviewed the following consent agenda items brought before the Board through the Personnel Services Committee, and asked if there were any motions to be held:

- PS-1 Approval of the support staff appointments of Deborah Helke (Special Ed Aide – THINK), Gina Webb (Noon Duty Aide – Washington), Tina Havitz (Service Cook – Woodside), Caryn Van Pietersom (Breakfast Aide – Mead), Rebecca Bubolz (Kitchen Helper, FFVP – Mead), Jennifer Clark (Instructional 4K Aide – Woodside), and Amanda Bullock (Health Aide – Lincoln).
- PS-2 Approval of the non-represented support staff appointment of Amy Hulce (Payroll Manager – District).
- PS-3 Approval of the professional staff early retirement of Judith Grover (Teacher – WRAMS).
- PS-4 Approval of the support staff early retirement of Jocelyn Johnson (Secretary – WRAMS) and Sandra Nugent (Media AV Aide – Lincoln).
- PS-5 Approval of the professional staff resignation of Abigail Bubnik (Teacher – Woodside).
- PS-6 Approval of the non-represented support staff resignation of Joni Raulin (Payroll Manager – District).
- PS-7 Approval of the support staff resignation of Karey Netz (Instructional 4K Aide – Woodside) and Peri Carlson (Food Service Helper – Lincoln).

Motion by Sandra Hett, seconded by Larry Davis to approve consent agenda items PS 1-7. Motion carried unanimously.

Ms. Hett provided updates and reports on:

- Brian Oswald, Director of Human Resources, updated the Committee on the current WRPS substitute fill rate. WRPS has 24 less substitute teachers and 20 less substitute aides this school year. The secondary fill rate has been around 80% while elementary had a fill rate as low as 69% in the fall, but has had a fill rate of 87% since returning from winter break.
- Mr. Oswald shared a staff member's question with the Committee pertaining to wording found in the Post-Employment Insurance Benefit section of the employee handbooks regarding how "at least 15 years of employment" applies to qualifying for the retirement benefit. The administration has been interpreting this language to mean at least 15 consecutive years of employment leading up to the date of retirement, not 15

total years of employment. The Committee agreed with the administration's interpretation, and requested that they update the handbook language to clearly state that employees must work at least 15 consecutive years leading up to their retirement date to be eligible for post-employment insurance benefits outline in the handbooks.

Motion by Sandra Hett, seconded by Larry Davis to approve the balance of the Personnel Services Committee report and minutes of the February 1, 2021 Personnel Services Committee meeting. Motion carried unanimously.

Motion by Sandra Hett, seconded by Larry Davis to approve special closed session minutes from the January 18, 2021 Personnel Services Committee meeting. Motion carried unanimously.

Agenda Referrals/Information Requests

Sandra Hett requested a report on training that has been offered to staff around virtual programming to date, as well as planned training coming up during the school year.

Legislative Agenda

Troy Bier shared the following information:

- The Wisconsin Association of School Board Association (WASB) Delegate Assembly met on January 20, 2021 to discuss and take action on ten proposed resolutions, which Mr. Bier described.
- On January 26, 2021, State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) submitted a plan to the legislature's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee (JFC) for how it plans to allocate federal ESSER II funding from the latest federal COVID-relief package to school districts in light of statutory regulations. The JFC then undertakes a 14-day passive review process of the plan and can approve or modify the plan.
- Since his inauguration, President Biden has issued a number of executive orders addressing COVID-19 and other societal issues, of which three are relevant to K-12 education and school employment issues which address: 1) supporting the reopening and continuing operation of schools and early childhood providers; 2) preserving and fortifying Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); and 3) preventing and combating discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation.
- State and federal pupil assessment requirements for the 2020-21 school year are still in place, and the DPI is prohibited under statute from granting a waiver from administering these assessments. The Legislature appears unwilling to repeat a suspension of the statutory requirements related to assessments and related school report cards during the current school year as it did during the 2019-20 school year.
- On February 4, 2021, Governor Evers issued a new mask mandate order immediately after the GOP-controlled state legislature repealed his previous executive order. This issue will ultimately be decided by the courts as the Wisconsin Supreme Court has a case pending on it.
- The Senate Committee on Government Operations, Legal Review and Consumer Protection recently held a public hearing on Senate Bill 55, a bipartisan bill that would modernize the publication of proceedings (minutes) of meetings held by school boards and other governmental bodies by allowing proceedings electronically on a school district website and other social media maintained by the school district in lieu of paying to publish the notices in newspapers.
- Governor Evers vetoed Assembly Bill 1, the state COVID response bill, in its entirety on February 5, 2021 after the state Senate met in extraordinary session to approve the latest change made by the state Assembly and sent it to his desk. Governor Evers called on Republicans to send him the compromise version of AB 1 passed by the Senate almost unanimously and with bipartisan supports weeks ago.
- The State Superintendent race has seven candidates running with a primary scheduled to occur on Tuesday, February 16, 2021.

Bills

Motion by Sandra Hett, seconded by Larry Davis to note January, 2021 receipts in the amount of \$9,891,447.62 and approve January, 2021 disbursements in the amount of \$5,737,819.76. Motion carried unanimously on a roll call vote.

Unfinished/Old BusinessFuture Levy Override and Bond Issue Referendum Questions

Superintendent Broeren provided updates on the outreach being planned to inform the community about the upcoming referendum questions that will be on the election ballot. In addition to print materials being distributed, a variety of community forums both in person and livestreamed, radio interviews, press releases, and visits to local community groups are scheduled to present information in more detail and answer any questions. The District website will have a dedicated referendum page for individuals to visit to learn more about both questions.

New BusinessEmployee Appointments, Resignations, and Retirement Requests

None.

Resolution Authorizing the Transfer of Funds, Establishment of an Escrow Account with Respect to Defeasance of Debt

Daniel Weigand, Director of Business Services, presented a recommendation to approve of a Resolution to authorize the transfer of funds, establishment of an escrow account, and defeasance of the General Obligation Refunding Bonds, Series 2015, dated June 29, 2015. He explained that this is the last outstanding referendum debt services bond of three bonds that remain: 1) revenue limit exemption bond for energy efficiency projects, which cannot have the duration shortened in accordance with state statutes; however, the District was able to refinance this bond at a lower rate to create a window of opportunity to phase in any new debt without impacting the tax levy; 2) another debt issue bond in the amount of \$2,820,000 that has a fully funded sinking fund to pay off the debt when it becomes due in two years; and 3) the bonds dated June 29, 2015 that are being recommended for defeasance. The Board questioned what the interest savings will be with the early payoff of debt. Mr. Weigand stated the savings amounts to approximately \$100,000.

Motion by John Benbow, seconded by Troy Bier to approve a Resolution authorizing the transfer of Funds, the establishment of an Escrow Account with respect to and the defeasance of the General Obligation Refunding bonds, Series 2015, dated June 29, 2015. Motion carried unanimously on a roll call vote.

With this being Mr. Weigand's last Board meeting prior to retiring, the Board expressed deep gratitude and appreciation to Mr. Weigand for his many years of excellent service and commitment to the District.

Potential Movement to 4- or 5-Day In-Person Instruction at Secondary Level

As a follow-up to the discussion held at the Educational Services Committee meeting on February 1, 2021, Superintendent Craig Broeren provided details around the District's plan to potentially move to more in-person instructional days at the secondary level in a phased in manner beginning in March with 4 days, and eventually 5 days toward May if conditions allow it. Recognizing that some parents would prefer to keep Wednesdays off since their schedules have been set up to accommodate this, the administration is leaning toward 4-day weeks having students in attendance Tuesday through Friday with Mondays off for catch-up on contract tracing as necessary. He introduced Dr. Amy Falk and Dr. Olson from Aspirus who have been serving as medical advisors to the District since reopening plans were developed in summer, 2020 and continuing through the pandemic. Mr. Broeren also introduced medical student Ali Benda who has been assisting Dr. Falk in masking and school transmissibility rate studies involving local Wood County schools, and Wood County Public Health Director Sue Kunferman.

An explanation of the timelines from the beginning of school up to the current point in time was shared by Mr. Broeren in terms of how the administration has arrived at the recommendation being considered. A trajectory of how local COVID cases increased significantly in the fall leading up to Thanksgiving break before subsequently leveling off and declining after winter break in January was shared. Information continues to be released around the slow roll-out of vaccinations and the fact that the community at large will likely not have access to vaccinations until the middle of next school year. Knowing that viral transmission rates in school are extremely low with the precautionary measures in place and given the fact that viral transmission isn't occurring frequently among youth in the community, the administration believes that it would be best to bring students back at some point in time this spring in a phased-in approach in readiness for a return to 4 or 5-day in person instruction in September if pandemic conditions locally will allow it. After performing some research on the topic and speaking with his colleagues, Mr. Broeren discovered that large districts with schools similar and larger in size to Lincoln and WRAMS have been successful with this approach with precautionary measures in place, including physical distancing not necessarily at six feet as recommended by the CDC, but to the greatest extent possible. Increased lunch periods, early release for students, and established seating charts are strategies that other districts are utilizing in order to maintain physical distancing and perform contact tracing when necessary. The approaches implemented in these districts have not caused super spreading events among peers in school, nor exacerbated community

spread. The administration at LHS and WRAMS has been working through details to develop similar solutions and approaches which would allow a comparable return for students at WRPS.

Mr. Broeren explained that a virtual staff meeting has taken place involving secondary level employees to discuss the approach to add more instructional days for students in an effort to help address any questions. A video for parents was also recorded and shared to explain the rationale behind the 4/5 day plan, including how it would be implemented. In addition to the recording, parents and staff members also received a survey link to gather attitudes and feedback around the concept of moving to more in-person days, as well as the possibility of the District conducting surveillance testing of students and staff. While the timing to add more days was initially being considered for the first day of the third trimester, that date is flexible.

Staff and parent survey results were shared. A total of 206 responses from LHS and WRAMS staff were collected, while 682 responses were received from secondary level parents. Commentary from the surveys was shared, and following is a synopsis of the results to specific questions asked:

Staff

How do you feel about moving toward 4 or 5-day in person instruction?

42.2% support 24.8% uncertain 33.0% do not support

Would you be willing to participate in surveillance testing?

44.7% yes 20.4% maybe 35.0% no

Parents

How do you feel about moving toward 4 or 5-day in person instruction?

68.5% support 13.0% uncertain 18.8% do not support

If the secondary level moves to 4 or 5-day in person, will you keep your student(s) attending in person?

82.7% yes 17.3% no

Would you be willing to consent to having your child(ren) participate in random surveillance testing?

43.5% yes 21.3% maybe 35.2% no

Dr. Olson and Dr. Falk expressed their support in returning to more in-person days for students. Just as there was apprehension and unknowns leading into the school year, science and data was followed and the approach has gone well. An explanation of how surveillance testing would work to first determine a baseline and thereafter to monitor case number levels when all students return was shared. The goal would be to test up to 450 student and staff members per week between LHS and WRAMS if enough individuals provide consent. It behooves the District to attempt to bring students back under a phased-in approach in a scientific, calculated, data-driven manner. Dr. Falk shared data around the percentage of students at the secondary level who continue to remain mask compliant. Director Sue Kunferman also expressed her support for the change, complimenting the District on the approach it has utilized up to this point. Community case numbers continue to remain low.

Student Representative Rachel Marten explained that she believes students need more of a voice in this process that greatly impacts them. Students are ready to return to a regular routine and there are underlying mental health concerns among students as a result of being out of school. She does have concerns about what impact Spring Break may have on cases in school after people have traveled. Rachel went on to mention that numerous students are working while not in school in places where viral spread is likely, and she believes they would be safer in school with the safety protocols in place. She further shared that students will be mask compliant if they understand that they can avoid quarantine by following the rules.

Principal Ronald Rasmussen from LHS, and Tracy Ginter from WRAMS were on hand to answer any questions of the Board.

Mr. Broeren explained that the Board has received a variety of commentary, recorded meetings, and scholarly, research-based articles over the course of the past week leading up to the meeting. While it would be easy to just keep things as is and not make any changes, when there is emerging data that suggests students can return for additional days of in-person instruction which would benefit them it is the duty of the District to make modifications in the best interest of kids, even if it is difficult.

Board members discussed the proposed plan, asking a variety of questions around mitigation measures, masking compliance, potential for quarantine modifications in classroom settings, surveillance testing, potential COVID variant strains in the near future, current levels of local community spread, air filtration systems in buildings, the additional work and staff necessary for cleaning and surveillance testing in terms of who might do it.

Mr. Davis stated the pandemic has highlighted the importance of the difference that schools and educators make in the lives of students. He shared concerns about returning to more days in person without staff members having received vaccinations, particularly if they have health concerns or underlying conditions.

Mr. Krings stated that he believes fear and anxiety should not drive decision-making in this case, rather science and available data should be the primary focus. Issues surrounding COVID will not be going away anytime soon and if there is opportunity to take incremental steps to move toward more in-person days in the best interest of students, he feels it should be tried.

Mr. Benbow agrees that students should be back in person as much as possible. However, he expressed concern with the upcoming Spring Break and what that might mean for increased viral cases. Other concerns he mentioned include how a change might impact the upcoming referendum, how a failed attempt to return students for more days might upset family schedules, community noncompliance with masking, liability of the District if CDC guidelines are not followed, busing issues, passing time and lunchrooms at the larger schools with more students in the building, costs for surveillance testing and the ability to benchmark what is necessary with the times suggested, and he questions whether spring is any better to implement the plan versus fall. What the District is doing is working, and Mr. Benbow believes the current model should remain in place.

Mr. Broeren explained that surveillance testing timelines are fluid and provided details around how the testing would be established in a manner that would provide the baseline data needed to be able to return students to more in person days in March. In terms of returning students to 4 or 5 days in September rather than spring, Mr. Broeren stated that before that would happen, he would want to still see a baseline established in order to have an idea of where the health of the student body is at in terms of viral caseload unless something occurs over the summer with the pandemic that makes concerns around these things a moot point. While he will support whatever the Board decides, from his perspective as a Superintendent and parent, what is best for students is to bring them back for more in-person days if the circumstances and data supports it, which he believes is the case. He has great concern for the social emotional well-being and self-worth of students and instilling structure and motivation in their days, even more so than academics at the moment since academics can be addressed and will be addressed by the staff as necessary. As far as the referendum goes, he sees no correlation about the referendum and a decision to bring students back because it is in their best interest. To be clear, there is no ulterior motive in any recommendations being made except for what is best for kids. The merits of the referendum will stand on its own based upon the information shared with the community.

Ms. Medina questioned how long surveillance testing might continue, and Dr. Falk stated that should there be enough interest over the summer to continue this monitoring she would be willing to analyze data and be as involved as possible to guide the process.

Mr. Krings questioned whether the surveillance testing would still be effective if less than the ideal number consent to testing. Dr. Falk stated that any data is better than no data and would encourage testing even if the pool to test is lower than anticipated. Mr. Broeren clarified that the costs for surveillance testing would not come out of regular District budgeted funds and instead be paid for using potential philanthropic grant dollars or ESSER II funding allocated to schools in order to deal with the pandemic.

Ms. Hett reflected on the fact that in the fall, the Board had a similar decision in that they entertained whether to implement a hybrid model for students versus all virtual. No matter what decision gets made, there will be some who are unhappy. However, the Board's job is to make decisions in the best interest of students, and she believes that following the science and moving toward more in-person days is what is best for students.

Motion by Sandra Hett, seconded by Troy Bier to approve of moving in the direction of implementing a 4-day and eventually 5-day in person instructional model at Lincoln High School and Wisconsin Rapids Area Middle School between March 2021 and the end of the school year if surveillance testing is implemented and it is determined by the administration that proper precautions and mitigation efforts to curb viral transmission can be implemented. Motion carried on a roll call vote of 4-2. Larry Davis and John Benbow voted no.

Calendar

Calendar items were reviewed.

President Krings adjourned the meeting at 8:30 p.m.


John A. Krings – President

Maurine Hodgson – Secretary

Larry Davis – Clerk