

MAINE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT #37

August 18, 2021

A Special Meeting of the School Directors of RSU #37/MSAD #37 was held at Narraguagus Jr./Sr. High School on Wednesday, August 18, 2021, at 7:00 p.m. to consider and act upon the following items of business:

Board Members present: Jeffery Beal, Chris Chartrand, Stephen Dunham, Everett Grant, Shelby Greene, Beth Hartford, Grace Kennedy, Ronald Kennedy, Debra Murphy, David Perham, Tiffany Strout, and Mark Wright

Board Members absent: None

Other persons present: Ronald Ramsay, Denise Vose, Susan Meserve, Lorna Greene, Maria White, Mary Ellen Day, Todd Emerson, Lori Mathews, Dave Mathews, Eric Brooks, Leann Beal, Anna Emerson, Moriah Nichols, Kyle Kennedy, Robin Pineo, Valerie Kennedy, Erica Thompson, Donna Grant, Joan Ramsay, Denise Curtis, Brenda Beal, Dawn Fickett, and other citizens

MINUTES

1. **The meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. by Chair Debra Murphy.**

2. **RE: CONSIDERATION OF RETURN-TO-SCHOOL PLAN FOR 2021-2022**

ACTION: Supt. Ramsay noted that it is a difficult issue/situation to be charged with coming up with a plan to return to school under current circumstances. We have waited to make a decision because things keep evolving with COVID-19 and the Delta variant. The big issue is do we require masks in the schools or not. Do we follow the Department of Education's (DOE) recommendation to mask everyone in schools, even those vaccinated, or do we not follow that recommendation and allow individual choice for masks? This is a decision that is not taken lightly. It is a no-win situation for the school system as we have community members on both sides, some saying they won't send their kids if we require masks and others saying they won't send their kids if we don't require masks. Both sides have valid arguments, and we understand both sides.

Debra Murphy shared an email that she received today from Dr. Jarvis, of Northern Light Medical Center. His message is that masking, distancing, and cleaning are the top three ways we can help mitigate COVID-19.

Tiffany Strout noted that she has received many questions and concerns about why masks should be mandated in schools if they are not everywhere else. It should be up to the parents to decide if their child wears a mask or not.

Ronald Kennedy stated that he feels we should provide remote instruction for students who can't come to school due to medical issues. Supt. Ramsay noted that he has talked to some parents about that very thing and has told them that if their child qualifies for an IEP or 504 plan and has a documented medical condition, then remote instruction may be offered. We will look at these on a case-by-case basis.

Mark Wright asked if the DOE has given any indication of ramifications for districts that don't require masks. Supt. Ramsay noted that masking is only recommended by the DOE at this point and not mandated, so for now there are no ramifications. The protocols are different if an outbreak occurs, and you do pool testing or have a mask mandate in the schools. It changes who must quarantine.

Chris Chartrand asked how quarantining in the high school setting would work? Supt. Ramsay noted that the school nurse works closely with the CDC to make an educated judgement on who the close contacts

are. The rules for quarantine are pretty much the same as last year with the exceptions for those with masking mandates, pool testing, and vaccinations in place.

Supt. Ramsay noted that all CDC and state mandates have been dropped at this time. It is up to the district to decide if we keep kids in pods, wearing masks or not, etc. Cases right now are at about the same level as last January when they peaked in Washington County. We have no way to know if this could be the peak of the new variant or not, or if it will go up or down.

Everett Grant asked about masking on busses. Supt. Ramsay noted that we have no say in that as a federal mandate is in place requiring masks on all public transportation, which school busses have been determined to be by the feds. So even if we don't have a mask mandate in the schools, masks will still be required to ride our busses.

Stephen Dunham asked if we have no mask mandate in place, but students have to quarantine, what do we do to provide them an education. Supt. Ramsay noted that we will have a plan in place to keep their education moving forward, continuing to provide support, homework, etc. He also noted that most of the school districts around us have voted to make masks optional. This includes Jonesport, Machias, Eastport, Calais, Woodland, and RSU 24. Ellsworth voted to mandate masks in congested areas such as hallways, but not in classrooms. The Commissioner indicated that it is about a 50/50 split across the state as to those mandating masks or making them optional.

Ronald Kennedy noted he is one of the first to say he doesn't like his civil liberties to be trampled on, but we have to look at the safety of all kids. Is there a way to allow masks to be optional, but keep those wearing masks separated from those not wearing them in the classroom by placing them on opposite sides of the room?

Mark Wright noted that if we had a large outbreak in a school, that would have a negative impact on the education of students. Otherwise, we don't know what will happen. He asked what the administrative team's feelings are on the best chance to give kids the best education we can. Supt. Ramsay noted again that this is not a matter taken lightly by any administrators and they all understand the angst of parents. Last week, he would have said "no masks" because he fears losing many kids who won't come to school. Since then, he's heard from others that won't send their kids if no masks are required, so that puts him closer to the fence. He shared two motions he wrote, one for mandatory masking and one for optional masking. He noted that both include wording that a change to the mask policy can be made based on conditions around us that we will need to react to.

Stephen Dunham stated he believes it is more prudent to be cautious than reactive to start with. Grace Kennedy noted she feels it should be up to the individual...if you want to wear a mask, wear one; if you don't want to wear one, don't wear it. Jeffery Beal noted he is for parent choice as to masking or not masking, but worries that some kids may make fun of those wearing masks. David Perham stated there is a limit to what masks can do. The only mask that truly works is an N-95 mask that is properly fitted to each individual.

Moriah Nichols, a Harrington parent, shared a letter asking the board to allow parents the choice to mask or not mask their children. Steve Strout, another Harrington parent, noted that we all care about kids. Last year, the Senior class was deprived of academic, social, and athletic events that kept them from being active. This is as harmful as the virus. We need to keep the kids active to help build their immune system, which in turn will help against COVID. He also asked the board to allow parents to choose for their kids.

Supt. Ramsay noted that we were looking forward to having all the mandates and protocols gone this year. In recent weeks, and with the surge of the Delta variant and recommendations from the CDC and the state

to mask indoors, it brings us here tonight. There were a lot of things we did last year to help mitigate COVID. We don't really know exactly what helped keep our numbers low because of the multiple measures. He believes the combination of all that we did helped keep the numbers low. Whether we have a mask mandate or not, we are looking to have as normal a school year as possible.

Other parents in the audience shared their views.

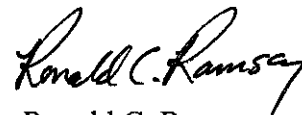
Everett Grant noted that the state uses a color code for levels of community transmission that includes blue (low), yellow (moderate), orange (substantial), and red (high). He feels we should require masks based on this code. He moved, and it was seconded by Stephen Dunham, that the district require masks in the schools whenever Washington County is at an infection level of orange or red, per CDC guidelines. This motion did not pass with a vote of 329-yes and 672-no. ("Yes" votes: Grant, Murphy, Dunham, Hartford; "No" votes: Chartrand, Perham, Greene, Wright, R. Kennedy, Strout, Beal, G. Kennedy)

Motion by Ronald Kennedy, second by Chris Chartrand, and voted (769-yes, 232-no) that the Board authorizes the Superintendent to revise the current School Re-opening Plan to remove references to mandatory masking, except on school busses, and all other COVID related protocols that are no longer mandated by the CDC and DOE. The school board recommends masking in schools but is leaving the choice up to each individual at this time. If at any time circumstances change to include a much higher case rate in our county/community, or a significant increase in positive cases in our schools, or the state of Maine changes from a recommendation to a mandate, a mask mandate may be implemented by the Superintendent in consultation with the Board Chair and Administration. ("Yes" votes: Chartrand, Perham, Greene, Wright, R. Kennedy, Strout, Beal, G. Kennedy, Hartford; "No" votes: Grant, Murphy, Dunham)

3. RE: ADJOURNMENT

ACTION: Motion by Tiffany Strout, and voted (unanimously) to adjourn the meeting at 8:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Ronald C. Ramsay
Secretary to the Board

AUGUST 18, 2021, SPECIAL MEETING SUMMARY

APPROVED motion to make masking in schools optional, and authorizing the Supt. To implement a mask mandate should circumstances warrant it