

BUNCOMBE COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING
5:30 p.m. – Call to Order – Minitorium
February 22, 2022
OPEN SESSION
Broadcast Live on YouTube

MINUTES

BE IT REMEMBERED: That the Buncombe County Board of Education met in a special called session on February 22, 2022 at 5:30 p.m. in the Minitorium located at 175 Bingham Road, Asheville, North Carolina and streamed live on YouTube, when the following business was transacted.

The following Board members were present:

Ann Franklin, Madam Chair	Pat Bryant, Member
Peggy Buchanan, Member	Amanda Simpkins, Member
Cindy McMahon, Member	Max Queen, Member
Amy Churchill, Vice-Chair	

Staff present: Dr. Tony Baldwin, Superintendent; Susanne Swanger, Associate Superintendent; Joseph Hough, Assistant Superintendent; Tonya Robinson, Director of Secondary Education; Jennifer Reed, Director of Elementary & Intermediate Education; David Thompson, Director of Student Services; Ginny Barrett, Director of Title I; Robert Frisby, Interim Director of Technology; Stacia Harris, Director of Communications; Tim Reaves, Assistant Director of Communications; Leslie Averill, Scott Emory and Joshua Ponder, Technology Support Specialists; Clark Wyatt, Director of Maintenance; Tim Fierle, Director of Facilities; Dean Shatley, Attorney and Kim Matthews, Executive Administrative Assistant

CALL TO ORDER – Madam Chair Franklin

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Mr. Queen made a motion to approve the agenda and Ms. Churchill seconded the motion – the motion was approved unanimously.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

MOMENT OF SILENCE

Dr. Baldwin introduced Dr. Kathleen McGann a representative from the ABC Science Collaborative and Division of Infectious Diseases Professor, Department of Pediatrics, Duke University Medical Center. Dr. McGann joined the meeting virtually. She gave a brief overview of the objectives of the ABC Science Collaborative and their goal to keep children in school and to keep them and staff healthy. Dr. McGann described what the case trend for Covid has looked like over time. She also discussed the major educational and health impacts on children that have resulted from the pandemic and virtual learning. Dr. McGann presented information to the Board on universal masking recommendations by public health professionals and organizations, stating that with other mitigation strategies also in place, there was a markedly lower transmission rate of Covid. She also gave examples of the impact of masking on the transmission rates within the school setting. Dr. McGann spoke to Buncombe County’s Covid statistics and vaccination rates. Information was shared with the Board to take into consideration when making a change in masking policies. Dr. McGann then answered questions from board members regarding hospitalizations, severity of the Omicron variant and case rates of Covid and the similarity between those and other respiratory illnesses such as the flu and RSV.

Mr. Shatley stated that since the Board has limited the public comment portion of the agenda to thirty minutes and there are fourteen people signed up to speak, each person will receive two minutes to speak and be limited to the agenda topic.

Ms. Franklin informed everyone that a total of forty comments had been received via email and that eighteen comments expressed a desire to keep universal masking in schools in place and that twenty-two comments advocated for an optional mask policy in schools be adopted.

PUBLIC COMMENT

The following people spoke in favor of keeping the mandatory mask guidelines in place:

Kim Presley, a grandparent from the Roberson District
Catherine Ashe, a parent from the Enka District
Mary Catherine Cole, a parent from the Owen District

The following people spoke in favor of making face masks optional in the schools:

- Kelli Worley, a grandparent from the Reynolds district
- Katie Worley, a parent from the Reynolds district
- Wendy Nevarez, a parent from the Reynolds district
- Sara Disher Ratliff, a parent from the Reynolds district
- Taylor Haynes, a parent from the Enka district
- Jennifer Smith, a parent from the Erwin district
- Melissa McFee, a parent from the Erwin and North Buncombe districts
- Tamara Parker, a Buncombe County resident
- Kay Olsen, a Buncombe County resident
- Mike Coladonato, a parent from Asheville
- Christiana Dillingham, a Buncombe County resident

ACTION AGENDA

- Consideration of Revisions to Buncombe County Schools’ “Return to Learn” Plans

Dr. Baldwin shared the following information with the Board: the four key policy revisions in the recent week from the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit revisions, the Buncombe County Commissioner’s indoor face covering requirement expiration, Governor Cooper’s announcement encouraging school systems to end universal masking and the announcement that the StrongSchoolsNC Toolkit will be revised on March 7 to recommend ending universal masking. Dr. Baldwin also noted Covid data patterns and positivity rates and the latest update to other North Carolina school systems face covering policies. Dr. Baldwin then gave his recommendation to Board that beginning February 28, 2022, face masks should become optional in the schools, while maintaining the federal requirement of face masks on school buses and for those individuals that will be returning to school after a five-day exclusion due to testing positive for Covid. Dr. Baldwin concluded his presentation with comments concerning “respect”. He emphasized how important it will be for our students, staff, parents and stakeholders to have respect for each individual’s decision regarding the wearing of face masks during this time of transition.

The Board members discussed the information at length. Mr. Bryant asked if the date of transition to a mask-optional environment should be pulled out as a separate motion. Mr. Shatley said that it could be separated if so desired. Ms. McMahon stated that the Board should look at new metrics that might possibly trigger a change from a mask-optional to a mask-required status. Ms. Churchill stated that the Board should look at the metrics that Dr. McGann referenced in her presentation this evening. Ms. Simpkins and Mr. Queen asked if three days’ notice to transition to mask-optional would give staff time to prepare. Dr. Baldwin and Mr. Thompson both agreed that the schools would be ready and stated that the time would be used to educate staff and students to be respectful of each person’s choice. Our teachers and counselors will focus on this, and expectations will be set for our students.

Ms. Simpkins made a motion to approve the recommendation from the Superintendent that beginning Monday, February 28, 2022, Optional Masking will be enacted in all Buncombe County Schools with exception of the following: Masks will be required on all school buses based on current federal guidelines and masks will be required for students/staff on days 6-10 while returning to in-person instruction from a 5-day exclusion due to testing positive for COVID-19 and Mr. Queen seconded the motion – the motion was approved unanimously.

ADJOURNMENT – Madam Chair Franklin

Ms. McMahon made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:18 p.m.: and Ms. Churchill seconded the motion – the motion was approved unanimously.