

**Watertown Board of Education
Special Board of Education Meeting**

Meeting Date: August 21, 2020
Meeting Time: 7:30 p.m.
Meeting Place: REMOTE MEETING

Members Present: Ms. Leslie Crotty, Chairman
Mr. Tom Lambert, Vice Chairman
Ms. Janelle Wilk, Secretary
Ms. Cathie Rinaldi
Ms. Diane Bristol
Ms. Cindy Eastman
Mr. Jason Malagutti
Ms. Josephine Cavallo-Rosa

Members Absent: Mr. Robert Makowski

Others Present: Dr. Rydell Harrison –Superintendent of Schools
Mr. Tom DiStasio – Business Manager

- A. Convene Regular Meeting – 7:30 p.m.**
- B. Salute to the Flag**
- C. Roll Call – Ms. Davidson**
- D. Discussion: 2020-2021 Recommended School Calendar Update**

Dr. Harrison - Good evening everyone. Prior to the last board meeting that we had on last Monday, the administrators shared information regarding some of the reopening challenges that we are facing as we got closer to the start of the year. As you know, there have been a number of changes in the guidelines from the state that have had a direct impact on our district plan and also on our building implementation plans. While we have been able to collectively address some of the issues to move forward with our preparations, there is one issue that continues to persist which is the reason behind my request tonight. Since the school year ended in June, our administrators have already filled 53 positions across all of our schools. That is a huge number in comparison to previous years. We've had a number of new positions that came

on board for this upcoming school year but also because we have had a number of retirees. So that begins a chain reaction. If we have an internal candidate move into a position from a retiree, it then creates another new position that we have to fill. With each of those positions, we have the guidelines from their contracts which specify the number of days that the positions have to be posted for internally first. That was a huge challenge and a good portion of the summer for most of our administrators. Since then, in relationship to our plan, in preparing for the fall opening, we had to create new or add new positions. For instance, we are doubling the number of nurses we have across the district which means we must post and then hire for those positions. One significant change with staffing is that there are new regulations and laws related to hiring and providing staff with accommodations if they fall into one of the high-risk areas related to covid-19 or if they have child care needs that cannot be met while they are working. Each of those is an individual case. our administrators worked closely with our HR department to identify what those needs are, to work with the teachers or staff, to talk about possible accommodations and then to put plans in place to meet those accommodations. As a result of all that, we are in a position right now where we have a number of new hires that need to take place prior to the start of the year. In a typical year, if we were moving forward with the start of the year and we had identified a few candidates, we would have had to wait the period for them leaving other districts. While we are waiting for them to transfer in, you can use a building sub oh, you can put a sub in. This year is very different because of all the robust professional learning that has to take place prior to getting people in front of our students. We must prioritize that training and the safety protocols that come with it. Currently, we have 14 substitute positions that we need to hire for and they are directly related to accommodations teachers have made based on their medical concerns or their qualification under FMLA. In addition to that, we had a huge shift and enrollment for the summer. Typically, we might see a small increase in enrollment across the district, an excess of 5 to 10 students, 20 students let's say in a really big year. As of today, across all five of our schools, we have 102 new enrollees. That is 25 new students at John Trumbull, 13-15 at Judson, 12 at Polk, 25 at Swift and then 25 also at the high school. That is a pretty significant change that we will need to make some staffing adjustments for in order to meet those needs. Additionally, we surveyed all of our families to determine how many of our families were choosing the voluntary remote learning option for the fall and we initially came up from K-12 that we had 297 students. As you know, families still have the option of making that choice, as all they have to do is reach out to their principal and we will put the plan in place. Since the survey closed, we had another 19 students across the district that moved to voluntary remote learning. Each of these changes with students going from in-person to remote or from remote in person, bring staffing challenges along with it where we have to make some adjustments. As things stand right now, we have the 14 substitutes that we need to hire and additionally we have 4 certified staff, two nurses, and 11 non certified staff. We are in need of a new first grade teacher, a new school psychologist, a library media specialist, and then a special education teacher. As far as non-certified staff, it is a number of paraprofessionals and 1 library clerk to be shared at Judson and Polk. Some of those are again, filling those who have just resigned from the district but then there are also a couple of new positions in order to provide additional monitoring in the hallways, and then working directly with students. So that being said, given the hiring challenges that are in front of us, the request is to delay the start of the school year from September 1st to September 8th to allow for additional time for hiring. It is really important to note that the challenges that we are facing related to staffing are significant but they are also challenges that districts all across the state

are dealing with. What happens is in several cases, we have gone all the way through the process of interviewing the pool of candidates, moving them to the school level, sending the two finalists to me for a final interview, and then we have a fantastic interview and they are excited but what is different about this year, is that once they are offered the position the response is can I call you back tomorrow? I have two other offers. Right now, it is a very competitive field when it comes to hiring for positions. We got some good news earlier this week from the State Board of Education that they are providing some flexibility with licensure requirements on a temporary basis which will allow us to increase our candidate pool because we will have an opportunity to consider people outside of their initial certification area so that we can still get licensed staff members working with our students. I thought it was very important to bring this forward because I think that ultimately it's not about convenience, or not about not having enough candidates, it's really about having the time that we need to make sure that we are able to on board new staff members and engage them in the training that is necessary.

Ms. Crotty - Thank you Dr. Harrison. I have a couple of questions and then we'll open it up to board members. Of the 14th substitutes that are needed how big of an application pool do we already have? **A:** There are two ways that we look at substitutes, one is the traditional way as a long-term sub where for instance a 4th grade teacher is scheduled to be out of work for a possible maternity leave or a way for surgery, we would post for a long-term sub position and look for someone who has elementary certification. When we are talking about some of these substitute positions related to teacher needs and accommodations related to their health, in some cases we will have our staff members teaching remotely from home, but we still need a substitute teacher to be available in the classroom to be with the students. In that case it doesn't necessarily have to be a substitute hired in that content area because that licensed teacher is still in charge of the instruction. That said, we don't have a huge pool of the typical applicants of substitutes but there are a lot of teachers, certified teachers, who may not end up being hired this season that we are reaching back out to as potential substitutes for us across the district. We are really trying to be creative and expand our candidate pool.

I realized the task of the 102 new enrollees coming in which is different than in other years, not only in numbers but in the process, from what I understand all of the schools and already worked out their classes, the people, the social distancing space needed, and then you add 102 more, that really has to throw a curveball to the work that has already been done. Do you have any indication as to where those new enrollees are coming from? **A:** In other parts of the state we are seeing enrollments increase, but those are people who are coming from New York City, for example. We know that that is likely not impacting us here. When I talked with our principals, some of what we know is that there have been a number of parochial schools in our area that have closed. I think some of it is from there, I think its people moving in oh, and a lot of different issues and we can't really pin down one specific trend or where they are coming from.

Do you think that one week is really enough time to give the administrators to complete the interview process for potentially having to repost positions and get new applicants? Is 5 business days really enough to complete that or do you think a week after that we will be in the same position? **A:** I am confident that we can put ourselves in a position that we are ready within one week. I think there may be some areas where we might have to onboard some folks after we start and that will really be dependent upon particularly when we are looking at the

four certified positions that have to be hired, because if we are pulling people that are currently in other districts that will be a little bit more of a challenge as far as waiting on start times because people have to give their notice. But ultimately, I think that we will be prepared to start the school year. At some of our schools, we have interventionists that work with small groups of students, and those are not staff members who start building groups on the first day of school. That will be some opportunities for us to have a little bit more flexibility if needed, and we are creating the professional learning modules so that they can be done in person and then also some virtually. So, if we needed to kind of run a second wave about training, we have that option as well.

Should applicants who apply for those jobs that didn't get them at this point, should they anticipate that they could potentially now be called for an interview since we need to go back for some of these positions? **A:** Yes, which is what we often do. For a certified position we normally get about 85 candidates. So, it could be in working to hire a first-grade teacher, we would look at some of those folks who we have already interviewed or one of our other schools I've interviewed, but maybe it wasn't a good fit to that school. I feel confident in the pool of people that we have, but we can go back.

Ms. Bristol - To summarize, you mentioned that we need 14 subs, four certified staff, two nurses, and 11 non-certified staff. Of those, which positions are the showstoppers? What positions can we not hire for or can we not start school with the positions? And what is the plan for ensuring that we have those positions hired and ready to go for the 8th? **A:** That is a hard question to answer because some of the things that we would do for mediation matters are just not available to us. So, to start the year without a first-grade teacher... we have a strong candidate pool so I am not concerned that we will not have a first-grade teacher. But if that were the case, in a typical year, if you needed to spread those kids out and have them push into other classrooms, that would be something you could do. That is certainly not an option for us this year. I think that the biggest challenge for us is looking at the substitute positions at the secondary level. Of those at the secondary level, 10 of them are at the middle and high school. The reason why that is challenging is that in many of those cases, the instruction will be able to continue, however, we need someone in the room present with them to monitor. That is where they become showstoppers. This is the benefit of having experienced administrators. I would be working to fill those positions but I'm also working on what would be my B plan. If that sub is not ready to go, is there a para I can use and can I please something else together. So, while those sub positions have the potential to be showstoppers, there could be some temporary fixes put in place if we did not get all 14 of them.

I am concerned that five business days of hiring and reshuffling and all of those things... it seems like it is a huge undertaking. If you are confident, then I think we have to consider it. You are saying we have a strong candidate pool for the certified staff, but are you confident we can hire people for those positions because you also said that while we have qualified people, when we go to make an offer they're not necessarily accepting it because the competition is so broad out there. As a parent and a board member, I want to do what's right for our kids. It's going to be an uneasy time for them, and in my opinion, the more that we can have in place, ready to go with not a lot of movement for our students, I think would be in their best interest.

Ms. Crotty - In Watertown, we don't have an Assistant Superintendent. We don't have a full-time Human Resource Director. What are we doing to provide support to our administrators

who are responsible for filling all these positions? A: That is part of the challenge. We were working with administrators today to provide a list of potential substitutes. Ms. Fekete is helping with that process. It is one of the challenging pieces and you are thinking that as our administrators are sitting in an interview with a person, it's not like they can sit there and look at other candidates as well. One of the things that we will be competing with our principles is to do some pre-vetting so we can provide them with a list of potential people that we have already done some screening of over the weekend, and then had a stronger list for them. I will say that when it comes to the accommodation, we nailed down the completion of identifying the accommodations and making a list of accommodations that we could meet. That process was literally finalized this morning. It is part of the challenge here as so many of these things are fluid.

Ms. Rinaldi - I asked at our meeting on Monday about having enough subs for teachers who don't feel comfortable coming back. We spoke about that and you mentioned that we would be okay and you also mentioned that you may be able to use paras as well for different positions. So now I am concerned because it's Friday and we don't have enough positions. I don't want to have to come back in another week and asked that we start another week later. I don't think that is fair to parents either so is a week enough time? Parents are trying to shift around schedules as it is, and I know it is a difficult time, but they all have jobs as well so I feel we need to take that into consideration too. **A:** Absolutely. Given the conversation that I had today to the accommodations, I am comfortable with delaying just the week. And that being enough time. I will save the number of people that we have regarding accommodations, and particularly approved accommodations, on Monday, are very different then what we have today. Part of that is working with some of the guidance, the legal guidance we are getting, related to the best way to meet those accommodations. We have to take each request for accommodations on a case-by-case basis.

Ms. Bristol - How many pending accommodation requests do you have? Does that mean we might need more paras or substitutes? Is there a point where you say we can't accept anymore because you're trying to run your school district? **A:** Legally, there is no way to say we can't accept any more accommodation requests. There could be where we got to the point where we could make the accommodation that we're at the district, we make a really good effort to meet and meet those accommodations and that would help us to meet the legal standard and to be very understanding with our staff members. but you can't just cut it off and say you missed the deadline and that is it. There are no pending requests based on the information that was sent to HR.

Dr. Harrison - I want to make one clarifying point. I also need to point out why hiring two nurses is not a showstopper. That is because we can contract with a nurse temp agency to bring in people in the meantime. That is a practice that, as a district, we have had to do before when we have had nurses that were out where we couldn't find a nurse on our sub list.

E. Public Participation (Please state name, address and topic of discussion)

To view the public participation, please visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrV5gtbO7tQ>

Ms. Crotty – Before we close public participation, I would just like to comment that our teachers and our administrators want our children back in our schools so much. For those that are concerned about additional accommodations being requested, I have complete faith that if one of our teachers in Watertown Public Schools needs an accommodation beyond the 8th, or tomorrow, it is for a very good reason. I am confident with these hiring's; we will be ok even if we get a few more accommodation requests. I just know how deeply and passionately our teachers want to see our students in our schools as do our administrators, and I don't believe that this is for lack of planning. I know the work that has been going in and I think that we have to understand that this is an issue across the state in regards to staffing and accommodations and it is the law and we need to make sure that we are following it and giving our employees what they deserve.

F. Action Items – Adoption of Items to be Approved by Consent

Agenda Item:	F.1
Subject:	Consideration for the Approval to Change the Re-opening Date for Watertown Public Schools
Motion Presented By:	Ms. Rinaldi
Motion Seconded By:	Ms. Rosa
Text of the Motion:	I move that the Board approve of the superintendent's recommendation to change the date of the 2020/2021 calendar's first day of school to September 8th for grades K-9 and September 9th for grades 10-12.
Discussion:	<p>Ms. Rinaldi – I just want to make sure...I don't have any problem extending it to the 8th, I know that a lot of school districts are doing that, my only concern is that...I also know that the CEA has extended their to open up even later than that, so I just don't want to have to come back again and change the date. I want to make sure again, that a week is enough.</p> <p>Ms. Bristol – My comments are that while listening to our parents public speak, is that we may not have all of the positions filled on the 8th (inaudible from alarm)...so my recommendation is that we start on the 1st as we originally planned knowing that we are going to have to come up with things mentioned where we have to put a para in a class until we hire that position or other certified staff that will have students so until those</p>

people come on board or we postpone until we are confident, we will have everybody ready to go. I am not getting the feeling that the 8th is that date.

Opposed: Ms. Bristol
Abstained: None
Vote: Motion Passes

G. Executive Session (7:33 p.m.)

Agenda Item: G.1
Subject: To Go into Executive Session

Motion Presented By: Ms. Bristol
Motion Seconded By: Ms. Eastman

Test of the Motion: I move that the Board go into Executive session for a discussion regarding the Interim Superintendent's employment. Attending the session will be Leslie Crotty, Tom Lambert, Janelle Wilk, Cathie Rinaldi, Cindy Eastman, Jason Malagutti, Josephine Rosa, and myself, Diane Bristol.

Discussion: None

Opposed: None
Abstained: None
Vote: Motion Passes

H. Regular Session (7:55p.m.)

I. Adjournment

Agenda Item: I.1
Subject: To adjourn the meeting

Motion Presented By: Ms. Wilk
Motion Seconded By: Mr. Malagutti

Text of the Motion: Madame Chair, I move that we adjourn.

Discussion:	None
Opposed:	None
Abstained:	None
Vote:	Motion Passes

The meeting adjourned at 7:55 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Mindi Davidson
Recording Secretary

Janelle Wilk
Secretary of the Board