

BURLINGTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF JANUARY 12, 2021

Chairman Monaco called this WebEx virtual meeting of the School Committee to order at 7:00 p.m. Present: Mr. Carl Foss, Mr. Thomas F. Murphy, Ms. Martha Simon, and Mrs. Katherine Bond. Superintendent Eric Conti, Assistant Superintendent Patrick Larkin, Business Manager Nichole Coscia, and Director of Operations Bob Cunha also present.

- CALL TO ORDER** Chairman Monaco read the following statement: Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §20, and the Governor's March 15, 2020 Order imposing strict limitations on the number of people that may gather in one place, this meeting of the School Committee is being conducted via remote participation. She further explained that if someone would like to be recognized to raise their hand.
- A moment of silence was observed for those serving our country in the face of grave danger and doing their jobs to protect us.
- APPROVAL OF MINUTES** Moved by Mrs. Bond and seconded by Ms. Simon to approve the minutes of 8/10/20. Mr. Foss, aye; Mrs. Bond, aye; Ms. Simon, aye; Mrs. Monaco, aye, Mr. Murphy, aye. Motion carried 5-0-0. Moved by Mr. Foss and seconded by Ms. Simon to approve minutes of 12/15/20. Mr. Foss, aye; Mrs. Bond, aye; Ms. Simon, aye; Mrs. Monaco, aye, Mr. Murphy, aye. Motion carried 5-0-0.
- PUBLIC PARTICIPATION** Parent Grace Janusis inquired about data collection of iReady and math assessments; in her child's class, students scores didn't change and their class score overall remained the same. She'd like to see students scores using these two assessments over the past couple years to see how students are doing districtwide and are they progressing or just maintaining skills. She further inquired that if the MCAS requirement is waived, how will it be ensured that seniors are graduating with the necessary skills. Dr. Conti replied that iReady assessment standards change each semester and are given three times per year. Chairman Monaco stated that given the current pandemic, students are not getting as much content as in a typical year, are students making progress or not, and if students are graduating without taking the MCAS, do they have the skills that are tested by the MCAS. In response to Ms. Janusis' query about seniors graduating with the necessary skills, if MCAS is waived; Dr. Conti replied that for MCAS in the immediate future, the School Committee is considering the MCAS resolution, and explained that most students finish their MCAS graduation requirement in their sophomore year. Counseling Coordinator Joe Attubato stated there is currently one senior who needs to take the math state assessment and four seniors who are new to the state of Massachusetts who will be required to take an MCAS approved course in lieu of the MCAS assessment. Dr. Conti further explained that district diagnostics would ensure students are receiving the necessary skills. Chairman Monaco requested a progress report at the next meeting on student iReady and math assessments.
- INFORMATION/REPORTS**
Student Representative Sara Shaikh reported on a number of high school events and fundraisers. The next Equity Committee meeting will be held on 1/21, the hiring process working group met yesterday and they are conferring about interview questions to potentially be used with Director of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion applicants. She sent out a student survey, and reviewed a couple questions and response including: the new policy of students keeping cameras on during remote class is it making students feel more engaged with answers of 19 yes and 42 no. In answer to the question of if students felt safe coming to school during covid, the response was equally split.
- Subcommittee Reports** Mr. Murphy reported that the fenced wetland area at BHS was cleaned up; Mr. Cunha noted recreation department and school department employs performed the clean up. A recreation committee meeting will held tomorrow at 1 p.m.
- FY22 Budget Update** Dr. Conti stated that he, Ms. Coscia, Mr. Murphy and Mrs. Monaco met with Ways & Means, Selectman, and Town employees to discuss the upcoming FY22 budget. Local revenues have been greatly affected by the pandemic. The town is waiting to see what revenues/additional data will be available as well as possible federal funds prior to making a decision on a FY22 budget guideline. This makes the budget process approximately a month behind. Their next meeting is tomorrow night.

Chairman’s Report –
Inspector General

Chairman Monaco requested that careful notes be taken for this agenda item, so that it will not be said that the School Committee wasn’t upfront about this. Chairman Monaco stated that a letter was received from the Office of the Inspector General a month or so ago and through the school district attorney the letter was responded to. The two letters will be on the Inspector General’s website and at that point, the two documents will be public documents. She explained she was not looking for conversation or discussion and these two documents include pertinent details. She gave the following summary of what she thinks transpired: a complaint was made to the Inspector General’s office from an unidentified person about Dr. Conti. The Inspector General’s office determined that Dr. Conti used a school owned trailer as well as using a school owned vehicle lift in maintenance for his car (both of which he had permission to use). Chairman Monaco explained that Dr. Conti had a clause in his contract that authorized him to use the school district’s facilities and equipment, when Dr. Conti found out this was an issue, he requested that the School Committee remove this clause from his contract and the School Committee ultimately removed it. Contact with the Inspector General’s office started over three years ago. During the investigation, they identified an incorrect employee reimbursement procedure and this was changed a few years ago when new Business Manager Nichole Coscia came to the school department. The response letter submitted to the Inspector General’s office noted that the school department removed the identified clause of reasonable use of school district facilities and equipment from Dr. Conti’s contract and eliminated the employee reimbursement process. These two letters can be found on the Inspector General’s website when they post them. She related that the School committee doesn’t discuss school personnel or individual contracts in public. Chairman Monaco stated that at no time did Dr. Conti do anything he wasn’t supposed to and that he had permission for everything he did. Finally, she explained that she didn’t want anyone to say the School Committee didn’t address this issue. In response to Chairman Monaco’s inquiry if anyone had comments, former school committee member Kristin Russo stated that she was the School Committee Chair during this time, everything was taken seriously, and it was in the same timeframe as the Powers & Sullivan audit. She further commented that all items identified were addressed.

Student representative Sarah Shaikh again referred to the student survey question: did teachers take the appropriate time to discuss recent events at the Capitol: 41 students responded yes and 14 responded no. Sarah related that teachers took the time to address this with students on Thursday and Friday last week and that students appreciated it. Dr. Conti observed that it was handled well by principals and teachers and information/resources were shared with staff.

Ways & Means

Roger Riggs, Steve Morin, and Jaya Voruganti in attendance. Mr. Riggs stated that the Ways & Means Committee hasn’t convened regarding the FY22 budget yet.

Coronavirus Update From
The Superintendent

Dr. Conti stated he’s getting public health input from the Board of Health and Araidne Labs, it has been a challenge to keep schools open, and some neighboring districts are in a remote setting. Burlington is beginning to face challenges with adults being impacted, potentially having to go to remote learning because we don’t have an adult to teach class, we may have more of this, and the situation is dynamic. We are trying to keep schools open as long as possible and targeted closures may be needed due to staffing. The state is offering a 6 week pilot covid testing where they will put a group of ten people’s tests into one test tube and if a positive result is obtained, all 10 people will need individual tests. The state will provide pool testing kits but will not provide staffing or funding. The Superintendent explained that Burlington is not scheduled to participate in this group, but he is still thinking carefully about it as the deadline to respond to the state is Friday. He explained that surrounding communities have had mixed results on the decision on whether to test or not test. In response to Mr. Foss, Dr. Conti replied that Watertown schools are conducting individual testing at approximately \$50 per test and a cost of \$10,000 per week. Lexington is beginning testing this week. He further explained that in all the presentations they’ve seen, no one could answer his question of what is the number of tests needed to get a saturation to have a scientific impact and commented that some adults are reluctant to take a test. Ms. Simon commented that Dr. Conti’s decision to not participate in the pilot right now makes sense, 6 weeks of testing is not much, and would testing continue after the initial 6 weeks and if so, would our school district need to fund it. Chairman Monaco also agreed with Dr. Conti and noted the concentration should be on vaccinating.

BHS 2021-22 Program of
Studies – First Reading

Principal Sullivan stated that this process begins in the fall, they work with department chairs who review course offerings, descriptions and are asked for changes/updates/modifications. He reviewed four pages of proposed new courses, modifications and deletions that was included in

the Committee’s packet. This year due to the pandemic only two new courses are being proposed: Graphic Narratives: The Refugee Experience, a semester course for grades 11 and 12 and Physical Science, a foundational level course for students on an IEP in grades 10 or 11. Due to declining enrollment, the Reasoning and Argumentation honors course will be deleted. There are 8 courses that will be modified with only a course name change. Counseling Coordinator Joe Attubato reviewed three art department courses that are only offered every other year: Architecture, Web Design, and Fashion Design. Mr. Attubato explained the dual enrollment courses offered at BHS where students get high school credit and potentially get college credit from Middlesex Community College. BHS students could graduate with a possible 15-20 college credits. New dual enrollment courses will be: AP Computer Science Principles, honors Computer Science Principles, and AP Environmental Science. The Program of Studies have minor adjustments in computer science offerings. He also reviewed covid related MCAS graduation requirements update explaining that information will be published in the Program of Studies. Covid language has been updated on student transcripts and the BHS profile. In response to Ms. Simon, Mr. Attubato explained that the basic business and economics class has been offered the past couple years, they are trying to capture juniors and seniors who haven’t taken a business course, and they have approximately 15 – 20 students in a course section. Chairman Monaco stated that changes were made to AP biology and AP chemistry last year and inquired if there are any other changes; Mr. Attubato responded that there haven’t been further changes for these two courses. As this is a first reading, the School Committee will take this item under advisement and vote on it at the January 26 meeting. Principal Sullivan commented that for next January they anticipate beginning the process to look at the graduation requirement for course exploration 500-900 and are considering adding an embedded English honors course. The social studies standards are changing and they will continue to make changes to that curriculum. Finally, Mr. Sullivan explained that if next fall is a normal school year opening, they will begin the new modified block schedule that was delayed due to covid.

2021-22 School Choice -
First Reading

Dr. Conti explained that the request for School Choice for 2020-21 will remain the same with: 10 freshman spots and 5 spots each in grades 10, 11, and 12. Principal Sullivan noted the high school doesn’t typically fill all spots, this year have 5 freshman, 5 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 8 freshman. No new freshman spots are opened until after scheduling all Burlington students first. A public hearing and vote will be held at the January 26 meeting.

Parent Survey Results

The Superintendent related that a parent survey went out to parents prior to winter break asking if they’d like to switch their student’s mode of instruction (i.e. hybrid to remote and vice versa). Mr. Larkin stated that at the elementary level, 10 students want to switch from hybrid to remote and 17 students want to switch from remote to hybrid and most changes will take place on January 11 and a few on January 19. Eighteen middle school student learning mode changes took place on January 4. BHS Principal Sullivan stated that approximately 50 students have inquired about changing their mode of learning, mostly from hybrid to remote. Seventeen students are switching from hybrid to remote on January 29, 12 or 13 additional students are checking into the possibility of switching to remote, and 15 students are undecided. Mr. Attubato explained he reviews with students potential impacts on their individual schedule if they change their current mode of learning. Mr. Sullivan further explained these numbers of students switching modes of learning are fluid and the numbers may change again.

The Superintendent commented that they will probably not be switching learning mode changes this spring; they want to continue strong established relationships between students and teachers. He further explained that the school district is responsible for reporting absences. The challenge in the hybrid schedule is, students come to school but some students need to be out and may access learning via livestreaming. If a student needs to be absent, they need a parental excused absence from their hybrid schedule.

Chairman Monaco inquired if the virus numbers begin to go down, would the school district consider longer elementary days or more days per week. Dr. Conti responded that we are always looking to do that and are closely monitoring the situation. He explained that Commissioner Riley is anticipating that teachers will be vaccinated in February through April. The elementary schools are in person for mornings but to increase hours/days, we will need to manage lunch/recess and providing 45 minutes of afternoon teaching. Chairman Monaco stated parents are inquiring about a possible full day of kindergarten and requested the Superintendent conduct a parent survey for full-day kindergarten. Dr. Conti explained the administration will work at it, work through scheduling challenges, look at possibilities for a realistic kindergarten

day, review funding implications, consult kindergarten teachers and elementary principals and look at transportation. After completion of these items, families will then be surveyed.

School Building/Facilities Mr. Cunha stated that the gym floor poly and striping is done, the bleachers are installed, and full project should be completed next week. He is completing an application to submit to the electric company to see if four schools are eligible for a possible grant to be able to install remote management controls and devices and have smart capabilities. The MSBA statement of interest will have a summer deadline this year. A follow up meeting with the MSBA is being held at the end of the month regarding the Fox Hill statement of interest. Yesterday Mr. Cunha emailed the Committee a 25 page draft ventilation report created by himself, Ed Parsons, and Mike Walters. He provided a quick summary: ventilation assessment of 6 school buildings, the fixes and repairs put in place, CO2 testing conducted, and HEPA filters installed. The point of the report is to document: making and tracking changes, elements providing additional fresh air, and to demonstrate that air quality requirements are being met. If there are any remaining space where we're not, classes are being relocated and individual heating units are being fixed/repared. Volunteer Ed Parsons commented he will review findings, remediation, and conclusions. The Superintendent explained this will be further reviewed at the January 26 meeting. The School Committee thanked Ed Parsons, Mike Walters, and Bob Cunha.

COMMUNICATION
Monthly Financial Update

Ms. Coscia reviewed highlights of the four page FY21 monthly financials¹. In revolving accounts, the school lunch deficit is \$178,729, which reflects reimbursements through November. The Town has set aside approximately \$100,000 for the lunch program deficit from covid relief funds. After anticipated reimbursements, Ms. Coscia is comfortable with the lunch revolving account balance. The Sprouts revolving account deficit is a timing lag issue associated with when teachers' paychecks are issued. Ms. Simon observed that the schools are offering free student lunches because there is reimbursement for them, but it doesn't cover the whole cost of providing lunches. Ms. Coscia explained that the operating budget is down approximately \$20,000 as a couple of extra course sections were added at BHS and there is \$205,000 remaining until the end of the fiscal year. The Accommodated budget has a total of \$3,458 remaining.

Ms. Coscia reviewed COVID related expenses² funded by two COVID-19 federal relief grants received for a total of \$902,314.

Grant expenditures included:

- Professional Teacher salaries: \$457,023
- Support salaries: \$87,104
- Contracted services: \$119,039
- Materials & Supplies: \$239,148.

Dr. Conti noted that the majority of grant funds were spent on Burlington teacher salaries further explaining that the school district invested in live teachers when we could. Ms. Simon requested that these two sets of financials be put on the school website. Roger Riggs inquired if there are anymore grant funds expected and Ms. Coscia replied there may be something in the pipeline but there aren't firm numbers.

Director of Diversity,
Equity & Inclusion
Update

Mr. Larkin explained that the Director of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion open job posting has 38 applicants to date, the posting closes at the end of January, and the interview committee should be meeting prior to end of January.

January 13 & January 27
Professional Development
Days

Mr. Larkin stated that tomorrow's professional development offerings will include IDEAS training for Memorial and Fox Hill staff, MacBooks training, collaborative meetings, and at the end of the day, they will then be asked to take a survey. Professional development days are also scheduled for January 27 and two more in March.

Student Opportunity Act

Dr. Conti stated that there have been conversations about the Student Opportunity Act in the past with the Committee, it's a way to get more funding from states to districts that need the funds, and the funds were delayed. Burlington is slated to get approximately \$100,000; these are not new funds but a subset of chapter 70 funds. The deadline for the application is this Friday and requested that the School Committee take another vote to approve this. Dr. Conti

¹ FY21 Monthly Financials (12/31/20)
² COVID-19 Relief Funding & Expenses

commented that he's unsure if there is money in the state budget for this, two additional nurses were hired this year and that would be the intended use of the funds. Moved by Mr. Murphy and seconded by Ms. Simon to spend Student Opportunity Funds on two additional nurses we have added in FY21. Mr. Foss, aye; Mrs. Bond, aye; Ms. Simon, aye; Mrs. Monaco, aye, Mr. Murphy, aye. Motion carried 5-0-0.

MCAS Testing

Superintendent Conti explained that at a meeting with Commissioner Riley last week, it was announced that the state will be administering MCAS tests this year, not for accountability but for diagnostics and the K-grade 8 test will be shortened. As of today, MCAS is happening and school districts are waiting for guidance on how the test will be administered to remote students.

MCAS & High Stakes Testing Resolution – Second Reading

Dr. Conti stated this was submitted to the Committee in December for a first reading with four members in support and Chairman Monaco skeptical. If approved, the resolution will be submitted to MASC. Dr. Conti read again the MCAS and High stakes Testing Resolution submitted by the Mass. Association of School Committees included in tonight's meeting packet for discussion and consideration. The resolution supports not administering high stakes MCAS testing for students graduating in 2022 as well as a moratorium for all students during the 2020-21 school year due to COVID. Moved by Mr. Foss and seconded by Mr. Murphy to adopt the resolution as written. Mr. Foss, aye; Mrs. Bond, aye; Ms. Simon, aye; Mrs. Monaco, aye, Mr. Murphy, aye. Motion carried 5-0-0. School Committee comments: Mr. Murphy noted it is an appropriate and important message to send and Mr. Foss commented that he liked the language referring to local school district control particularly with things so upside down this year. Ms. Simon remarked that given the pandemic there are other priorities for the school department to be spending time on, and Dr. Conti has done a good job on setting priorities for Burlington including the social/emotional health of students.

Chairman Monaco observed that livestreaming instruction at the middle school is going well. Dr. Conti responded that feedback was unanimously positive from his Thursday night parent working group, teachers are working tremendously hard, and the early input is that students are feeling more connected.

ADJOURN

Moved by Mr. Murphy and seconded by Mr. Foss to adjourn at 9:30 p.m. Mr. Foss, aye; Mrs. Bond, aye; Ms. Simon, aye; Mrs. Monaco, aye, Mr. Murphy, aye. Motion carried 5-0-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon Gilbert
Recording Secretary

Date submitted: 1/26/21
Date approved: 1/26/21