

## NPS ELEMENTARY FAMILIES CANDIDATE FORUM RECAP

Who we are:

*We are a group of NPS elementary parents who organized in 2020 to advocate for more in-person education, and learned that there was no other entity in Newton devoted 100% to NPS parents and children without competing interests. We believe there is an ongoing need for organized, constructive parent engagement with the NPS administration and school committee regarding district-wide policies.*

To receive our newsletter and ongoing communications, please register [here](#). Feel free to register if you are a Newton resident who would like to stay informed about NPS, even if you are not an active NPS family.

Thank you to the candidates and moderators for hosting this October 12<sup>th</sup> event. For those of you who couldn't join us, please find below our notes of the discussion.

### AUDIENCE QUESTIONS & CANDIDATE RESPONSES

#### **Describe how you think about Excellence & Equity**

Cove

Equity & Excellence are not mutually exclusive, need to have both in schools. Things people view as being anti-excellence don't have to lead to less excellence. However, changes like reducing the number of AP classrooms may just create the appearance of equity.

Paul

Important to ask how we bridge the achievement gap each year, and boost up underperforming students. During the superintendent School Committee review, the SC asked about NPS metrics for measuring improvement, but there was no follow up.

Chris

Need to think about unintended consequences of policies. Re-opening debate was couched in equity terms, however closing schools was the most inequitable thing we could have done. Families with time and resources supplemented education, those that were unable to didn't. There was a direct correlation between the value of homes in an elementary district and the number of families who opted for in-person private schools.

#### **What is your view of the NPS building conditions?**

Paul

Physical condition of schools needs to be a priority on annual budgets

The MSBA (Massachusetts School Building Authority) list for rebuilding schools may entail a 10-15 year waitlist for a new school in the hope of getting a 30% grant. During that time the cost goes up and the city may have been able to do it sooner at a lower net cost.

Cove

Was surprised that grounds weren't always cleaned up at Memorial-Spaulding (children attended), I personally picked up trash for example. Families need to have a sense of what's

acceptable for facilities. When I was a principal in Chelsea, had clear expectations for facility maintenance

Parents volunteered painting the cafeteria at Memorial Spaulding.

### **How should the SC both collaborate with and evaluate the superintendent?**

Chris

There shouldn't be any friction between collaborating and holding accountable via a rigorous, analytical, objective evaluation.

Paul

A properly functioning governing body, if it's doing its job well, is helping the Superintendent do his job. SC meetings recently tend to feature Powerpoint presentation listing accomplishments, then overly polite response from the SC for fear of appearing negative. Being honest isn't being negative, it's being helpful.

### **What are your priorities for Special Education? (insert link to SEPAC event)**

Cove

We have data from IEP's about whether students are achieving progress. Increasing staffing using federal funds is a way to ensure programs are fully staffed. We need to make sure programs are in place for Newton students that fit their needs, we have an opportunity now to allocate resources.

Chris

My 2nd grader is a special education student, he did remote learning from a classroom last year. No question there's an incremental challenge for those kids, this is hopefully a one-time bump in the road, and we should allocate some of our one-time pandemic funds to solve that problem. We need to focus on the relevant: we need to get students back to square and recover last year's learning loss.

### **How will you use data to inform decisions?**

Chris

Resource allocation must be a data-driven analysis, we can't make public policy based solely on anecdote.

Paul

As CEO of Beth Israel hospital, we used data to improve quality of care. But, like the hospital, NPS has to look beyond quantitative metrics and also demonstrate empathy and compassion are important. SC cannot address every issue with every student and parent, but it can require of the administration a sense of how they are providing moral support to both teachers and parents. We have the right to expect leadership from superintendent and senior staff to "have the backs" of the teachers and aides who are providing essential services to children

Cove

I remember when educators first began using data (MCAS data to place kids), it was revolutionary, however we need to use data well and smartly. Culture around data has to be pushed down to school level and classroom. Data includes MCAS and IRES scores. Data needs to measure how engaged are students in classrooms.

**How will you ensure teachers are represented in decision making?**

Cove

Union's job to elect leaders, and then communicate/negotiate contract requests. My work at 5 District Partnership is about empowering teachers and acknowledging their expertise. We can build and maintain a strong a culture of leadership which will lead to active members in the union.

Chris

Transparency will help promote that culture that Cove refers to.

Paul

The SC should recognize great teachers. It's important to remember parents are NOT in opposition to teachers. Teachers have tremendous commitment, are highly trained, and enthusiastic.

There is a great commonality of belief and hope between parents and teachers. A problem today is the adults in between the two groups have not provided a vibrant/positive environment to work together. I'm committed to trying to do that.

**What is your opinion on high school math being shrunk to 2 levels from 4 levels?**

Paul

Experts in the field say there can be advantages to mixing students in class; however, to do that well requires real classroom management. You have to divide the class up into different ability levels and design different lesson plans. Principals need to be asked what they're doing to support for that kind of classroom. A constituent wrote to me saying she was concerned about not doing the right thing for her daughter by keeping her in public schools. No parent should feel that way, and the lack of mutual understanding can often be the result because of poor communication.

Cove

I'm generally not a fan of extreme differentiation. For example, I wouldn't want to see HS levels in social studies, want diversity of opinion. However, communication with parents is a big issue. Nobody wants to hear their child is no longer in honors. Need to communicate with parents about what their goals are.

**What are your top priorities?**

Chris

Student learning, get back on track, real plan and goals. Student learning must be focus.

Cove

Holding superintendent accountable over the next 1-3 years.

Paul

I've talked with many parents and what I'm hearing is a lack of confidence in administration and governance, and growing number of families being taken out of NPS. Historically about 19% of Newton families attended private school, however that's increased to 23.5%. 16 kids in my son's Kindergarten class at Bowen in a class that typically has 20-22, because neighborhood parents have told me they're unsure about public elementary school. Our elementary schools have always been our gem. Schools create fabric of the community. If too many families choose not to go to public schools, we will lose public support for budget allocations and improvements.

SC as a governing body must demonstrate to the public its willingness to learn, and improve the way it conducts meetings, deliberates, and operates like strong governing body.

## **Medical Advisory Committee Background**

Narrated by Chris Brezski

This story begins in July 2020, when despite the State's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education ("DESE") guidance for school districts to develop both fully in-person and remote learning models, NPS elected to only develop fully remote and 75% remote (hybrid) models for elementary, and more heavily remote models for middle and high school. At this time Newton's Health and Human Services commissioner stated that 6' of distance was required between students, which would make it physically impossible to re-open schools in the fall. This 6' of guidance came from the Centers for Disease Control in the early days of the pandemic. Numerous medical experts, including those at the World Health Organization and American Academy of Pediatrics, stated clearly that 3' of distancing was sufficient. Further, future CDC director, Rochelle Walensky, told the Newton mayor directly in writing that "if people are masked, [it's] quite safe and much more practical to be at 3". However, in a July 14 2020 meeting the NPS Superintendent and Newton HHS commissioner made the decision that a minimum of 6' of distance would be required at NPS, and revised all HHS and NPS documentation to conform.

Following these events, I began advocating for the formation of a Medical Advisory Committee ("MAC") to advise NPS regarding health and safety considerations, similar to other towns, However there was little to no interest from Newton's elected officials. In October, the School Committee negotiated a draft Memorandum of Agreement ("MOA") with NPS educators that would have codified the 6' of distance into a formal contractual obligation of the district, thereby ending any hope of in-person learning for the entire year. On the weekend before the School Committee ("SC") vote, almost 1,000 parents organized and signed a petition imploring the SC to vote down the MOA, which they ultimately did.

Although the MOA was not approved, there was still no appetite at the NPS administration or SC for increasing in-person school. I was speaking frequently with Newton resident physicians, many of which have children at NPS, who were equally as frustrated as other parents. They all said the same thing: “I offered help and advice to the City, but nobody wanted it.” In December, with thanks to City Councilor Josh Krintzman for allowing it as the council’s Programs & Services Chair, several physicians were granted a public forum, virtually, with the Newton City Council, where 160 doctors endorsed the formation of a MAC. However, NPS still wouldn’t budge. Clearly there was a lack of institutional will.

In January we tried another tactic. Per City Charter Article 10 Section 2, the School Committee must take a vote on a citizen petition with at least 50 original paper signatures. Our group of parents organized the petition, receiving well over 100 signatures on paper and hundreds more online, and submitted to the City Clerk. After months of public statements by the NPS administration, SC, Mayor, and HHS commissioner that the City did not need more advice; Superintendent David Fleishman announced the formation of the MAC exactly 11 days after we submitted our petition. The MAC was heavily consulted to advise on the spring 2021 re-opening, and is still frequently cited today by the NPS administration and SC for its recommendations, such as masking and ventilation, which are followed in our schools.

### **DESE vote to mandate in-person education**

#### Narrated by Paul Levy

During the 2020-2021 school year, it was apparent that mitigation measures were available to NPS to facilitate in-person learning, however the SC and NPS were not moving in that direction. The rigorous, analytical consideration of science appeared to be lacking.

At the state level, DESE and the governor’s office were becoming increasingly concerned about the toll that school closures were taking on students’ social, mental, and emotional well being, as well as the massive inequities created by families of lesser means having fewer resources to manage remote learning. The imperative to act existed, however the state Board had to be sure they were following the science.

Building on the network of doctors mentioned previously, I helped expand those Newton physicians and public health experts to a statewide group of over 300 medical professionals, and put them in touch with DESE Board members and commissioner Jeff Reilly. That group began correspondence with DESE in February 2021, and certain members testified to the DESE Board regarding the safety of in-person school.

These actions culminated in a DESE vote on March 5th 2021 to grant the DESE commissioner the authority to mandate full time in-person learning for those families that wanted it. Several Board members have commented that the physician support was instrumental in providing the political will to vote to re-open. NPS elementary schools re-opened full time on April 5th, the latest allowable day by the state. Middle school and high school followed later that month, also on the latest allowable day.

