

**TOWN OF SIMSBURY
BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Record of Proceedings

Special Meeting

August 24, 2021

Ms. Susan Salina called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. in the Program Room at the Simsbury Public Library.

Roll Call:

Members present: Mmes. Susan Salina, Tara Willerup, Jen Batchelar and Sharon Thomas. Messrs. Todd Burrick, Jeff Tindall and Brian Watson.

Members absent: Mrs. Lydia Tedone.

Also present: Superintendent Matt Curtis, Assistant Superintendent Sue Homrok-Lemke, Assistant Superintendent Neil Sullivan, Director of Finance Amy Meriwether and Recording Secretary Katie Wilde.

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Shannon McLean, 2 Hayes Road, expressed her concern with the mask mandate for children in school. She stated that this is a virus and not a pandemic. Ms. McLean stated that staff should wear masks, not children. She stated that the school district is not responsible for making health decisions; it is the decision of the parents. She asked who will maintain responsibility if her children gets sick from wearing a mask. Ms. McLean stated that masks are not effective in stopping the spread and they affect the emotional and social wellbeing of children. She demanded that masks be optional.

Monica Madrid, 1 Neal Drive, stated that the mask mandate should be the decision of parents. She noted that 90% of the population in Simsbury is vaccinated. Ms. Madrid stated that she hopes after September 30 the district will pull the mask mandate as it is not fair to children.

Micky Kopel, 9 Pinecrest Drive, stated that the system is failing our children. Masks don't work, they are not worn properly and they hold bacteria. Ms. Kopel stated that 99.97% of children under age 18 have survived COVID. Adults can protect children by getting vaccinated. Children were out all summer without masks. Ms. Kopel noted that the flu kills people even with vaccines in place, and we don't wear masks for the flu. She stated that teachers have the option to be vaccinated. Masks should be optional, not mandatory.

Margie Jakubowski, 26 Quorn Hunt, applauded what the school district accomplished last year. She implored the district to continue to make forward progress and do better for our children. Ms. Jakubowski stated that a school should not be able to tell parents they cannot pickup other children if it is for social reasons. She noted that school is an important social environment.

Michele Paige, 7 Hampshire Lane, expressed concern with the mental health of children and cited articles relative to how masks affect mental health. She stated that no one wants sick kids, but no kids are dying from COVID. Ms. Paige provided data

on the number of kids who die from suicide, stating that kids die and they are not dying from COVID.

Mike Park, 12 Alder Drive, thanked board members for all of their good work. He stated 3 requests: (1) make masks optional when you have the power for local control, (2) do not mandate vaccines for kids, and (3) no mass testing of healthy kids. Mr. Park stated that COVID will become endemic. He compared suicide numbers to the number of children who die due to COVID. He stated that in Simsbury, we are leaders.

Robert Hensley, 20 Fox Den, urged the school district to normalize mask wearing. He stated that masks don't work and vaccination rates are high in Simsbury. He questioned the end goal, at what number or date will mask wearing change?

Temra Pelletier, 5 Birch Road, stated that her family moved to Simsbury for the school system. She stated that here is where we draw the line. Kids are not super spreaders. Parents should be given the choice about mask wearing. Ms. Pelletier pointed out that masks get dirty, fall on the floor, and children are being exposed to more germs when they wear masks.

Ms. Batchelar read a letter submitted by **Megan Myers**, 425 Bushy Hill Road, expressing concern with the social-emotional risk to our children of mask mandates. Ms. Myers noted that children have been out doing things all summer without masks. She stated her belief that parents deserve to make medical decisions on behalf of their children.

Mr. Curtis thanked the audience for attending the meeting and presenting in a civil manner. He noted that at the close of the last school year we thought we could make masks optional. Mr. Curtis stated the importance of decisions being aligned with our health district. He agreed that decisions need to be made based on metrics and the markers used to change decisions need to be defined. Mr. Curtis stated that the district recognizes the stress of these decisions for those who have opposing views. For the continuity of school, the district has regulations we have to follow.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/BOE COMMUNICATIONS

Ms. Thomas reported on the CABA Leadership conference held earlier in the month. She stated that during the conference board members were asked if their districts have an equity policy. She suggested that the Simsbury BOE adopt an equity policy. Ms. Thomas questioned the status of renaming Columbus Day on the school calendar. Ms. Salina responded that the renaming of Columbus Day will be addressed by the Equity Council in order to hear from a larger voice and to garner community input.

Ms. Willerup thanked the audience for their thoughtful and kind comments during a very difficult time for everyone. Ms. Batchelar noted the student ambassadors assigned to new students at SHS. Mr. Burrick stated his appreciation for the civility and passion of town residents and their willingness to talk directly to the board.

Mr. Sullivan reported that new teacher orientation started today with more than 30 new certified staff. Ms. Salina thanked the audience for their kindness and civility.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Communications

A. Approval of Minutes of June 8, 2021 Regular Meeting Ms. Willerup: MOVE to approve the minutes of the June 8, 2021 regular meeting. Mr. Burrick: Seconded. So moved.	Minutes of June 8, 2021 Meeting
B. Approval of Minutes of June 23, 2021 Special Meeting Mr. Burrick: MOVE to approve the minutes of the June 23, 2021 special meeting. Ms. Batchelar: Seconded. So moved.	Minutes of June 23, 2021 Special Meeting
C. Approval of Minutes of June 23, 2021 Special Meeting Ms. Willerup: MOVE to approve the minutes of the June 23, 2021 special meeting. Ms. Batchelar: Seconded. So moved.	Minutes of June 23, 2021 Special Meeting
D. Child Nutrition Program Authorized Signature Change Ms. Willerup: MOVE that the Simsbury Board of Education authorizes the following signatory changes associated with the Agreement for Child Nutrition Programs: (1) maintain signing authority for the Superintendent, Matthew Curtis, (2) eliminate signing authority for the School Business Manager, Burke LaClair, and (3) add signing authority for the Finance Director, Amy Meriwether. Mr. Burrick: Seconded. So moved.	Child Nutrition Program Authorized Signature
<u>INFORMATION AND REPORTS</u> A. Back to School Report Mr. Sullivan discussed enrollment totals versus projections as of August 20, 2021. Enrollment is currently 36 above projections. Mr. Tindall asked whether there are any space concerns at Squadron Line School given the increase of 28 students. Mr. Sullivan responded that a minor redistricting or moving of some programming will need to be planned for as this is not a one year problem. Ms. Batchelar asked if all distance learning students are coming back to school this year. Mr. Sullivan responded that of the 24 students who switched to homeschooling for the first time last year, approximately half of those are returning to in-school instruction. Mr. Sullivan addressed the effect of summer enrollment on elementary classes. He provided a comparison of certain school grade levels where classes have been added and one where a class has been eliminated. Five new teachers were hired to accommodate these changes. Class enrollment at SHS allowed for the reduction of one teacher so the net increase is four teachers. Mr. Sullivan provided data on historical kindergarten enrollments, noting the significant increase this year of 57 students. He presented the elementary class size report. Mr. Watson questioned class size as compared to last year during COVID.	Back to School Report

Mr. Sullivan responded that classes are within class size guidelines and supports will be added if a class goes over the guideline. He noted that there are space limitations at Squadron Line School.

Mr. Sullivan addressed COVID mitigation strategies for the coming school year. Masks in schools will be required regardless of vaccination status. Students do not need to wear masks when outdoors. The FVHD plans to hold a vaccination clinic in September. We are awaiting guidance on Governor Lamont's executive order relative to vaccinations for those working in schools. Mr. Sullivan noted that hand hygiene; cleaning, spacing and contact tracing will all be in place for the coming school year. Social distancing protocols have changed to three feet when masked. Should there be a positive COVID case, there should not be a need to send the entire class home and there is a shorter quarantine period, and the ability to test and return to school sooner, if you are a close contact.

Ms. Lemke stated that the district will be asking staff and students to share vaccination cards with the administration. This information will help with the parameters for contact tracing. Ms. Lemke addressed COVID testing in schools. The state testing program requires parental consent. The intention of the testing is to target low vaccination/high case count communities. The district does not see a value to in-school testing at this time.

Ms. Lemke noted that distance learning is no longer an option for families except for in cases of quarantine. Remote learning during quarantine will be based on targeted plans for K-2, 3-6 and 7-12. The state will no longer permit remote snow dates. Ms. Lemke stated that the district has once again obtained a waiver and USDA funding to provide meals at no cost to all students. Additionally, popular a la carte items will be sold again.

Ms. Lemke reviewed summer programming. She stated that more than 200 students participated in summer programs K-12. These programs were funded through grant monies.

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John Grossman, 17 Hop Hollow, stated that he is a rising junior at SHS and involved in numerous clubs. He spoke in favor of mask wearing, noting that masks are saving lives. He stated that wearing a mask is protecting him as well as those in his home. Mr. Grossman supported wearing masks now as they won't be needed in the future.

Robert Hensley, 20 Fox Den, asked if classes will be permitted to comingle during recess. Mr. Sullivan responded that in the cafeteria students will sit with members of their class and once outside will be permitted to comingle with other classes.

Lori Boyko, 15 Oakhurst Road, stated that she is not in favor of everyone wearing masks. She stated her concern that children will become afraid to not wear a mask. She cited CDC statistics for those aged 0-17 for the period January 2020 to August 2021. 361 children have died with COVID, not necessarily because of COVID. 792 have died with pneumonia without COVID. She asked the district to teach critically and follow the evidence.

Micky Kopel, 9 Pinecrest Drive, stated we have the vaccine to protect ourselves so masks should be a choice. She asked if a child is vaccinated and in close contact to

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a COVID case will the parents still be notified. Mr. Sullivan responded that all parents of a child who is a close contact will be notified. Ms. Kopel noted that last year her daughter was sent home twice because of symptoms related to allergies. She questioned the guidelines for sending a child home sick. Ms. Salina responded that these decisions are at the discretion of the school nurse.

Ms. Thomas asked when the SHS roofing project will be completed. Mr. Sullivan noted that the weather has been an issue, but we expect substantial completion by this weekend. Ms. Thomas asked when the bleacher project will be completed. Mr. Sullivan responded that the bleacher project will occur next summer.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Tindall: MOVE to adjourn the meeting at 8:04 p.m.

Ms. Willerup: Seconded. So moved.

Jennifer Batchelar
Secretary

Katie Wilde
Recording Secretary

Adjournment