

Concord School District
Board of Education
Special Board meeting
November 12, 2020

Board members present: Jim Richards, *President*; Barb Higgins, Gina Cannon, Danielle Smith, Liza Poinier, Tom Croteau, David Parker, Pamela Walsh (Chuck Crush participated remotely)

Administrators present: *Superintendent* Kathleen Murphy, *Assistant Superintendent* Donna Palley, *Business Administrator* Jack Dunn, CHS Principal Mike Reardon, *BGS Principal* Susan Lauze

Agenda Item 1. Call to Order

President Jim Richards called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. and noted that the meeting constituted a quorum of Board members. As several Board members participated electronically, any votes would be by roll call. He noted that public access to the meeting by telephone was provided, with additional access by other electronic means. The meeting was broadcast contemporaneously on ConcordTV's education channel (Comcast Channel 6 or www.youtube.com/ConcordNHTV). He noted the Board would take public comment in two public comment periods by unmuting phone lines one by one, and encouraged the submission of comments via e-mail at concordinfo@sau8.org.

The agenda was to discuss the learning model for the District and whether to stay in the hybrid model of instruction from Thanksgiving until the New Year.

Instructional Committee Chair Barb Higgins reported on the meeting of November 10, at which Committee members listened to a presentation and heard questions and comments from Committee members, Board members, and community members. The Committee voted 2 – 2 and was unable to make a recommendation to the full Board.

Superintendent Murphy recommended staying in the hybrid learning model (hybrid) as long as the District was able to.

Tom Croteau asked the Superintendent about any modifications to the criteria in the "Decision Matrix Response to Covid-19 Cases in Schools" (the matrix) for making a decision about switching from the hybrid to the remote learning model (remote). Superintendent Murphy said the matrix had been modified by State data; for example, a change to travel guidelines (one could now quarantine for 14 days, or quarantine for only 7 days with a negative Covid-19 test).

Mr. Crush asked why Superintendent Murphy felt the District should stay in hybrid. She noted that originally, 75–80% of families wanted their children in hybrid and now it was 75% in hybrid and 25% in remote. Daily mandatory attendance numbers had been higher in hybrid than in remote. As of that week, there had been a total of seven positive cases of Covid-19, out of over 4,000 students, but none of those cases showed any transmission within

the schools. The most significant factor for staying in hybrid was staffing. Thirty-six professional staff and 23 support staff indicated they planned to travel over Thanksgiving. Teaching staff were considered essential employees, and were eligible for limited waivers relative to the travel quarantine. Area school districts were all planning to stay in hybrid over the holidays. The value of students being in classrooms interacting with their peers and teachers was significant. She spoke to the value of remote perceived by those families who had chosen that option.

Ms. Walsh said most families were better off with students in schools at least two days per week, but was concerned that parents had the understanding they could change from one model to another in January, and now the matrix seemed to have changed.

Ms. Poinier suggested that families had made choices based on the matrix as it stood, although now that the matrix had changed, their requests to move to remote should be accommodated. A community member suggested the District move to remote after Thanksgiving, return to school December 14 (a full two weeks of quarantining later), have the holiday break and stay remote until approximately January 19.

Ms. Higgins noted the matrix, completed in September, was a good guideline for what was thought at the time would indicate the need to move to fully remote. Danielle Smith suggested that moving into and out of fully remote for short periods of time would be inconsistent for parents.

Gina Cannon agreed that switching from hybrid to fully remote would be logistically difficult for everyone, but the Board needed to protect the community as best it could. Mr. Parker noted the disadvantages of remote, including the possibility that school staff were unable to detect instances of child neglect or abuse; the necessity of parents working and leaving children alone; and children being out in the community where transmission was more common. He emphasized that schools were demonstrably safer than many other settings, primarily due to strictly observed protocols.

Mr. Crush said there were no good answers for these questions and that he was worried about children's safety in remote, but ultimately the decision was about student and family safety. He said the question was whether there would be sufficient staff for hybrid.

Mr. Croteau said that he wanted to continue in hybrid through the holidays. Special education students needed to be in school in person, as did students in at CRTC. He was reassured that Mr. Cashman and his staff that the District had sufficient PPE, the buildings were being cleaned daily, and protocols were in place and being followed to make the setting as safe as possible. The District could also switch to fully remote if necessary.

Mr. Richards referred to the decision matrix and the community's concern with how it was being applied. He noted that the Division of Public Health's "consideration for transition" chart indicated that, when the level of school transmission was low even when the level of community transmission was substantial, the hybrid range was indicated. He suggested using this chart, as it was clearer. He said he visited CRTC and the high school to observe for himself how protocols were being followed, noting that every student and staff member had

worn a mask, social distancing was observed, temperatures had been taken, and screening questions were asked. He was impressed by teacher and staff commitment to those protocols.

Ms. Higgins said that safety was more than a negative Covid-19 test; mental, social and emotional health was equally important. She favored staying in hybrid as long as possible.

Ms. Walsh favored staying in hybrid. She asked if the Superintendent would allow the switch from hybrid to remote for elementary students from November 30 to the end of the winter, for families who were no longer comfortable with their original choice.

Superintendent Murphy said every effort had been made to accommodate parent requests. By early October, some of the remote classes were approaching the upper limits of the Board's class size guidelines, and placement choices were limited. This was less the case at the middle and high schools. Teachers would find that students accessing the classroom remotely, while they were also teaching students in person, presented significant challenges and could impact learning. She wanted to meet with teachers to make sure they were ready for that. She said significant management and keeping students on task were required; for example, additional kindergarten students zooming in with 10 students physically in the classroom would be difficult. The District had been hiring monitors and proctors to assist the teachers, as they could not do it by themselves.

Ms. Walsh stated that students "remoting" into a class was a good idea, and asked whether the District could hire permanent substitutes for classes close to the maximum guidelines.

Superintendent Murphy indicated that in that case, students who moved to remote would lose their teacher, and this had been a concern for parents. Some parents who initially chose remote changed their minds when they realized their children would lose their teacher.

Ms. Higgins indicated that the rules had not been changed. She spoke to teachers' difficulty with having both in-person and remote students in one class, and having students move in or out of those classes. Ms. Cannon stated that if the District could not accommodate parents who were afraid to send their children to school, the impact of the staffing issue was at minimum strained, if not critical. Mr. Parker pointed out that the matrices reflected community transmission, not transmission within the schools. Ms. Cannon indicated that the very low transmission rate in the school was only one of three variables in the matrix. Ms. Smith noted that the Board was contemplating action on a temporary basis because of travel. She said it was her understanding that if the District did go to remote, about 12 hybrid teaching days would be lost, but about 24 days of remote learning would occur.

Superintendent Murphy said hybrid comprised two full in-person days, but teachers reported that they accomplished more in those two days because classes were small. She acknowledged that remote learning days provided four days of full-day instruction.

Mr. Crush asked what would happen if parents whose children were in hybrid called their school to indicate that because numbers were rising they would not be sending their children to school and would like to go fully remote, noting that schools might see quite a bit of this if the District stayed in hybrid. He commented that the administration and teachers had done a phenomenal job getting students to follow protocols.

Ms. Palley noted that switching from hybrid to remote was primarily an issue at the elementary schools; middle and high school students could more easily switch models. In RMS grade 6, there were no outstanding requests. Of the five elementary schools, two schools had one request pending, two schools each had six students whose parents had requested remote and had not been able to be accommodated. These were parents whom the Principals were aware had asked for the change.

BGS Principal Susan Lauze spoke on behalf of elementary students and their families, noting that students' academic learning, social and emotional skills, and overall wellness had been negatively impacted by the period of fully remote learning in the spring and start of school. At BGS, a large number of students did not meet learning goals that had been set. Children of this age respond to active, hands-on learning experiences; their curiosity, creativity and imagination need to be activated, which is not easy to do on a screen. Children this age do not need more screen time; they need to be active, outdoors, and interacting with one another. Since hybrid began, the school had seen an overall improvement in writing skills, comprehension, inference, analysis, and applying math skills to real-life situations. Reading assessments on students when they came back in October were improved. She described the many children in her school who had less than optimal learning environments in the remote setting, as their parents had to work. She described difficulties her parents encountered trying to optimize their children's remote learning. BGS had 13 hybrid classes and three remote classes. She had tried to accommodate all parent requests to switch from hybrid to remote. She emphasized that students were more comfortable asking questions and seeking assistance in their in-person classes than they had been in the remote setting. Principal Lauze said that equity for students could not be achieved by going fully remote, and urged the Board to support staying in the hybrid model as long as possible.

Public comment

Those community members making public comment included Concord resident and BGS teacher Ellen Kenny, Concord resident and parent Tina Philibotte, CRTC Director Steve Rothenberg, Concord resident and parent Ally Maltais, Concord resident and CHS teacher Kim Bleier, Concord resident and teacher Mike Macri, Concord resident and parent Jim Kennedy, Concord resident and parent Sarah Robinson, Concord resident and Board member-elect Jonathan Weinberg, Concord resident, CEEA president and CHS paraprofessional Jessica Jordan, CHS senior Mattison Howard, Concord resident and parent Rebecca McHugh, CHS senior Nathan Schmitz, Concord resident and parent Beth Richards, CHS student Bailey [last name not given], Concord resident, parent and CMS elementary teacher Sharon Richert, Concord parent Kimberly Demaris, Concord resident Beth Hardy, Concord resident and District employee Lisa Nordegraaf, Concord resident and parent Karen Craver, Concord resident and parent Angela Nelson, District employee Chris Russell, and someone who did not state her name. Mr. Dunn read emails from Concord parent Krystin Van Ostern, teacher Mary Maccini, and those who did not identify their residence: Ian MacKinnon, Michael Bourke, Marissa Parent, and Steven Johnson.

Ms. Higgins made a motion to support Superintendent Murphy's recommendation to continue hybrid education, with this modification: continue hybrid through December 22,

and for the two weeks following the holiday break (January 4 to January 15) the District would move to remote to address the concerns expressed by families about the potential spread of Covid-19, and give families and staff time to quarantine.

Mr. Parker seconded the motion.

Ms. Poinier said the Board needed to know with certainty what parents could do who no longer felt comfortable sending their children to school. Since the decision-making matrix was difficult for some to understand why decisions were being made the way they were, what points would trigger a shift. She said she did not want to move to remote on an emergency basis. She said the school nurses were seeing considerable traffic these days and were probably stretched very thin. She asked if the Board could increase capacity for nursing staff.

Superintendent Murphy said the administration had said all along that the numbers, including include staff attendance, number of students, and student attendance, would determine whether schools would need to be closed.

Mr. Richards said NH Division of Public Health had defined a “cluster” as three individuals confirmed with Covid-19 who were part of a related group of individuals with the potential to transmit the infection to each other.

Superintendent Murphy said this would be done by building; and balancing whether to close down the entire District although a cluster was confined to one building.

Mr. Richards asked, if the motion passed and the District were hybrid up to the holiday break, what parents who wanted to switch to remote, and he had heard that there were many, would do.

Superintendent Murphy said she would speak to this in her upcoming letter to families, and that the Principals had addressed those requests. If there were more requests than could be accommodated with existing staff, the District might need to hire more staff. She said the problem was pulling students away from their current teacher. She noted that BGS Principal Lauze had addressed those needs from parents and would have to accommodate requests for remote. She said again that requests for remote for grades 7 to 12 were not a problem.

Ms. Higgins said again that, if grades 7 to 12 wanted to be remote, they had the option.

Superintendent Murphy again suggested parents contact their children’s school Principal with a request to move to remote.

Mr. Richards reiterated that parents needed to know their students might have to move to a completely different teacher.

Ms. Cannon said that Instructional Committee members were told at their November 10 meeting that it would not be possible to switch, because the District did not have staffing to accommodate parents now choosing for their children to move to remote. She asked, if parents now decided they were not comfortable sending their children to school, they could choose remote starting on a specified date and it would be approved, not that it “would be conditional on whether we could find staff.”

Superintendent Murphy said when grades K through 6 were examined, the class that presented staffing difficulties was grade 4. There had been no requests in some buildings and at some grade levels. If there were now requests, there were some remote slots available, and the District would make every effort to cover staffing needs to cover classes that would move to remote. She had indicated at the November 10 meeting that there were slots available.

Mr. Croteau said it was important that the Board did not put the Superintendent, HR Director or Principals in a bind they could not fix, in the interest of trying to accommodate parent requests. There would be some things the District simply could not predict in this pandemic. To guarantee that students could switch from one model to another without knowing if staff or space could be found was an impossibility. He felt the Superintendent's response was as honest as it could be, to try to do it with available resources.

Mr. Parker said the reason he seconded the amendment was that he believed that parents should have the choice to keep their children out of school, but if the District went fully remote, there would be parents who really needed their students to be in school. He said people needed to understand that the reason students were in school in person only two days per week was that there simply was not enough space to fit all the students in at the same time and be safe. He said the schools were the safest place to be, and felt hybrid allowed students to attend school in person, but remote took away choices.

Mr. Crush thanked teachers, students and parents who provided input, recognizing the difficulties of life in this pandemic. He felt it was important to focus on equality, giving everyone the same opportunities. He asked if state reimbursements would change if the District moved from remote to hybrid. Superintendent Murphy noted that attendance numbers would not affect this, as it was based on registration numbers. Mr. Crush asked whether a move to remote would affect the paychecks of bus drivers, custodians, and other staff, and whether there was a plan for that. Superintendent Murphy said memoranda of agreement were being developed to address these questions, and described the various ways staff had been redeployed to keep them working in the spring. She commented that the District also had an obligation to taxpayers. Mr. Crush gave kudos to Steve Rothenberg for his work at CRTC and the Center's adherence to safety protocols, but nonetheless opposed the motion, as Covid-19 cases were higher than they had been in the spring.

Ms. Walsh said she was frustrated that the state was not taking more aggressive action to lower transmission rates. She felt schools should be the last places to close rather than the first. Children were legally required to attend school, and people had therefore had reasonable expectations that they could seek and maintain employment, but 1.6 million mothers had left the workforce as of September. She suggested sending out a separate survey and hosting another forum to address issues with remote at the middle and high schools, to see if there were better models that could be considered. She would like the Board to reconsider the matrix and have a definitive answer and plans for families that would like to switch to remote.

Mr. Croteau noted that, if the District were to stay in hybrid, more work on the teaching model was needed, as it wasn't working the way parents felt it should. He felt the motion on the table represented a good compromise.

Ms. Smith said she was disappointed with the motion. She felt staying in hybrid was not the responsible action to take. The message from parents, students and teachers was that this was not what people wanted at this time. Remote would be temporary, while people were traveling. As a benefit, students would also get increased instruction time in remote; teachers and students who did not travel as well as teachers and students who did travel would be safer; and planned consistency allowed better planning by teachers and parents. With remote, all students would be able to keep the same teachers.

Mr. Crush asked if Ms. Higgins would be open to an additional compromise: if remote was adopted the Monday before Thanksgiving with a return to hybrid on January 19. This would allow the administration to examine ways to do hybrid and remote better and keep everyone safer at this time.

Ms. Cannon stated that her intent was to move to amend the motion to change the dates for moving to remote from November 23 to January 18.

Ms. Higgins said her motion was not to go remote.

Mr. Richards clarified that the motion was not to go remote from December 22 to January 15, as District students would be on vacation from December 22 to January 4. The motion was that the District would move to fully remote from January 4 to January 15.

Ms. Cannon declined to complete her motion to amend the original motion.

Ms. Poinier said that input was split down the middle, between people who appreciated hybrid and those who missed the synchronous hours of remote. As this depended on students' ages, she suggested considering splitting the grade levels and taking the middle and/or the high school remote first. She did not feel ready to vote because of this divide. She suggested putting out a short but thoughtfully worded survey, as she did not feel equipped to make this decision for the entire community, and felt teachers and families did not all have the same comfort level with remaining in hybrid.

Mr. Richards indicated that Ms. Higgins would have the ability to table or postpone her motion to a later date if she chose. He stated the Board was being forced to vote to set a period of remote. He was sensitive to parents who would have difficulty with any level of remote, but felt the alternative was to push on as far as the District could, knowing that infection rates were increasing and, in that case, the Board would need to vote on a 24-hour notice of moving to fully remote. He was inclined to consider CHS and RMS differently from the elementary schools. He said losing nine days of hybrid learning at CHS and RMS would be less impactful than the same loss at the elementary level.

Ms. Higgins said she felt the Board needed to make a decision and plan for it. She said it would make sense for CHS and RMS to go remote starting the week of Thanksgiving, and the elementary levels to stay in hybrid. She said families' needs were different based on their children's grade levels.

Mr. Richards added that he felt the groups of students who needed to be in the buildings should continue in hybrid, just as the Board had decided for the beginning of the school year

(special education, homeless students, ELL students). Ms. Higgins said that was her intention as well.

Mr. Parker called the motion. He said he did not believe those who had called in were representative of all families in the District.

Mr. Croteau said the Board was talking about a very small number of days (10). He supported the motion, saying that students needed to be in school. Ms. Cannon said she was concerned about not including the Thanksgiving holiday in the period of remote learning, as traditionally the greatest number of people traveled at that holiday. Ms. Higgins agreed that 14-day quarantining, or 7-day quarantining with a negative Covid-19 test should be mandated. Ms. Cannon said her understanding was that teachers would be expected to return to school after the (Thanksgiving) holiday because they were essential (or “critical infrastructure”) employees. Mr. Richards said that, if the District did not force teachers and staff who said they would be traveling to return to the buildings, there would not be enough teachers to cover educational needs.

Superintendent Murphy said there would be sufficient numbers of elementary teachers and paraprofessionals to staff the classrooms. Middle and high school staffing would be considerably more challenging. She said if several elementary teachers were not returning because they were on 7- or 14-day quarantines, staffing would likely still be sufficient. At CHS and RMS, more staff indicated they would travel. CHS and RMS could be in remote (grades 7 to 12), for two weeks, brought back before the holiday break in hybrid to touch base with their teachers, moved to remote for the holiday break, then kept in remote for two weeks in January.

Mr. Parker disagreed, noting that he was worried about Thanksgiving from the standpoint of community transmission. He said that did not mean coming back to school would be unsafe. He said he was worried for his own safety but did not want to make that decision for families.

Ms. Smith asked about grade six, and how this plan would impact the “specials” teachers (PE, art, paraprofessionals). She said that setting up two different situations would be confusing. She felt this was a critical time, with numbers were starting to get out of control, and this was the time to go remote.

Mr. Crush said that, as many people planned to travel over Thanksgiving, there was a high chance of community transmission. He respectfully disagreed with Mr. Parker, noting that they were voted to the Board precisely to make these decisions. He said the Board owed it to parents to vote on the motion.

Mr. Croteau noted there was Covid-19 transmission in the community, but not in the schools, and the Board did not have reason to expect there would be a spike in schools. Nonetheless, the Board knew how to make that call if needed.

Mr. Richards disagreed with Mr. Crush, noting he saw a significant difference between the elementary and other levels, with the amount of interaction and time spent in different areas of the buildings. High school students were more mobile and not be as hurt by remote. The Board would be able to respond to a cluster outbreak (15-30 kids) quickly. The state was seeing higher cases now in a week than had been in all of September. He felt the Board could

not rely entirely on everyone being safe, and reporting their exposure. He said the District should “fix” remote and hybrid for next semester, but not tonight.

Ms. Higgins said she was making the assumption that people who travel (staff) would quarantine, and she did not think that 30 teachers would lie and not quarantine. She said the Board’s role was not to control families. She added to her motion the phrase, “... expect that staff members who travel are honest about it and quarantine, and we make adjustments at high school that need to be made.” She also commented that Ms. Smith and Mr. Crush had the ability to care for their children in remote, but many families who did not have the guts to come to the meeting, or speak English well enough to come, did not have those options. She said as much as she wanted to support families who wanted their children home, she needed to speak up for the families who could not speak for themselves who needed their children in school.

Ms. Smith added that she understood the struggles parents faced to make school work, when they themselves were working. She said she worked full-time, and part-time on the weekend, so her family could do that, and was taken aback by the comment. Mr. Crush said he was appalled by the comment, and that he also appreciated the difficulties of people who did not have options for having their children in remote. Ms. Higgins apologized for her comment.

Ms. Higgins amended her motion to include hybrid between Thanksgiving and the December recess and then two weeks in remote following the December recess “with the expectation and requirement that staff members who travel outside of the New England states are honest about it and follow quarantine requirements after they return,” and adjustments at high school that need to be made are made.

Ms. Walsh suggested adding “required to follow state guidelines on travel and isolation” to cover any changes in those guidelines during this period. Ms. Cannon said it was her understanding that the Governor was coming out with new protocols, and suggested adding “whatever protocol is in place at the time they travel is the protocol they follow.” Mr. Richards restated this language.

Ms. Higgins amended her motion by adding [... hybrid from Thanksgiving to the December recess and then two weeks remote following the December recess] to include “with the expectation and requirement that staff members who travel outside of the New England states [were] honest about it and follow state guidelines then in place regarding isolation/quarantine after they return,” [and adjustments at high school that need to be made are made.]

Mr. Parker seconded the amendment to the motion.

Mr. Richards asked the Superintendent if this amendment were to pass, whether it would, effectively, require that CHS and RMS move to a remote model. Superintendent Murphy said that if the numbers of staff indicating in the survey the week prior, that they planned to travel, then there would not be sufficient staff to open CHS and RMS, and they would have to go to remote. Mr. Richards stated that if this amendment were to pass, it would effectively require that CHS and RMS would move to remote after Thanksgiving.

Mr. Croteau asked again if CRTC [and special education/ELL] would be considered separate entities in this scenario. After additional discussion, Board members realized that if CRTC teachers, special education and ELL teachers had not traveled, they would return in-person after the holiday. The Superintendent noted that those programs would be closed because there was insufficient staff, not for current safety issues. She suggested that staff might be reconsidering their travel plans given the spike in Covid-19 positive numbers.

Ms. Walsh asked if there would be interest in following the new state protocol (7 days of quarantine with a negative Covid-19 test after travel), to go remote November 30 to December 4 and then again to January 5. Ms. Higgins said this level of detail would be impossible to predict. Superintendent Murphy noted that the test would need to be taken *after* the seven days of quarantine, and it could also take several days to get the test result back.

Mr. Richards called the vote on the amendment.

The Board voted by roll call 7-2 (Gina Cannon, Tom Croteau, Barb Higgins, Liza Poinier, Jim Richards, Danielle Smith, Pamela Walsh voted aye; David Parker and Chuck Crush voted nay) to approve the amendment as described above (moved by Ms. Higgins, seconded by Mr. Parker).

The amended motion was restated. Ms. Poinier suggested adding language indicating that a decision to move to fully remote would supersede this motion, but declined to make this an amendment to the motion on the table.

The Board voted by roll call 5-4 (Tom Croteau, Barb Higgins, Liza Poinier, David Parker, Pamela Walsh voted aye; Gina Cannon, Jim Richards, Danielle Smith, Chuck Crush voted nay) to have District schools remain in the hybrid learning model from Thanksgiving to the holiday recess and then move to a remote learning model from January 4 through January 15, with the expectation and requirement that staff members who traveled over the holidays would be honest and follow state guidelines in place at that time regarding isolation/quarantine after they returned, with adjustments at the high school to be made if needed (moved by Ms. Higgins, seconded by Mr. Parker).

Mr. Croteau made a motion to adjourn.

Ms. Walsh said she would like a plan to address the matrix and the issue of families wanting to switch from the remote model to the hybrid model or vice versa. The Board decided to have the Instructional Committee discuss these issues, including winter athletics and the 2021-2022 school year calendar, at its next meeting.

The Board voted 9-0 to adjourn (motioned by Mr. Croteau, seconded by Ms. Higgins).

The Board adjourned at 11:06 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Barb Higgins, *Secretary*
Linden Jackett, *Recorder*