

**Salem School Committee
Committee of the Whole Meeting Minutes
Tuesday - February 15, 2022**

A Committee of the Whole (COW) meeting of the Salem School Committee was held on Tuesday, February 15, 2022 at 6:00pm using the Zoom platform.

Members Present: Mayor Kimberley Driscoll, Ms. Mary Manning, Ms. Amanda Campbell, Dr. Kristin Pangallo, Mr. Manny Cruz, Mr. Fleming and Ms. Beth Anne Cornell

Members Absent: None

Others in Attendance: Dr. Stephen Zrike, Kate Carbone, Mary DeLai, Chelsea Banks, Dr. Charlene Moske-Weber, Anna Martel, Dr. Sarah Moore, Dr. Cloveme Campbell

Call of Meeting to Order

Mayor Driscoll calls the meeting to order at 6:02pm. She notes there is only one topic for the evening and identifies all committee members by name for the record as all members are in attendance this evening. Mayor Driscoll introduces the different folks who've joined the meeting and provides an overview of the meeting's intent regarding next steps in masking within the Salem Public Schools. She continues to provide an overview of the data provided by the district in terms of testing and vaccination. She turns the meeting over to Dr. Zrike ahead of the invited guests providing their thoughts on approaching the masking policy within the district.

Discussion on mask mandate in Salem Public Schools

Dr. Zrike makes mention of the data sent over to the committee ahead of this meeting. He notes the vaccine rates by school with a significant increase in the past months though it's noted the rates are not near the 80% threshold which was the target number DESE previously noted for mask lifting. He mentions the spike in cases following during the holiday season and following the season but seeing a decline in cases at this time. He mentions the reality of seeing cases increase following breaks and vacations but also knowing that a sense of normalcy is a desire throughout the community as fatigue for masking has set in. He turns it back to the mayor to hear from the invited guests.

Mayor Driscoll calls on Dr. Campbell to share thoughts, perspectives, and metrics that may be important when considering lifting masks being worn in schools. Dr. Campbell states the lifting of the masks mandate really means that masks are optional, not that they are not allowed. She notes that those who continue to wear their masks and those who choose to go optional if the mandate is lifted, should not be shamed for their decision. She mentions the data surrounding cases following a break and being mindful of the date of return and perhaps waiting two weeks following the vacation to consider lifting masking as a precaution upon return.

Mayor Driscoll calls upon Ms. Sara Moore, member of the Board of Health. She shares her role and brings her thoughts on masking noting it's a gray area and tough decision ahead for the committee. She mentions ideas of one-way masking, the quality of masking, and the equity standpoint of masking. She echoes ensuring having very clear metrics to guide the decision. She highlights schools being different than restaurants and gyms in the light that going to school is required and is not a choice. She notes the data surrounding the vaccination rates with concern for some schools only showing rates in the 30%. She mentions equity and access as a concern for safety if masking is lifted. Dr. Moore closes her thoughts mentioning the social emotional aspect of masking and notes that lifting the mask mandate will not repair the issues our community faces with mental health in regard to COVID-trauma.

Mayor Driscoll introduces Ms. Anna Martel, school psychologist to the discussion. Ms. Martel echoes Ms. Moore's reference to the lack of data that notes mental health as part of the distress and anxiety for students. From a social-emotional perspective she believes that removing the masks will benefit students as they will be able to view and understand facial social cues. She mentions the concern for students who seek the mask as a comfort to "hide behind," and noting we don't want to create a reliance on masks for those who find it as a tool to "hide." She notes students are resilient and can bounce back from masking and recognizes the need for increased vaccines but does support removing masks for the better of social-emotional needs.

Dr. Charlene Moske-Weber notes appreciation for every perspective shared this evening. She notes lifting the mask mandate will come with choice and respecting one another is important. She shares mitigation strategies that will need to be important such as hygiene, staying home when sick, etc. to help with staying healthy with the potential of removing masks. Dr. Moske-Weber raises the question of "when will this feel right?" and mentions everyone has been traumatized by COVID and normalcy needs to return when it feels right. She notes the data in Salem and recognizes the drop in cases. She mentions keeping an eye on the data and pivoting if needed in the future.

Mayor Driscoll comes back to the committee noting the data. She provides a synopsis of what the invited guests have said, mentioning perhaps not tying a specific date to the lift, hesitancy on the day after vacation, and what are the most important metrics to consider in making this decision. She mentions a few items to consider for the committee in terms of requesting more data or information from the district ahead of making the final decision.

Dr. Pangallo wanted to know if there was a plan to share the vaccine data for anyone watching and to note where families can see the latest case count metrics. Ms. Banks shares her screen with the vaccination changes between December 2021 and February 2022. Mayor Driscoll shares vaccination rates by grade level clusters. Dr. Pangallo notes the vaccination rates and numbers by ethnicity group. She notes the disproportionate metrics in the ethnic groups throughout the district.

Mr. Cruz notes the vaccination and case count metrics and what he would like to see in change when considering the mask removal. He notes that the governor's change does not need to go into effect on the 28th and we have the decision to make here. He notes the Bentley numbers are alarming and raising the numbers there for vaccination would need to change to increase his comfort with this change. He also mentions the student population within the district not yet eligible for vaccination and that those students would be at risk but could potentially put their siblings and family members at risk as well.

Dr. Pangallo notes there are three schools with student populations that are not eligible for vaccination and to keep that in mind when considering the next steps in the discussion.

Ms. Manning requests the slides being presented to the attendees for a longer time for folks to be able to view the metrics. She also notes the results from the family and staff survey regarding comfort of masking or removing and mentions the folks who did not want the masks removed and those who would like to wait a few weeks are withing seven votes of those who would like to remove the masks on 2/28/22. She notes previous meetings where the committee would look to the state guidelines and decisions and the department of education guidelines to help guide their decisions and this is now one where the committee will need to create guidance on their own. She notes considering a timeline to revisit metrics and consideration of the masking down the line.

She also mentions the concern of policing masking and which students are required to wear a mask or if their parents want them to wear a mask and how staff will enforce that process with a big change of removing masks. She also notes hesitancy for the February 28 date - if it were April vacation her thoughts would be different but with winter break, it's a concern.

Ms. Cornell echoes the concern brought up by Ms. Manning for teachers needing to monitor mask requirements for children versus those who are mask free. She notes the concern for putting another task on the plate for teachers. She also shares concern for vaccine rates at the elementary school level and the former threshold number being 80% and not one of the schools is even at 70%. Ms. Cornell wonders how to land on a decision based on metrics in terms of positivity rate and vaccination rate. She also questions the efficacy or one-way masking.

Dr. Pangallo responds to Ms. Cornell for masking noting the various percentages thrown around. She notes one-way masking will provide some protection but universal masking will be the most effective protection for the community. She also notes the need to have masks available in terms of equity and access as noted by Dr. Campbell. She shares a bar graph noting case counts and what "low case counts" mean today versus a month ago which are lower but they are still high when looking back in the fall and this time last year. She also identifies being equity driven in decision-making.

Mayor Driscoll notes the metrics being a driving factor for lifting the mandate but also being the driving factor in the event we do lift the mandate and need to return for masking if numbers and data drive into that direction.

Ms. Amanda Campbell notes a few areas of concern. First, having a set of metrics to reference, realizing that new variants may arise and knowing what works now may not work for a future variant. Second, how fine are we applying a mandate lift - are we to consider grading bands - K-8, or 9-12, or school specific etc. Third, noting the split vaccine eligibility across the district in terms of our youngest learners as well as the concern for students having younger unvaccinated siblings in their homes. The last component - universal/one-way masking and the concern for finding properly and consistently fitting masks for students.

Mayor Driscoll notes the current masking policy will remain through the 28th as that date will be the next time to discuss and make informed decisions on that date.

Mr. Fleming wonders if a policy would need to be universal or if we could adopt a policy in terms of age, school, grade level, etc. He also would like to hear the opinions of the unions - teacher and custodial. He also wants a clearer vision of where the parents are - he thinks expanding and analyzing data in that survey is important.

Ms. Cornell notes the mask mandate dropping on February 28th per the governor but questions athletics in terms of the MIAA noting it's the responsibility of school districts to inform other districts of what they are expected to do in terms of masking. Dr. Zrike notes there is a mask mandate in our school system and folks would be expected to wear masks. Ms. Cornell asks if there are away games that day and if students would be required to wear masks in a different district with perhaps a different policy. Dr. Zrike doesn't think there is a game that day but would look into that question.

Dr. Zrike notes the two slides shown tonight are now up on the SPS website under "COVID-19" for viewing.

Mayor Driscoll wraps up noting a desire to be thoughtful about coming to a decision regarding this issue, wanting metrics to tie our decision making to, wanting to know a bit more about masking efficacy and recognizing equity issues raised, and better understanding what the school district staff may consider with future variants and changes.

Dr. Pangallo extends gratitude for community members reaching out to the committee with their opinions and thoughts.

Adjournment

Mr. Cruz makes a motion to adjourn. Mr. Fleming seconded. A roll call vote was taken.

Ms. Campbell	Yes
Ms. Cornell	Yes
Mr. Cruz	Yes
Mr. Fleming	Yes
Ms. Manning	Yes
Dr. Pangallo	Yes
Mayor Driscoll	Yes

Motion carries 7-0

The meeting ends at 7:02p.m.

Respectfully submitted by,

Jensen Frost

Executive Assistant to the Deputy Superintendent