



## Winchendon Public Schools

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School Committee Chair: L. Murphy 9/16/2021

### School Committee Meeting

August 23, 2021 - 6:00 pm

2nd Floor - Town Hall Auditorium

1. Call to order
2. Pledge of Allegiance

#### Attendance:

Larry Murphy, Chair, Shauna LaPointe, Greg Vine, Ryan Forsythe, Thad King, Interim Superintendent

3. L. Murphy states that the only item on the agenda this evening is to discuss the opening of school and how they were going to deal with the COVID situation and that the committee has three goals: one is to ensure the safety, health and welfare of students and staff; two is to keep teaching and learning for all students and staff on an in-person basis; three is to prevent the spread of the COVID variant in our schools and our community. L. Murphy states that the committee plans to follow the rules for this type of meeting that are in their guidebook. He then recites the rules regarding speakers' time limit being three minutes unless an extension is approved by the presiding Chair. Additionally, topics for discussion must be limited to those on the agenda. Improper conduct and abusive remarks or conduct is always considered out of order; persistent improper conduct or remarks may cause the Chair to terminate that individual's privilege of address. All remarks must be addressed through the Chair. Speakers may offer such objective criticisms of the school operations as concern them, but in public session, the committee will not hear complaints of school personnel or any member of the school community. Written comments longer than three minutes may be presented to the committee before or after the meeting for the committee members' review at an appropriate time.

#### 4. Public Comment:

L. Murphy mentions four emails that were sent to him: one was anonymous, and all were addressing the mask issue. Two were strongly in favor of requiring masks and two were strongly against. He then invites community members to come down to the mic when called upon to speak and asks that they give their names.

Karen Kast-McBride calls in to join the meeting via telephone. K. Kast-McBride requests that it be mentioned that this committee meeting is also being offered remotely.

Community member, Daniel Main is then called upon to approach and address the committee. D. Main opposes masking in schools, citing Dr. Jeffrey Barker, a medical director of Orange County, who stated that wearing masks for the entire school day was more harmful to children than COVID itself. D. Main states that Dr. Barker referred to an increase in the prescribing of anxiety and depression medications and suicides and states that those deaths far outweigh the number of COVID deaths to date. D. Main states that more children died of drownings and car accidents last year than COVID. D. Main refutes the idea that the unvaccinated are the cause of the rise in COVID numbers. D. Main cites Dr. Robert Redfield of the CDC, who stated that there is no evidence supporting masking and that it should be a local decision. D. Main continues to refute the validity of masking, stating that the mask mandate is more about power and politics than safety and that their children are being used as political pawns. He finishes by stating that his children will be home schooled this year and encourages all other parents to do the same, as the students get a better education via Zoom classes.

The next community member to be called upon to approach and speak is Debra Contois, who states the younger children in the elementary schools will not be able to remove their masks, even when the vaccination rate is at 80% because they are too young to be vaccinated. D. Contois opposes masking, stating that COVID poses virtually no threat to children, citing the numbers of COVID deaths in children. She states that masking prevents children from learning social cues and from allowing their bodies to create their own natural immunities. She finishes by asking that people be given a choice as to whether they mask or not.

The next community member to be called upon to approach and speak is Kayla Main, wife of D. Main. K. Main opposes masking in schools and shows several mask examples where the packaging states they do not eliminate the risk of contracting diseases or infections. Also citing the numbers of COVID deaths in the United States, she states that masking children harms their developing lungs, their immune system and their emotional behavior. She states that we are teaching them that everyone around them is sick and that the air is toxic. She asks that parents be allowed to choose whether their children wear masks or get vaccinated. She states that the school committee and school system should be worried about the failing school system and not ridiculous mandates.

The next community member to speak is Matthew Clark, who opposes masks on the basis that they do not protect from contagious disease. He cites the statistics of previous years where children died of other illnesses, including diarrhea. He states that masks cause fear and that children are being taught they can only catch COVID at school, that masks are damaging to children psychologically, calling the masks a "muzzle". He states that masks prevent children from seeing facial expressions and take away freedom and rights. He believes that areas of the world that have highest vaccination rates also have the highest rates of COVID infection and death.

The next community member to speak is Tiffany Newton. T. Newton opposes masks because her children are having anxiety regarding wearing a mask. She states that her son has a medical mask exemption, however, not seeing people's facial expressions causes him anxiety. She believes that masking causes emotional damage that could potentially cause an increase in dropouts as they get older. T. Newton finishes by stating that schools should not hurt children's mental health by requiring masks.

The next community member to speak is Brittany Ellis. She comments on how children who get to the bus stop without their mask experience fear and anxiety knowing that they might not be able to get on the bus. B. Ellis states that as a healthcare worker who works with adults with substance abuse issues, she has seen no positive cases of COVID, despite the fact that they are the unhealthiest of people. She opposes masks because other unhealthy habits are not being mandated, including sugar and organic vegetables.

The next community member to speak is Jake Gatlin. He addresses Chairman Murphy on whether or not the board could be addressed through him. L. Murphy replies that the board will not be responding as this is a public comment, the public's chance to speak. J. Gatlin states that the committee is making the same mistake as last year by listening to the same people who told them to shut down the schools.

Robert Williams is the next community member to speak. He references a document that states the commissioner will be asking for permission to mandate masks. He asks if the committee has the option to put in a "no vote" since there are enough community members there who oppose the mask mandate. L. Murphy replies that the committee does not have that option and explains the committee has no say in the commissioner's decision. R. Williams asks what the purpose of this meeting is if they have no say. An unknown community member replies that he suggests civil disobedience.

K. Main returns to ask the school committee if they will be representing the community the following day. L. Murphy replies in the negative. K. Main asks why they are here, telling the school committee that they are supposed to be standing up for their kids.

L. Murphy asks the community members to calm down, informing them that they do not get paid, as one community member shouted out that the town pays their salaries. L. Murphy explains that the school committee are volunteers and that if the community members continue to be unruly, he will ask them to leave. L. Murphy asks for anyone else who has not had a chance to speak to come forward.

An unknown member of the community who delivers mail comes to the mic to address the committee, opposing masking in schools.

Susie Green addresses the school board to oppose masking on the grounds that children need to see facial expressions. She asks whether Toy Town Elementary is no longer safe as it was the previous school year.

Several audience members shout out questions regarding remote learning. L. Murphy explains that the state has said there will be no remote learning.

Cathy Vacra approaches and addresses the committee. She states that buses should provide masks for students who get to the bus stop and do not have one.

Laura Parks expresses concern because her child hates wearing masks and is concerned that children are not getting to experience facial expressions.

B. Ellis approaches and asks the committee what will happen if a student shows up to school without a mask. L. Murphy replies that masks will be provided. B. Murphy asks what will happen if a child refuses to wear a mask. L. Murphy replies that she should contact the individual school principals to find out their building policies. B. Murphy questions medical exemptions and is again referred to the individual building principals and the mas.gov website for a list of qualifications for medical exemptions from the mask mandate.

Robert Gonea approaches and expresses disappointment at the community's unwillingness to do whatever it takes to help protect others. He approves of the mask mandate.

Another unknown community member addresses the committee to oppose masking and the vaccine. She states that those who want to mask can go ahead.

L. Murphy invites any others to speak so that everyone can be heard and reminds the community to be civil to each other.

An unknown community member approaches to speak. She asks the community to try and be positive about masking. She supports masking and asks that masks be provided on buses and at the door of the school.

Ryan Tenney approaches. He believes that the type of masks allowed should be included in the mandate.

L. Murphy thanks community members for speaking on such an emotionally charged issue.

Public comment is completed.

##### **5. School committee comments:**

L. Murphy asks for comments from the school committee.

R. Forsythe shares quote of Tim Ritchie, President of Museum of Science, who stated that the decision of Museum of Science was weighed by pros and cons. He shares evidence from CDC, DESE, MASC, Department of Health, who have all agreed that masking is the most prudent choice for people in schools. The Winchendon Department of Health reported that the number of positive COVID cases in Winchendon and in Massachusetts are rising. Reports from Heywood Hospital show that the Delta variant is a problem in the area. R. Forsythe states that based on the evidence, he will be voting in support of masking in schools.

S. Lapointe comments that her goal is to keep students in school and that one of the areas in which Winchendon Public Schools is failing is in student attendance. If there is any way she can get students in school the entire year, she is for it. She acknowledges that missing out on visual cues is hard, but it is more important for the students to be in school. Students that learn are those that are in the building.

K. Kast-McBride reveals that she is COVID positive at home. She does worry about children, staff and community members dying and therefore if masking keeps people safe yet in school, it is something that should be considered, regardless of the commissioner's request for a mask mandate. She also states that it is necessary and could be viewed as a liability issue that the schools are doing everything possible to protect children and staff and the community as a whole. She says that it is necessary for the school committee to think beyond the borders of the schools. She asks that people remember that it is not just their child that is affected, that it is the community, the towns outside Winchendon that are also affected.

G. Vine thanks the community members that stayed to listen to what others had to say. He reflects on how his young granddaughter understood the importance of wearing a mask to school and how having a loved one in the hospital affects one's family, how those who die from COVID are alone, surrounded by strangers. He believes that making the decision to wear masks in schools will help. He shares the statistics that 81% of Massachusetts parents favored masking in schools; in Worcester County, COVID cases were up by nearly 27% in just a week. He reflects that the school committee must make the hard decisions.

6. Motion to require all PreK through 12th grade students, educators and staff in Winchendon Public Schools to wear masks to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 unless unable to do so due to documented medical or behavioral issues, as well as religious exceptions made by G. Vine. Policy to go into effect Monday, August 30, 2021 will be reviewed by school committee Thursday, October 7, 2021.

Seconded by R. Forsythe.

L. Murphy asks for any discussion on the Motion. K. Kast-McBride questions religious exemptions, to be amended if necessary at a later date, if not allowed.

T. King comments that his responsibility is not to vote on the mask mandate but instead to make sure that it is executed. He echoes other community members, that he does not want to mask but believes that the most important thing is to keep children in schools. Based on the current guidance, unmasked students will have to be sent home, which was what had to be done last year, whether it be a positive COVID case or a close contact. Buses are under federal transportation guidelines which state that students must wear masks on buses regardless of what the committee votes. Toy Town's ventilation issues were fixed and the school is ready to be opened. T. King believes that the path to keeping students in schools today is to require masks. He states that the current guidance states that masked students who are considered close contacts in a positive COVID case do not have to be sent home to quarantine. T. King explains the Test and Stay protocol.

7. G. Vine withdraws previous Motion and moves to substitute Motion to require all PreK through 12th grade students, educators and staff in Winchendon Public Schools to wear masks to help prevent the spread of COVID. Potential exemptions to this rule will be reviewed by school counsel. Policy to go into effect Monday, August 30, 2021, will be reviewed by school committee Thursday, October 7, 2021.

L. Murphy states the committee will research the religious exemption policy to ensure whether or not it is part of the policy. S. Lapointe seconds.

L. Murphy asks for any discussion.

K. Kast-McBride asks that T. King clarify that the Winchendon Public Schools has masks that show the social cues for students who need them.

S. Lapointe states that the type of masks allowed has not been addressed as of yet, that the committee is only voting on the requirement of masks.

T. King verifies that all buildings have a plentiful supply of masks available. He will ensure that the bus company, NRT, has a supply of masks available on all the buses as well. Windows must also be open on buses.

R. Forsythe states that the commissioner will request from the state board the ability to provide a statewide mandate, which will include medical and behavioral exemptions without a religious option. If there is a state mandate, the committee would be beholden to that mandate, making any potential requested exemptions made to legal counsel moot.

G. Vine asks that T. King ensure that other safety protocols will be taken as well, including disinfecting classrooms to ensure protection of students and staff. T. King verifies other safety protocols will be in place and continued.

L. Murphy states that WPS is using every strategy made available to the district, including social distancing, washing hands, promoting vaccinations, ventilation. Hundreds of thousands of dollars spent to improve ventilation in the schools to attempt to keep children and staff safe and stop the spread in the community.

T. King clarifies that social distancing takes place in very limited instances in current guidance, relative to someone who is symptomatic or not masking, overall social distancing guidelines are no longer in place.

S. Lapointe asks that the vote continue for masks, not social distancing or any other measures.


L. Murphy asks for vote. Vote is unanimous. Motion passes.

S. Lapointe asks that data cited tonight by the community be emailed to the school committee so that the information can be reviewed before the next meeting. If community members do not have email capabilities, they are asked to send to the Superintendent's office.

## **8. Adjournment:**

Motion to adjourn made by G. Vine. Seconded by R. Forsythe. Vote is unanimous. Meeting

adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted:   
Liz Latoria, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent

Documents Attached:

None