Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
Date: August 24, 2021

Held at The Birches Academy

Present: Chair: Christie Storniolo (CES), Vice Chair: Christine Miele (CM), Secretary: Alyssa Ross (AR) Treasurer: Michael Gendreau (MG), Bob Hawkes (remote) (BH), Pamela Sarantis (PS), Debbie Kruzel (DK)
Staff: Chris Smith (CDS), Jessica Wachsman (JW), Erin Balfe (EB), Aimye Haroutunian (AH)
Public: Coral Kanu, Rob St. German, Paul Burns, Kelly LeBlond, Alpha Kanu

CES called meeting to order at 5:38pm

General

This meeting is taking place at the school for the first time since March 2020. Board meetings are intended to take place in person again, though committee meetings may still be via Zoom.

Approval of minutes from July 20 regular meeting. CM motions to approve, MG seconds. All others in favor. None opposed.

Correspondence

- Related to school reopening plan; will read when we get to that part of the agenda

Upcoming events:

- August 28: Field of Dreams sponsorship; AH and CDS are staffing 12pm-6pm
- August 30: Back to school meet the teacher/BBQ
- September 8: Boo Hoo breakfast for K parents after dropoff
- September 30: School pictures

Next meetings

- September 14: 5:30pm Finance committee (remote)
- September 21: 5:30pm Board
- October 12: 6pm Finance committee (remote)
- October 19 : 5:30pm Board

Dean of School update

2021-22 Reopening Plan

- CES welcomed the in person audience, explained process:
    - CDS and JW will share plan, which has been posted on the website
    - public can comment maximum of 3 minutes each
    - AR will read letters received
    - BBOT will discuss proposed changes
    - BBOT will vote
- Current plan is on the website, will be amended as needed based on discussion/votes during this meeting; CDS went through each section:
    - We will be open full time starting September 1 unless federal/state government mandates otherwise
    - CDS met with Salem superintendent to share overall plans, strategies; also confirmed that we will follow their bus plan
    - Hired a nurse for 2020-21 who will stay on staff, will also attend State calls for health professionals
    - The school will address social impacts more this year since many students were impacted in socially/emotionally with COVID; we already have a lot of this in place (i.e. House system) but we will amp this up even more
    - Families are not required to fill in the daily symptom check but we are asking that all students and staff perform these checks regardless
    - Iif students have allergies or other existing conditions that mimic COVID we need a note on file so we know how to differentiate
    - All visitors must sign in and validate that they have no symptoms
    - Lunch will continue in classrooms and The Woods but will be spread out
    - Classrooms will be arranged for maximum distance, working with the allocated space
    - Students will have assigned seating in all classrooms to help with contact tracing - the state is saying exposure doesn't require quarantining, but with assigned seating we can give the family information of a potential close contact
    - Enhanced cleaning during day in classrooms/bathrooms
    - HVAC filters will be replaced more regularly, HEPA filters in classrooms and AC on to help with air flow
    - Worked in the spring to offer teachers and of-age students the opportunity to get vaccinated
    - Masks - this is the key change from the proposed plan; the May version said no masks, but with the Delta variant and the numbers CDS is now recommending masks in the current (August) version of the plan; NH HHS recommends using county data and trends to make decisions to mandate masks; CDC is recommending masks for all 2 and up in schools - this will be discussed in more detail (notes below)
    - Can offer a new program called SASS for asymptomatic testing - if we have this we can use our local data to make decisions; parents and staff need to opt into this but it could give us more specific information about how our school community is doing

    - Will continue to work with students to provide reminders for handwashing and respiratory etiquette
    - As of now, there is no remote option other than a case by case basis for other long-term illness; we will reassess this as the numbers/state warrants

- Board clarification questions
    - Q: Do we need a certain % to move ahead with the SASS program? A: not really but we would need about 20% to get good information for decision making purposes
    - Q: If we adopt the SASS program and find a whole class is positive, what happens? A: If we have more than 3 clusters, DHS gets involved and makes the decision; only the governor can shut down a classroom

- Public comment on reopening plan:
    - ***Coral Kanu:*** Birches has been good for her children and thanks staff and board members for all they do. She is concerned a mask mandate is bad and doesn't make sense because masks have holes and kids take them off and on. Also those kids are with others outside of school without masks. She is concerned that we are teaching the children to just go with the government and not question things. The death rate for kids is so minute that it doesn't feel like enough of a risk to require masks. She is concerned about the teachers, however. She asks to please let the children breathe. Her one daughter came home with a headache nearly every day last year due to masks; but her other child did not. Children learn by looking at faces and expressions. Feels that masks are teaching people to look at others like the enemy. She wants her children to be helpful - hold doors, pick things up for others. Masks feel like counteracting these qualities. She knows of at least one family who will home school if masks are mandated; her family is not in the position to do this so they'll come anyway, but she will have a hard time explaining the decision to her children. She wants people to have the freedom to choose both masks and PCR testing; some of the swabs are cleaned with a carcinogen so she is concerned about having her kids be exposed to that regularly. She appreciates and respects people but she doesn't buy everything that is being reported and wants choice. Teach more things like hand washing and respiratory hygiene.

    - ***Rob St. German***: Agrees with what Coral says. Not sure he will send his kids if they're required to wear masks. His kids were home all last year because they didn't want them making masks - but they will not home school so they'll have to look for other options for online school. Simply doesn't want his children wearing masks all day.

    - ***Paul Burns:*** Respects that the staff/board have a difficult job as do parents; respects that we are all being challenged. He is a first year parent this year. He respectfully disagrees with the prior speakers and believes there is plenty of data

that show masks do work, and these are professionals who study this. He personally knows a lot of doctors who are keeping their families on lock down which makes him feel we should err on the side of caution both for his child and for other people's children who might be exposed if his child is exposed.

- AR read letters submitted through email
    - Letter from 13 teachers (***Allison Baldonado, Erin Balfe, Heather Black-Ward, Kathleen Cox, Julie Davis, Becky Dineen, Kelly Hawkes, Andrew Jones, Kelly LeBlond, Jennifer Madden, Alysa Mulligan, Monique Simard, Stacy Stone***) saying with great conviction they believe it is in the best interest of students and staff that masks be required. The majority of our student population remain unvaccinated from Covid 19 due to age, and we feel it is our duty to protect students to the best of our ability. Additionally, with the unpredictability of the Delta Variant, it is important to take precautions even within the vaccinated community.
    - Letter from ***Andrew Jones***, music teacher. He was very proud to have been part of how the administration, faculty and community handled ourselves over the last school year and that the challenges presented were met with data driven thoughtfulness and caring. He wants to continue to let science and health data inform decisions. At this point the science shows that an indoor mask mandate is the best protection we have for our unvaccinated children. He is concerned that not following the best practices presented by the CDC will lead to poor health outcomes for children and our community. Earlier this summer a close family member who is an otherwise healthy 15-year-old got very sick with COVID and ended up spending five days at Yale New Haven Hospital on breathing assistance. This was scary. Thankfully, she fully recovered but not after becoming very sick. He personally hates wearing a mask, but I am happy to do it for as long as needed to help protect our community.
    - Letter from a ***parent who asked to remain anonymous due to medical information about her child***. Her otherwise healthy daughter got COVID last year (she was only home, at school at a time when there were other positive cases, and one other place for two hours outside of home (masked) during the two week period she would have been exposed). She now has long COVID. She is being seen at Boston Children's Hospital for her symptoms, which include lack of taste and smell, fatigue, and short term memory/brain fog struggles. She is starting cognitive OT and they have recommended accommodations at school as a result. She was able to maintain her grades last spring at Birches, but it required a lot of extra work and caused her a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety that she still grapples with. Her doctors are telling them about kids as young as ten in similar situations and that they are being inundated with requests for care and evaluation. The narrative that COVID doesn't impact kids because they are not hospitalized or dying at the rate of older adults is naive and quite frankly frustrating to us. She does not want to see any other family or child have to deal with this. If she was able to be infected with COVID with a mask on, I

shudder to think of how quickly this will move through spaces of a mostly unvaccinated, unmasked community. Ask that we strongly consider following the recommendations of health professionals, and not politicians, implementing masks for everyone in school as numbers go up. People can choose for themselves in their personal lives, but members of a community need to do what is best for all when their choices can impact others. Long COVID requires time and financial resources that many families in our community do not have.

    - Letter from ***Cressida Madigan***, writing as a professor and microbiologist at the University of California, San Diego. Her laboratory studies infections that are spread by the air, similar to SARS-CoV2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The CDC's guidance on COVID-19 prevention in K-12 schools is that all adults and children wear masks while indoors, regardless of vaccination. Doctors and scientists developed this guidance because new data on the delta variant of SARS-CoV2 show that it can easily be transmitted from vaccinated people (for example, teachers and parents) to unvaccinated people (for example, children). Vaccinated people will be protected from COVID-19 hospitalization and death, while unvaccinated people remain at high risk. The best protection we currently have for unvaccinated children is to require mask-wearing indoors. Provided link to guidelines and encourages the Board to consider both the CDC's guidance, as well as the overwhelming clinical data from hundreds of thousands of COVID-19 patients.

- CES asked ***Erin Balfe*** to comment as the teacher liaison to the Board. She reiterated what was in the letter she signed.
- ***Kelly LeBlond***: Asked to add one more piece of public comment. She's a teacher here and signed the teacher letter. But she also grew up with a sibling who was always sick and died at age 19, and knows there are children with preexisting conditions in the school who need to be protected. Feels kids do so much better with masks than people think. She is also concerned as a child of an unvaccinated child in the school. Asks with respect that masks be required to be worn.

End public comment, and move to Board feedback.

- ***Christine Miele***: Studied the numbers and wants to share what she's read. With ~314,000 residents, Rockingham County has had 25,530 cases or an 8% positivity rate. Currently 524 positive cases or a .16% positivity rate in the county. NH Covid website shows 6.1% for NH which is close to the moderate level of less than 5% and does not include false positive tests. Negative test information is not passed back to the government and therefore does not update the positivity rates. She knows people that have tested positive and then several days later tested negative so this information is skewed. She recognizes cases are on the rise in NH, but the rates of positive tests and hospitalizations of children under 13 do not translate to the mask recommendations in the re-opening plan. Last year The Birches did an amazing job of moving to remote learning well ahead of other towns and feels we remain prepared should the cases in our

school warrant a change. She believes if you wish to wear a mask, you should but we should not mandate mask wearing. The social development and emotional well-being of our students outweighs a .14% positivity rate in Rockingham County. The CDC and the state are not mandating masks but leaving it up to NH residents to decide and she wants to see the autonomy and self-directed guidance of The Birches continue rather than follow data that does not adjust for negative cases or breakout the cases by school age infection rates. The risk to our families is too low to force students to wear uncomfortable, ineffective masks while curbing their social and emotional growth. She is for the option of the asymptomatic testing. If masks are mandated we should review the SASS data on a monthly basis.

- ***Debbie Kruzel***: On July 21st the CDC stated the PCR test can't identify between COVID and the flu but the PCR tests will still be in use until Dec 31, 2021. She taught Experimental Biology at MIT 1990-2015 to Biology majors and pre-med students, which included PCR. Since the outset of the pandemic she knew using PCR test to identify cases was fraud, and even the developer of PCR said it should never be used as a viable diagnostic test. She believes since Feb 2020 public health policies worldwide are based on bogus manipulated data, citing numbers from CDC about death rates due to COVID v. co-morbidities. Asked why if we had such a deadly pandemic in 2020, why were the total deaths in America slightly less than the total deaths in 2019? Where were the deaths from the flu? Stated NH population 1,359,711 in 2019 and total deaths of 1194 for people aged 70 and above. Between 30-69 there have been 198 deaths. Under 30, 0 deaths. COVID is reported to be .1 micrometer. Cloth masks have hole sizes of 5-200 micrometers (50x the size of the virus) and surgical masks are reported to be .3 micrometers, (3x the size of the virus). Feels masks may make people feel good but are ineffectual based on simple math. Also states masks reduce oxygen, increase CO2 and bacterial infections by allowing growth inside masks. Said the last 18 months have been bad with rule changes and death tickers (that have disappeared). Children need normalcy, clean fresh air, see people's expressions and to be able to play. The government has ramped up testing due to the Delta strain with the bogus PCR test but there is no simple test to identify that now. Delta seems to be more contagious but it is less deadly as happens with the normal life of viruses. Acknowledges that Birches teachers and staff did a tremendous job pivoting and teaching the children in different ways, but children lost over 12 months of social development. She is 100% against masks for herself but won't stop others from wearing them if they make them feel safe. It is a "my body my choice" decision and she believes parents need to determine what's best for their children.
- ***Pam Sarantis:*** Board member but also parent of a child on the spectrum who needs to see faces for interaction. That child also has asthma, as does her older son who has ended up in the hospital. She believes that we as a school follow the guidance for all policies from the government so even if we don't like everything we follow the experts. And the experts are saying masks in school for children.

- ***Mike Gendreau:*** His approach to masks and their impact comes right from source impacted: the kids who wear them. Outside of his 4 children I reached out to 14 others across grade levels. Many of the responses were the and made him ask “what are we doing to these kids.” Responses included:
    1. Uncomfortable around the ears
    2. While talking I never felt people could really hear what I was saying. I felt like I am always yelling. It made me talk less
    3. By the middle of the day the mask was soaking wet
    4. By end of the day the mask smelled
    5. I broke out with acne like I never did prior to masks
    6. Hearing my teachers talk with masks on made learning tough at times. Many times, I had no idea what they were saying but got too embarrassed to keep asking them to repeat
    7. With friends I hated not seeing them smile or laugh – hard to read facial expressions
    8. I am Sick of friends saying, “what did you say?”
    9. The mask was very itchy
    10. Why did we need to wear masks when we had screens up between us?
    11. Hard to breathe at times
    12. If had to sneeze the whole mask got soaked quickly
    13. The most common masks work (blue with white on the inside) for older students said material with get stuck to their stubble
    14. I had headaches all the time
    15. Had a hard time socially

  None of the children said they were afraid of breathing without a mask. All said they remove them immediately after school. 8 said they wore the same masks multiple days in a row. All said if they had the option they would rather not wear masks. 5 has COVID (all mild symptoms and recovered within a day in a half) and almost all had been tested just due exposure. 8 knew friends who tested positive with mild symptoms. 6 knew someone who died of COVID (all older) and all knew others who recovered fine. He’s always felt the school’s strength is its ability to make decisions fast. He feels the best solution for the 2021-2022 school year would be to allow families to have masks as an option. School did an amazing job with remote learning, keeping families informed, contact tracing and doing their best to always be teaching in school. Today we at 524 days since “stop the spread” for 14 days & then another 30 to “bend the curve.” Although he does not deny science or vaccinations and wants the best for the children of this school (including his own) we need to see how children view it. The impact of the past 75 weeks educationally and socially could set us back a decade. We have a very manageable school and if we need to adjust course we can. For now let the masks be a choice for families and students. Because what is the end game? If not now when? This virus is not a death sentence. Daily numbers don’t show local hospitals overwhelmed with children with COVID. There will always be certain risks, before COVID and we will

after too. The governor has not mandated masking, he left it as a choice and he says we do the same.

- ***Alyssa Ross***: Finds it very important to listen to one of our most valuable resources: the teachers. And 13 of them sent a letter asking for masks. Agree with Pam that we do listen to most official guidance so why not this? Also concerned about long-haul COVID; we don't know what the impact will be years down the line: it might look mild when they're first impacted but there could be lingering impacts. Numbers and data can be looked at in many different ways and interpreted differently; cited DK's 2019 death/flu stats v. 2020 - might those be because fewer people were out in the world so things like car accidents were down and flu was down because people were masked. Also MG cited ICU numbers here are low for children - but other states are higher and who says that won't be us when school starts. But - also recognizes the social issues for children and that they're often taking off masks and being around other kids outside of school. Basically: feels we should see how September goes with masks so we can avoid an immediate shut down and let the kids have some normalcy by being in school full time.

- ***Christie Storniolo***: Only thing she wants to say is what weighs on her the heaviest: no one wants to wear masks or to have our kids wear them, but parents of children under 12 don't have the choice, they don't have that tool. And that is a huge % of our school.

CES moved to review the reopening plan.She went section by section; comments or questions are below if something was raised in a section, but not all sections had comments.

- Board would like to review the plan each month in planned meetings and vote again on the plan, based on the version that is voted on today. Must have an odd number of board members available to lower the risk of a tie vote.
- MG asked about recess and mingling; when would that end? CDS said we'd need to watch the data. That lead to a discussion about how all the experts don't even agree and people are making the best decisions for themselves. CDS feels he needs to do absolutely everything to keep everyone safe. Feels he'd rather be more conservative and look at other schools who don't have a mask policy and see if they don't have a big transmission rate. The data should come out to help guide us.
- PS asked if kids were outside for recess or gym, can they take their masks off. CDS said some kids do and others do not care or want to be safe but affirmed they do have the option.
- Classrooms have already had barriers removed. Will leave the line in the plan that barriers can be added if a teacher requests them. But they will not be required.
- Confirmed that last year the teachers moved classrooms (for specials, etc.) but this year the kids will move as has been traditional. If numbers change we can pivot in the monthly review, or by emergency meeting.
- Validated that we have budgeted for a school nurse who will be onsite as well as attend calls with the state.

- MG asked how much we are spraying the deep cleaner; CDS said it's less than before but still being used daily.
- MG asked if the school would ever mandate vaccinations for students; JW said we follow the state, that is not something mandated at a school level. But for staff, we could require it if the Board adds a policy.
- Looking for more outdoor options for learning opportunities. Will add a new line to show how we are looking for creative ways to adapt learning approaches, and promote social and emotional growth. JW read the proposed line and all agreed.
- BH said we should allow SASS for any one interested; it shouldn't be mandated but no reason to not let anyone opt in.
- MG asked if we would honor exceptions to mask requirement. CDS said we always do if a medical professional says it's necessary.

CES proposed we vote on masks and then on the entire plan as proposed/amended as noted above.

With regards to the section in the back to school reopening plan that is mandating masks, roll call vote will be taken to approve that section. Motion to vote CM, AR seconds.

- *DK: no*
- *PS: yes*
- *CM: no*
- *BHL yes*
- *MG: no*
- *AR: yes*
- *CES: yes*
  ***RESULT**: 4 yes, 3 no*

With regards to the overall back to school reopening plan with modifications previously discussed verbiage re mental health and monthly Board review, and mask mandate remaining per the above vote, roll call vote will be taken to approve plan. Motion to vote PS, AR seconds.

- *DK: yes*
- *PS: yes*
- *CM: yes*
- *BH: yes*
- *MG: no*
- *AR: yes*
- *CES: yes*
  ***RESULT**: 6 yes, 1 no*

Enrollment

- 220 enrolled, but have several that we are waiting to hear from; wait list at 136
  - CDS said overall patterns are disrupted so it's hard to tell what is going on in communities but we will continue to monitor it

        - MG in particular wondered about K because there is just one on the list; CDS is going to ask around to see if other charters are seeing this trend
            - JW speculated that not having spotlight tours hurt us, but those are again scheduled for the school year

Events and Updates

- Summer learning sessions went well
- School readiness is making progress
    - Will have Early Birds/Night Owls
    - Will have after school programs
- Working on several reports that have to be in before school starts and also reports due for grant work

Personnel Update

- Continuing to search for a replacement for middle school mat
    - In the meantime, will have Tammy as a TA do 6-8 and anyone working above level on VLACS will be monitored by another TA
- Hired one TA, interviewing for another
- Replacement for Ruth Templeton is on board though not in the exact capacity/same job requirements, making connections with the sending districts and she's leading the social/emotional components

Foundation update

Current fundraisers:

- Fall Mum fundraiser
- Tuft & Needle
- Amazon Smile

Current:

- August 30: Back to school BBQ - Free event
    - Meet & Greet teachers 4:00-5:00
    - Groups separated by last name to control traffic flow in the classroom and parking areas
    - Will serve hot dogs, hamburgers, veggie burgers, chips, water, Hoodsies and freeze pops
- Sept: Annual Appeal mailing, Tears & Cheers for with K & 1 parents
- October: Meadow Farms Catalog sales
    - Socktober

    - Halloween event - Free party at the school
- November:
    - Fill Your Cup fundraiser (may be rebranded) 11/19
    - Canned food drive
- December:
    - Movie Night/Stuff a Mascot Event 12/3
    - Scholastic Book Fair December 12/10-12/17
    - Grandparents/Special Friends breakfast 12/14
- January: Cultural Fair, School Choice Week, Alumni Open House
- February: Candy Grams
- March: Read a Thon
- April: Cash Calendar
- May: Spring party
- June: NH Day of Giving

Committee updates

Finance

- Board signed the annual financial report
- Review year-end (6/30) financials. CM motions to approve, MG sections. All in favor.
- JW reviewed the changes to the original proposals: including new TA, teacher categorization, no summer camp, not having quarantine guidance when this came up, not yet knowing grants, things that CARES act covers, etc. Also - we are accepting some money that we have 3 years to spend. New shortfall is 86K. Ended the year with 219K in the bank, not including Foundation money. CM motions to approve, PS sections. All in favor.

All other committee updates were tabled.

Policy Reviews

August: input has been provided but decided to table the discussion/comments to September since the reopening plan took a long time.

- Homework
- Criminal Background Checks
- Bylaws: Board will review bylaws since it's been 10 years; attorney will check any legal changes, we know we want to look at Board make up rules around staff. CES will send the Board the current document for everyone to review by the August 24 meeting.

September:

- COVID-19 Attendance

Moved to non-public session.

Returned to public session.

Public comment:
Alpha Canu: question about curriculum about CRT and BLM. CDS validated this is not taught in NH.

PS motions to adjourn. BH seconds. All agree. 8:49pm meeting adjourned.