

Board of Education Minutes
Special Meeting
October 7, 2020

DRAFT

A special meeting of the North Stonington Board of Education was held on Wednesday, October 7, 2020, at 6:00 p.m. via ZOOM platform meeting ID 82185670765. Present were Mrs. Wagner, Mr. Karpinski, Ms. Welborn, Mr. McCord, Dr. Robert, Mrs. Mastroianni, Dr. Potemri, and Mr. Mendolia. Also present were Mr. Nero, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Costa, Mrs. Wilkison, Mrs. St. Germain, and Mrs. Reyes. Chairperson Wagner called the meeting to order at 6:08 p.m.

2. Pledge of Allegiance – The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

3. Public Comment on Agenda Items with Students Speaking First – Mrs. Wagner had comment. Mrs. Wilkison said she had attended a Rotary Club meeting and through a program with them, we were awarded 1,000 masks. She thanked them. Carolyn Bennett, teacher, had comment on the number of COVID cases and said it is a mathematical fallacy. She read a statement and asked the Board to refer to the rates in New London County or the state's data and not just North Stonington's. Mrs. Helen Cassata, parent, had comment and questions. She said Uncas and Ledge Light are saying they are cautioning returning to school. When or will parents or staff be notified if there is a case or do we just find out through the grapevine. She had further comment. At what point would it constitute going to full-distance learning or do we not have a number in mind? Mrs. Wagner said our re-opening plan is on the web site. She said we go right to Ledge light Health District when there is a case and she elaborated. What the situation is depends on what Ledge Light tells us. Mr. Nero said he is in constant contact with Ledge Light. He explained the process when there is a case. He explained the different scenarios. He is not taking any chances and will always err on the side of caution. He had further comment.

4. School Re-Opening Plan – Mrs. Wagner explained the survey that was sent out. She read the results of the survey at each school. She said 88 teachers took the survey and 15% would come back with a full opening. Ms. Welborn had comment. She asked about the staff and wondered if we had staff that wouldn't want to return. Mr. Nero had comment and said he has met with some staff members and he explained. He said it is a concern and had further comment. He said it is compounded by the fact there are not subs out there. He said he did check with other superintendents about double-sessions and nobody is doing it. Nobody is allowing volunteers in their school. Mr. McCord commented on the amount of staff that would come back with a full return. He had further comment and said our staff has to feel comfortable; he said that would hold him back from sending the kids back in full. Mr. Karpinski said teachers stated some specific issues that would make them uncomfortable. Can we look at those? Mrs. Wagner said we asked the teachers to tell us what they need. Mr. Nero commented on some of the PPE items that are coming in. He understands the comfortability. He said we do have an MOU with the union and we do have the outlines of what is high-risk and might-be-at-high-risk. He had further comment. He said there is no replacement for a teacher in a classroom. He spoke of the lead Dr. Potemri gave us for man power but they won't come out this far. He said we are not alone and he elaborated. He said it is tough in the hybrid plan and if we bring

everyone in we would do our best. Mrs. Wagner asked if we are doing the cleaning the way we are supposed to and she was told yes. She said we are hearing a lot of “we can’t” but what can we do to make this a viable option if all the models are saying we can go in? Roberta Curry, teacher, said she can speak to what the teachers are uncomfortable with. They are concerned about social distance in the classrooms. They took furniture out to do this. She had further explanation. Social distancing will not be possible. She said some of the cohorts already have too many students to be able to distance. Additional concerns are the cleanliness of the classrooms. She had explanation. They are uncomfortable with the lack of subs. She has had people say they will ask to support students at full-distance learning if we come back in full. Many have elderly parents, health conditions, or family health conditions. Mrs. Mastroianni echoed Mrs. Wagner’s concerns of the disconnect between what parents want and what teachers want. Most teachers have gone back to work. We do seem to be starting from a place of “no.” She feels like the social distancing piece is the main concern. She said we have the PPE and we need to get on that pathway to return. Mr. Nero commented about the cleaning. On Monday and Thursday we do the best we can with cleaning. The buildings are sanitized. He had further explanation. He sent an email to the staff asking them what is not being cleaned and he elaborated. He did go through the elementary school today and he is seeing the check-off and signoff sheets. As far as using bigger space and more space, he does need more staff to do that. If he has staff saying about splitting the classes, he needs quality staff for that. Mr. Nero had further comment. Mr. Mendolia said he wanted to go back half or three-quarters and it doesn’t seem that is going to happen. If the teachers are telling us we can’t fit more students, how do we fit more kids in there? Mrs. Wagner had comment. She’ll look at this when she goes to the schools. She asked are the classrooms bigger on the other side of the street? Mr. Mendolia said we are getting mixed messages from the teachers. Mr. Nero commented on the classroom sizes. Mrs. Wagner had comment. Mr. Karpinski was in favor of a structured return. He wondered about staggering. Mr. Nero explained the scenario the administrators came up with. Mr. Karpinski said you can’t just look at a checklist and assume everything has been cleaned. He said we do have room across the street and maybe some classes could go to some bigger spaces across the street. He spoke of the 58 families with no technology and elaborated. Mr. Nero had comment. Mr. Nero spoke again about the cleanliness and reiterated it would not be cleaned on certain days. Dr. Potemri said she goes back to the last meeting and asked Mr. Nero what he recommends for a return. Mr. Nero said he has said this up to last week. He was in favor of a full-in plan until Mr. Mansfield called him. He said it scared him a little and prompted him to look at this. He had further comment. He said it was the largest spike; the numbers from Friday to Tuesday of the previous week were exceptionally high. There have been meetings with the superintendent and the state. He had further comment. Mr. Nero said he has discussed this with Mr. Mansfield. We do have a plan to start to bring the students back and he gave the grades and date ranges. That is in a month. That gives us time to what the numbers will be and see what happens. As people get out, we are going to see cases. We have a plan that is a little less than a month. He said the Board asked for a plan; they have the ability to modify it, change it, etc. He said a lot of colleges are calling it their semester at Thanksgiving and not going back until spring. He elaborated. He said we have given you a plan. We have been thinking about this since July. We’ll execute it if the Board wants us. Dr. Potemri said we are an unfortunate position. She said if that is the

plan they are bringing us, our job is to support that plan. She asked if that was what he was recommending. Mr. Nero said he doesn't know what the numbers would be then. He said that is what we are recommending now but he doesn't know what it will look like in three weeks. Dr. Potemri had comment and said we should be listening to you and if that is what is being recommended to us we should be following your recommendations. She said things could change. We need to be in a position to have a solid plan and that needs to be the focus. Mr. Nero had comment. Ms. Welborn said we are looking at metrics and what are we looking at? Mr. Nero said our metrics are good now but he wasn't sure with the recent increase. He said we are proceeding with caution. Mr. Nero had further comment on actions out of school. People are trying to get back to a normal life and we are getting spikes. He elaborated. If we don't spike any further or get worse, let's look at November. Ms. Welborn had comment. Mr. Nero said he is constantly monitoring these things and he elaborated. Mr. Mendolia had comment. Mr. Nero said his staff comes from areas where this is spiking. We have great teachers—we did great on the first round. He's a little concerned about staff when we do a full-in. We have a little time to look at this. We won't get any more staff. Mr. Karpinski commented on the cleaning, the technology for those that need it, and the social distancing. That gives us time. He had further comment. Mr. Nero commented on the cleaning and explained. He said he cannot find any outside help to clean. We are waiting for our technology. Mr. Nero had comment. Mrs. Wagner asked about hiring extra help and Mr. Nero said Mr. Boucher has been looking at this and we just can't get anyone in. He said to please let him know of anyone that may be able to help us out. Mrs. Wagner said we need to address three things, additional help for cleaning, spacing, and the plan doesn't take effect until November but we continue to need to watch the numbers. She reviewed some case numbers. She spoke of secondary indicators. She said we'll talk about this again next week and that we need to continue to look at this. Mrs. Wagner spoke of numbers on the spreadsheet. She said we really need to look at what is going on with the hybrid at the elementary school. We need to work on that. We gave extra staff development days for this. We have a half-day professional development this Friday. Mrs. Wagner said parents were told they would be full-in on hybrid. She reviewed what the students are supposed to be getting and they are not getting that. Mrs. Wilkison said it is happening but depending on the grade level it is different. She explained. She said there is live-streaming going on and she explained. She said she has never seen her teachers work so hard. Mrs. Wilkison said it is a struggle in the elementary school and elaborated. She said we have almost 60 kids without computers and she has gotten more requests. There are many issues but her teachers have not worked harder in their entire lives. Mrs. Wilkison said it isn't just K-2 that she is hearing from and elaborated. The curriculum should continue to be looked at and it should be the same in the grade levels. Mrs. Wilkison had further comment about what she is hearing from parents. She spoke of what the teachers are doing. Mr. Nero said we expect our parents to teach their children certain things until they get to school and then they send them to school to learn. He said that is not happening due to COVID. He had further comment and said there is no substitute for a classroom teacher and he elaborated. Mr. McCord asked if we have received the barriers we ordered and Mr. Nero said they have come in with more ordered. He explained. He had further comment. Mr. McCord had comment. He said it sounds like we had a lost spring and we may have a lost year. Mrs. Wagner said it sounds like we need to help at the elementary school for more

support and wondered what we could do to help and support. Mrs. Wilkison said when you are talking about young children you are asking them to teach the children in their classroom and also the kids at home. She elaborated. In the perfect situation, we would have one teacher dedicated to those in the classroom and one for the distance learners. She had further explanation. Mr. McCord asked if we could use the large spaces for those. Mrs. Wilkison had comment. Mr. Nero had comment. He said the Chrome Books are not going to be the be-all end-all. He said we are fortunate in some regards. Ms. Welborn said she had been thinking about the distance piece and it concerns her the most. She doesn't know if that weighs at all with her and she had comment. If she has twice as many students in the classrooms, it would compromise their teachers' abilities because they are concerned about the space. She commented on the CDC's recommendation of six feet spacing. She wanted to know for the elementary school teachers as to what would make things better to work in the hybrid. Mrs. St. Germain doesn't want people to lose sight that there is a lot of great teaching happening. We are not losing what we did in the spring. We are not losing minutes. It goes down to the elementary. Mrs. St. Germain said if people are going to take the time to comment on something, it's usually when they have something negative to say. She said getting kids to log in at home is the teachers' job now and she elaborated. It is a partnership. She said there is great teaching going on. Mrs. Wagner said she is not saying they are not doing a good job and elaborated. She spoke of her daughter's experience. If there is a different way to do this that is easier we have to look at that. She doesn't want the message to be that they are not working hard. She had further comment on tweaking the hybrid. Mr. McCord had comment and asked if there was anything that could help. Mrs. Wilkison said a dedicated distance learning teacher, and making sure every kid has a computer and that will happen eventually. She said the primary levels are struggling and it's not just us. She elaborated and said it is not the best situation. She said as Mrs. Wagner said there is good instruction going on. She had further comment. Dr. Robert had comment. He said he knows parents are not equipped to be teachers and he elaborated. He spoke of his class sizes and how they have had to move to accommodate the spacing. He said our expectations have to change. Dr. Robert said if we can't follow those guidelines he is not so sure we are ready yet. If we could use those spaces Mr. Nero talked about it would be awesome. Mrs. Mastroianni said everyone is doing a great job but she thinks overwhelmingly it has been said this is not the way children should be learning. She had further comment and said these conversations are circular and we are not going anywhere. She said we need a real plan about when we are going back. Mrs. Mastroianni understands we cannot say we are going back on a certain day. What are the metrics we are looking at? We have to have a clear plan and she elaborated. Dr. Potemri said enough has been said and Mr. Nero needs to come with a plan. Mrs. Wagner said we are not ready to go to a full-in next week. She commented on what we need to look at in order to bring everyone back to school safely. She commented on the number of staff that wanted to return. She will be meeting with Mr. Nero and looking at the schools on Friday. She asked to get one or two points from each teacher to help make the hybrid work. Look at what the obstacles are and continue to look at the numbers. Mrs. Wagner said at this point she was comfortable that we have a plan and we have to look at how to move forward. Mr. Mendolia asked about sharing this with other schools. He was told it would be very difficult with different curriculum. Mrs. Wagner said we do appreciate the hard work. She agrees with Mrs. Mastroianni that it feels like

we are talking in circles. We need to stick with our hybrid for right now but have our plan in place ready to go when the numbers warrant it. Mrs. St. Germain said as we listen to schools that are closing, we have teachers with children who are students in other districts that are closing and she elaborated. She spoke that finding care for their children is a big factor and we need to look at that metric. We will look at those few obstacles that have come up for a full-in.

5. Return to School – Full Return – Covered above.

6. Public Comment – Roberta Curry, teacher, said we were the first school to go back. We took five days of professional development and most of it was to learn the technology that we needed. She had further comment and said there is nothing we can do about the technology. Mrs. Curry said teachers came through with some great suggestions and she asked them to look at those comments. She thanked Mrs. St. Germain for bringing up about the parents needing coverage for their children. She had further comment and asked them to keep that in mind. She said to please listen to the teachers; we have been in this. Mrs. Wagner said she is hoping all these suggestions are going on in their staff meetings and had further comment. Mrs. Coats, teacher, said she is more confused tonight than ever. She commented on the survey and said please look at the comments they made. She said the teachers are working very hard on this hybrid. In general they give the first six weeks to the students in a normal year. She said their students log in three times a day and they are making gains. She said Sheri Tardiff (another teacher) had a great idea about doing an alternate activity with the groups and she explained. She feels like they are looking at the metrics and had further comment. Mrs. Coats said she doesn't understand the need to rush the full return. She said it takes huge planning on everyone's part. She commented on distancing. Mrs. Coats said to please just take it slowly; let's look at this through the trimester. She said you'll have a better idea of where you want to go. Mrs. Wagner said that date is not a set date. We are looking at all our models. She didn't want her to feel unheard. We are going to continue to talk it through. We do hear you and we do appreciate you. Jessica Zichichi, parent, spoke of her children's experience. She spoke of her middle school child's communication with the teachers. She doesn't think it is a technology problem at the elementary school. Mrs. Zichichi said this is the first week her son has been able to stream most of his classes. She doesn't think they have to be streaming to work; packets could be used. She highly recommends flipping the order and having the older kids come back first. Mrs. Zichichi would just like more work for her younger child. She had further comment. She would ask that the elementary school model the communication they get from the middle school. Rachel Ryan, parent, spoke. She has an 11th grader and a 2nd grader. She elaborated on her children's experiences. She is very impressed with how going back to school has been. She volunteered to come help clean. Mr. Nero said he would rather have a company come in and explained why; he was not ready at this time for volunteers. She said she understands about the social distancing but some parents are allowing their kids to play sports which is great, but you can't go back and forth. It didn't make sense to her. She doesn't know if any full-distance students are playing sports but maybe they shouldn't be. She said she is happy to be in North Stonington. Mrs. Ryan said you are not going to make 100% of the people happy. She knows deep in her heart they want to teach the kids or they wouldn't be teachers.

Sarah Nelson, parent, welcomed Mrs. Ryan and her family to North Stonington. In terms of the school and Board no one ever thought they would have to be making these kinds of decisions. There was a lot of discussion about the metrics and it is pretty clear. She had further comment. She would like to hear what Mr. Nero can't take care of. She gave spacing as an example and said maybe the Board and town could work on that. The teachers are going above and beyond to make this hybrid work and she elaborated. What do we need to do if the teachers don't want to come back? She asked if we know about whether the busses will have enough space. Mrs. Nelson said what is on the table should be the areas that are problems. She said her daughter loves coming back to school. She explained her circumstances and why if we went back to full, she would be full distance. Mrs. Nelson said we need to keep everyone happy and healthy and moving forward. She thanked the Board for letting them talk. Mrs. Wagner had comment. Chris Nelson, parent, said he doesn't understand why that metric alone is a deal breaker with the teachers not wanting to come back. He said at the end of the day, it's the teachers that are cannon fodder and he elaborated. He had further comment. Roseanne Salisbury, parent, said this week has been much better with the hybrid. She echoed Mrs. Zichichi about more work coming home. She reiterated the vast improvement this week. She said we do appreciate everything the teachers are doing. She had further comment. In her opinion, the masks and social distancing are going to be here through the 2021 year. We need to come up with a plan or we will never be back in school.

On a motion by Mr. Karpinski, seconded by Mr. Mendolia, the Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Roberta T. McCarthy, Secretary to
The Board of Education