

Andover School Committee
Minutes of Friday March 13, 2020

Members in Attendance: Chair, Joel Blumstein, Vice-Chair, Tracey Spruce, Paul Murphy, Susan McCready, and Shannon Scully.

Others in Attendance: Superintendent Berman, Paul Szymanski Assist. Superintendent Finance & Administration, Assist. Superintendent Teaching & Learning Sandra Trach, Asst. Superintendent of Student Services Dr. Sara Stetson.

I. School Committee Emergency Meeting

A. Call to Order

Joel Blumstein called the School Committee to order at 12:00 P.M. in the School Committee Meeting Room located in the School Administration Building.

In light of the COVID-19 health emergency, the School Committee is holding this meeting with less than the normal 48-hour notice, in conformance with the exemption in the Open Meeting Law for matters requiring immediate action.

B. COVID-19 Update

The Superintendent has decided to close the Andover schools for two weeks starting Monday, March 16th. The School Committee will vote on whether to support this decision and will discuss practical implementation issues. This is a very stressful and unsettling situation for all of us and not something we have dealt with before.

The closing of schools is not out of panic, but out of caution and follows the recommendation of scientific experts on social distancing. The aim is to slow the spread of the virus. This is clearly a time for all of us to come together and support one another.

Dr. Berman read his recommendation.

I recommend that the Andover Public Schools close for the next two weeks from March 16 through March 27, and be prepared to close for a longer period, if necessary. I realize that this decision has a serious economic, social and educational impact on our students and families. We are confronting an unprecedented situation so therefore, although no presumptive positive or confirmed case have been identified in Andover, we are confronting an unprecedented situation that requires this type of independent action on the school's district's part.

This decision is not in alignment with the Governor, the Commissioner of Education or the Department of Public Health. To date, there has been no state-wide order to close schools, or reimbursing for free and reduced lunches. We are closing the schools for two weeks in the best interest of staff and students. After the two-week period, we will know more. The closure could extend beyond the initial time period.

Staff will return on Tuesday and Wednesday (cleaning will be done on Monday and after they leave on Wednesday). If they are ill or have childcare arrangements they cannot change, they can participate virtually. Staff will meet in small groups. Learning will not be rigorous, but more informal to continue learning with strategies provided.

We have spent the last week preparing in case the closing occurred. Elementary teachers will send home a packet with the students today. All of the administrators met yesterday and know what the expectations are.

Chairman Blumstein is fully supportive of Dr. Berman's decision. Many other school districts have made this decision over the past 24 hours. He is very disappointed in the leadership from the Governor and Commissioner of Education, leaving it to the individual school districts to make these decisions. A communication will go out to everyone, students included.

They will also be reaching out to our legislative delegation at state and local levels about not being reimbursed for meals for kids who need them.

Susan McCready said this is a difficult issue and difficult for everyone to arrive at the responsible thing to do. This is the right decision and we need to consider our own faculty and staff, delivering education. Serious medical issues don't stop presenting due to this pandemic.

We should all reach out to our legislative delegation to join together to help us do this. This will present incredible challenges to many of our families. As a school/town community we need to find ways to support our vulnerable population and each other.

Sandy Trach met with all principals by level and they recognized up front the students who don't have access to technology, and students who have 1-1 devices are typically using them through ASPEN and Google Platforms.

Learning for K-5 students will be a combination of books going home in bags today, and a packet of worksheets that will be in their homework folders and literacy and math online activities that can be done in their own home with/out internet access. Grades 6-8 will use typical means of how students do/find/submit using Google Classroom and other platforms. Ten or more assignments are under development and will be available for students, but not graded. We are not making a departure from what the students are used to using for their education.

Should the closure go longer, we will have to determine how we continue going forward. If absent today, parents can come to the schools on Tuesday or Wednesday to pick up the materials. Arrangements will be made for parents who cannot pick up the materials.

Paul Murphy fully supports this decision. However, there will be difficult emotions and he hopes there will be great opportunities too. Look at young people for ways to learn new ideas for social distance learning.

Tracey Spruce absolutely supports this decision. Her greatest concern is the population of folks who are food insecure and to think through how we can make food available. She is also concerned with supporting the needs of Special Education students.

Shannon Scully is disappointed in the direction from the Commissioner of Education and the Governor Baker. Disappointed there is not a further edict that makes this decision more useful and concern that decision being made is mitigated if not everyone pitches in. She thanked Sandy and her team for preparing the home learning plan over the past week. Are there mechanisms for teachers to use to work together without social contact? She hopes there is thoughtful consideration for those having to leave their home and come into an environment with other people and to look into the software platforms to focus on what we can do to minimize people being in our buildings.

Dr. Berman explained that this decision may move us to collaboration online (teachers/staff) using "Go to Meeting" and other tech platforms. All of our teachers have Google Classroom and Google Hangout.

Joe Piazza reported that the IT Department has platforms in place and is working on escalation of roll-outs of the Web-X Platform which is free from CISCO for the next 30 days that will provide remote capability for meetings. Once we have all the information, it will be provided to staff and we will also offer training sessions.

Shannon Scully moved for the School Committee to support the Superintendent's decision to close the Andover Public Schools from March 16-March 27, 2020. Tracey Spruce seconded the motion. Motion passes 5-0.

Gail Koutroubas, Director of Food Services, joined the meeting to talk about meals for students on free and reduced lunch. If meals are delivered, they could deliver the learning packets at the same time to students. They have a refrigerated van and could provide enough food for a few days at a time, making deliveries 2-3 times a week instead of everyday. They are still in the development stage on how they will do this and prefers using the AHS kitchen as the production cafeteria. Gail is also very disappointed in USDA for not reimbursing school districts who have less than 50% students receiving free and reduced lunches. Dr. Berman said the economic security for our staff is important and they will be paid at their regularly hourly rate.

Sara Stetson addressed the needs of Special Education students. They will provide equivalent packets for students on IEPs and 504 Plans as they are for regular education students. Obviously, there are some experiences that can't be replicated on-line or in a packet but there are technology options they will use. Substantially separate programs will have an outline of daily lessons virtually or through online support. They have developed ideas to use for tele-therapy through teleconferencing, and are in consultation with some of our families with in-home support packages.

Joe Yarid said the Social Workers are developing a plan to make sure that students with social/emotional needs continue to receive that contact via a hot-line and will be sending out some recommendations.

Exercises that can be done at home will be provided for students with physical therapy needs. There are a number of activities to recommend to students with O/T needs per age level.

Rita Casper, Director of Nursing, acknowledged that we are doing something that is not necessarily in agreement with the Dept. of Health. There will be more testing next week and she expects the numbers to continue to climb. Making this decision is the best protection for everyone.

Dr. Berman recognized Sandy Trach, Paul Szymanski, Sara Stetson, Rita Casper, Nicole Kieser and Steve Chinosi who have worked tirelessly to address all the questions that have come up and to learn what the alternatives are. Shelley has alerted other districts that Andover would be making the decision to close; many of these districts are going to join in a 2-week closure.

SAT testing will be held at AHS this Saturday as scheduled.

Joel reported that they have the authority from the Governor to allow all public meetings to be held remotely so as not to require a quorum present in the room to have a meeting. In all likelihood, we will not have an audience forum but will be working on the mechanism for that. He anticipates that meetings held over the next few weeks will be limited to the business that has to be acted upon. The next meeting School Committee Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 24th and will be remote.

II. Adjourn

Susan McCready moved for the School Committee to adjourn at 1:07 P.M. The motion was seconded by Tracey Spruce and voted 5-0 to adjourn.

Respectfully submitted,

Dee DeLorenzo
Recording Secretary