

HENDERSON COUNTY BOARD OF PUBLIC EDUCATION  
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING  
MINUTES  
January 25, 2021

The Henderson County Board of Public Education met in a special called meeting on Monday, January 25, 2021, beginning at 4:00 pm, at 414 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue West, Hendersonville, NC.

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the January 25, 2021 regular business meeting was held in accordance with approved safety thresholds for public gatherings established by local health officials and Governor Roy Cooper. Capacity for the public/staff to attend the meeting was capped at no more than 10 persons. Therefore, no members of the public were allowed into the meeting room. The Board received public comment via email prior to the meeting. The meeting was accessible to the public via a live stream link on the HCPS YouTube channel, <http://tiny.cc/HCPSlive>.

Board Members Present: Blair Craven, Chairperson; Robert Bridges, Dot Case, Stacey Caskey, Jay Egolf, and Kathy Revis.

Amy Lynn Holt Vice Chairperson, joined the meeting virtually.

Administrative Staff Present: John Bryant, Ed.D., Superintendent; Jan King, Ed.D., Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum & Instruction; Scott Rhodes, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources; Carl Taylor, Chief Administrative Officer, and Rick Fender, Chief Technology Officer. Mr. Bernie Sochia, Chief Finance Officer, joined the meeting remotely.

Attorney Present: Mrs. Cynthia Lopez

Board Clerk: Mrs. Kathy R. Johnson

#### CALL TO ORDER

Board Chairman, Mr. Blair Craven called the meeting to order at approximately 4:00pm. Mr. Craven stated that the meeting would stream via YouTube for public access. Mr. Craven acknowledged that Mrs. Amy Lynn Holt had joined the meeting remotely.

#### AGENDA APPROVAL

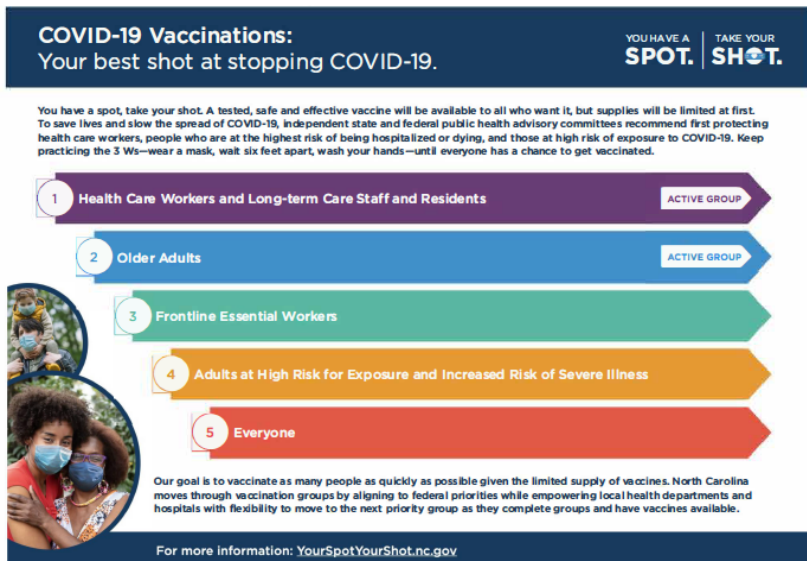
Mr. Blair Craven acknowledged receipt of the meeting agenda and called for a motion for its approval. Mrs. Stacey Caskey moved that the agenda be approved as presented, seconded by Ms. Dot Case. A roll call vote was taken: Mr. Bridges, Yes; Ms. Case, Yes; Mr. Craven, Yes; Mr. Egolf, Yes; Mrs. Caskey, Yes; Mrs. Revis, Yes; Mrs. Holt, Yes. *(Unanimously approved.)*

#### NEW BUSINESS

##### A. RETURN TO LEARN UPDATE – *(Superintendent John M. Bryant)*

Superintendent John M. Bryant shared the local health pandemic indicator numbers from the Harvard Global Health Institute. He reminded everyone that research data from the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI) indicates risk levels that are calculated based on daily cases per 100,000 people using a seven-day rolling average. As of Friday, January 21, 2021, the rolling average in Henderson County was 54.1/100,000 people. Dr. Bryant stated, this represents a downward trend from our January 4, 2021 meeting. Henderson County remains on the ‘Red/Critical’ tier on the NC DHHS COVID-19 County Alert System with a 10.9%, 14-day Percent Positive rate. The downward data trend shows some stabilization is occurring in our community and across the state.

Dr. Bryant shared updated vaccination plans from the Henderson County Department of Health. The plan was updated from NCDHHS in mid-January 2021 and moves educators to Group 3 to receive the Covid vaccination. Dr. Bryant stated that Group 3 contains all frontline essential workers so there is no definite timeline for school staff to receive the vaccine. The leadership team has started its logistical planning for HCPS staff members to receive their vaccine as soon as it becomes available. The Henderson County Department of Health continues to be a great partner with our system in the ongoing battle against Covid.



Dr. Bryant reminded those in attendance of how we returned to school on January 7, after the 2020- 2021 winter break:

- Plan C for all students began January 7, 2021
- Monitor community health trends and workforce stability
- Continue district communications to keep parents and families informed
- Goal of transitioning to Plan B on February 1, 2021
- Prepare to bring back fourth and fifth grade students under Plan A on Monday, February 1, 2021
- Acknowledge that Plan A implementation will eliminate social distancing within classroom environments and on school buses for elementary school students

Dr. Bryant shared the HCPS workforce stability tracking numbers, stating our employee absences have decreased from the December average, this data includes all absence reasons. For comparison, the January 2020 employee absence average was 44.

Date	AVG # of Employees Absent	AVG # of Teachers Absent	AVG # of TAs Absent
December 14 - 21, 2020	169	94	29

Date	AVG # of Employees Absent	AVG # of Teachers Absent	AVG # of TAs Absent
January 11 - 15, 2021	89	52	13

Date	AVG # of Employees Absent	AVG # of Teachers Absent	AVG # of TAs Absent
January 19 - 22, 2021	79	44	13

In December, the board had discussed considering Plan A (fully in-person) for all elementary grades and Plan B (hybrid) for grades 6-12 in February. However, acknowledging that Plan A implementation will eliminate social distancing within classroom environments and on school buses for all elementary students, district administrators recommended fully in-person for only grades K-3 at this time. Dr. Bryant recommended that students and staff in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 3, including Intensive Intervention students, transition to Plan A, beginning February 1, 2021. In addition, students in grades 4-12 would transition back to Plan B, with alternating A day/B day, face to face attendance beginning February 1, 2021. The leadership team will continue to monitor community health trends and workforce stability while maintaining district communications to keep parents and families informed. Dr. Bryant stated we continue to maintain the goal of transitioning students in Grades 4/5 to Plan A on

Monday, March 1, 2021. Attainment of this goal is reliant on community health trends. Dr. Bryant acknowledged that Plan A implementation will eliminate social distancing within the classroom environment and on school buses for all elementary students.

This recommendation, and the goal to transition grades 4 and 5 plus students with Individualized Education Plans to Plan A in March, is part of the district's efforts to reintroduce more students to the traditional face-to-face learning environment, as long as it is allowable under Executive Order and advisable by local public health officials.

Dr. Bryant reiterated that all Return to Learn plans continue to be fluid models and are contingent on local health data. We will continue to respond to questions, concerns, and updated direction from NCDPI, NCDHHS, and other state governing bodies. Dr. Bryant stated, we will continue meeting the instructional obligation to all students every day.

Board Chair, Mr. Blair Craven opened the floor for discussion and board comment on the Return to Learn recommendation.

Ms. Dot Case asked if M-95 masks could be purchased for all teachers? Dr. Bryant will research this, however during the pandemic M-95 masks have been reserved for medical personnel only. Ms. Case is fearful of increased COVID-19 cases in the high schools and asked if our school nurses will return to the schools on February 1, as well? Dr. Bryant stated that we will continue to stress the importance of the 3 W's, Wear the mask, Wash your hands, and Wait six feet apart, at all grade levels including the high schools. School nurses will return to their assigned schools when students return on Plan A or Plan B on February 1, 2021. Ms. Case commented that private schools have a maximum of 300 children enrolled and our system has 13,500 students enrolled, so comparisons made in public comment emails, are invalid. Ms. Case asked why are we returning to Plan B at this time? Dr. Bryant said that we are suggesting a return to Plan B due to the downward trend data, staff absence stabilization, and the fact we had success with Plan B in the fall of 2020.

Mrs. Stacey Caskey shared concerns about student social distancing during lunch and offered suggestions for consideration. She discussed the mortality rates associated with COVID-19 and feels there is incorrect information being circulated. Her research indicates a 1.7% mortality rate. Looking at our 2000 teachers, she asked, 'which 37 adults are we okay with dying?' Mrs. Caskey believes our teachers are working hard and doing their best with the hand they've been dealt. She asked the public to show grace and patience as we all navigate our first pandemic together. Mrs. Caskey is not in favor of a return to Plan A but prefers Plan B for social distancing capabilities.

Mrs. Amy Lynn Holt shared information from a local pediatrician stating her office has followed the recommended safety precautions and none of her staff have gotten the COVID-19 virus. Mrs. Holt continued, the doctor stated they have limited contact (20 min) with their patients and they have been successful. Mrs. Holt reminded everyone that when we were on Plan B in the fall, zero school transmission cases were reported, only community spread cases being brought into our schools. Mrs. Holt feels if we continue to wear the mask, stay six feet apart and wash hands as recommended we can safely bring our students back to school. Mrs. Holt asked if students in grades 4 and 5 with IEPs could be allowed to return under Plan A? She would like to see these students to return to plan A prior to March 1, 2021. Mr. Case interjected, that a 6-hour school day is much different than a 20-minute interaction in a doctor's office.

Mrs. Kathy Revis despises the divide this pandemic and virus has caused between our school staff and our parents. Mrs. Revis stated that Henderson County has always had such a good relationship between its teachers and parents. She feels our teachers are doing everything they can to make this work, and she knows some are reluctant with the return to plan B, but she feels students are better off in the classroom. Mrs. Revis stated that we all want the same thing, students back in school. Dr. Revis is in full support of the recommendation from Dr. Bryant but isn't sure we need to wait a full month to consider the return of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. She feels we need to get creative with our student scheduling and think outside the box while still accommodating the virtual students. Dr. Revis wants to see our community come together saying, "we are all in this together for our children."

Mr. Robert Bridges agrees that students should be back in school and they need the socialization that comes with being in the classroom. Mr. Bridges commended our teachers for doing such a good job with the hand they've been dealt.

Mr. Egolf took exception to some parents calling this a ‘lost year’ for their children. He believes our teachers have reached above and beyond all expectations and they are doing an outstanding job educating our children. He stated that his three children are being educated this year, even though they’d rather be face to face, they are making it work. Mr. Egolf asked how many 4<sup>th</sup> grade students have IEPs? Dr. Bryant didn’t have the exact number but stated the leadership team started researching the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade numbers while planning for their return to learn recommendation. Mr. Egolf agreed with Mrs. Holt and Mrs. Revis that we need to closely monitor the effects of the gradual implementation of small groups of students back to school on Plan A.

Dr. Bryant shared that the number of additional students that could return in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades would be dependent on the individual class sizes at each school and he emphasized that each school would be different. Dr. Bryant said that decisions made should create the best opportunities for all children. He added, once we see how many children choose to return on February 1, we will have better data for our conversations.

Mr. Craven thanked Mrs. Revis for recognizing the current divide between our parents and teachers. He feels community email he has received seem to be getting more hostile towards our administrative staff and teachers. He believes teachers are doing a fantastic job. He emphasized that the Board’s intent is not to keep kids out of school but to try to ensure a safe space for them to receive a quality education.

Mr. Craven asked Dr. Bryant what had changed since the last meeting, when adding 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders back on Plan A was a consideration? Dr. Bryant believes the safest next step is to not eliminate the things we know work. Dr. Bryant continued by saying, we were effective with K-3 returning under Plan B in the fall due to class sizes and the number of students attending. We were able to successfully implement that transition for K-3. When we consider adding 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades back full time, we realize those classes have no caps, those students are larger and are often served in smaller square footage areas. Dr. Bryant believes we have demonstrated the ability to safely operate across all of those groups from September 21 to December 22. He feels that creating a greater risk environment unnecessarily by adding 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> back at this time, would not be the recommendation of the leadership team. Dr. Bryant stated that our goal is to have every child in school and he believes that moving incrementally and monitoring each movement is the best way to proceed.

Dr. Bryant recapped the Return to Learn recommendation for January 25, 2021:

- Plan A for all students [PreK - G3 and II] beginning February 1, 2021
- Plan B for all students [G4 - G12] beginning February 1, 2021
- Monitor community health trends and workforce stability
- Continue district communications to keep parents and families informed
- Maintain goal of transitioning G4/ G5 students under Plan A on Monday, March 1, 2021
- Acknowledge that Plan A implementation will eliminate social distancing within classroom environments and on school buses for elementary school students

Board Chairperson, Mr. Blair Craven proposed a two-part motion for consideration.

Mr. Craven made a motion that students in Pre-K through Grade 3, including eligible Intensive Intervention students, return to school under Plan A on February 1, 2021 and Grades 6-12 students should to return to school on Plan B beginning February 1, 2021. Mr. Jay Egolf seconded the motion.

A roll call vote was taken:

Mr. Bridges, Yes; Ms. Case, Yes; Mr. Egolf, Yes, Mrs. Caskey, No; Mrs. Revis, Yes; Mrs. Holt, Yes; and Mr. Craven, Yes. The motion passed 6-1.

Mr. Craven asked for discussion on the Return to Learn plan for grades 4 and 5. Mr. Jay Egolf asked how many total fourth and fifth grade students we had in the system? Dr. Bryant replied, around 1000 per grade level. Mr. Egolf suggested that we could work out the bus situation to help with social distancing issues, if 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades are allowed to return on Plan A. Mr. Egolf suggested that some parents may be willing to drive their students to school, thus opening space on buses. Dr. Bryant replied that he will have more data to share at the February 8 board meeting, once we see how many students chose to return to face to face instruction the first week in February. Dr. Bryant will have more data on bus ridership and attendance when children are back in the buildings. Schools will monitor bus ridership the first week in February to obtain the most accurate data. Ms. Dot Case

reminded everyone that every student has the legal right to ride the bus if they want. Ms. Case is concerned how the buses will be affected when adding 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders back to ridership.

Mr. Craven called for a motion regarding the Return to Learn Plan for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders.

Ms. Dot Case made a motion for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students to Return to Learn on Plan B beginning February 1, 2021. Mrs. Stacey Caskey seconded the motion. Additionally, the leadership team will research possibilities to bring back IEP and 504 students as allowable. Dr. Bryant will present more information on the IEP and 504 considerations at the February 8, 2021 meeting.

Mr. Jay Egolf stated he would like to have a ‘plan for the reentry of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders before leaving today.’ Mr. Bridges replied that Dr. Bryant will provide information at the February 8<sup>th</sup> meeting and that will allow for more board discussion. There was board consensus on returning 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders to Plan A as soon as possible and when it is safe to do so.

Mr. Craven called for a vote on the motion on the floor, a roll call vote was taken:

Mr. Bridges, Yes; Ms. Case, Yes; Mr. Egolf, Yes, Mrs. Caskey, Yes; Mrs. Revis, Yes; Mrs. Holt, Yes; and Mr. Craven, Yes. The motion passed unanimously.

Monday, February 1, 2021, Grades PreK-3 and eligible Intensive Intervention students will begin attending class on campus in-person every school day, and students in grades 4-12 will resume face-to-face learning under the hybrid model. HCPS will operate under these plans until further notice or Board action.

While operating under Plans A and B, HCPS will resume updating the COVID-19 District Dashboard with school-affected cases reported while in-person learning is occurring on campuses. The Dashboard reflecting this new stage of in-person learning will report cumulative positive cases since February 1, 2021, and include a link to the dashboard data archiving the period of in-person learning from September 21-December 22, 2020

With no other business on the agenda, Mr. Craven asked for a motion to adjourn at 4:55pm. Mrs. Kathy Revis made a motion to adjourn. Mrs. Stacey Caskey seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken: Mr. Bridges, Yes; Ms. Case, Yes; Mr. Craven, Yes; Mr. Egolf, Yes; Mrs. Caskey, Yes; Mrs. Revis, Yes; Mrs. Holt, Yes. The motion was unanimously approved.

Minutes Approved: February 8, 2021