

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC) MEETING
Approved Minutes

Virtual Public Zoom Webinar Meeting
To attend: <https://zoom.us/j/503148228>

April 2, 2020
7:00 p.m. Business Meeting
8:30 p.m. (approx.) Executive Session

Members Present: Diane Baum, Michael Bo, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, John Petersen, Nora Shine, Angie Tso
Members Absent: none
Others: Marie Altieri, Deborah Bookis, Dawn Bentley, Debbie Dixson, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino, Amy Bisiewicz

1. **Call to Order** (7:00)

The ABRSC was called to order at 7:05 p.m. by Chairperson Tessa McKinley.

Due to the schools being closed as a result of the coronavirus, Tessa stated that the meeting was being conducted remotely via a Zoom webinar by all 11 School Committee members, per our Remote Participation policy, BEDJA. It was also recorded and being live streamed on youtube. It will be posted on Acton TV's website at <http://actontv.org/on-demand/government>. Per the remote policy, all votes were to be done by roll call with each member stating their vote after the Chairperson called their name.

2. **OPEN MEETING**

2.1. Chairman's Welcome

2.1.1. Annual Spring Town Elections

The public was encouraged to check the Towns' websites for the most up to date information about the elections and Town Meetings. Both Acton and Boxborough's Elections have been postponed to June 2.

2.2. Public Participation – *none*

2.3. High School Student Representatives Update – *Michael Cheng and Charles Wang*

Michael spoke about the transition to Pass Fail grading at the High School and that it is generally being well received. He said there is a good amount of variance between how the teachers are approaching instruction so far. Charles agreed with Michael. He felt that most seniors agree w Pass Fail because it has been so stressful after doing the college applications. Younger students may feel more negative about Pass Fail. There are conflicts with teachers doing meetings at the same time so kids have to choose.

2.4. Superintendent's Update

Mr. Light thanked the Senior Leadership Team for their extraordinary efforts over the past weeks. Many have been working 12-14 hour days and it is very challenging for everyone.

He asked everyone to consider what it means to have a core value of equity. While the district plans educational values in the best of times, he stressed that today, during one of the most challenging times of our lives, equity is even more important to keep in the forefront. During the worst of times, our value of equity must "be held so near and dear" and must be "thought of so deeply" to ensure that our students who really need assistance to access our educational system and opportunities are able to do so. Worries about jobs and food, access to internet, reliable technology, the ability to speak English, and more makes access even more difficult. Putting families in the role of education provider as well, makes it even more stressful. Mr. Light reminded everyone that because we are so deeply committed to equity as a core value,

we never want to put ourselves in a position of pitting one student against another. It is a very important moment to keep this focus front and center.

3. PRESENTATION

3.1. **Social Emotional Program Evaluation** - *Nate Levenson* from District Management Group (DMG)

Dawn Bentley joined Nate Levenson for the presentation of DMG's work of "Expanding and Strengthening Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Supports" for the District. Three conditions must be met for any of Nate's recommendations: they have to be good for kids, good for staff, and reasonable for the budget. After interviewing hundreds of people and working with 40 staff members, five areas of strength were identified for AB to build on, and six potential areas were identified for growth.

Nate concluded his slides saying that AB has been "walking the walk and is at the high end of being committed to the social-emotional and behavioral needs of their students." He also noted tremendous honesty in Superintendent Light's Report of Entry Findings because it set such a positive tone, and demonstrated that he was willing to identify issues and start addressing them.

Questions/Comments from the Committee included:

- Veteran teachers acting as mentors for newer staff was a focus several years ago. Do we still do this? Nate shared that we do mentor new staff and also commented that bringing in outside speakers can feel good, but it may not really be instructive. He further offered that professional learning is sometimes better coming from inside, because adult learning is very strong when it comes from colleagues, like with a coaching model. Dr. Levenson also noted that AB's staff takes PL seriously and in many cases, the expertise that we need already exists in our own staff.
- What is the next step in a unified vision for kids as they move up the grade levels? Nate replied that some staff members want this, especially those working in multiple schools across the district, but principals and teachers did not want this so much. He said that it is tough to establish a unified, aligned vision, but it is definitely worth doing. Three steps are required: First, a declaration that the District is doing this. Next, the District needs to consider what is non-negotiable and common, to be highly inclusive. He also suggested that when rolling out a plan, the district would be most successful if it is explicit in explaining the 'why' behind the non-negotiables. Lastly, the implementation plan over time must be excellent, otherwise there is no point to go through it all.
- Because this is part of Peter's Superintendent Goals, it's important that we do this now. Another presentation was done in May 2017 (related to MTSS). Although not as comprehensive, the takeaway was similar – increasing groups whose performance is low, diverse approaches in schools, within and without. A question at the end was, "are we a system of schools or a school system?". This is the most important question. Because we have open enrollment, schools have developed their own personalities.
- A locus of control should be as close to the students as possible, in one member's mind. "Inconsistency" is the key word. How do we think about centralizing ideas like social-emotional skill building and programming without taking the control away in order to benefit students the most? Nate replied that as a country, we have gone through a pendulum swing of tight Central Office control and site-based control, and we are "seeing sanity move somewhere in the middle." We need to acknowledge that we have differences from school to school but also that they funnel into a singular school at the Junior High. Nate added that every difference you see between schools should only be because the kids in the school are different and need something different. There are also historic reasons because they always did it one way, particularly if people like what they're doing. Sometimes it's because of the kids, and sometimes not. He cautioned to avoid thinking that all of this is about one way only.
- When addressing the differences between the schools, is it also true for the Junior High and High School? Nate responded that most students start in elementary, move to Jr High, then to High School. They benefit from continuity and similarities, particularly those who struggle with

transitions. As they get into junior high and high school, there is more variation teacher by teacher.

- What is an appropriate timeframe to implement these kinds of changes for teachers? Nate answered that you can start soon and make a difference in 6 months to a year, and you'll still be working on it in 5 years. Depending on how inclusive the process and implementation is, teachers will be okay working on it. More importantly is how you implement changes. If you do a few things well and they are helpful to the staff, morale goes up. Nate felt that if you try to do it with an outside person or in a traditional way, it can be frustrating and not helpful.
- AB's demographic changes and the perceived tension between the social-emotional learning and special education needs of our students and academic excellence/achievement is cleaving at our district. How can we move forward without it dividing us? Nate replied that AB is fairly unique with the rate and mix of demographic change. Palo Alto and some Silicon Valley studies were very similar to AB. The path forward will be nuanced. A shared vision around the causes of anxiety is key to addressing the tension between academics and SEL. This vision must embrace high achievement and rigor but in a way that reduces tension and stress. The answer can't be to reduce high levels of achievement. "Being high-performing and modestly mellow is rare but possible," according to Nate.
- A member noted that most people do not like receiving constructive criticism or feeling vulnerable, but members should model behavior for our students.
- A member commented that our students live part of their lives virtually and wondered if that had been taken into account? Nate indicated that the sixth opportunity in his list says this is all bigger than just the schools' issues.
- One member commented that the most disturbing part of the presentation is the lack of consensus around anxiety.

Nate concluded the discussion by telling the Committee not to forget that AB is starting from a very strong place. The challenges are significant but we will be able to address them. He also reminded them of the universal tension between rigor and stress and the Central Office vs site-based control. While some things should be more uniform, they don't need to be lock-step. Mr. Light thanked Nate and his team as well as Dawn Bentley and the SEL Leadership Team that steered this effort. He added that these are universal dilemmas that need to be managed, not problems that will be solved. They are not binary, but are about finding the middle ground for the community.

3.2. **Kelley's Corner Update** – *Acton Town Manager John Mangiaratti, Senior Planner Kristen Guichard*
Following the Acton 2019 Town Meeting, due to the strong support shown by the community, MassDOT agreed to fund completion of the design, saving the Town \$450,000. Voters will be asked to fund the \$800,000 right of way cost at the 2020 Acton Town Meeting. Minor delays are expected due to Covid-19 however construction is expected to begin in FY2022.

3.3. **School Closure Update – Education Plan** – *Peter Light*

Deborah Bookis, Dawn Bentley and Debbie Dixson joined Mr. Light for the Distance Learning Plan for Extended Closure presentation. This is the intended plan no matter how long buildings are closed now. The Superintendent, Leadership Team and teachers were thanked for a very impressive plan.

Questions/comments from the Committee included:

- What about PreK and if new content is deferred until classes resume in person, what if they aren't? Peter: Leadership is planning to possibly altering the curriculum for the fall if needed. Often first quarter is review so this would work if necessary. Regarding the preschool, Joe Gibowicz's team has similar learning plans, and is very innovative with his staff.
- Regarding synchronous learning time, are we trying to have elementary classes at consistent times during the day similar to what the Jr High and High School have? Peter: a webinar similar to this presentation will be done for families next week to share this information. We will aim for consistency about times and want to try to avoid conflicts across grade levels.

- Will High School students receive guidance from all of their teachers every day? Peter: Yes, teachers are asked to give all students about 20 minutes of work per day, but they are live in class for about 20 minutes one or two times per week. The rest of the time the students are working on other things.
- Regarding equity, different levels of students require different amounts of time to learn. This plan sets a fixed amount of time. Will there be incremental changes? Peter: We will have to read our students and look for ways to refine as we go. We don't plan to change right away because this is a moving target, and something that we have never had to do before.
- The four days of "live sessions" and one day of independent activities strikes a good balance between learning and staff collaboration. Will there be after school help/office hours? Peter: our educators are working full days with flexibility, but during the non synchronous times, students can reach out. Some families are struggling and would like more school time and rigor for students, "expectations with compassion" is our guide. We expect students to engage but we know that every student and family is unique. We are not going to penalize people because they cannot access something. We will work with our families.
- How are we handling kids that are not checking in or don't want to participate? Debbie Dixson: we will continue to reach out to the family or student at least on a weekly basis, until a parent says not to, even if it's not academic. Peter: The High School is tracking if students turn in assignments because that is a way to see if they are engaged.
- Is there an update to the Parent Communication Map? Peter: It is still in place and will probably be shared again as a reminder for families. They should always start a concern with the teacher, then department head or administrator, and then move up to the Central Office if still unresolved.

Comments from the Public:

- A citizen was very impressed by the comprehensive plan for distance learning with a holistic approach, but felt that more time for learning and wellness to be connected with staff and friends could be included. Peter: Administrators have tried to balance things using feedback from staff and parents. Some people want more online learning with time spent live. Some students struggle to be available at a specific time. Some families don't have a computer/device for each child. This seems like the right balance for now.
- How does this Plan compare to neighboring towns? Peter: Every town we spoke with approaches it differently based on their community feedback. We are in the middle for synchronous time. He talks to superintendents in neighboring towns three times a week.

4. NEW BUSINESS

4.1. School Closure Finance Update – *Dave Verdolino*

4.1.1. Revolving Accounts

Dave's reports assume students are not returning to the school buildings this school year. His focus has been to try to understand the impact of the school closure on the revolving accounts in order to project year end estimates for FY20. These include: All Day Kindergarten, Integrated Preschool, School Lunch, Athletics, Community Education, Circuit Breaker and School Choice Revenue Funds.

4.1.2. Possible Roll Call **VOTE** FY21 All Day Kindergarten Tuition

The budget subcommittee met yesterday and recommends that the School Committee vote at a future meeting on next year's tuition. Mr. Light presented a series of options for the next meeting, asking for guidance on how to resolve the \$200,000 deficit in this revolving account for FY20. The Committee could:

1. revisit the decision to reduce ADK tuition for FY21
2. decide not to provide additional tuition refunds for ADK students in FY20
3. replenish the deficit from district reserves
4. make reductions to the FY21 operating budget to offset deficiencies in the ADK account

Members discussed how ADK students receive the same educational opportunity as the half day students right now. When school is in normal session, these students do get more time, but not more content.

While closed, half-day and all-day students are getting the same time and content. If it was decided not to refund the ADK tuition, families with financial hardship should be encouraged to reach out to the administration for assistance. Some members felt it was important to keep the Committee's commitment to ADK with the lower tuition as planned. Several members agreed with Adam Klein's point that addressing a \$200,000 ADK deficit when we have a healthy reserve balance was the type of situation that our reserves policy was created to cover to maintain our programming. John agreed but emphasized that this decision needs to be seen in the entirety of the whole budget. Members agreed to consider these options and vote at a future meeting as suggested by the Superintendent.

4.2. **Policy Subcommittee** – *Amy Krishnamurthy (met on March 31st)*

4.2.1. Graduation Requirements, File: IKF, **First Read** – *Deborah Bookis*

Note: The request to name the ABRHS pool will be discussed at a future meeting.

Due to the late hour, this item was tabled for a future meeting.

5. **ONGOING BUSINESS**

5.1. **Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes** of 3/19/2020

Paul Murphy moved, Ginny Kremer seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to approve the minutes of 3/19/20. (YES: Baum, Bo, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Minkin, Murphy, Petersen, Shine, Tso)

5.2. **Superintendent Evaluation Implications of School Closure** – *Tessa McKinley (oral)*

Typically a more detailed evaluation update would be given at this time, but given the current circumstances, and that the current school committee members will be in place until at least June 2 due to elections being rescheduled, further guidance will be shared at the next meeting.

5.3. **Subcommittee and Member Reports**

5.3.1. School Building Committee Update – *Peter Light*

5.3.1.1. Minutes of meeting on 3/11/20

Mr. Light reported that nothing critical has occurred. Cost estimating and value engineering are continuing and are all still on target. Proceeds from the sale of the bonds have been deposited in the bank.

5.3.2. Budget Subcommittee – *Diane Baum (met on April 1st)*

This was covered in the budget discussion earlier in the meeting.

5.3.3. Boxborough Leadership Forum – *Tessa McKinley - none*

5.3.4. Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAAC) – *Diane Baum/Tessa McKinley*

6. **Statement of Warrants** – *none*

7. **FYI** – *none*

8. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

At 10:15 p.m. the Chairperson stated that

“Pursuant to MGL Ch 30A, sec.21(a) Purpose 3: to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining with the Acton-Boxborough Education Association (ABEA), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the Acton-Boxborough Office Support Association (OSA) because an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining position of the Committee”

The motion was made by Adam Klein, seconded by Paul Murphy and was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: YES: Baum, Bo, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Minkin, Murphy, Petersen, Shine, Tso

The Chairperson stated that the Committee would return to Open Meeting for the sole purpose of adjourning.

The Committee returned to Open Meeting and following a Roll Call Vote (moved by Paul Murphy, seconded by John Petersen) the ABRSC adjourned at 11:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: see agenda with list

NEXT MEETINGS:

- April 16 – ABRSC Meeting at 7:00 p.m.
- May 7 – ABRSC Meeting at 7:00 p.m.
- Acton and Boxborough Elections are postponed to June 2

Posted on 3/27/20 at 5:00 p.m.

Reposted on 3/31/20 at 5:15 p.m. to add ABEA to the Executive Session,
4.1.2 Possible **VOTE** FY21 All Day Kindergarten Tuition, and
5.3.2 Budget Subcommittee Update