

**KETCHIKAN GATEWAY BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
BOARD OF EDUCATION**

**SPECIAL meeting of
Wednesday, November 17, 2021
Ketchikan Gateway Borough Assembly Chambers**

CALL TO ORDER; PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE; ROLL CALL

The Ketchikan Gateway Borough Board of Education met in special session on the 17th day of November 2021, in the Ketchikan Gateway Borough Assembly Chambers. Board President Stephen Bradford called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

The following members were present to establish a quorum and due notice had been published: Board President Stephen Bradford; Board Vice President Keenan Sanderson; Board Clerk-Treasurer Bridget Mattson; and Board Members Diane Gubatayao; and Paul Robbins Jr. Board Members Jordan Tabb and Nicole Anderson participated by remote videoconferencing and then via teleconference, as neither were able to attend in person. Student Board Member Braxton Zink was also present in person.

Administrative staff present included Interim Superintendent Melissa Johnson; Linnaea Troina, COVID Communications Director; and Board Clerk Kerry Watson.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda was approved without objection.

Explanation of the special meeting format and order of agenda

President Stephen Bradford explained that the special meeting would begin with a presentation by health officials and district staff, with an opportunity for Board members to ask questions. Citizen Remarks would follow. Citizens' comments needed to pertain to that night's special meeting purpose, and each individual's comments would be capped at 5 minutes, stated Mr. Bradford.

Presentation from state health officials

The district's COVID communications director Linnaea Troina facilitated the presentation with the Alaska state health officials through a Zoom videoconference hosted on her laptop. Board Members Jordan Tabb and Nicole Anderson attended the meeting via the Zoom link as well as they were not able to attend in person. (*The Zoom feed was displayed via the rooms presentation for the benefit of the audience and School Board, as well as being streamed.*) The Alaska state health officials participating were: Dr. Anne Zink, Alaska's chief medical officer; Dr. Mishelle Nace, a Fairbanks pediatrician who works with the Department of Health and Social Services; Anna Frick, an epidemiologist with the Alaska Section of Epidemiology; and Dr. Joe McLaughlin, chief of the Section of Epidemiology.

Dr. Zink opened the presentation by explaining that health officials were available for any Board questions and to provide data to help the body make informed decisions. Information and data presented by the panel included: Alaska COVID cases, hospitalizations and deaths as of November 16, 2021 and Ketchikan specific data for the same; vaccine rates in Ketchikan; data on the higher transmissibility of the Delta variant; information on the efficacy and safety of COVID-19 vaccines; monoclonal antibody treatment; and "long COVID" symptoms; and recent studies on the efficacy of masking in schools. It was noted that while COVID cases in much of Alaska are dropping; that is not currently the case in Southeast, and a surge occurring in Ketchikan has kept it at a high community alert level.

The presentation lasted about 20 minutes, after which questions were asked by school board members. The topics during the question and answer discussion included: natural immunity; risk to children of seasonal flu versus COVID; effectiveness or harm of requiring masks during inside physical activity in schools; breakthrough cases and severity with COVID and Delta variant; effectiveness of masks; layering of mitigation strategies and removal of mitigation strategies; and quarantining and "test to stay" programs.

The discussion with the presenters was concluded at about 7:14 p.m.

Recess

There was a brief recess in the meeting of about 5 minutes to allow for a transition out of the Zoom presentation and to connect the two remotely attending Board members to the meeting through teleconference.

Superintendent's Statement

Interim Superintendent Johnson read a statement regarding her responsibility as superintendent during a pandemic. In part, she noted she was concerned about more absences of both students and staff, if mitigation measures are lessened. She reported that a "test to stay" program would soon be available for students and staff who would normally have to quarantine. Ms. Johnson advised the Board to continue with the Start Strong plan as now written, with reassessment of the COVID numbers in January.

She asked Alan Jacobson, Maintenance Director, to provide information about the district's filtration and ventilation system, and on HEPA filters. He described the commercial grade filtration and air handling system used by the district in its buildings, and defined the standards used to rate a filter's efficiency. His summary was that there is suitable filtration in the district's buildings at this point. He also addressed some specific areas where air purifiers might be appropriate.

Local health personnel invited to comment.

Local medical professionals who were in attendance at the meeting were then invited to speak.

Steve Rydeen, chief of the South Tongass Fire Department, who was also part of the disbanded Emergency Operations Command, urged the district to provide COVID testing for students and staff with the goal of keeping kids in school. He also commented on how COVID is currently affecting EMS services.

President Bradford followed up those comments to report that a testing program is being implemented and it should begin in early December.

Charley Jose, a family physician in Ketchikan, stressed the main priority should be keeping kids in school, and said that masks have been shown to work. If that mitigation strategy is dropped, other mitigations need to be looked at, he said. Dr. Jose also referred to several COVID cases he'd diagnosed in the past few days to illustrate that there is mixing between the pediatric population and the adult population that does occur outside of the schools.

Ketchikan Public Health Department nursing staff Arizona Jacobs and Jennifer Bergen came to the podium. Ms. Bergen echoed the messaging from the state public health experts that masks are effective and safe, and that a layered approach to mitigation should be taken to reduce virus transmission and to keep kids in school. There were some questions of the duo and comments regarding their involvement with contact tracing and following clusters and cases in schools; how likely children were to transmit the virus; and potential removal of mitigation measures.

School District nurse Kimm Schwartz described her workload as the sole nurse testing in the schools, and asked the Board to support the COVID testing program that was being considered. Some days she tested 60 kids. Ms. Schwartz cautioned against taking away mitigations, and urged the Board to consider factors such as fragile children and the district staffing shortages that are occurring daily.

Break

The School Board took a break from 7:53 until 8 p.m. before opening Citizen Remarks.

CITIZEN REMARKS

Monica Thorne spoke about how masks affect her daughter with a processing disorder; adding that her child's education is suffering.

Jason Thorne commented on the medical professionals' presentation, on natural immunity, and children having to wear masks.

Sharyl Yeisley spoke against children having to wear masks in school, stating it isn't the district's choice. She alleged that her ten-year-old's mask had been taped to her face by a district staff person when it ripped.

Ann McKim said she was disappointed that much of that evening's presentation was about vaccines. She asked for masks to be optional at school.

Student Zarek Arntzen commented that the number of children's deaths from COVID are very low. He said he wants masks to be optional, and that his heart hurts when he has to run wearing a mask in physical education.

Sharli Arntzen called for eliminating the mask requirement in physical education, and asked that families rights be respected. She commented that the district is not expected to eliminate SARS from Ketchikan, and that there needs to be an end game.

Christy Willis briefly commented on the state health expert presenters, and said other doctors with different opinions are afraid to speak out. She said children are being traumatized by wearing masks, fear is being spread and COVID is not overwhelming the community.

Liz Thomas said that studies can be found that support various "sides" agendas. Florida schools had a different outlook than the Arizona study mentioned in the presentation that evening, she said. She spoke about how some other school districts in the state are dealing with school operation during COVID with less mitigation than Ketchikan, such as no required masking.

Heather Dalin cited low pediatric mortality rates of COVID versus what she said was a surge nationally in teen suicides. She also spoke about a local pediatrician who she said is afraid will lose her license if she speaks publicly countering the "narrative."

Autumn Bremmer said she is homeschooling two of her children due to masks being required at school. She asked for the Board to make masks optional.

Kirk Thomas stated he has nine grandchildren in the school district and they are unhappy about wearing masks at school. He described various scenarios with masks he'd witnessed during his travels as being illogical. He concluded that science depends on which TV channel is being watched.

Ms. Willis returned to the podium to read written public comments by Christian Lorenzo, who works at Fawn Mountain. Mr. Lorenzo wrote that kids should be in school, and that parents should be able to choose for their kids, whether it was masking at school or vaccines.

Tiffany Cook said masks were mitigation measures employed to get school started. With vaccines now available to kids, the district needs to consider the end game and let the parents manage their children's risk, she said.

Revilla Middle School/High School Principal Kurt Lindemann remarked on all the training and effort he'd taken during his school career to keep kids safe, including looking for bombs and guns at school, stopping fights and being trained for the possibility of an active shooter. In doing so, he had listened to and been trained by experts, he said. Mr. Lindemann stated that the state medical officials who had presented that evening were experts and they should not be discounted.

Gara Williams, Ketchikan Education Association president, implored the Board to keep children safe, and said that masks seem to do that best. She pointed out that Kayhi is run at full capacity and the main mitigation is masks.

Nathan Gibson commented that experts have differing opinions. He said he had pulled his daughter out of school because her academic growth and mental health had suffered. He also commented that the district is segregating vaccinated and unvaccinated children; and stated that America was about choice.

Gloria Burns told the Board that the district's mitigation efforts against COVID will have a lasting impact. She said that eight of the nine people whose deaths had been attributed to COVID in Ketchikan were Native American, and those weren't just statistics to her. She also commented there were less mitigations in the schools this year and cautioned against removing required masking.

Teresa Elliot asked that parents have a choice and manage their own risks regarding mitigation measures, stating that now there is more knowledge, treatment and resources regarding COVID. The District needs to get back to its mission, she said.

Written comments submitted by persons who requested their comments be read aloud were heard next.

Lucy Ortiz, fifth-grade teacher, requested that the current Start Strong plan and mitigations be kept in place, to keep students, families and staff safe.

Houghtaling Elementary administrative assistants Shawna Harrison and Tami Daniels co-submitted written comments describing their observations at the school, including regarding staff shortages, and requested the mask mitigation tool be retained.

Parent Jamie Doyon wrote that she is pro-mask and that mitigation measures should not be lessened until more children have the opportunity to be fully vaccinated.

Heather Muench wrote that there is no need to get rid of the Smart Start committee, and it is the wrong time to change masking requirements.

A submission from Bev and Jack Davies referred to a study regarding masking in schools from Arizona, noted the local statistics of COVID and stated support for the district's current mask requirement.

Teacher Janae Merrill wrote about the type of daily experience she has with her first-grade students and masks, and asked that masking at all ages be a parent/student choice.

Motion to extend the meeting until at least 10:30 p.m.

Moved by: ROBBINS JR.; Second by: MATTSON

There was no opposition expressed by Board members.

Additional public comment

Ms. Thomas returned to the podium to read a letter to the Board from Jaylyn Merrill. Ms. Merrill wrote about time being spent on public health matters taking away from children's education. Parents should be able to parent and teachers should teach, she indicated.

At about 9:20 p.m., the public comment portion of the agenda concluded.

Opportunity for Board motions/action

Board President Bradford invited motions by Board members as allowed for by the agenda which stated: "Action regarding changes to the COVID Start Strong mitigation plan and school operations as impacted by COVID."

Board Member Jordan Tabb asked to hear about the possible "test to stay" program. Superintendent Johnson provided information on the program. When a testing coordinator had to resign, Mr. Bradford had suggested outsourcing to a local clinic, she said. Preliminary plans to do so had begun. Ms. Johnson explained that the goal of the testing program would be to keep all students and staff in school instead of being at home quarantining. Ms. Gubatayao referred to a district grant for testing, and showed a testing kit.

Mr. Bradford said he'd been advised that the decision regarding the testing program came under the purview of the superintendent, but he asked if any Board members objected. No Board members objected. Ms. Johnson clarified that this is an opt-in program.

Motion to change masking to optional under the Substantial risk level for high schools and middle school students and staff starting December 6, and for elementary schools when school resumes after the Winter break (i.e. post-Christmas/New Year's).

Moved by ROBBINS; Second by MATTSON

Discussion

In speaking to his motion, Mr. Robbins said that it is time to get back to some normalcy, so he was suggesting optional masking at the substantial risk level. His suggested timeframe would allow COVID numbers to come down, which he anticipates will occur, he said. He proposed a later effective date for the elementary schools as vaccines for that age group had just come out.

Mr. Bradford pointed out that the substantial risk level was marked by 26 to 49 positive COVID cases in the community.

Ms. Gubatayao spoke about why she would support the motion.

Board Member Mattson clarified that even under the proposed scenario, the principal or superintendent could require masking at a school if an outbreak occurred to put it at an elevated risk.

Board Member Nicole Anderson commented on personal choice with vaccines becoming more available to more ages.

Ms. Johnson cautioned that, if the optional masking proposal passed, school district staff would not be responsible for whether a student wore a mask or not at school. The parent would need to be sure their child knew whether they wanted them to wear a mask or not at school.

Student member Zink spoke against masks being optional at the high school level. He predicted more COVID cases will occur with that action, and more students would be out of school. This runs counter to the Board's priority that kids be in school, he added.

Board Member Keenan Sanderson stated that the school district had been at high risk for the majority of the school year. If masks are removed as mitigation, and there is an uptick in cases, the Board will need to re-address the issue.

Board Member Jordan Tabb said removing the mask requirement changes who is considered a close contact in the classroom. He said he'd rather see the proposal considered in January.

Ms. Gubatayao responded that high school students have the option to be vaccinated and that many of them are.

Ms. Mattson said that in removing mitigations, the district has to be ready for possible school closures.

Board Member Anderson pointed out that school bus transportation is subject to federal regulations, so masking for school bus riders would still be required.

Mr. Robbins was asked if he intended optional masking at substantial risk to also apply to visitors to school and spectators at school events. Mr. Robbins affirmed that masking should be optional for visitors, but it should be up to the discretion of a school principal on handling large events at their school.

Interim Superintendent Johnson stated that student activities protocol would be subject to the Region V ASAA guidelines regardless of the risk level.

Mr. Robbins said that masks contribute to learning loss, even more so with the young students. If teachers are being the mask sheriff, they are not being teachers, he commented.

Mr. Bradford said he is concerned that the district has a full contingent of staff, but he also believes in moving toward an end of masking requirements.

There were more comments in support of the motion or voicing concern with lessening the mitigation strategy.

ROLL CALL

Student Member Braxton Zink (preferential vote) - NAY

GUBATAYAO, MATTSON, ROBBINS JR., ANDERSON, BRADFORD - AYES

SANDERSON, TABB - NAYS

5-2

MOTION PASSED

Motion that masks be optional for physical education and other strenuous activities.

Moved by: GUBATAYAO; Second by: ANDERSON

Discussion

Mr. Sanderson suggested it was prudent to start smaller with mitigation action, and suggested piloting optional masking at the high school level in physical education classes.

Motion to amend the motion to make masks optional as a pilot program at the high school level.

Moved by: SANDERSON; Second by: ROBBINS JR.

Ms. Gubatayao said she'd rather a pilot be done at the elementary schools.

Ms. Johnson asked what was considered strenuous activity, and also weighed in on how physical education was handled differently at individual schools.

Mr. Sanderson explained his proposed amendment. He feels more comfortable with optional masking at the high school level as that population has had vaccinations available.

Board Member Tabb said the Board had already approved a motion for optional masking at school when the community level goes down to Substantial. He favored maintaining the mask mitigation at the high-risk level, stating that strenuous activity was a high-risk level.

Mr. Robbins stated his intent to vote no to both the amendment and the main motion. He stated he'd rather have physical education teachers advise again as to what activities could be done with what mitigations.

Student Member Zink concurred with Mr. Tabb that strenuous activities and physical education are where students are the most likely to catch and spread COVID.

Ms. Mattson stated her intent to vote no on both the motion and the amendment. She referred to data provided by various medical organizations regarding masks and exercise. She spoke about physical education being a far greater potential spreader than a math class, for example.

Ms. Anderson indicated she'd support the motion. She referred to the Recreation Center's success with summer programs without cases; and the difficulty in exercising while being masked. She added she wanted to have students be active.

Ms. Gubatayao spoke about her grandson's difficulty with wearing a mask during exercise as he is asthmatic, stating that was a greater risk to his health than COVID.

ROLL CALL on Amendment

Student Member Braxton Zink (preferential vote) - NAY

SANDERSON, BRADFORD - AYES

ROBBINS JR., ANDERSON, MATTSON, GUBATAYAO, TABB - NAYS

2-5

AMENDMENT FAILED

MAIN MOTION

Discussion on main motion

Mr. Tabb stated that, if approved, masks will already be optional at a substantial risk level. He suggested retaining masking at the high level.

Mr. Robbins stated he believes the COVID surge in the community will stop soon and the Board's approval of optional masking would become a reality.

ROLL CALL ON MAIN MOTION (masks optional for physical activity/strenuous exercise)
Student Member Braxton Zink (preferential vote) - NAY

ANDERSON, GUBATAYAO - AYES
ROBBINS JR., MATTSON, SANDERSON, TABB, BRADFORD - NAYS
2-5
MOTION FAILED

Ms. Troina briefly reported on plans for a survey related to COVID and school mitigation response in response to Ms. Gubatayao. The intent is to have the survey ready before the district's Christmas break.

Ms. Gubatayao made a motion to switch from community-based risk levels to site-based (school) risk levels. There was some discussion, which was interrupted at 10:24 p.m. with a motion to extend the meeting past 10:30 p.m. Mr. Tabb objected to that extension.

After some more Board discussion, Ms. Gubatayao withdrew her motion, with the concurrence of the Board, due to the approaching meeting deadline. She stated she would pursue the idea at a future meeting and would provide more details.

BOARD COMMENTS

Mr. Sanderson congratulated Braxton Zink for being named to the National Honor Society and for his performance at the recent debate meet.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made and seconded for adjournment. With no objections expressed, the meeting was adjourned at 10:29 p.m.

Approved as distributed at the December 15, 2021 regular meeting of the Board of Education.