

OWOSSO PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Board of Education Minutes
Special Meeting
November 16, 2021
Report 21-42

Present: Adam Easlick, Ty Krauss, Sarah Keyes, Rick Mowen, Shelly Ochodnicky, Olga Quick, Marlene Webster
Absent: None

President Rick Mowen called the Board of Education Meeting to order at 7:30 a.m. The meeting was held at the Washington Campus Gymnasium, 645 Alger Street, Owosso MI 48867.

Pledge of Allegiance

Public Participation Statement

The Board of Education is a public body and recognizes the value of public comment on educational issues. Time has been included in the meeting's agenda for public participation. Members of the audience are reminded that they should announce their name and group affiliation when applicable and to limit their participation time to three minutes or less. Comments should be directed to the Board and be relevant to the business of the Board of Education. This is not an opportunity for dialogue with the Board of Education. The rules of common courtesy should also be observed.

Public Participants

- Heather Balzer

COVID-19

Dr. Tuttle thanked everyone for their attendance and apologized for the circumstances. "I know that we have worked hard to balance the concerns of students, staff and parents with health and safety, with what the Health Department and MDHHS are saying. I will tell you again, I am not a health expert. I do not have all the answers. I can tell you we are doing our best. We very much appreciate you listening this morning and helping us make decisions moving forward. However, to make decisions I think you need to know the data as it stands today. I share with you the following. As of today, we have 76 positive cases in our district. We have fourteen staff members that are positive. We have 321 students quarantined. We're currently testing 130 students a day at our high school. When we started that program, it was about ten students testing per day. Our support personnel are being deployed to cover classrooms. We even had to move support staff from one building to another to cover classrooms. We do not have the highly qualified people in front of our students right now. We're using our encore teachers to cover classrooms as well. We have all hands-on deck, working evenings and weekends trying to do the contact tracing, trying to communicate with parents of students who are possible exposures to COVID positive cases. At the beginning of the year, we saw a lot of cases coming from home, however we are now seeing a much greater transmission rate in school. The contact tracing we're seeing a trend where students are testing negative the first couple days and then they test positive

after being in school and wearing a mask. We have about two thousand more tests remaining, which at a rate of roughly 150 tests a day will last approximately thirteen more days. We requested more tests a couple of weeks ago and have yet to receive any. I understand the concern for mask mandates. I also understand that research will show that masks obviously help to curtail the spread. I know that mask mandates place further responsibility on our team to try and enforce those mandates and our team is incredibly taxed. The human resource issue is at a dire level each day. Principals are covering classrooms; we've had to have support staff to come in and cover classrooms even for a moment while we try to find someone else. We have all the subs that we can. We've hired permanent subs to work in our district just to have available people when needed. I have people crying because they are so taxed. I understand the need to be in school, I understand the need to be educated. I've received numerous emails from parents, grandparents, staff at all levels, expressing their concerns on various issues. I have always said and will continue to say my first responsibility is the safety and security of our students even above education. If this were influenza, we would shut down the district. I don't know why this is any different. We have a policy 8450, it does talk about the control of communicable diseases. I want to look into the future. I was very hopeful last year in the summer when I saw the trends, obviously much better than they are now. This is the worst we've seen since COVID began. I would like to have a discussion with you on your thoughts. As you know we have already sent out communication to families that we will be moving to virtual learning the Monday and Tuesday of Thanksgiving week. People have asked why the district is waiting until Monday and Tuesday. My response was because of the staffing issue; we want to be able to staff and clean the buildings. There are basic things that are not getting done because we do not have the staff to do them. Yesterday we had five classes move to virtual instruction. The MDHHS says that three students who have COVID and it could be closely connected to one another counts as an outbreak. In consultation with the Health Department and that point a class should be all virtual for a time. Fortunately, we are coming up on Thanksgiving Break so we wouldn't be school those three days anyway. I am concerned about what happens after Thanksgiving Break. Trends after holidays spiked last year. I would like to hear discussion with you, your thoughts, and concerns. I do have a recommendation that I would like to bring forth, but I would like to hear your thoughts first on where we should go from here. If you need any more information from me, I can certainly present it. I can give you various scenarios in each of the buildings that are causing hardships. I know families have hardships too. Some families think we should shut down the district some families think we should do nothing, so it is a balancing act but in the end, we have to keep the safety and security of students at the top of our priority.

Vice President Ochodnický asked "Of the 76 positives do you know how many of them are asymptomatic?"

Dr. Tuttle responded, "I do not know."

Treasurer Keyes asked "What percentage of students are currently in school? Attendance wise?"

Dr. Tuttle responded "We track that every day. As a district we have to be at 75% attendance in order for the day to count to receive full funding. Yesterday we were just above 75%. On any given day our middle school seems to be struggling the most, but we have been over 75% district

wide since we started school. As a district. There are times when buildings have fallen below 75% attendance.”

Trustee Krauss “How much have the cases spiked in the last couple of weeks?”

Dr. Tuttle responded “Yesterday was incredibly concerning to me. We had one classroom that had six positive cases. It is the largest spike I have seen. It started with one classroom in one elementary building and the phone calls just kept coming. That is why we had to take the five classrooms down. We are seeing siblings contracting it. I would say that is the greatest spike I have seen on any given day. Typically, when we do the Test to Stay, we haven’t been seeing a lot of positives, yesterday we had five positives.”

Secretary Webster “I appreciated the information on the possible false positives due to the vaccine. However, if I am understanding correctly, we have students testing negative for a couple days and then they test positive after they’ve been exposed which would indicate that is the incubation period for COVID. If it was from the vaccine, they would be positive from day one. Is that accurate?”

Dr. Tuttle stated “I am not a medical doctor, so all I can give you is the trends we are seeing. We’ve had students that have tested negative and then on the third or fourth day after being at school will test positive. Is that the majority? No. But those are students that, prior to the Test to Stay program, would have been quarantined for seven to ten days.”

Vice President Ochodnický asked “If we were to do all online, are we getting the funding for those days?”

Dr. Tuttle responded “Yes. That is a complicated state requirement for attendance called Two Way Communication. Last year we had all virtual instruction for some time for preschool through twelfth grade. At that juncture everybody had a one-to-one device. The reason we had those devices is because we disassembled all the iPad or laptop carts and distributed those to students. That is a very taxing and cumbersome process. We did not get a lot of those back and of the ones that were returned some were damaged. The elementary, because not everybody has connectivity or devices, we would offer a zoom opening or google classroom for anyone who does and paper-pencil packets for the students that do not. The state has a lot of requirements for how to count attendance but yes, those days would count for funding.”

Trustee Quick “I’ve been keeping track of the statistics. On November 1st, statewide we were at 9,313 from the period of Friday to Monday. On November 15th we jumped to 21,340 for the same period of time. In that same time our numbers in Shiawassee County were 7,539 for the total and yesterday they were 8,197. So, we have seen a substantial jump in numbers in the last few weeks. I share your concerns and I agree that safety and security are our biggest priority. I personally feel we should go virtual and when we return implement a ten-day mask mandate to maybe get us over that hump. I think it’s fair to say that we all prefer face to face, that our children learn better face to face. Not in my lifetime have we ever had to deal with a situation of this nature. I am concerned for staff, for students. I believe this is our only alternative.”

Secretary Webster stated “I have to say I am a little biased, or emotional, today. I spent 13 hours in the ER yesterday for a family member. This balancing act is not working. Sometimes when you try to balance you fall off. That is what has happened. Although this balancing act has tipped unfairly towards families that have been vaccinated, that have been wearing masks. Now we are looking at a possible shutdown. I would think we close the school beginning tomorrow and then impose a mask mandate from the end of Thanksgiving break to mid-January. There is no sense in doing ten days and then coming back and then we do Christmas and then we come back again to another spike. I think from November 29 to at least ten days after Christmas break, we need to have a temporary mask mandate. We all want life to be normal. But if you look at our healthcare system right now – there is no balance. There is no balance at the hospitals. The emergency room is overflowing. We sat in the hallway for ten hours yesterday before we saw a doctor. They are stretched to the absolute limit. We have to stop the balancing act now and do something really, really, difficult. That none of us want. If we had a child that had leukemia and had to be in the hospital, we would all want to just take the child home and for them to be well. We all want this to be over. But it isn’t. We have to do what we have to do. Not only for the health and safety of our staff but for our medical community. We have to do our part and now is the time.”

Vice President Ochodnický stated “Many of the things going on in our hospital are not just COVID. We’ve had a huge spike in RSV which concerns me more than COVID and it’s that time of year, too. We need to look at the whole picture when we’re looking at all of this too. I would like to show my appreciation for our staff that are giving 110% every day. That doesn’t go unnoticed. To my fellow Board members, what is our end game? We are over 18 months into this. We need to reconsider our practice of going online and masking, quarantining, and isolating our healthy students and staff. We have parents that can’t bring their healthy children up to test daily. So those students must quarantine. We have parents who don’t want to test their children because they don’t believe it is the healthy option and they don’t want to mask their children. So those children have to stay home. We have children out of school more than in school. We are creating more stress and anxiety for parents and staff. We are creating unnecessary anxiety in our children. We have parents who work full time and do not have childcare options during the day. If we shut down to stop the spread now, what’s next? We come back after Thanksgiving to start this over in Christmas. We are left with more questions than answers. We should not treat our unvaccinated differently than our vaccinated students. No one knows the needs of students better than their parents. We are overstepping our bounds by telling parents what to do with their healthy children. I implore us to take all of this into consideration before we make any decisions today.”

Trustee Quick stated “As we’ve said before, we all want our kids to be in school. I believe that parents know best. However, I will also refer you back to policy 8450. The school must take measures to control communicable diseases. Nobody wants to be where we’re at right now. But we have an outbreak and as Dr. Tuttle said safety and security are paramount.”

Secretary Webster stated “To respond to Vice President Ochodnický’s comment about letting parents choose; that is what we’ve been doing. They could mask or not mask. They can Test to Stay or not Test to Stay. They can quarantine or not quarantine frankly because there is nothing we can do if someone who was told to quarantine comes to school. So, we have been at parents’ choice for two and a half months. To continue forward would be to disregard the information we

have in front of us. I am in support of not masking our kids, but something has to change. I don't know – we can't just do nothing. We don't want to be in masks, we don't want to quarantine, but we still want to be in person – how does that work when we have an infectious disease spreading rapidly? I don't understand the rationale behind that?"

Vice President Ochodnický stated "How will that change when we're not doing anything different outside of our schools? Everything is running as normal."

Secretary Webster stated "I don't think everything is. And when you have kids in a classroom, especially in our elementary classrooms, you have people that are together for six hours a day. That is much different than when you're in a grocery store or an outdoor sporting event. You're not in close quarters like in a classroom. And hopefully, the community will do something about it. We don't have a say in what the community does. But hopefully the community is paying attention to what is happening and will start to do things different. I haven't been masking, I haven't been careful, but I see what is happening and I have to do my part."

Treasurer Keyes stated "As far as Test to Stay, there are upwards of one hundred and thirty students standing line who are possibly exposed or positive that could be spreading it to each other while they are standing in line waiting to test. I am concerned about our teachers maxing out their sick day leaves for quarantine. Mental health of our staff must come second if safety is first. If we're sending our kids to school to teachers who are barely staying above water...I don't think that is the smartest option either. Maybe we should give them a break. I'm not against implementing masks for a time, but I don't think it is a good idea to have masks indefinitely."

Trustee Krauss stated "I respect the parents tremendously. They know what is best for their kids. But we've been charged with the education of our kids and to keep them in safe educational environment. That is my top concern. We've been doing this now for eighteen months. We've been doing all kinds of different things to make this environment safe for these kids. This is a continuation of that. I think we have to look really close at the safety of our students, our staff and administration and what that looks like in the decision we make today. With numbers spiking and what we've seen in the past eighteen months we need to ask ourselves what if it gets worse? What if next week it doubles? How long do we go before we shut down? If this was influenza, what would we be doing right now? Dr. Tuttle, you indicated we may be shut down."

Dr. Tuttle "We may be. It is unfortunate that COVID has become so polarizing. We can all agree on the flu but not on this. Our health directors are having a hard time giving us firm orders. We could continue taking down class by class. It may work this time because they will have ten days off due to Thanksgiving break. But if this were to happen after Thanksgiving break...I'm not saying this is going to work. I don't know the answer to this. I'm trying to keep the school running. We run the risk of coming back worse because of family contacts over holiday break."

Trustee Krauss "We saw numbers go up after Thanksgiving and Christmas last year."

Treasurer Keyes said "With families gathering we know that numbers are going to go up. Regardless of recommendations we give out families are going to do what they are going to do. Like Shelly said people are gathering all the time. We can't control that, but we can control what

happens in school. I am very concerned for our staff. Teachers are scared. They should be scared. Some have immunocompromised family, some have babies, some are pregnant. There are a lot of concerns out there, we have to take those into consideration.”

Dr. Tuttle stated “There is going to be a day where I can not operate the school because I don’t have staff. I have staff on the phone literally in tears asking me what I want them to do because they do not have staff. I can’t close that day because all the kids are in school, so I ask can we make it through a day? Then I am calling asking for bodies to get through the day. So to Sarah’s point that break is also for staff. I am trying to keep my staff working effectively and healthy. I don’t know that this is going to work. I don’t have a crystal ball. This is an attempt to ultimately stay open longer.”

Trustee Krauss said “GST Michigan Works is doing a job fair today for fifteen or sixteen healthcare employers, big hospitals and so forth. They are begging and pleading for people to come to work. Some of these places are closing off floors. It is a big issue for our healthcare providers.”

Vice President Ochodnický stated “I also know many people are leaving the healthcare field because of the vaccine mandate.”

Trustee Easlick “Dr. Tuttle, if we go all virtual will our students be in front of teachers?”

Dr. Tuttle stated “Yes. The teachers that are home that have COVID just like last year, if they are asymptomatic and can teach, we will have them teach.”

Trustee Easlick “I understand we need bodies in classrooms but there is a reason that teachers are licensed. The quality of education goes down. We’ve all been in class with a substitute. I never got educated on those days, those were free days. So, my thought if my kids at home at least they are in front of a teacher.”

Dr. Tuttle stated “I also want to add this is not an Owosso problem. I meet with all the superintendents and represent the legislative committee for Ingham, Eaton, Clinton, and Shiawassee. We all have lists of positions not filled. We’re having to call teachers and ask them if they’ll leave their district to come to us. It is the craziest predicament, what we’re in right now. There are simply not enough teachers to cover the positions needed in the state. I want our teachers to stay, to incentivize them to stay. I am a passionate educator and want our schools open. I understand sometimes we have to go backwards in order to move forward.”

Treasurer Keyes said “We have to have more than warm bodies in classrooms. We don’t send our kids to school for day care.”

Dr. Tuttle said “People need to understand that we don’t know that this is going to fix the issue. We’ve tried to be the least restrictive possible and it’s not working. If we keep going like this we’re not going to have staff.”

President Mowen stated “We have done the bare minimum following recommended guidelines from the health department. We’ve gotten criticism from the community at our Board meetings for following, what are to me, common sense guidelines to keep our children safe. We’ve also heard comments that this doesn’t affect kids, but we are seeing that it does affect kids. What we’ve been doing is not working. Whatever we can do to try and remedy this situation and bring it back under control. Like Trustee Quick said I think a temporary mask requirement after returning from Thanksgiving break is a good idea. Dr. Tuttle and your staff, I know the Board supports you. To me this is the right thing to do. We have to take some action.”

Treasurer Keyes “I do have another comment I’d like people to think about. We’ve talked about bullying and student conflict this past year. If all of our administration and staff are covering for other people that leaves bullying situations open to a greater issue.”

Dr. Tuttle “That seems to be a common theme. You could argue kids have been out of school for a long time and have lacked structure. To Sarah’s point, we don’t have the support staff to support our teachers because they are filling in elsewhere.”

Secretary Webster asked, “If parents don’t want to send their kids to school in masks is there an online option for them?”

Dr. Tuttle responded “No. There is an online option and it’s run from the county-wide level through the RESD, contrary to last year. There is one teacher that serves all the elementary students which is based on the parents that chose online. Parents were informed that if they chose online at the beginning of the year, they would not be able to switch to in-person and vice versa. That is a county wide program. Last year, teachers tried to teach both online and in-person students and while there was enormous effort from everyone it was not tremendously successful. We also then hired the six virtual teachers for each grade level at the elementary which was probably one of our best moves. We’re seeing a lot of staff retire as well. I would like to now present my recommendation that I do not claim is perfect in anyway. So, I listen to everybody. I’m not able to respond to everyone, I am inundated from comments on all sides. I hear you, but with everything going on there is not enough time to respond to everyone. I would recommend that for today and tomorrow, Tuesday and Wednesday, we continue to transition classes with three or more positives to virtual learning as we did yesterday with those five classes. I would all continue to hold regular classes for today and tomorrow. I then recommend we transition the district to virtual for Thursday and Friday. For the following Monday and Tuesday which we said would be virtual, the 22nd and 23rd, I would use those as inclement weather days. Administrators would be in the building but other than that everyone would be home. My rationale for waiting a day is because I understand the difficulties of parents trying to find childcare and although it would be difficult regardless of the time frame, I think the two days would help. Extracurriculars will be a parent’s option and be allowed at a high school level only and if the participants test before the activity; that’s band, choir, drama and so forth. Regarding the masks, I recommend we start with 10 days after Thanksgiving and go from there. I don’t claim this is perfect but we’re trying to be cognizant of the mental health of our staff and safety of our students. That is why I’ve made this recommendation as I did.”

Trustee Quick stated “I would move that we accept those recommendations with the addition of reviewing it in December to determine if another mask mandate would be appropriate.”

Secretary Webster supported Trustee Quick’s motion.

President Mowen asked for a roll call vote. Trustees Easlick, Quick, Webster, Keyes, Krauss voted aye. Vice President Ochodnický voted nay. Motion carried in six-one roll call vote.

Adjournment

Moved by Quick , supported by Easlick to adjourn at 8:21 a.m. Motion carried unanimously.

Minutes recorded by Brooke Barber.

Respectfully submitted,

Marlene Webster

Marlene Webster, Secretary