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TOWN OF SOUTHBRIDGE  
MASSACHUSETTS

## TOWN OF SOUTHBRIDGE

SPECIAL meeting of the Southbridge Board of Health

January 7, 2021 5:00 pm

2-11-2021  
APPROVED  
BY VOTE OF  
BOH  
4-0  
Julius Pelletier

## Minutes

### Agenda #1- Open Meeting-5:06pm

Chairperson Elizabeth Stephens reads a paragraph summarizing Gov. Baker's march 12, 2020 Order suspending certain provisions of the open meeting law.

### Agenda #2- Roll Call

Elizabeth Stephens  
Roland LaRochelle  
Anthony Postale  
Nicole Duffey

### Agenda #3 - Special Meeting Agenda Item:

To hear the petition of the Southbridge Educators Association (SEA) in which they request the Board of Health consider the following:

1. To recommend to the Southbridge School Administration that the Schools go forward in a "Remote Learning" only module until January 25, 2021, and
2. To recommend that the Southbridge School Administration offer "Transparent and uniform reporting on Covid-19 cases.

A. Pelletier reads a letter submitted by the SEA in verbatim (see attached).

Miss Jocelyn Tallis, President of the SEA explains she is representing all educators and expresses concern with the amount of COVID cases quickly rising and spreading, the SEA wants to put safety as a priority. Miss Tallis shares some data collected from educators as:

- 69% of educators disagree the district's guidelines to determine close contact with a COVID 19 individual are sufficient to limit the spread within the school.
- 65% strongly disagree the students are consistently adhering to 6-foot social distancing policy
- 76% of educators disagree that the district has clear and transparent health and safety metrics to determine when to transfer to a learning model
- 71% of educators strongly agree with the following statement: due to the increasing COVID 19 cases, the Southbridge Public School District should return to remote learning model

Miss Tallis informs the Board this data was share with Doctor Villar before Christmas break because of what we saw with the Thanksgiving break it would be likely we would see another up rise because of the longer amount of time off. We want a clear metric of when, how and what metric the district is going to use or go to remote model.

Mr. Joseph Keppler, employed at Southbridge Academy shares his concerns regarding the HVAC systems within the schools. Explains the Middle High School is very modern and has filters in place that do seem to adequately filter COVID 19 along with the additional UV lights. The concern is the balance of airflow within the school. If you do not have the proper air flow, you basically have air pool in the school and it won't be filtered as it should be, increasing the likelihood of transmission.

Additionally, Mr. Keppler explains not all the schools have the same modern HVAC systems. Many of the schools are older and there's limited airflow.

Ms. Maria Murray states there are holes in the system that are difficult to close. We depend on the honor system for students and families to report if they've traveled or if they've come in contact with another person or family member that has contracted the virus. Potentially exposing other students and staff to the virus.

Another hole in the system, Ms. Murray explains is keeping the students six feet apart. This has been extremely challenging. Also, during breakfast and lunch, students are unmasked for approximately 20 to 25 minutes.

Ms. Murray believe that the school system should be doing their part to flatten the curve and we should be doing everything we can to protect the community as well.

Ms. Jessica, employed at Southbridge Academy explains students at the Academy have trouble with developmental level of self-control and impulsivity. They have an impulse to touch one another, get closer to each other and not thinking if they are breaking COVID 19 guidelines. Having the possibility to catch or transfer the virus to their parents or their grandparents. Ms. Jessica states a large amount of our student population live in multi-generational or multi-family homes, transmitting the virus to and from the school.

Dr. Villar explains since the beginning of the pandemic, he has been working very closely with Deputy Superintendent, the Town and Ms. Karen Checka, Lead Nurse.

Dr. Villar praises the teachers, educational assistants, principals, custodians and his entire staff within the Southbridge Public School and believes the purpose of their work is delivering education.

Dr. Villar respects opinions given at this meeting and points out that putting together questions, asking a group of people what you think about a scenario is not scientific data. It's really important that we try to make decisions based on data.

Dr. Villar states the data carefully gathered by K. Checka and Mr. Pelletier tells us that we are not in a place where this virus is spreading. At the beginning of the school year, we talked about when we might make the decision to close the schools. We would consult with the Board of Health and Department of Education to determine what is best for our kids. We have six feet social distancing as our priority, mandated mask wearing, hand sanitizer, hired bus monitors and nurse's aides, sanitize at night so I think that might be part of the reason why we have not been traced into our schools.

Dr. Villar states with over 1100 attendees, a majority of our parents want our students to be in school. They trust the schools while providing students with social interactions, two meals a day, medical care and get social emotional support. Notices are sent out every day about any case that we have in this district. We post it on social media and our website. We are not hiding data.

Discussion:

Member R. LaRochelle request Dr. Villar to provide a weekly summary of cases within the school to the Chair of the Board of Health. Dr. Villar agrees to share the data.

Southbridge Town Councilor Jack Jovan and also Chair of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) states Southbridge has taken an aggressive approach when this pandemic started and can't say enough about the assistance that Southbridge School Department has put forward. The EOC have worked very diligently to make sure that we address every concern that everybody has in the community. We're probably one of the only communities that have continue to have the EOC ongoing to make sure that we keep on top of what the numbers are and provide assistance to the community. We have been in communication with Dr. Villar, who has been very transparent throughout this pandemic to make sure that all staff and students are safe.

Discussion:

N. Duffey agrees that there seems to be "holes in the system" (Per Ms. Maria Murray's statement).  
Shares concerns with Covid numbers rising and that they are not going to be accurate because there are a lot of asymptomatic cases as well!  
30 new cases reported today and a recent spike in deaths - Eight since November.

Motion made by R. LaRochelle Agenda item3; #1 the Southbridge Board of Health take no action and watch the numbers and reserves the right to call this agenda item to the table as we see fit. Motion is 2<sup>nd</sup> by A. Postale:

Roll Call

N. Duffey-No

A. Postale-Yes

R. LaRochelle-Yes

E. Stephens-Yes

Motion passes 3-1 (N. Duffey).

R. LaRochelle makes a motion to amend item 3; #2 that School Administration include the Chairman of the Board of Health with school data weekly. Motion is 2<sup>nd</sup> by N. Duffey;

Roll Call

N. Duffey-Yes

T. Postale-Yes

R. LaRochelle-Yes

E. Stephens-Yes

Motion to amend passes unanimously.

Motion to recommend that the Southbridge School Administration offer "Transparent and uniform reporting on Covid-19 cases AND to include the Chairman of the Board of Health with school data weekly made by R. LaRochelle. 2<sup>nd</sup> by N. Duffey:

Roll Call

N. Duffey-Yes

T. Postale-Yes

R. LaRochelle-Yes

E. Stephens-Yes

Motion passes unanimously.

Agenda #4- Adjournment-motion to adjourn made by R. LaRochelle; 2<sup>nd</sup> by A. Postale;

Roll Call

N. Duffey-Yes

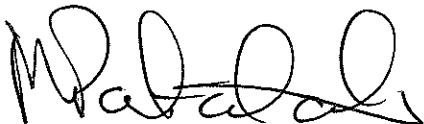
T. Postale-Yes

R. LaRochelle-Yes

E. Stephens-Yes

Motion passes unanimously. Meeting closed at 6:44pm

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Contact: SEA President Jocelyn Tallis 508-868-5371

## **Southbridge educators call for remote learning after break**

Members of the Southbridge Education Association sent a petition to the district's state-appointed receiver arguing that Southbridge Public Schools should prepare for fully remote learning after the winter break to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the community and surrounding towns.

The petition to receiver Jeffrey Villar supports a fully remote learning program through at least Jan. 25 before resuming hybrid or any in-person learning models. The SEA also calls on Villar to ensure that all students have access to the technology necessary to have a successful experience with remote learning. Additionally, the SEA wants transparent and uniform reporting on COVID-19 cases in the community and assurances that staff will not be cut at any point during the school year.

With a COVID-19 positivity rate that is greater than 100 residents per 1,000, Southbridge is among the communities in Massachusetts with the highest coronavirus rates, and the number of infections in Southbridge has been consistently climbing for many weeks.

"Educators wants the district to get ahead of the problems we saw after the Thanksgiving break when COVID-19 infections spiked across the state and in Southbridge," said SEA President Jocelyn Tallis.

Tallis said that with the lack of free and accessible COVID-19 testing in Southbridge, the only safe way to control the spread of the disease is to limit gatherings, and the schools must play a role in that larger community health initiative.

Members of the SEA have consistently expressed concern with the receiver's lack of a transparent and comprehensive plan for teaching during the pandemic. The receiver is acting more in line with Gov. Charlie Baker's agenda to force students into in-person learning and is not guiding the district with enough consideration for the public health crisis in the town.

“The SEA knows that there is no replacement for in-person learning, and educators have made every effort to maximize opportunities for students to be in the classrooms with their teachers,” Tallis said. “However, the SEA also prioritizes the health and safety of students and their families as well as the health and safety of educators and their families. With vaccines arriving in communities, our most difficult struggles with the coronavirus will be behind us in the foreseeable future. Until then, the SEA is advocating for reasonable measures to slow and reduce the spread of the disease in Southbridge.”

*Jocelyn*