

**Please Note: These minutes are pending Board approval.**  
**Board of Education**  
**Newtown, Connecticut**

Minutes of the Board of Education special meeting on March 19, 2020 at 12:00 p.m. in the council chambers at 3 Primrose Street.

M. Ku, Chair  
D. Delia, Vice Chair  
D. Cruson, Secretary  
D. Leidlein  
J. Vouros  
R. Harriman-Stites  
D. Zukowski  
H. Jojo (absent)  
M. Chand (absent)

L. Rodrigue  
A. Uberti  
R. Bienkowski

Mrs. Ku called the meeting to order at 12:00 p.m.

Item 1 – Pledge of Allegiance

Mrs. Ku stated that we would be recording this meeting on Google Meet and it would also be streaming on the Town website. She clarified this unusual meeting format due to conflicting circumstances but wanted to provide government meetings to the public and be safe. She thanked everyone involved for helping to set this up including Carmella Amodeo and George Yagop in the Technology Department.

Item 2 – Discussion of COVID-19 Waiver and Distance Learning

Dr. Rodrigue thanked all staff members and the leadership team especially Mrs. Uberti and Dr. Purcaro for thinking ahead well in advance to prepare the alternative learning plan. We received the waiver and implemented this plan. Parents had multiple communications from us. We did not do this so we could get out earlier. We felt this was good for students and the right thing to do to keep them engaged. Many districts were not prepared. We have been asked for our plan by multiple districts. She thanked Mrs. Ku for supporting that and the leadership team. This is not easy and people have to be patient.

Mrs. Uberti said we are transitioning from a supplemental learning phase to actual distance learning under our plan. The high school was ready to start with true online learning but there are other challenges in the lower grade levels. The elementary teachers are working on creating lessons to include new learning. There are a lot of challenges in balancing the workload for students by the parents. We are also trying to provide training for parents and will upload a digital resource page for our website to provide training for staff and parents. Another challenge is ensuring equity to make sure we are consistent in what we are doing and supplying lessons for special education students and those receiving ELL services. We will look to rolling this down to third and second grade students which offers the best way to provide distance learning to them.

Dr. Rodrigue stated that we are providing devices to parents who need them. We are also dealing with students receiving free and reduced lunch but we put the free lunch offer out to the entire community. She thanked Joe Stango and his Whitsons staff for providing food to be picked up at Head O'Meadow School, the middle school and the high school for pick up on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Mrs. Ku recognized Dr. Rodrigue's forward thinking and support of the administrative staff which made our district a leader in the State giving students an opportunity to learn and seeing ahead to what was going to come and where we are now. These are not ideal circumstances for

students but this plan will bridge the gap to when they come back to school. She was proud of the district for this all-hands approach.

Mr. Cruson clarified that when the State announced the waiver it was for 10 days.

Dr. Rodrigue said this is now for the duration of the closure until further notice.

Mrs. Zukowski asked if there was a way parents could get things from their child's locker.

Dr. Rodrigue said we've been doing this and making appointments to meet them.

Mrs. Uberti said at the K-8 schools the administrators are getting the needed materials and leaving them in the vestibule for parents to retrieve.

Dr. Rodrigue will check on the procedure at the high school.

Mrs. Leidlein shared Mrs. Harriman-Stites' question which was how we were dealing with the student accommodations such as OT services.

Dr. Rodrigue said that case managers and special education teachers are working closely with students and are reaching out to families and continue to send modifications. Regarding OT and BT services, they are reaching out to family members and will send additional activities to meet those needs. The State has been very flexible. The special education department is working to find alternative strategies. We encouraged parents to reach out to us, principals and teachers with any concerns. Counselors are also in touch with their families.

Mr. Delia asked if there was a plan for SBAC and SAT testing.

Dr. Rodrigue stated that the SAT schedule was moved a week and AP testing could be rescheduled. When the governor speaks March 30 or 31 things may change again.

Mr. Cruson said that as we progress it would be helpful to share with parents when the school year will end.

Dr. Rodrigue was waiting for clarification because the governor stated that all districts could land on their ending date but there are mixed messages to where that is.

Mrs. Harriman-Stites' question was about the expectation for the level of completion and level of mastery on assignments going home.

Mrs. Uberti said that was hard to answer right now because some parents are looking for more work and some find it very challenging. We feel the classroom teachers are the best persons to reach out to with individual concerns. We will collaborate with the principal and grade levels to fill the gaps. The message now is classroom teachers should be contacted by parents.

Mrs. Zukowski asked if there is a plan to help teachers bring everyone back to where they should be when they return to class.

Mrs. Uberti said that's a future phase of planning.

Dr. Rodrigue said there is a big difference between the grade levels. The high school students are used to working on line but it's different at the elementary levels and it's new to students and parents. We need to have some flexibility. We understand what families are going through and students are doing the best they can with their parents.

Mr. Delia asked about outplacements.

Dr. Rodrigue said we would transport as long as transportation is running and the facilities are open.

Mr. Cruson said distance learning started yesterday with K-4 delayed until Monday and asked if this will affect those students at the end of the year.

Mrs. Uberti said we planned supplemental learning activities and developed a time when they would switch over. We had to create a transitional period when they would switch over. Staff needed more time to develop lesson plans and they will share their lesson plans. As long as we move grade levels at the same pace and all four schools are doing the same thing we will deal with what was next.

Mr. Cruson said it makes more sense to start them on a Monday.

Dr. Rodrigue stated that elementary parents needed a little more time to prepare for the school work to begin.

Mr. Vouros said it was important to remember the elementary teachers are reaching out to each household to be sure parents and students know what they are doing on a daily basis. He saw firsthand that it's working very well.

#### Item 3 – Box Lunch Program through Whitsons

Dr. Rodrigue said Mrs. Amodeo worked with Whitsons to create a survey for parents which is sent to Whitsons to process which is working well.

Mrs. Ku said we have community members interested in helping.

Dr. Rodrigue agreed and there were volunteers also at the Board level also but we decided to limit it to staff because of the virus.

#### Item 4 – Discussion and Possible Action on the April Recess

Dr. Rodrigue said we had three snow days and two non-distance learning days for a total of five days altogether. If these days are counted and if we come back at some point before the April break she suggests to not cancel the break. We have less than the number of days that we would need to cancel the April break. Teachers are stressed as many have their own children dealing with this along with teaching their students. She recommends going with the break and just adding other days to the school year.

Mrs. Ku was not sure if we know enough information to make that decision. Feedback from the public would be useful.

Mr. Cruson was always in favor of having spring break even if we had a rough winter but if we used the break as education time it could potentially move back our end date. With the uncertainty of whether we are going back it would help to decide on end of the year activities. Taking the April break and ending earlier in June would be better. He would continue following the calendar.

Mrs. Zukowski asked if there could be some flexibility in considering the April break but we could use it as catch up time and an optional week with teachers and parents opting in for a way to help students.

Dr. Rodrigue stated this time is being counted as school days for teachers. She was not sure if having the April break as an optional week would work out because we would have to pay teachers which means they would be working on a week they didn't work before.

Mr. Vouros was in favor of leaving the April break as is because the teachers, students and parents need it. He agreed with Mrs. Zukowski that when we get back there would be a discussion on how these students will regroup by class or grade level so those who need extra help will get it. Students that are not where they need to be will get the help they need and catch up before moving to the next grade level.

Mrs. Uberti said regarding the April break and depending where we are, that could be valuable time for central office and the Technology Department if we are looking at another phase of when students might return.

Mr. Delia said it was critical that everyone gets the break and he would not support changing anything on the calendar.

Mrs. Leidlein was in support of not changing it and Mrs. Harriman-Stites agreed.

Mrs. Ku recognized that everyone was putting in a huge amount of effort so she isn't in favor of removing the spring break.

Financial Report and Transfer for the Month ending February 29, 2020:

MOTION: Mr. Cruson moved that the Board of Education approve the financial report and transfer for the month ending February 29, 2020. Mr. Vouros seconded.

Mr. Bienkowski said we received the first installment of the Excess Cost and Agency Placement Grant based on the December data submission. This first receipt is based on a State calculated rate at 74.8% and amounts to \$1,409,141. He recommends transferring \$100,000 from the special education contingency fund to the special education out-of-district tuition line. This fund was established to be used for this purpose. Emergency repairs were required at Sandy Hook School, Newtown Middle school and Newtown High School.

Mrs. Zukowski asked the impact of the shutdown on next month's financial report and where we are spending more and where we are not spending.

Mrs. Ku noted that would be discussed in the next agenda item.

Mr. Delia asked if it was better to wait on transferring from the contingency fund until the end of the year.

Mr. Bienkowski said it was appropriate to transfer now. We used it the end of last year.

Regarding the Board of Finance and the Legislative Subcommittee meetings, it is a continuing topic of why we haven't used it. We know this isn't going to change so it makes sense to do it so we can demonstrate we are expending it in accordance with what the original intention was.

Dr. Rodrigue said the Legislative Council talked about when Mr. Bienkowski took money from other accounts instead of using the contingency. That led us to use it when we needed it.

Mr. Cruson said if we had money left from the contingency fund we could put in a fund at the end of the year. He asked if we have a positive balance if part of it could be put in the contingency fund and part in the nonlapsing account.

Mr. Bienkowski said that nothing would prevent us from doing that as long as the Board agreed.

Mrs. Ku stated that conversations at the Board of Finance and Legislative Council levels indicated some confusion about the nonlapsing account and if special education money could be used for special education funds. Prior to all of the changes, the CIP/Facilities Committee was going to take up that discussion.

Motion passes unanimously.

#### Item 6 – Fiscal and Personnel Implications of COVID on the District

Dr. Rodrigue said there are a lot of unknowns regarding areas we will not spend and difficult to predict.

Mr. Bienkowski said we are dealing with uncharted territory but a number of accounts will be impacted because schools are closed. Accounts negatively impacted would be medical-related costs because we have waived all copays and onsite fees for COVID-19 testing and treatments. That will come out of our self-insurance fund, which would be .1%. Another area is services we bill to other districts such as the pre-school program so the parents deserve a refund. Also, school lunches being provided because there is no fund that Whitsons has so it will be our responsibility.

Offsetting these are a number of items because of no activities in the schools. They include custodial/maintenance overtime, security overtime, substitutes, tutors, springtime activities, Fica and Medicare will be less, there will be no staff training, savings in the water account, classroom repairs of instructional equipment which will be on hold but we are looking at buildings repairs that can't be done when students are in the buildings, staff travel, class travel for field trips, all supplies, electricity with the schools being set on night mode, bus fuel and overall bus contract adjustments. He spoke to All-Star Transportation and they still have fixed costs to pay.

There are significant dollars that can accumulate at approximately \$600,000 to close to \$1M. The \$600,000 is without transportation and tuition. Tuition contracts have to be reviewed to see how they are paid.

He had a conversation with EdAdvance regarding transportation for out-of-district students. We won't get a determination of the balance until students return to school. Whatever is left over would go into the nonlapsing account. We have \$500,000 in that account now

Mr. Vourros asked the position we are taking presenting this to the Legislative Council.

Mr. Bienkowski said we will continue with our adopted budget. We aren't going to suggest any of these will impact that budget.

Mr. Vourros was concerned about them suggesting that we reduce our budget by \$600,000.

Dr. Rodrigue agreed with Mr. Bienkowski that we should not change our approach because we are at the Legislative Council phase now. She would hate to have the unknowns impact that in some way. We have no idea of what legal implications and medical costs will be.

Mrs. Ku asked how we are going to make sure students are on the same level when they come back to school.

Dr. Rodrigue said that OT and PT services will continue over the summer. Compensatory services need to be made up after July 1.

Mrs. Zukowski said it could be possible we have enough overall net money to ensure focusing on bringing students up to where they were if this hadn't occurred. She hoped the Legislative Council doesn't cut the operational budget. Students need to learn as well as they are capable of learning.

Mr. Delia asked if teachers were being provided the additional resources they require to provide the students with what they need.

Dr. Rodrigue stated that we have had lots of professional development and this is occurring every day between staff. With technology and library media services we have what we need.

Mrs. Uberti said we don't need a lot of supplies because we aren't face-to-face with students and we are also providing training.

Mrs. Ku stated this brought to light the importance of technology.

Mr. Vouros said if we don't return this year and the students comeback in August, we would need to have plans in place and enough staff to get them to where they need to be. He hopes some of this money could be used to provide the personnel to infuse into the classrooms to help because this will not be easy for teachers to do on their own.

Mr. Cruson asked if besides All-Star, were there other contracted services not being used now. Mr. Bienkowski said any type of maintenance service contracts are continuing. We need to look at special education contracts and the expectation for paying.

Mr. Delia asked that since teachers are working at home if there were any modifications for evaluations and things of that nature and new teacher requirements to make sure teachers know they're appreciated and not adding additional pressures at this point.

Dr. Rodrigue said at the State level they relaxed the teacher evaluation and wants the districts to focus on students and learning now and using distance learning. Our focus is to support teachers so they can support students in a new way and they are truly being recognized. Our staff has done an amazing job.

Mrs. Ku asked how the employees of contracted services like All-Star, the special education transportation and Whitsons are being addressed.

Mr. Bienkowski said they are all private employers. For our public employees we pay the unemployment that someone is eligible to receive. Private employees in the school system are eligible for unemployment compensation for the school breaks and over the summer. We can't interfere in that process of unemployment. The unemployment office has been overwhelmed since this began which will impact the State budget.

MOTION: Mr. Cruson moved to adjourn. Mr. Vouros seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

#### Item 7 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 1:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

---

Daniel J. Cruson, Jr.  
Secretary

If you would like to view all attachments included with these Board of Education minutes click the following link and select "3-19-20 minutes" from the listing:

<http://www.newtown.k12.ct.us/District-Information/Board-of-Education/BOE-Agendas-Minutes-2019-2020>