

**Minutes
Transylvania County Board of Education
October 5, 2020**

INVOCATION/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

CALL TO ORDER/WELCOME

BUSINESS ITEMS:

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comment
3. K-5 Transition to Plan A

ADJOURN

The Transylvania County Board of Education met in regular session at 6:30 p.m. on October 5, 2020 at the Morris Education Center. In accordance with the remote meetings statute from the General Assembly and the Governor's guidelines, the meeting was conducted remotely and public access was not permitted. The public was invited to view the meeting livestream at <https://youtube.com/tcsnc>. Persons wishing to make public comment were invited to email their comments by 1:00 p.m. in order to have their comments read aloud as appropriate within board guidelines. Ron Kiviniemi led in a moment of silence and Courtney Domokur led the Pledge of Allegiance. Chairman McCoy welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order. The following individuals were in attendance (* indicates remote attendance). Social distancing was observed for in-person attendees.

BOARD MEMBERS:

Tawny McCoy, Chair
Ron Kiviniemi, Vice Chair
Courtney Domokur
Marty Griffin
Alice Wellborn

BOARD ATTORNEY:

Kris Caudle

MEDIA:

John Lanier, Transylvania Times*

STAFF:

Dr. Jeff McDaris, Superintendent
Jenny Hunter, Administrative Assistant
Dr. Brian Weaver, Assistant Superintendent*
Missy Ellenberger, Director, 9-12 Curriculum/Instruction*
Carrie Norris, Director, K-8 Curriculum & Instruction*
Carolyn Barton, Director, School Nutrition Services*
Alan Justice, Director, Transportation, Safety, Athletics*
Kevin Smith, School-Community Relations Coordinator*
Chris Whitlock, Director, Technology Services
Stephen Shields, Technology Specialist
Jayson Rogers, School Resource Officer

1. Approval of Agenda

ON A MOTION BY MR. GRIFFIN, SECONDED BY MRS. WELLBORN, the meeting agenda for October 5, 2020 was unanimously approved as presented.

2. Public Comment

Dr. McDaris read aloud two public comments that were received:

#1

I am happy to see the relative success of Plan B thus far, but have some concerns about a move to Plan A for K-5 students. One is related to the adherence to the mask-wearing policy currently in place. On a given day, numerous students and staff are observed not complying with this policy. This is largely in the form of keeping the mask consistently below the nose, rendering it fairly useless, and also removing the mask for extended periods of time not related to a mask break. With a consideration of a return to full time instruction, mask wearing must be a very strict component of a successful plan at this time. A second concern is related to the ability to social distance in a full-attendance classroom. Right now, an appropriately socially distanced classroom is only able to be done because of the reduced numbers of students in attendance at one time. I urge the board to seriously consider how our requirement to

implement socially distanced instruction can occur in Plan A. This also extends to hallways, buses, and the provision of lunch. A clear plan with serious considerations of how Plan A may negatively impact the relative success with which we have been able to operate thus far is essential to continued success of our district's in person education.

Lastly, and this concern applies to both Plan B and potentially Plan A, I urge the board to consider a district policy that includes more transparency to TCS constituents (staff, parents, students) as well as the community with regard to COVID cases in our schools. As a TCS employee, I have several times found out about cases at my own school from parents and community members, even those affecting students in my classes. While I feel that privacy in these situations is of utmost importance, a simple policy that recognizes our school community's and greater community's right to know is something the board should consider. If I am asked to work in my school every day and to send my own children to their respective schools, I feel it is necessary for me to know the situation at each school on a regular basis. Keeping this information from staff, parents, and the community breaks down trust and respect that is desperately needed at this time.

Jodi Huggins
Brevard Middle School Teacher
Parent of students at Brevard Elementary and Brevard High

#2

I come to you again, only 7 weeks into this school year and I still bring to you the unique perspective of a school nurse and a parent. The start of this school year has proven to be challenging and beautiful all at the same time. I am so proud of how well Transylvania County Schools adapted to Plan B when the decision was made that we would re-open on August 17th.

As I said previously and now have seen first-hand, this school year doesn't look like the previous ones of my career. It has been absolutely amazing to see students in the classrooms and hallways of schools again. It was great to hear a student say to me, "I got to play on the playground today" with such excitement. I am so appreciative to have had the opportunity to work more closely than ever with the administration of my schools during a global pandemic. When I say, "more closely than ever" that means countless phone calls from them per week. Transylvania County Schools reopened when a lot of other counties chose not to. Not only have we done it but we have done a great job!! You have a lot to be proud of as our Board of Education. Choosing to move to Plan A for the K-5 students will probably generate more phone calls from my administrators and some anxiety as more students will be in each classroom. However, this does not deter me from supporting wholeheartedly this transition. I am a firm believer in not admitting defeat before even trying. Since the moment Governor Cooper announced that systems could transition to Plan A for K-5th grade students my colleagues and I have been brainstorming ideas that will allow that transition to be successful as well if given that opportunity.

As a parent I have experienced first-hand just how resilient my children have been in such uncertain times. However, my 2nd grader is struggling academically and needs more face to face instruction. She is learning as much as feasibly possible on the days that she gets to attend school but on her virtual days she is falling behind. The proof that the younger students need more face to face instruction is ever apparent at our house. We will be the very parents that will have one elementary student on one schedule and a middle schooler on another if the decision is made to transition. But we are willing to accept and accommodate for this as it is what is best for our youngest daughter.

In conclusion, I support the transition to Plan A for K-5th grade students both as a parent and as a school nurse. Thank you to each of you for the work you do for the students and staff of Transylvania County Schools!!

Sincerely,

April H. Owenby, RN, NCSN
 School Health Nurse
 PFES, BES, BHS, & DRS

3. **K-5 Transition to Plan A**

On September 17, Governor Cooper announced that school districts have the option to bring students in grades K-5 back for daily in-person instruction under school reopening Plan A, effective October 5th. On September 21, the board discussed the possibility of transitioning elementary schools from the current Plan B to Plan A. Parents of children in grades K-5 and teachers were invited to participate in online surveys to provide feedback on the proposed transition. Dr. Brian Weaver summarized the survey results:

In regards to our current Plan B model, rate your level of comfort with COVID precautions/procedures currently taking place at your/your child's elementary school:

84.4% of parent respondents are completely comfortable.
 65.3% of teacher respondents are completely comfortable.

What has been the biggest obstacle for your family under Plan B? (Top 2):

"Finding time to support my child academically during his/her remote learning days" (38.4%).
 "Student motivation/working independently from home" (31.7%).

What is the best educational plan for your child?

73% of parents selected "Transition to Plan A (full capacity in school, possibly 5 days/week on campus).
 27% of parents selected "Remain in Plan B (half capacity in school, 2 days/week on campus).

If Plan A is selected, what date would be best to transition?

54% of teacher respondents selected beginning of second semester. 25.8% selected end of first nine weeks (October 21).

46% of parent respondents selected earliest possible date (October 5). 34% selected beginning of second semester (January 7). 16% selected end of first nine weeks (October 21).

If Plan A is selected to begin in January 2021, which statement would apply to your family?

59.8% of current Plan B path would keep their child in Plan B for the rest of the school year, understanding that he/she may go face to face 4-5 days per week.

6.8% of current Plan B path would want their child to move to the online learning path (OLP) for the remainder of the school year.

18.2% of current online learning path (OLP) would move their child to face to face instruction in January 2021.

15% of current online learning path (OLP) would keep their child enrolled in the OLP for the rest of the school year.

Dr. Weaver presented social distancing estimates for the elementary classrooms under Plan A based on enrollment at each grade level. Board members discussed how different classroom layouts and the state's class size mandates would impact social distancing.

Mrs. Wellborn relayed a concern she had received asking if we would be violating the Governor's social distancing guidelines by having classrooms at full capacity. Dr. Weaver reported that the Governor waived the social distancing restrictions for elementary grades when he announced Plan A. Social distancing is encouraged, but not required.

Mr. Griffin stated that when he looks at the numbers, he does not know how we can win the war (on COVID-19) if we are unwilling to do what needs to be done. He asked how we can consider "waiving" the health of our kids. He feels that parents do not want their children in a position where they are not socially distanced. As a parent and a grandparent, he wants our schools to do the right thing. He reported that North Carolina's number of cases and deaths are up, and although things may be better by January, right now he is having a hard time supporting this proposal.

Mrs. Domokur asked Alan Justice to share a report on student mental health that was presented at the last School Health Advisory Council meeting. Mr. Justice summarized a physician's report which indicated that teen, pre-teen, and elementary populations are experiencing increased levels of anxiety, depression and stress. Not having regular social interaction is taking a toll. Mrs. Ellenberger confirmed that student services staff have received referrals for anxiety and depression, including at the elementary levels. Schools are providing online counseling as possible and making the appropriate referrals to mental health providers. Mrs. Domokur stated that it is important to meet the social-emotional needs of students as well as the physical needs.

Mrs. Wellborn stated that the purpose of public schools is to educate children. Her fear is that we are harming students' academic progress and motivation by not providing adequate in-person instruction. Dr. McDaris shared anecdotal evidence that significantly less participation and motivation is happening on remote learning days. And even for the students who are attentive during virtual instruction, there is less of the normal banter and interaction with the teacher and peers. Students are described as "not themselves."

Mr. Justice reported that truancy is a concern. Some students are not showing up at school or not logging in for virtual lessons. Staff are working to find these students and get them in school.

Mr. Kiviniemi asked about social distancing on buses. Mr. Justice reported that social distancing is recommended but not required for buses with Plan A elementary riders. If there are middle/high school students on the same bus, we must follow Plan B standards. Mr. Justice feels we can make this work within current capacity.

Mr. Kiviniemi expressed concern that some Plan B parents would not support a move to Plan A. Mrs. Norris reported that parents who enrolled their children in Plan B were told that Plan B could convert to Plan A at some point. A small number have said they would move to the online path if we go to Plan A. She added that it may be possible to let some online path students come to Plan A if space allows.

Mrs. Barton gave an update on School Nutrition. She reported that when schools opened this fall and meals were served in classrooms, some children would not eat. When we switched to all-free meals, they still would not eat. She does not know the reason for this, but it seems that having a normal meal procedure is what makes children comfortable enough to actually eat. In places where they have been able to have students go through the serving line and see the choices, eating has improved. Mrs.

Barton noted that colleagues in other school districts have reported the same issue with their students. Having this situation continue for an extended period is concerning.

Mrs. Barton reported that our school nutrition crews are not set up logistically to operate school kitchens and deliver meals to students for the long-term. The geography of our county means that a considerable number of children live in remote areas. They would need more trucks, more volunteers, and more infrastructure to reach all the families they need to reach. Mrs. Domokur asked about Backpack Buddies. Mrs. Barton reported that they are giving lots of backpacks and meal bundles at drive-through locations, but that is not enough to sustain children for the three days a week they are not in school plus the two-day weekend. Mr. Kiviniemi asked if going to Plan A would help improve the situation. Mrs. Barton stated that since most backpacks go home with elementary children, having them in school for at least four days a week would allow much better coverage. Mrs. Barton stated that she has reached a point where her worries about the kids who are at risk for food are outweighing her worries about the COVID virus.

Mrs. McCoy asked what would happen if the board implements Plan A and there are outbreaks—could the schools return to Plan B? Dr. McDaris reported there is nothing to prevent that. The Governor's order allows school systems to choose the plan that is best for them. Attorney Caudle noted that in the event of a localized cluster or outbreak, the superintendent has the authority to act for those schools without closing down the entire system.

Mrs. Wellborn reported hearing from teachers who say we are getting complacent about masks and need to push for stricter compliance. They also see a need for more "mask breaks" at elementary schools and want to keep the four-day week in place. Dr. McDaris stated that virtual instruction takes a lot of extra work, and agreed that teachers need Fridays for professional development and individual student help. Fridays also offer time for deep cleanings of classrooms and facilities. Mr. Griffin stated that some teachers are wearing masks improperly (not covering the nose). He feels there should be zero tolerance on this issue.

Mrs. Wellborn reported that teachers are concerned about students being allowed to change mid-semester from the online learning path (OLP) to in-person learning. They were told the OLP would be a semester commitment. Dr. McDaris reported that some students have been allowed to change due to specific individual circumstances.

Mrs. Domokur stated that relationships between parents and children, especially younger children, have been stressed by the challenges of online learning. Mr. Kiviniemi noted that whatever direction the board chooses, the board is committed to doing what is best for students, staff, parents, and the community.

Mr. Griffin stated that he could live with a four-day Plan A if the transition were done in January after the semester break. He feels that transitioning to Plan A in the middle of the semester does not give teachers, who are carrying all the weight, enough time to adjust. Mr. Kiviniemi stated that he is worried about what may happen this fall with the expected COVID surge and flu season. He feels that we need to get in as many instructional days now as we can. Mr. Griffin disagreed, saying that it is impossible to know when or if a surge will occur. He feels that moving to Plan A too quickly can lead to deaths.

Chairman McCoy stated that she is concerned by the instruction some students are going to miss by not expanding in-person learning as soon as possible and by how far behind some students already are, especially at the elementary level.

Mrs. Wellborn stated that by waiting until January, some primary students will be going to second grade next August having lost a little over one year of basic instruction. This is critical time that cannot be replaced. She feels that daily face to face instruction is absolutely critical for elementary children.

MR. KIVINIEMI MADE A MOTION, SECONDED BY MRS. WELLBORN, to transition grades K-5 to a four-day Plan A schedule beginning with the start of the second nine week grading period and to reinforce mask mandates with all students and staff. Mrs. Wellborn asked Dr. McDaris for his recommendation. Dr. McDaris stated that our teachers are resilient and have a proven track record of making things work. Because of that and our strong partnership with the local health department, he believes our system is well positioned to successfully transition to Plan A. He stated that he too is concerned about students who are not experiencing meaningful instruction and those who are not in a safe environment at home. He believes that our teachers and staff will make Plan A work to the best of their ability. CHAIRMAN MCCOY CALLED THE VOTE AND THE MOTION PASSED 4:0 (FOR: Domokur, McCoy, Kiviniemi, Wellborn; AGAINST: Griffin).

Mrs. McCoy and Mrs. Wellborn emphasized it is the expectation of the board that proper mask-wearing and temperature check procedures are to be followed at all times.

There was no further business, and ON A MOTION BY MR. GRIFFIN, SECONDED BY MRS. WELLBORN, the meeting was adjourned at 8:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Chairman

Secretary