

**Minutes
Transylvania County Board of Education
August 27, 2021**

CALL TO ORDER/WELCOME

BUSINESS ITEMS:

1. Approval of Agenda
2. COVID-19 Status Update and Re-Entry Guidance 2021-2022

ADJOURN

The Transylvania County Board of Education met in emergency session at 12:30 p.m. on Friday, August 27, 2021 at the Morris Education Center. The purpose of the meeting was to allow board members to receive an update on the impact of the COVID pandemic in the school system, and to consider action in response to changing circumstances, including modifications and/or amendments of prior decisions. Chairman McCoy welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order. In addition to approximately 12 guests, the following individuals were in attendance:

BOARD MEMBERS:

Tawny McCoy, Chair
Ron Kiviniemi, Vice Chair
Courtney Domokur
Marty Griffin
Kimsey Jackson

BOARD ATTORNEY:

Chris Campbell, Campbell Shatley

MEDIA:

Jordon Morgan, Transylvania Times

STAFF:

Dr. Jeff McDaris, Superintendent
Jenny Hunter, Administrative Assistant
Dr. Brian Weaver, Assistant Superintendent
Missy Ellenberger, Director, 9-12 Education
Carrie Norris, Director, K-8 Education
Kevin Smith, School-Community Relations Coordinator
Chris Lambert, Technology Specialist
Blake Tesnow, Technology Specialist
Greg Stroup, School Resource Officer
Scott Thomas, School Resource Officer
Kelly Cook, School Resource Officer
Mike Hall, School Resource Officer

1. Approval of Agenda

ON A MOTION BY MR. GRIFFIN, SECONDED BY MR. JACKSON, the meeting agenda for August 27, 2021 was unanimously approved.

2. COVID-19 Update & Re-Entry Guidance

Chairman McCoy read the following statement:

“This morning the Board of Education received current information from the County health department regarding the increasing numbers of COVID-19 positive cases and quarantines impacting our schools. Based on the current data, it is the opinion of this Board that these trends must be addressed immediately and prior to school resuming on Monday morning in order for the administration to implement any changes and for parents to be adequately notified of any changes. On August 2nd, this Board voted to make masks optional for the Transylvania County Schools. On August 16th, this Board reviewed current data from the health department and again voted to make masks optional. This afternoon we are meeting again to review the current data to decide what the policy should be effective Monday morning. This Board has received extensive and significant public input on this issue. We appreciate all of the constructive public comments and emails we have received. Therefore, there is no need for additional public comment, and this is a decision the Board must make today. Anyone disrupting

our meeting can be removed by law enforcement. Again, these are very difficult decisions, and we appreciate the respect from folks in the audience and ask you not interrupt the meeting at any time. At this time I will ask the Superintendent to review the current data with the Board.”

Dr. McDaris reported that Dr. Brian Weaver has been tracking daily COVID data in the schools. Dr. Weaver presented the following update as of 9:00 a.m.:

| Update as of August 27, 2021 | | Change since last update (8/25) |
|--|-----|---------------------------------|
| Number of total positive cases for STUDENTS (Aug. 2 to Aug. 27) | 118 | +15 |
| Number of current cases for STUDENTS (currently isolated) | 49 | -1 |
| Number of STUDENTS currently quarantined due to being considered a close contact | 169 | +22 |
| Number of total positive cases for STAFF (Aug. 2 to Aug. 27) | 23 | 0 |
| Number of current cases for STAFF (currently isolated) | 6 | -2 |
| Number of STAFF currently quarantined due to being considered a close contact | 3 | 0 |

Dr. Weaver also presented a breakdown showing the rising numbers of positive cases, isolations, and quarantines for students each week:

| Date / Week of | Positive Cases for STUDENTS | STUDENTS currently isolated | STUDENTS currently quarantined | Positive Cases for STAFF | STAFF currently isolated | STAFF currently quarantined |
|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 8/02 | 9 | 9 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| 8/09 | 18 | 17 | 0 | 7 | 6 | 0 |
| 8/16 | 45 | 31 | 87 | 14 | 9 | 6 |
| 8/23 | 83 | 40 | 98 | 22 | 11 | 2 |
| 8/27 | 118 | 49 | 169 | 23 | 6 | 3 |

Dr. Weaver pointed out that this data does not include “home administered” COVID tests; it only includes test results collected by the county health department. “Isolated” means the individual has tested positive and is under health department guidelines for quarantine. The health department establishes the individual’s return date based on the most current CDC/NCDHHS guidance.

Dr. McDaris read the following statement:

“The Board has asked for staff to keep them abreast of data pertaining to COVID-19 and as noted, that has been shared. I know the Board is reviewing all data and information on a daily basis and approaching all of this with deep thought and serious analysis. A serious concern for all of us is the increasing number of student quarantines that could be minimized through a mask mandate. I don’t presume to predict the direction the Board may want to take, but I will suggest that if there is a decision to go to masking that we approach it by preparing operational design to be studied and reviewed by the Board for either continued masking or the necessary analytics to move back to optional masking. We can have those available by the next regularly scheduled board meeting for consideration. I will also add that in order to be prepared for a possible change in direction, there are some immediate logistical considerations that our principals need to know, such as where masking must occur. In that case, if that is the decision, I suggest the following protocols:

1. Mandatory masks inside all school buildings used for student instruction at all times by students, staff, and visitors (except for legally required exceptions);
2. Masks will not be required outdoors;
3. In accordance with the *Toolkit* as used last school year, mask breaks are encouraged;
4. During indoor athletic events held at schools, masks will be required of everyone, including spectators. However, students may remove their masks while engaged in strenuous activity;
5. Inside all other Transylvania County Schools properties, we will continue to request that all unvaccinated individuals wear a mask on the honor system; and
6. We will continue to encourage everyone eligible to be vaccinated, but will not require proof of vaccination.”

Mrs. Domokur asked about masks school buses. Dr. McDaris reported that has not changed since the last update. Transportation falls under federal mandates and therefore masks are required on all school buses.

Mr. Kiviniemi asked why masks would not be required at the Education Center, bus garage or plant operations. Dr. McDaris reported that students typically are not present in those facilities. In the event that students are at the Education Center for testing or other purposes, masks would be required.

Mr. Griffin asked if volleyball players or other indoor athletes would have to wear masks while playing. Dr. McDaris reported that according to the NCSHAA guidelines, volleyball matches meet the definition of strenuous activity; therefore, masks for those players would not be required.

Mr. Jackson asked if there is any data showing how many of the quarantined students end up testing positive. Dr. Weaver stated that he would request that data from the health department. Mr. Jackson stated that he thinks the numbers do not match up and requested further clarification. Dr. Weaver reviewed isolation vs. quarantine, and explained that the data reflects the number of students *currently* under quarantine; not a total since the beginning of school. Chairman McCoy added that 169 is just the number who are in quarantine right now. She reminded Mr. Jackson of the diagram provided by the school nurses to help parents understand quarantine protocols based on variables of mask/no mask, testing status, and exposure.

Mr. Griffin asked if there have been sufficient substitute teachers and bus drivers for full coverage. Dr. Weaver reported that we currently have enough drivers, but we have not been able to fill vacancies for all staff who require a substitute. The most recent count shows 13 spots not covered by substitutes so far. Some of that is due to late notification. For example, if a teacher is notified after hours that they must quarantine, lining up a substitute with less than 12 hours' notice can be difficult.

Mr. Jackson asked how we are providing instruction for the students who are not getting in-person instruction due to isolation or quarantine. Dr. McDaris reported that most are interacting with their teachers via email or Google meet. Mr. Jackson asked how effective that is. Dr. McDaris stated that we have no data yet. Some kids do better with online instruction than others.

Mr. Griffin stated that he would like to see language added to protocol no. 5 that staff must wear masks if students are present inside the Education Center or other non-school facilities.

Chairman McCoy asked whether or not any positive cases were transmitted at school. Dr. Weaver reported that confirmed COVID exposures have resulted in linked cases in the schools (e.g., clusters at BMS and other schools).

Mr. Griffin asked for more information about sports. Dr. Weaver reported that initial guidance said that if one team member tested positive, all activity had to pause for five days. Now the high schools are piloting masks in weight rooms, locker rooms, and other areas where athletes congregate. This is a non-mandatory measure and the outcome has been good. We have not needed to test an entire squad as we did two weeks ago.

Mr. Jackson repeated his question regarding how many quarantined students end up testing positive. Dr. Weaver again informed Mr. Jackson that he would obtain that data from the health department. Mr. Jackson questioned if we would ever be rid of masks or if we are going to require masks until there is no more COVID in the schools. Mrs. Domokur reported that elementary teachers are trying to keep students at least three feet apart to cut down on the numbers or quarantines. Chairman McCoy gave a reminder that the administration will continue to look at the analytics for mandatory masking or optional masking.

Chairman McCoy asked Dr. Weaver and Dr. McDaris to review the notification process for a positive result, close contact, or potential contact. Dr. McDaris and Dr. explained that school nurses perform the contact tracing and report the information to the health department. Potential contacts are notified by the schools. If there is a close contact or a positive, the school may notify parents immediately and a school nurse will follow up. If it is after hours, the parent would be notified by the school nurse.

Chairman McCoy asked the board attorney to clarify policy 4230, Communicable Diseases - Students. Mr. Campbell reported that the board is not in violation of policy 4230. The policy states that the board will implement control measures as directed by the state or local health department. In the case of emerging illnesses, the schools will implement control measures recommended by the CDC unless directed otherwise by the school nurse or relevant authority. Everything in the *Toolkit* is currently a recommendation.

Mr. Kiviniemi asked how many other school systems in WNC are mask optional. Mrs. Domokur reported that the last count she saw indicated that Transylvania was 1 out of 33 statewide. Mr. Campbell reported that that number is changing daily. Just last evening the Rutherford County school board held an emergency meeting and implemented mandatory masks. The NCSBA is tracking this data for all NC public school systems.

Mrs. Domokur stated that the board had only general data at the August 2 and August 16 meetings. Now the numbers are more specific. She added that the numbers are not high enough to cause a shutdown, but they are headed up, and her biggest concern is that we not be forced to return to virtual learning.

Mr. Kiviniemi asked if the proposed legislation from the General Assembly that would require school boards to revisit their masking policy each month has passed. Dr.

McDaris reported that the legislation is on its way to the Governor's desk and is expected to pass.

Mrs. Domokur reported that she just did a search, and there are currently 28 NC school systems with optional mask policies. She stated that she does not want Transylvania to be the district that lets it go so far that they have to return to virtual learning. She expressed concerns about cafeteria workers and others falling ill. If School Nutrition has to shut down, schools could not feed children. Chairman McCoy stated that she is concerned about students in quarantine missing instructional time. Mr. Kiviniemi agreed that having a kid out for two weeks makes it hard for a teacher to catch them up.

Mr. Jackson asked how our teachers feel that things are going in the classrooms. Dr. Weaver reported that teachers are optimistic about having students face to face. Our teachers are amazing at what they do and how they manage to deliver effective instruction every day. There are large volumes of students moving in and out of classrooms each day.

MR. KIVINIEMI MADE A MOTION that effective August 30, 2021, the board will require masks for all students, staff, and visitors in school buildings; follow protocols 1-6 as recommended by Dr. McDaris for all school properties; and revisit the mask decision again at its next meeting on September 20, 2021. MR. GRIFFIN SECONDED THE MOTION.

Chairman McCoy stated that she understands how hard this is for everyone. She added, "Whether you support masks or not, there have been unkind comments made by many people about the board and the administration. I know that we as board members ran for this. To those people making the comments, you don't know us. The comments attacking our integrity are not fair. I know these people. You do not. Think about it before you say something about our administration and staff. They care about your kids. That needs to be said. I hope and pray that we find a place where we can get back to not having to fight about masks all the time."

Mr. Jackson asked again for data showing how many quarantined students end up testing positive. Dr. Weaver again informed Mr. Jackson that he would obtain that data from the health department.

Mr. Jackson reported that he had received and read over 600 emails. Some were not respectful, many were the same, and some were obviously cut and paste. He stated that he was appreciative of the input that was informative and included helpful links. He added that he is not sure how much more information the board would need, but he will continue to take the emails. He requested that people not keep sending the same thing over and over, however.

Mr. Griffin asked if the protocols in the motion include his concern about masking while students are present at the Education Center. Mr. Campbell explained that the motion does not include anything other than the protocols as presented by Dr. McDaris. He recommended that the board vote on the motion as is, then make another motion for Mr. Griffin's issue if necessary. The vote was called and THE MOTION PASSED 4:1 (FOR: Domokur, Griffin, Kiviniemi, McCoy; AGAINST: Jackson).

Replying to Mr. Griffin's concern, Dr. McDaris clarified that students coming to the Education Center for testing would be considered instructional purposes and the mask requirement would apply.

There was no further business, and ON A MOTION BY MR. GRIFFIN, SECONDED BY MRS. DOMOKUR, the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 1:27 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Chairman

Secretary