**Minutes of the Regular Meeting**

**of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education**

**Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

**75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148**

**Tuesday, May 25, 2021**

**9:18 a.m. – 12:12 p.m.**

**Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Present:**

**Katherine Craven**,Chair,Brookline

**James Morton**, Vice-Chair, Boston

**Jasper Coughlin**, Student Member, Billerica

**Amanda** **Fernández**,Belmont

**Matthew Hills**, Newton

**Darlene Lombos,** Boston

**Michael Moriarty,** Holyoke

**James Peyser**,Secretary of Education

**Paymon Rouhanifard**, Brookline

**Mary Ann Stewart,** Lexington

**Martin West**, Newton

**Jeffrey C. Riley**,Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Chair Craven called the meeting to order at 9:18 a.m. and members introduced themselves.

**Public Comment**

* **Ashleigh MacKinnon,** Marshfield, addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **Beth Humberd**, Andover, Bring Kids Back MA, addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **Antigone Grasso,** Bring Kids Back MA**,** addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **Keri Rodrigues,** President, The National Parents Union, addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **Tim Langan** addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **Natasha Megie-Maddrey** addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **Rodolfo Aguilar** addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **Priscilla Hedgepeth** addressed the Board on Item 2, School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps
* **David DiBarri,** Superintendent, Northeast Metropolitan Regional Vocational Technical High School, addressed the Board on Proposed Amendment to Vocational Technical Education Regulations
* **Adele Sands**, Superintendent, Bristol County Agricultural High School, addressed the Board on Proposed Amendment to Vocational Technical Education Regulations
* **Aaron Polansky**, Superintendent, Old Colony Regional Vocational Technical High School, addressed the Board on Proposed Amendment to Vocational Technical Education Regulations

## Chair Craven invited Vice-Chair Morton to present an update on the work of the Commissioner’s Performance Review Committee, which he chairs. Vice-Chair Morton said the committee, which includes Chair Craven, Ms. Fernández, and Mr. Hills, has met several times over the last few months. He said committee members have interviewed about 40 individuals – external stakeholders as well as members of the Board and DESE’s leadership team – to get their perspectives. Vice-Chair Morton said the committee is currently preparing its performance evaluation report; he will meet with the Commissioner in mid-June and then present the committee’s report to the Board at the June 22 meeting.

## Comments from the Chair

Chair Craven said she hopes that as restrictions are lifted, the Board will be able to resume holding some of its meetings at schools, particularly at the student member’s high school, which they have been unable to do during the pandemic. Chair Craven noted the Board has been participating in anti-racism training with thoughtful attention to issues of equity. She asked Ms. Fernández to offer her comments on equity issues. Ms. Fernandez’s comments follow:

I would be remiss as a Latina member of the BESE if I didn’t address the situation from the April Board meeting where a comment by Member Moriarty was heard by some to be disparaging to Latino communities. We could debate the question of intent of the words of one person but what’s far more important to me is the system level work to be done in centering equity as a DESE and BESE.

My life’s work has been focused on how our education system can be improved to advance educational opportunity for all children but with a particular focus on Latino children in the Commonwealth and across the nation. My work has been grounded in the belief that all young people regardless of skin color or nationality have a right to an education, that as the DESE mission says, prepares them for success in life.

Anyone working in and around education is being challenged right now as we undergo a racial reckoning as a nation, as a state and in our cities. This along with the disproportionate impact of COVID on Latino and Black communities makes it an extraordinarily difficult time for communities of color. If anything, we should uplift and learn from the resilience and tenacity of our fellow citizens in Chelsea, Lawrence, Holyoke, Roxbury and so many other communities of color.

The pandemic has laid bare what was already there relative to disparities in our education system but also the deep divisions and a level of vitriol and hate being spewed at adults and children of color including Asian Americans.

A level of anger about the decision making of DESE, districts and schools and between

community members with varying opinions about reopening school buildings reached a fever pitch during the last 15 months. It has been unlike anything I’ve ever seen in my lifetime. It is deeply worrisome.

In our living rooms, in our schoolhouses and in the BESE Board room my view is that there is a need for deep reflection on the collective responsibility we have as adults to all children in the Commonwealth.

For BESE, given the privilege of the position we are in, we play an important role in modeling the kind of conduct, beliefs about kids and learning, and taking care in our language choices. The stakes are high as stewards of education policies that I am confident we all take very seriously. But the context is different now. Our children are not only watching but they need more from us.

The Department is making strides in driving an equity agenda including the work of facing our historically racist education system and evolving the way they work to remove barriers to educational opportunity for our kids.

The Board is a part of that essential work. I thank Chair Craven for her commitment by

prioritizing racial equity training we’ve participated in, and the establishment of a committee on the board regarding the educator diversity work as examples. The work however must continue. We must go further because frankly the work to end racial and ethnic injustice never ends. Some tangible ways we may do that could include the Board spending time:

• Reviewing and learning how to use Racial Equity Decision-Making Tool that the DESE has piloted in the creating the roadmap to summer and fall; what of this

might apply to our own decision making?

• Creating a common definition of what centering equity means for the Board and putting it into practice.

I’ll end with this… Recently, I was at the Roxbury YMCA visiting the learning pods that are in operation there. A little girl of about 4 years old who I did not know, came running up to me with a book with the numbers 1-10 on the front cover. She proudly recited all of her numbers and we gave each other a huge high five after she finished. She then happily went skipping to her grandmother. In that brief moment it struck me that she is the reason for the work we are doing. We must make sure that this little girl of color will feel proud, be excited and believe she can have success in life throughout her K-12 experience. We owe it her to and all of the children of the Commonwealth to make sure that happens.

Chair Craven thanked Ms. Fernández for her remarks and said the Board needs to keep equity front and center. The Chair said she would like to have a special meeting of the Board over the summer, to talk about these issues as we gear up for the school year ahead.

Chair Craven thanked Ms. Fernández, Vice-Chair Morton, and Mr. Moriarty for the work they and their organizations have done relative to education equity pods during the pandemic. She asked the Commissioner to report to the Board at a future meeting about lessons learned from the pods that were set up this year to support students in continuing their learning.

Vice-Chair Morton said he endorses Ms. Fernández’s comments completely, noting it is appropriate to be having this conversation on the anniversary of George Floyd's murder. Vice-Chair Morton said he believes the Board’s job is to embrace those communities facing the greatest challenges, including poverty and institutional and systemic racism, and as Ms. Fernández stated, recognize the resilience and tenacity of people of color in the Commonwealth. Vice-Chair Morton said people of color in this country have endured a history of racism, contempt, and nullification, and the Board needs to do everything it can to provide a pathway to opportunity so every child in the Commonwealth can reach their highest potential.

## Comments from the Secretary

##### Secretary Peyser thanked Chair Craven, Ms. Fernández, and Vice-Chair Morton for their comments this morning and their thoughtfulness in marking this sad but momentous anniversary. He thanked all Board members for their care and concern for the students of the Commonwealth and for doing what we can to address long-standing inequities in our society and in our schools.

Ms. Lombos voiced her support for Ms. Fernández’s thoughtful statement and thanked Vice- Chair Morton for his comments. Ms. Lombos suggested it would be helpful to have some sort of protocol for dealing with concerns about a member’s statements. She expressed appreciation for Ms. Fernández’s reminder that equity should be at the center of our decision making as Board members and thanked Chair Craven and Vice-Chair Morton for their leadership.

##### Comments from the Commissioner

##### Commissioner Riley noted that today marks the one-year anniversary of the murder of George Floyd, a tragic event that deeply affected all of us and led to ongoing national conversations about racial justice. He thanked Ms. Fernández and Vice-Chair Morton for their comments today. Commissioner Riley congratulated Mr. Coughlin for his admission to George Washington University and wished him all the best. The Commissioner’s remarks concluded with a moment of silence to reflect on the comments today and to remember George Floyd and where we are going as a Board and as a country.

**School Counselor of the Year, Jessica Descartes**

Commissioner Riley introduced JessicaDescartes, school counselor at TechBoston Academy, who has been selected as the 2021 School Counselor of the Year by the Massachusetts School Counselor Association (MASCA). Senior Associate Commissioner Cliff Chuang provided a brief introduction on behalf of Bob Bardwell, Executive Director of MASCA. Mr. Chuang noted that MASCA supports counselors throughout the Commonwealth and is recognizing Ms. Descartes as an exemplar of the vital and multi-faceted work that school counselors do.

Ms. Descartes said it was humbling to be nominated and then selected for this honor and thanked MASCA for their leadership in promoting school counseling in the state. She said this is her seventh year at TechBoston Academy, where she primarily serves English Language Learners who are in the Sheltered English Immersion program and students with limited or interrupted formal education. Ms. Descartes noted that most of the students in her caseload are from Haiti and this is special to her because her family is from Haiti; her parents came to the United States in the 1970s. She said she can relate to and represent the students she serves and build strong connections with them, and it is important for her students to see themselves reflected in their school counselors, teachers, and administrators. Ms. Descartes thanked her team at Tech Boston for their support.

Mr. West commended Ms. Descartes for her work; he noted that research shows school counselors can play a significant role in students’ lives and encouraged Ms. Descartes to continue sharing her best practices. Commissioner Riley recalled TechBoston Academy’s creation and thanked Ms. Descartes for her service to students.

Chair Craven called for a break at 10:30 a.m. The Board reconvened at 10:40 p.m.

**School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps**

Commissioner Riley said that since the Board’s last meeting on April 20, DESE has continued to inform districts of new developments related to COVID-19 and to support schools and districts as they bring more students back into classrooms. He explained that after the Board's vote in March authorizing him to end hybrid and remote learning models as district-wide approaches, the Commonwealth began a phased approach to reopening schools for full in-person instruction. Commissioner Riley said this approach culminated with the return of students in grades 9-12 as of May 17, and in fact over 60 percent of districts in grades 9-12 were open before that date. He said 100 percent of our elementary and middle schools and 99 percent of high schools were open for full-time, in-person instruction by the week of May 17. The Commissioner added that while the Board was split when the initial vote was taken in March to grant him this authority, and the Board will be taking a final vote on the regulations later today, he believes the Board made the right decision in March to move forward and support students’ return to in-person instruction.

Commissioner Riley informed the Board that the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced on April 20 the extension of free school meals for all students over the summer and through the end of the 2021-2022 school year. He thanked school nutrition workers who have been providing meals to students in school and the smaller number who are still learning remotely.

**a. Academic Excellence Roadmap (MA Acceleration Roadmap) and Other Plans for Summer and Fall**

Commissioner Riley said DESE is increasingly turning attention to the supports that students and schools will need this summer and in the new school year, and the massive infusion of federal funds that is on the way. He said school and district leaders, educators, students, and families have demonstrated ingenuity and perseverance over the last year and have gained new skills and experiences. The Commissioner said the Department will be supporting school and district leaders in taking the lessons learned this year and creating a clear vision and a plan for teaching and learning in the coming year, to meet students’ varied needs and keep equity at the center.

The Commissioner said the Department is releasing the Massachusetts Acceleration Roadmap, which includes easy-to-navigate guides and resources as well as training opportunities for school leaders and educators. He said the roadmap identifies three key priorities for the next school year: creating a sense of belonging for students and families, monitoring student understanding, and ensuring access to grade level content. Commissioner Riley noted these priorities are centered on the research-based approach of acceleration, providing just-in-time scaffolds to create access to grade level assignments rather than focusing exclusively on the prior year's content. He added that the roadmap contains a teacher guide plus a leader guide for school building and district leaders. Commissioner Riley said the roadmap is designed to help schools and districts create an academic plan for the next school year; it lays out month-by-month priority actions and directs users to DESE resources for acceleration such as literacy screeners, math acceleration programs, a family engagement guide, and resources for establishing a multi-tiered system of support.

Senior Associate Commissioner Komal Basin and DESE’s Director of Remote Learning, Jackie Gantzer, presented on the Massachusetts Acceleration Roadmap. Ms. Basin and Ms. Gantzer spoke about the vision for the roadmap, stakeholder engagement, and the design process, gave an overview of the roadmap, discussed the implementation support that DESE will be providing for the field, and responded to questions from Board members. In response to a question from Mr. West, Commissioner Riley said historically Massachusetts has set academic standards but did not necessarily describe good instructional practices, which is a purpose of the Acceleration Roadmap. Secretary Peyser noted that districts and schools should be making decisions now about resource allocation and staffing to advance these priorities.

**b. Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Planning (ARP**

**ESSER III)**

Commissioner Riley said the federal government has sent significant resources to Massachusetts school districts through ESSER funding. He introduced Matt Deninger, DESE’s Acting Chief Strategy and Research Officer, to present an overview of the major COVID-19 relief funding streams for education – a total of $2.8 billion over 3.5 years – with a focus on ESSER III. Mr. Deninger said ESSER III allocates $1.65 billion to Massachusetts through September 2024, using the Title I formula to distribute more funding to districts that serve high concentrations of students from low-income households. Mr. Deninger said the U.S. Department of Education has granted two-thirds of the funds to the state already and DESE will apply for the final third by June 7, 2021.

Mr. Deninger explained the ESSER III requirements for DESE and school districts relating to consultation and stakeholder engagement, planning, set-aside of certain funds for specific purposes, and maintenance of equity. He noted that DESE must use a portion of the grant for summer enrichment, after-school programs, and to address lost instructional time. With respect to maintenance of equity, he said at the state level, Massachusetts must maintain state support to highest poverty districts, and at the local level, districts must maintain state and local support to highest poverty schools. Mr. Deninger said in the June 7 application, DESE will describe its stakeholder outreach and the plan to prioritize how the funds will be used. He added that district ESSER III applications are available now but will not be due until October. Mr. Deninger responded to questions from Board members, noting that while districts must include certain elements in their plans, the ESSER law gives them broad discretion.

**Amendments to Student Learning Time Regulations, 603 CMR 27.00 (Return to In-person Instruction)**

Deputy General Counsel Deb Steenland explained the Board would be taking a final vote today on the amendments to the Student Learning Time regulations that the Board adopted in March as emergency regulations. The amendments authorized the Commissioner to determine when hybrid and remote learning would no longer count towards student learning time, to support the return to in-person instruction. She said he exercised that authority in a phased manner, starting with elementary schools returning to in-person instruction as of April 5, then middle schools as of April 28, and high schools as of May 17. Ms. Steenland briefly reviewed the process by which the Board adopted the regulations on an emergency basis and the Department then solicited and reviewed public comment in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act. She said the Commissioner is recommending no changes to the regulations that the Board voted on in March.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in accordance with G.L. c. 69, §§ 1B and 1G, and having solicited public comment in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act, G.L. c. 30A, § 3, hereby adopts the amendments to the Student Learning Time regulations, 603 CMR 27.00, as presented by the Commissioner.**

The vote was unanimous.

**State Student Advisory Council End-of-Year Report for 2020-2021**

Jasper Coughlin, BESE student member, expressed his gratitude to Chair Craven, Commissioner Riley, and Secretary Peyser for their support and said he was able to work with amazing students this past year. Mr. Coughlin said he knew the students on the State Student Advisory Council (SSAC) would not let COVID get in the way of their progress. Mr. Coughlin said the SSAC is the medium through which student voices are amplified to the Board and the reason he is here. He described the structure and membership of the SSAC and explained that they divided into three working groups to address issues of diversity/equity/inclusion, COVID-19, and health and wellness. Mr. Coughlin presented the initial goals and the action items from each working group and said he will submit the SSAC’s final report to the Board in June. He also discussed the SSAC survey, which drew approximately 5000 student responses about academic performance and students’ mental health.

Mr. Coughlin highlighted four themes that emerged over the year: (1) participation: lower levels of student participation this year hindered some SSAC business; (2) communication: they pioneered new methods of inter-SSAC communications and external communications; (3) research: they conducted extensive research into topics that are important to students, to be used and continued in the future; and (4) preparation: they adopted policies that will equip the next generation of SSAC leaders to represent student voices effectively. Mr. Coughlin thanked Donna Taylor of DESE for helping facilitate their group this year and thanked all the students who participated.

Mr. Moriarty commended Mr. Coughlin’s leadership and asked what the Board can do to support the SSAC next year. Mr. Coughlin said the students running for his position are well qualified and the policies on mid-year recruitment and communications should help the students work efficiently and take on more projects. Vice-Chair Morton thanked Mr. Coughlin for his presentation and all his thoughtful input to the Board and said the Board has benefited from great students who have been actively engaged in state education policy.

#### Approval of the Minutes

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approve the minutes of the April 20, 2021 Regular Meeting.**

The vote was unanimous.

**Update on Early College and Innovation Pathway Programs**

Commissioner Riley said the Career Vocational Technical Education programs that the Board discussed at the February 22 special meeting are part of the Commonwealth's broad

initiative to support high quality college and career pathway programs. He said the Board would hear today about two other important components of the initiative: Early College and Innovation Pathways. Commissioner Riley introduced Kristin Hunt, Early College Director; Jennifer Gwatkin, Innovation Pathways Lead; and Julia Landau, Senior Project Director at Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

Ms. Hunt said the Early College and Innovation Pathways are designed to enable high school students to envision and experience post-secondary opportunities in high school, making them more likely to continue their education after high school graduation. She presented an overview of the Massachusetts Early College initiative, which includes 26 designated Early College programs involving 38 high schools and 20 college/university partners. Ms. Hunt said the program prioritizes students historically underserved in higher education and enables high school students to earn at least 12 credits through college courses that are aligned with MassCore and Mass Transfer and provided at no cost to the student. She explained that Massachusetts adopted five guiding principles for the college and career pathways: equitable access, guided academic pathways, enhanced student support, connection to career, and effective partnerships. Ms. Hunt noted that a major goal of these programs is to close the opportunity gap for underrepresented students across the Commonwealth, including students of color, economically disadvantaged students, first generation to college, students with disabilities, and English learners.

Ms. Hunt explained that in 2017 the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Board of Higher Education each voted to approve the formation of an Early College Joint Committee to oversee development of the designation process. She reviewed the designated programs across the state, student demographics, and described the student experience. Ms. Hunt noted that Early College participants maintained high MassCore completion rates through the pandemic.

Ms. Gwatkin said Massachusetts Innovation Pathways draw on three decades of successful

practices that enhance students' ability to gain awareness of future employment opportunities,

fully prepare academically, and make informed choices related to post-secondary paths in their area of interest. She explained that Innovation Pathways are structured offerings at academic and comprehensive high schools, and they are products of strong partnerships with MassHire boards and area employers. Ms. Gwatkin said the intent of Innovation Pathways is to introduce students to a wide range of career opportunities within five broadly defined industry sectors that are in high demand in the Commonwealth. She reported there are now 121 Innovation Pathways at 49 high schools across Massachusetts. Ms. Gwatkin said high school students who participate in Innovation Pathways develop valuable knowledge and skills related to their chosen field.

Ms. Landau spoke about post-secondary opportunities being made available to students with significant intellectual disabilities through the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI), which is a state discretionary grant program run through the Department of Higher Education. She said people with intellectual disabilities have historically been excluded from the benefits of higher education, and with the support of DESE and the Department of Higher Education, MAICEI helps to bridge this gap. Ms. Landau explained that MAICEI is a partnership between high schools and public institutions of higher education to enable students with intellectual disabilities and autism to participate in college with supports and services they need to be successful. She said this initiative helps these students gain the academic, independent living, social and employment skills necessary to succeed when they exit special education services at age 22. Ms. Landau thanked the Board and Department for supporting this initiative.

Chair Craven thanked the presenters and expressed her thanks to former BESE Chair Paul Sagan and current Chair of the Board of Higher Education Chris Gabrieli for their leadership in generating the Massachusetts Early College program and related initiatives. Chair Craven added that she wants to keep this discussion going and hopes the Board will get to meet some of the students who have benefited from Early College, Innovation Pathways, and MAICEI. Mr. Rouhanifard, Ms. Fernández, and Mr. Hills commended the work. Secretary Peyser concurred and said making high school more relevant and engaging for all students could be the next phase of education reform. He thanked Commissioner Riley and the Department for their leadership and collaboration on these issues.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at 12:12 p.m., subject to the call of the Chair.**

The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey C. Riley

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

and Secretary to the Board