**Minutes of the Regular Meeting**

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

**Tuesday, September 21, 2021**

**John W. McCormack Building, Ashburton Cafe Conference Room**

**1 Ashburton Place, Boston, MA 02108**

**9:35 a.m. – 11:55 a.m.**

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

**Katherine Craven**,Chair,Brookline

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

**Amanda** **Fernández**,Belmont

**Matthew Hills**, Newton

**Eleni Carris Livingston**, Wellesley, Student Member

**Michael Moriarty,** Holyoke

**James Peyser**,Secretary of Education

**Paymon Rouhanifard**, Brookline

**Mary Ann Stewart,** Lexington

**Martin West**, Newton

**Member of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Absent:**

**Darlene Lombos,** Boston

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

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Chair Craven called the meeting to order at 9:35 a.m. and members introduced themselves.

Statements from the Public

* **Ashleigh MacKinnon**, parent, addressed the Board on Item 2: Update on School Reopening and Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Melissa Bello**, Needham parent, addressed the Board on Item 2: Update on School Reopening and Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Keyona Aviles**, parent, addressed the Board on Item 2: Update on School Reopening and Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families

Chair Craven called for a brief pause at 9:50 a.m. to be sure the livestream was working properly. The meeting resumed at 9:55 a.m.

* **Bethany Moffi**, Boston parent, addressed the Board on Item 2: Update on School Reopening and Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Amie Geary**, Lynnfield parent, addressed the Board on Item 2: Update on School Reopening and Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Gerry Mroz,** parent**,** addressed the Board on Item 3:Statewide Student Assessment (MCAS) Report

Mr. Moriarty noted that the Holyoke Public Schools have taken action to improve ventilation and indoor air quality in the district’s school buildings and asked the Commissioner if it is possible to get information about other districts. Commissioner Riley said he would follow up. Chair Craven said these matters may be overseen by local public health authorities rather than by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE or Department). Commissioner Riley added that DESE last year took the initiative to purchase air purifiers for schools and districts and has reminded districts that they have federal funding under ESSER to address building ventilation and other needs.

**Comments from the Chair**

Chair Craven welcomed Eleni Carris Livingston to her first in-person meeting of the Board. Ms. Livingston is a senior at Wellesley High School, the elected Chair of the State Student Advisory Council, and the 2021-2022 student member of the Board. Chair Craven commented that she and Ms. Livingston’s mother went to high school together. Ms. Livingston said she is excited to be on the Board and looks forward to representing the students of the Commonwealth this year.

**Comments from the Secretary**

Secretary Peyser thanked everyone who has been involved in helping to address the shortage of school bus drivers. He commended the Governor and his team, the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, the National Guard and its members who have been providing bus service, the Department of Transportation, the Registry of Motor Vehicles, and the Commissioner and staff at DESE who have been coordinating this effort.

Secretary Peyser said the Early College Joint Committee met last week and received an encouraging report on the progress of early college students, with the new data showing early college participants have a 6 percent higher high school graduation rate and a 20 percent higher rate of matriculation in higher education than their peers. The Secretary also noted that STEM Week is October 18-22; this annual celebration of STEM education includes hundreds of regional and statewide events and activities, including statewide design challenges.

**Comments from the Commissioner**

Commissioner Riley welcomed Eleni Carris Livingston to the Board. He said he will introduce Deputy Commissioner Regina Robinson to the Board at the October meeting.

**Approval of the Minutes of the June 22, 2021 Regular Meeting and the August 24, 2021 Special Meeting**

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

**VOTED:** **that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approve the minutes of the June 22, 2021 Regular Meeting and the minutes of the August 24, 2021 Special Meeting.**

**The vote was unanimous.**

**Election of Board Vice-Chair**

Chair Craven noted this is the Board’s annual meeting at which the Board elects its vice-chair. She called for nominations. Mr. Hills nominated James Morton for re-election as vice-chair. Mr. Hills said Mr. Morton has been an exemplary Board member, advocating strongly for his positions and always modeling how to agree or disagree thoughtfully and civilly. There were no other nominations.

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

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education elect James Morton to**

**serve as Vice-Chair of the Board, in accordance with Article I of the By-Laws.**

**The vote was unanimous.**

Vice-Chair Morton thanked the Board and said it is an honor to do this work. He said as was evident from the public speakers this morning, the issues that the Board is called upon to address each month are vitally important and often controversial. He said he treasures the fact that the Board takes the issues seriously and always tries to reach the right conclusions. He thanked all members for their work and for their support of him in this capacity.

**Update on School Reopening and Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families**

Commissioner Riley began by thanking all teachers, administrators, school personnel, and families for the strong opening of school. He said school nurses deserve special thanks for their service throughout this pandemic. Commissioner Riley said there is hopeful news that a vaccine for children ages 5-11 is on the horizon and could help restore a more normal school environment.

Commissioner Riley presented an overview of U.S. and Massachusetts trend data since the pandemic began. He recalled the Board’s vote in March 2021 to return students to in-person learning and, with the rise in cases due to the Delta variant, the Board’s vote in August authorizing him to mandate masks in schools. Commissioner Riley said he knows all Board members want to make the best decisions for the students. The Commissioner noted the different rates of vaccinations for 16-19-year-olds around the Commonwealth, with lower rates in parts of western Massachusetts and high rates in Chelsea, which is a standout among urban areas for having 81 percent of its 16-19-year-olds fully vaccinated. Commissioner Riley said the state remains ready to help any district set up vaccine clinics and has set up over 100 clinics to date.

Commissioner Riley said as of this September, 920,000 Massachusetts public school students are back in school. He noted districts are expected to provide services, including remote learning, for students with medical needs who cannot attend in-person school. The Commissioner thanked the Governor and all the agencies that came together in a very short time to deploy the National Guard to help transport students to school. Commissioner Riley described the Test and Stay program, which is enabling more students and staff to stay in school safely.

Commissioner Riley said the pandemic has had a profound impact on students’ social emotional health needs, including an increase in anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and other forms of mental stress. He thanked the Board for voting last school year to increase the amount of face time students had with teachers, which was one buffer to mental stress. Commissioner Riley said while it was controversial at the time, he believes having more face time with teachers and more synchronous learning had a positive impact on students. He added that ESSER and SOA funds will support districts in securing additional staffing and interventions to support students’ mental health.

Commissioner Riley said DESE is supporting districts through the Acceleration Roadmap to address social emotional learning and students’ mental health as well as improve academics. He said this bifurcated approach is needed to get students back on track.

Commissioner Riley noted some overarching themes about MCAS results this year, which mirror national trends showing some declines in English language arts (ELA) results and more pronounced declines in mathematics compared to two years ago. He said it appears that racial achievement gaps did not increase because declines were seen across all groups and districts, including in affluent suburban districts.

Mr. Hills asked how DESE will assess various initiatives, programs, and strategies to determine what is working well and what is not. Commissioner Riley said DESE communicates with districts about opportunities, resources, and research-based practices that work and then gauges performance. He added that MCAS is an important tool, along with formative assessments that take place throughout the year.

Mr. Rouhanifard reiterated his comment at the last meeting that mandating masks is not as critical an issue as the one the Board addressed in the spring, requiring schools to reopen for in-person learning. He said he believes rather than playing defense through continued mitigation and restrictions, this is the time to play offense and signal confidence and optimism, given high vaccination rates and lower COVID-19 risks to children.

Ms. Livingston commented on the need to address students’ social and emotional needs. She encouraged the Board to consider ways to provide resources to support educators so they can better support their students.

Ms. Stewart said the pandemic has affected various communities, parents, and students differently and caused a loss in relationship building in schools, which is essential. She said students, schools, and families need time to heal, and having students back in person provides the opportunity to listen to them.

Vice-Chair Morton said this virus has affected black and brown children and their communities differently. He noted that race and poverty have a significant impact, which was evident in the different stories the Board heard in the public statements this morning. Vice-Chair Morton said that like Mr. Rouhanifard, he wants to be optimistic, but he also wants to be cautious and consider the different ways the pandemic has affected people, particularly in low-income communities.

Mr. Moriarty said students with serious disabilities have also been disproportionately affected. He said he had an opportunity to speak with some legislators about students who are aging out of residential placements where they receive significant special education services. Mr. Moriarty said many in this group experienced a loss during the pandemic and they happen to be turning 22 at the wrong time. He encouraged the Legislature, DESE, and the education field to do as much as possible to address the losses to these young people and their families.

Mr. West commented that rather than calling for a bifurcated approach to address students’ social-emotional and academic needs, he would encourage an integrated approach because this is not an either-or situation. Mr. West added that some of the most effective programs integrate social-emotional learning with academic work, helping students to build relationships while engaging in academic work together.

Commissioner Riley said as a former adjustment counselor and special education teacher, he agrees it is critical to meet students’ social and emotional needs as well as academic needs. The Commissioner said MCAS has never been more important to families than it is now; they want to know how their children did during the pandemic and will want to know in the coming years if they improved or not. Commissioner Riley said our job in education is to address these issues in an integrated way and get better outcomes for students.

**Statewide Student Assessment (MCAS) Report**

Commissioner Riley introducedRob Curtin, chief officer for data, assessment, and accountability, andMichol Stapel, associate commissioner for student assessment, to present an overview of 2021 statewide MCAS results. Mr. Curtin said the 2021 MCAS data are now available on DESE’s website for all districts. He reviewed the adjustments DESE made for the 2021 MCAS administration and modifications the Board made to the Competency Determination for students in the classes of 2020-2023. Mr. Curtin commended school districts and DESE’s assessment staff for all their work, noting that across three subjects in grades 3-8 and 10, over 1 million assessments were administered in the state, 85 percent in person and 15 percent remotely. Mr. Curtin added that 99 percent of those assessments received a valid score and are included in the state results.

Mr. Curtin reviewed MCAS participation rates and pointed out that participation was strong across the Commonwealth. He noted that a small number of districts had a dip in participation, but overall participation was comparable to prior years. Mr. Curtin reviewed the achievement levels from the 2021 ELA, mathematics, and science MCAS tests by grade. He noted the modest decline in ELA and science and a more significant decline in mathematics. Mr. Curtin responded to questions from Board members about opportunities for high school students to earn the Competency Determination, noting there will be a retest in November and other opportunities in the future. He reviewed the changes in MCAS achievement levels from 2019 to 2021. Mr. West noted that results did not decline in 2019; rather, that was the first year of MCAS 2.0. In response to a question from Mr. Hills about the 2021 tests being shortened, Mr. Curtin said when the test results are combined, we get a complete picture that enables a valid year-to-year comparison.

Mr. West left the meeting at 11:00 a.m.

Mr. Curtin reviewed the 2021 performance levels by race and ethnicity. He noted the achievement decline was relatively similar across racial and ethnic categories. He said DESE will be doing further analysis of all the MCAS data. Mr. Rouhanifard commended DESE for administering the MCAS tests so ably in a very challenging year. Mr. Moriarty agreed and said the information is vitally important. He pointed out that only about 50 percent of students met or exceeded expectations on the grade 3 ELA MCAS test, which will have a huge impact going forward. Mr. Moriarty urged further attention to promoting the Mass Literacy Guide and strengthening early literacy instruction.

In response to a question from Ms. Fernández, Commissioner Riley said DESE will use the MCAS data analysis to drive a multi-year effort using the approach outlined in the Acceleration Roadmap. In response to a question from Vice-Chair Morton, the Commissioner said DESE is continuing to look at ways to improve student assessment.

The Chair paused the meeting at 11:20 a.m. because of a building evacuation. The meeting resumed at 11:40 a.m.

Mr. Hills asked Commissioner Riley about the status of the Boston Public Schools and any progress the district has made in implementing the Memorandum of Understanding to address systemic issues that were identified more than 18 months ago. Mr. Hills said given the concerns that have surfaced, he wondered if the Board should discuss whether to go further. Commissioner Riley acknowledged the comment and said the topic is to be continued.

**Competency Determination: Update on** **Competency Determination Advisory Committee and**

**Amendment to Competency Determination Regulations, 603 CMR 30.00 (Extending Interim Standard through Class of 2025)**

Commissioner Riley said the Competency Determination (CD) Advisory Committee, which is to advise on what the next CD model could look like, was on hiatus during the pandemic. He said he has asked Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, the committee chair, to restart the committee so the work can proceed, with the goal of providing recommendations early in 2022. Commissioner Riley added that in the meantime, we need to extend the interim CD requirements. He asked Mr. Curtin to provide an overview.

Mr. Curtin explained that the Board has taken several votes to set and then extend the interim CD standard due to the delays caused by the pandemic. He noted that at the June meeting, the Board voted to seek public comment on a regulation extending the interim CD standard through the classes of 2024 and 2025. This provides timely notice to all current high school students and allows time for the Board to consider, adopt, and provide fair notice of any new standard for future graduating classes. Mr. Curtin said the Department received no public comment on the proposed regulation, which he said is not unprecedented. In response to a question from Mr. Hills, Mr. Curtin said the Commissioner is aiming to have the Board vote on updating the CD standard by June 2022, so incoming ninth graders in fall 2022 (class of 2026) will know the standard expected on the grade 10 assessments.

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

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in accordance with**

**M.G.L. c. 69, §§ 1B and 1D, and having solicited comment in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act, G.L. c. 30A, § 3, hereby adopts the amendments to the Competency Determination Regulations, 603 CMR 30.00, as presented by the Commissioner. The proposed amendments extend the interim passing standard in English language arts and mathematics for two additional years, to include students in the classes of 2024 and 2025, and extend the interim passing standard in science and technology/engineering to the class of 2025.**

**The vote was unanimous.**

**Committee Report on Commissioner's Salary**

Vice-Chair Morton said at the June 22, 2021 meeting, the Board approved the Commissioner's

performance rating of 4.75 on a 5-point scale and commended the Commissioner for his leadership, accessibility, engagement of stakeholders, and his thoughtful decision-making during an extraordinarily challenging year. He noted that the committee was also asked to make a salary recommendation and met on September 9 for this purpose. Vice-Chair Morton said the committee took into account the Commissioner’s exemplary service and performance rating as well as the salary increases and one-time payment that the Commonwealth's Division of Human Resources announced in July for all eligible executive branch managers. The Vice-Chair presented the motion proposed by the committee.

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

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approves the salary**

**adjustment for the Commissioner, as recommended by the Board’s committee**

**and consistent with the salary increases and one-time payment that the**

**Commonwealth’s Human Resources Division announced on July 30, 2021 for all**

**eligible managers in the executive branch:**

* **a 2.5% increase for FY2021, effective July 5, 2020,**
* **a 2% increase for FY2022, effective July 4, 2021, and**
* **a one-time payment equivalent to 1.5% of the salary, to be calculated after the FY2021 and FY2022 increases.**

**The Board commends Commissioner Riley for his leadership during an extraordinarily challenging time and thanks the Commissioner for his exemplary service.**

**The vote was unanimous.**

Chair Craven thanked the Commissioner and his team for a job well done.

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

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at**

 **11:55 a.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