**Minutes of the Regular Meeting**

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

**Friday, December 17, 2021**

**Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

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

**9:06 a.m. – 12:46 p.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

**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 9:06 a.m. and members introduced themselves. Chair Craven noted that today’s Board meeting, like all open meetings of the Board, is being recorded.

**Statements from the Public**

* **Nathan Dickinson,** 8th grade student, Robert Adams Middle School, Holliston, addressed the Board on Item 2, Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Caroline Brosnihan**, 11th grade student, Westborough High School, addressed the Board on Item 2, Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Wendy Sullivan** addressed the Board on Item 2, Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Meaghan Benson** addressed the Board on Item 2, Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Beth Humberd** addressed the Board on Item 2, Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Doug Horton,** Bedford,addressed the Board on Item 2, Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families
* **Colleen Walston,** Concord,addressed the Board on Item 1,Early Literacy: Mass Literacy Update

**Comments from the Chair**

Chair Craven congratulated student Board member Eleni Carris Livingston on her early acceptance into Harvard College. Chair Craven thanked member Amanda Fernández and the Educator Diversification Committee for their ongoing work and noted Ms. Fernández would brief the Board later in the meeting. Chair Craven said the Board appreciates the statements from the public this morning about the frustrations and challenges of schooling during the pandemic. She said that she and the Commissioner, Secretary, and members of the Board share these concerns and are keenly aware of their responsibilities to students, schools, and families. Chair Craven thanked member Michael Moriarty for his steady focus on early literacy and the critical importance of achieving reading proficiency by third grade, adding that the Board looks forward to the Department’s presentation today on the early literacy initiative.

**Comments from the Secretary**

Secretary Peyser summarized education-related provisions of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) bill recently enacted by the Legislature and Governor.

**Comments from the Commissioner**

Commissioner Riley said he will update the Board in January on the status of vocational admissions policies. He noted that Governor Baker recently signed the Genocide Education bill into law. Among other things, the law requires school districts to provide instruction for middle and high school students on the history of genocide consistent with the content standards in the MA History/Social Science curriculum framework, starting in school year 2022-2023. The law also establishes a competitive grant program and a trust fund to support it. The Commissioner said the Department will provide information on resources and grant opportunities in the coming months.

**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 October 19, 2021 Regular Meeting.**

The vote was unanimous.

**Early Literacy: Mass Literacy Update**

Commissioner Riley introduced Senior Associate Commissioner Heather Peske, Director of

Literacy and Humanities Katherine Tarca, and Jennifer Hogan, Elementary Literacy Coordinator for Pentucket Regional School District, to update the Board on Mass Literacy, the Department’s initiative to promote evidence-based early literacy. Ms. Peske said the Board and the Commissioner prioritized early literacy several years ago and the pandemic has only intensified the need for excellent early literacy support and instruction. Ms. Tarca said achieving proficient literacy skills by grade three is key to students’ future success, and the most recent data are not reassuring: only 50 percent of Massachusetts third graders met or exceeded expectations on the 2021 ELA MCAS, and equity gaps are significant, with only 32 percent of Black students, 28 percent of Hispanic/Latino students, and 22 percent of students with disabilities meeting or exceeding expectations on the 2021 ELA third grade MCAS test. She said this suggests that during the pandemic, young students in Massachusetts lost ground in terms of literacy equity. Ms. Tarca said students need high-quality instructional support more than ever, and early literacy remains one of the Commissioner’s goals and an agency priority.

Ms. Tarca said the Department launched Mass Literacy and issued the Mass Literacy Guide in November 2020, to empower educators and students through evidence-based, inclusive, and culturally responsive practices for teaching early literacy. She presented information about the GLEAM grant program, the early grades literacy grant program, early literacy tutoring grants for pandemic response, and free online professional development that the Department is sponsoring. Ms. Tarca introduced Jennifer Hogan, Elementary Literacy Coordinator, Pentucket Regional School District, who spoke about her school’s successful experience with the Mass Literacy approach.

Ms. Peske said in line with the vision of Mass Literacy, the Department has set a goal that by school year 2024-2025, all early childhood, elementary, and moderate disabilities teacher candidates in Massachusetts will be prepared, through coursework and opportunities for practice and high-quality feedback, in evidence-based early literacy as outlined in the Mass Literacy Guide. Ms. Peske said the Department is partnering with educator preparation programs and K-12 districts to support prospective teachers as well as current teachers to gain the knowledge and skills they need.

Mr. Moriarty thanked the presenters and commented on the effective combination of advocacy that is both top-down (from the Board and Department) and bottom-up (from parents, educators, and organizations such as the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading) to strengthen literacy instruction. He noted that early literacy focuses on children from birth to age 8, and third grade is simply the point at which we get data from MCAS ELA tests. In response to a question from Vice-Chair Morton about early education, Ms. Peske said the GLEAM grant program is one example of a DESE partnership with the Department of Early Education and Care. Mr. West commented that the educator preparation component is vital. Ms. Fernández and Ms. Lombos encouraged outreach to families. Secretary Peyser thanked Ms. Peske, Ms. Tarca, and Mr. Moriarty for their work and advocacy, and suggested that a combination of incentives and requirements could advance this important initiative.

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

Commissioner Riley updated the Board on information the Department has been providing to district and school leaders on new developments related to COVID-19 and support for schools and districts as they navigate teaching and learning during the pandemic. He said the current school mask mandate, which was adopted after consulting with medical and state health officials, will be in effect through January 15, and he is consulting with those experts in anticipation of a further announcement in early January. The Commissioner said the Department is continuing to refine and expand the Test and Stay program, promote vaccination for students and boosters for all adults who work with children, and provide information about the vaccine in multiple languages so that schools can customize it for use with students’ families.

Commissioner Riley asked Dr. Frinny Polanco Walters, attending physician in the Division of Adolescent/Young Adult Medicine at Boston Children’s Hospital, to speak to the Board about the importance of vaccines for children and booster shots for all adults who work with students. Dr. Polanco Walters joined the meeting from her office via Zoom. She said the COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective for children; the safety data from the clinical trials show no adverse events related to the vaccine. Dr. Polanco Walters said that while children, overall, do not tend to get sick with COVID-19, they are not immune to serious outcomes. She noted that some studies have shown children can spread COVID-19 to other individuals. For these reasons, she said, vaccinating children is important, and the benefits of this vaccine far outweigh the risks. She said she strongly encourages families to discuss their options with their pediatricians who have accurate information and can address their questions. Dr. Polanco Walters responded to questions from Board members. Chair Craven thanked the doctor for taking the time to speak to the Board.

Chair Craven asked Commissioner Riley about the mask mandate and the metrics for the off-ramp as the virus evolves. Commissioner Riley said he will continue to rely on the medical community to advise on this, especially as we start thinking about how to navigate from pandemic to endemic conditions. He added that even after the state relaxes the mask mandate, local officials would have authority to make decisions based on their local situation. Commissioner Riley said he hopes to have a decision in early January on next steps. Mr. Hills commented that the key issue for the Board is keeping schools open for in-person teaching and learning.

Chair Craven called for a break at 10:40 a.m. and reconvened the meeting at 10:55 a.m.

**Board of Elementary and Secondary Education FY2023 Budget Proposal and Report from**

**the Board's Budget Committee**

The Board’s Budget Committee chair, Matt Hills, said the committee met in November and discussed key areas of focus for the Board’s FY23 state budget priorities. He noted the priorities outlined in his memorandum are organized according to the Commissioner’s *Recover and Reimagine* 2021-2022 agenda. Mr. Hills recommended that the Board endorse the budget priorities as presented by the committee, so the Commissioner can work with the Secretary, Governor, and Legislature to finalize a FY23 budget that advances these education priorities. Secretary Peyser said he would abstain because the Commissioner presents the Board’s budget priorities to the Secretary.

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

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in accordance with Mass. Gen. Laws chapter 69, § 1A, approve the budget priorities for the FY2023 education budget as recommended by the Board’s Budget Committee and the Commissioner, and direct the Commissioner to convey these recommendations and priorities to the Secretary of Education, the Governor, and the Legislature.**

The vote was 10-0-1. Secretary Peyser abstained.

Secretary Peyser commented that this is an unusual year from a budgetary perspective because districts have state resources through the normal budgeting process as well as significant federal funds under ESSER and ARPA that can be applied to these priorities.

**Educator Diversification Update**

Commissioner Riley introduced the topic, noting that Massachusetts has made good progress and still has much more to do. Ms. Fernández, chair of the Board’s Educator Diversification Committee, provided a brief overview of the committee’s work and said the committee recently got an update on the Department’s initiatives and progress in this area. She thanked the Department team and the Board for their continued support.

Deputy Commissioner Regina Robinson and Shay Edmond, Senior Associate Commissioner for Strategic Initiatives, reviewed the Department’s educator diversification work and progress to date. Ms. Robinson credited the Commissioner for making diversifying the Massachusetts educator workforce a priority. Ms. Edmond noted that in Commissioner Riley’s *Our Way Forward* report, he listed innovative practices around teacher diversification as a key tool to support improved student learning. She explained that the broad goal is to create a diverse and culturally responsive educator workforce that will promote better outcomes for students.

Ms. Edmond described strategies the Department is pursuing, in collaboration with districts and partner organizations, to address factors that impede diversifying the education profession. The strategies include grants to support school and district recruitment and retention efforts, publication of the Guidebook on Promising Recruitment, Selection, and Retention Strategies, an alternative assessment pilot for educator licensure, leadership academies, fellowships, and others. Ms. Edmond presented demographic data on administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals for FY19-21 relating to retention rates and new hires statewide. In closing, she reviewed actions the Department will be taking, including releasing a new educator data dashboard and scaling up high school education career pathway programs.

Ms. Edmond and Ms. Robinson answered questions from the Board. Chair Craven commented that the data graphs show an increase of two percentage points in three years, which is real progress, especially during a pandemic. Vice-Chair Morton suggested reaching out to community organizations that would be interested to help promote this initiative and join in recruitment efforts. Chair Craven thanked Ms. Edmond, Ms. Robinson, Ms. Fernández and members of the Board and its Educator Diversification Committee, the Commissioner, and former Senior Associate Commissioner Ventura Rodriguez for their commitment to this important work.

**Proposed Student Achievement Award Program**

Commissioner Riley asked Deputy Commissioner Robinson and Senior Associate Commissioner Edmond to present on the proposed student achievement program. The Commissioner said this would be a pilot program, designed to recognize students who may not always be told that they have done well. Recalling a data report on gifted and talented students showing that some students of color initially identified as gifted lost that designation within a few years, the Commissioner said he has observed that students can be encouraged by recognition and continue making substantial gains. He added that while the pilot being discussed today is about achievement on statewide assessments, he is also interested in celebrating students’ improvement and growth.

Ms. Robinson said this recognition by district and state leaders, particularly shining a light on students who have done well in the midst of the pandemic, would support a positive trajectory for high-needs students. She discussed the eligibility criteria and standards and what the award would include. Ms. Edmond added that students with disabilities who took the MCAS-Alt would also be eligible. Ms. Robinson and Ms. Edmond responded to questions from Board members. Mr. West commented that while cash incentives for performance have a poor track record, this is a worthy experiment about signaling to students that they are doing well and should keep it up. He suggested the pilot should be studied after a couple of years. Commissioner Riley said he envisions the pilot program operating for about three years and he would consider broadening it to include growth and other metrics besides MCAS performance. Vice-Chair Morton said he favors the pilot program idea and the proposal to provide resources for parents to support their children’s learning.

**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 1I, hereby adopts the Commissioner’s recommendation to issue awards to recognize high needs students who demonstrated high achievement on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) English Language Arts or Mathematics tests and authorizes the Commissioner to implement such a plan, starting in the current fiscal year based on the spring 2021 MCAS administration.**

The vote was unanimous.

**High School Chemistry and Technology/Engineering Assessments**

Commissioner Riley introduced Rob Curtin, Chief Officer for Data, Assessment, and Accountability,

Associate Commissioner Michol Stapel, and Lucy Wall from DESE’s legal office to present the recommendation to phase out, as of spring 2024, two of the four MCAS high school science and technology/engineering (STE) subject tests that are currently available to students to meet the competency determination requirements for graduation. The Commissioner said the number of students taking the chemistry and technology/engineering tests has always been low and the numbers have declined significantly in the past few years. He said the question is whether the resources to sustain these two tests could be better directed elsewhere.

Mr. Curtin explained that the matter is on today’s agenda for discussion and would potentially be on the agenda for a vote at the January meeting. He presented background on the testing program and data on the number of students participating in each of the four high school STE tests since 2015, as well as data on student course taking. Mr. Curtin noted that only one high school STE test is required to earn the competency determination, and as a practical matter most students take the test relating to the first subject in their high school science sequence, typically biology or introductory physics. He said phasing out the chemistry and technology/engineering assessments does not mean eliminating courses in those subjects; the decision to be made is whether the Commonwealth should devote significant resources to test development for two tests that very few students take.

Mr. Curtin went through the proposal to phase out these two tests by continuing to offer the chemistry and technology/engineering tests in spring 2022 and spring 2023 (for students through the class of 2025), and then for students in the class of 2026 and beyond, to offer only tests in biology and introductory physics. He explained that students will have the opportunity to take biology and introductory physics tests or retests two times per year. Mr. Curtin said that a Board vote on this matter in January would enable the Department to provide fair notice to students and schools for course planning.

Mr. Curtin responded to questions from Board members. Secretary Peyser noted while there may be concerns, there are ways to encourage continued course taking and rigor in high school science and technology/engineering. Mr. Curtin said the Department will continue to look at course-taking patterns. Commissioner Riley thanked Board members for their comments and questions, which he said the Department would consider for the continuing discussion and vote at the January meeting.

**Charter Schools: Modification of Conditions for City on a Hill Charter Public School**

Mr. Chuang explained this is a recommendation to modify conditions that the Board previously placed on City on a Hill Charter Public School, and it is needed because of the pandemic-related cancellation of MCAS testing in 2020 and the related changes to district and school accountability in 2021. He said the modification would allow the school an additional year to demonstrate significant and sustained academic improvement.

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

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in accordance with General Laws chapter 71, section 89, and 603 CMR 1.00, hereby extends the academic condition and modifies four additional conditions on the school’s charter as recommended by the Commissioner. The probationary conditions are as follows:**

**Condition 1: Until further notice, the school must submit to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department), at charterschools@doe.mass.edu or 75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148, board meeting agendas, materials, and minutes prior to each board meeting at the same time that these items are sent to the school’s board members. These monthly materials must include financial statements to be presented to the board. These monthly financial reports must reflect all considerations in revenue and expenditures, including lines of credit, debt obligations, and fundraising.**

**Condition 2: On its website, the school must maintain notice of the fact that the school’s charter is on probation and the conditions the school must meet.**

**Condition 3: The school must maintain an escrow account while its charter is on probation to pay for any potential closing, legal, and audit expenses associated with closure, should that occur.**

**Condition 4: Until further notice, the school will provide weekly updates to the Department of the total number of students in attendance, and the total number of students on the waitlist, by close of business on Friday of each week. The school must maintain student enrollment levels adequate to provide a strong academic program and financial and organizational viability, as determined by the Department.**

**Condition 5: The school must regularly report to the Department and the board of trustees on its progress toward meeting the benchmarks, including timetables and deadlines for key tasks, of its comprehensive action plan for improving academic performance (in mathematics, English language arts, and science for all student subgroups), school climate, staff culture, and faithfulness to its charter.**

**Condition 6: The school’s board of trustees must regularly report to the Department about its progress in providing adequate oversight of the school according to the Charter School Performance Criteria, Criterion 9: Governance.**

**Condition 7: By December 31, 2024, the school must demonstrate that it is an academic success by providing evidence that the school has exhibited significant and sustained academic improvement in mathematics, English language arts, and science. Should the school demonstrate significant and sustained academic improvement before 2024, the Commissioner and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education may consider removing this condition, rather than wait until December 31, 2024.**

**Condition 8: Enrollment at the City on a Hill Charter Public School is limited to 350 students. When the Commissioner determines that the school has met the conditions imposed on its charter, including the conditions for academic success, enrollment may increase to a maximum of 400 students. Should the school fail to increase student enrollment in accordance with a growth plan approved by the Commissioner or report fewer than 350 students enrolled at the school on October 1, 2024, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education may reduce the school’s maximum enrollment below 400 accordingly.**

**Failure of City on a Hill Charter Public School to meet the conditions placed on its charter may**

**result in immediate suspension and revocation of the school’s charter. The Commissioner shall**

**review and report to the Board on the success or lack of success of City on a Hill Charter Public School in meeting the terms of probation and its charter and, based upon his review, shall recommend such further action as he deems appropriate.**

**City on a Hill Charter Public School shall be operated in accordance with the provisions of**

**General Laws chapter 71, section 89; 603 CMR 1.00; and all other applicable state and federal**

**laws and regulations and such additional conditions as the Commissioner or the Board of**

**Elementary and Secondary Education may from time to time establish, all of which shall be**

**deemed conditions of the charter.**

The vote was unanimous.

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

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

 **12:46 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