

June 29, 2020

The Giles County School Board held a work session at 8:00 a.m. on June 29th, 2020. A closed meeting was also held to discuss personnel (applicants for the Macy principal position). Due to COVID 19 restrictions, the meeting was streamed on Facebook Live. Persons present were:

Melissa R. Guynn
Phillip A. Pennington
Stephen M. Steele, Chairman
Mark A. Wilburn

Amanda J. Tickle, Clerk
Dr. Terry E. Arbogast, II, Superintendent
Mrs. Lisa Mustain, Assistant Superintendent

The meeting was called to order by the Chairman.

The Board, on motion of Mr. Wilburn, with second by Mr. Pennington and unanimous voting, went into a closed meeting under Section 2.2-3711 of the Virginia Code and Paragraph 1. Discussion, consideration, or interviews of prospective candidates for employment. Following discussion, Mr. Pennington moved to go to regular session. Mrs. Guynn seconded the motion and voting was unanimous. The School Board, on motion of Mr. Wilburn, with second by Mr. Pennington and unanimous voting, certified that the meeting was in regards to personnel and conducted under section 2.2-3711.

VOTE Ayes: 4 Nays: 0

Clerk of the Giles County School Board

Date

There was no action from closed session.

The School Board then began their work session.

Dr. Arbogast stated that we need to talk about return to school. He stated that committees have been meeting for several weeks to discuss these options. He stated that the best option for our kids is to be in school 5 days per week, but with the times we are in and guidelines we have been given, they don't feel like it is feasible for social distancing, etc. The overall plan is to have students in school 2 days a week and the other days would be virtual learning. Group A would attend school on Monday and Wednesday and Group B would attend school on Tuesday and Thursday. Friday would be used for staff development and deep cleaning of the school facilities. Students and staff would be required to wear face coverings and masks when social distancing is not an option. Transportation will be the most challenging piece to this with social distancing guidelines. He stated that they would submit a variance to the state to allow more students on the buses. Family members would be allowed to sit in the same seat. There will be an option for a full-time virtual platform for parents if they want to utilize that. Dr. Arbogast stated that if the board wants him to do anything different than the proposed schedule, then they would need to submit a plan to the state for approval. Mr. Wilburn stated that the health and safety of the kids and teachers come before anything. He is not wanting to deviate from the guidelines that are in place. He does want to make sure we can provide as much service to our children as we can. Mrs. Guynn stated that she is not sure what the solution is, but she doesn't like two days a week. She feels like our kids need more than this. She is also concerned that some kids may not be able to get to certain places to be able to utilize the internet. Mr. Pennington stated we want our kids back in school 5 days per week, but he is not sure that it is feasible right now. He wants the best for our kids and our teachers. He stated that it is not an easy job making these decisions. Dr. Arbogast states that the plan he has discussed will work for phase 3, but he is not sure if we will be in phase 3 when school starts. Mr. Steele stated that we have a lot of stakeholders here that have a lot of concerns. He asked for patience as we figure out this process. He read a letter from Nicole Haskins. It reads as follows:

Dear School Board, Dr. Arbogast, and Mrs. Tickle (only copied as to ensure this makes public comments review for June 30th)

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As you know there are over 400 parents on a Facebook page looking for communication on where we sit in the planning for COVID and school in the fall. Many of them want the kids in school full time. I am just looking for communication and a plan. A plan that is helping the kids with ID and special needs, a plan that is challenging the kids that excel and are gifted, a plan that is healthy and safe.

No communication generally feels like you don't care, and I know that is not true. Many of you are in thankless roles here and one is paid. Paid to think and lead and plan. Paid to communicate with the teachers, the students at times, the admin, and the parents. However, the parents are the bulk of this audience that are impacted. They make up over 5,000 people. They have employment, daycare, income, and keeping our children on a good path to worry about.

We have all seen acts of kindness and great things done for our community during this time. The school lunches were an excellent example. We used programs to fund it, it was planned flawlessly, and the communication to parents was excellent. We need to learn from this. This email group celebrated it. We need the same communication on fall school and our kids' education. It is as important as food and social checks and deserves attention publicly to the parents.

The survey was inadequate. It did not ask the questions you need answered to make educated decisions based on parent feedback. In addition, it was sent only by phone which is not conducive to a survey. I myself never received it and had no way to answer it other than listen in on a friends. A email survey or letter like every other county in Virginia is doing is required. Parents have questions they would like to contribute as well so again we can be a resource for you and not a critic.

Example: If you had the choice to send your child to school but had to sign a waiver, would you? If you were provided a live feed of your child's teachers in the classroom teaching would you have your child attend from home? (thus the county does not lose any student head count money and parents have choices and flexibility as needed. They could also choose the days they stay home or attend or change their choice to fit the needs at home such as: someone is sick, work issues pop up, or daycare is a problem) – with this question it would mean technology purchases to execute, However, you have resources and people who are willing to be creative and help figure this out or provide mobile units for children to go to. We have some amazing people in this county and they are willing to help.

The reality is that it is time to get creative. Get the largest group you serve involved – parents. And communicate what is happening. This is a time where we can pull together as a community and figure out what is best. The Facebook group Amy Ballard Smith started believes the same thing. They are not looking to go to school full time, they are looking for information and a plan to get towards that goal at some point.

However, anything you do, you must plan for the worst. The worst being we have to shut down fully again. And how the last quarter went under quarantine is unacceptable. However, excusable since it was a first for all of us. But now we know. Now you have experience, and so do the parents, and NOONE knows there kids better than us and how they will learn best in the current landscape.

I want to trust the school board and leadership is in the process of making clear and healthy decisions for our children. However, I am suggesting the following for your consideration to execute.

1. GCPS attends all regional calls, meetings, and planning sessions with a single representative or team to show GCPS commitment to the community and surrounding areas. This helps with communities understanding our struggles and will help greatly when and if resources are needed. It also shows well as we try to hire and retain teachers and woo residents to Giles. Lastly, it allows you to easily here the creative plans and problem solving in place at other localities.
2. A emailed parent survey goes out with additional questions and results are provided. If you need assistance with this I am happy to execute using survey tools that are online. I am happy to also provide the results.
3. A email inbox with a distribution list to all school board and admin leadership is provided for visibility on suggestions and resource commitments. Meaning donations of laptops, mifi devices, time, and tools from the community, and productive and creative suggestions.
 - a. You have a hot pot of water right now and you need to let some steam out...I am one of the many parents feeling the same way and now you also have a very large facebook group wishing to hold a town hall to review parent's needs. I implore you to address this in the June 30th meeting before the steam turns to a rolling boil of water. A gesture of understanding this and addressing it is critical in the June 30th meeting. Just a understanding and overview of what GCPS is doing to plan, how parents can feel heard, and you understand the survey was inadequate

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and needs to be sent by email. Waiting till 15 days before school starts or even August is truly disrespectful of the many choices and decisions parents must prepare for. I also sympathize greatly with our teachers who must sit and wait when they could be getting the necessary steps in order for execution. Prepare for the worst and you all can alter from there.

4. Parent representation on key task force is needed... as we plan for the future and this fall with a note that says ---- Please email us if you are interested in this time commitment. However, we value our community and our parents opinions as their childrens lives and educations are at stake and we understand their work and homelife are deeply affected by decisions GCPS makes. , this is the basic courteous communication that every other county is doing right now. They are sending letters, answering calls, and responding to emails of concern. Please remember that we do have a choice of where our children go to school. We do have an escalation path if we feel decisions are not public and acceptable. We did invoke that our voices would be heard with our elected officials and the fact only one has taken the time to write back to my 11 emails is upsetting.

To be clear, this is NOT an email of fluffy complaints or an attack. I am offering to help you all however I can. I will find resources as I can for technology and funding. I will try to keep parents on a productive path to being heard and communication. You have that commitment from me and my family.

Now we need some communication from you. You might be surprised that when you let us hear information, let us understand what is under the kimono and the challenges you are facing, that people will rise to the occasion. They will come together as a community as if there is one thing everyone is united in...the kids.

Thank you again for your service to our community and for those that are employed as well. Please feel free to email, call, or schedule a meeting for an in person chat.

Nicole Haskins

Dr. Arbogast discussed the survey that was sent out to parents. The questions were in regards to the new schedule, transportation, and internet capability.

Mr. Steele mentioned the idea of some type of forum where parents can have the opportunity to give their thoughts on the opening of school.

Board members welcomed Mrs. Mustain to the team.

The School Board, on motion of Mr. Wilburn, with second by Mrs. Guynn and unanimous voting, adjourned the meeting.

Chairman

Clerk