

**COMMITTEE ON LIAISON  
DECEMBER 7, 2020 at 6:05 p.m.  
CITY COUNCIL CHAMBER  
WOBURN CITY HALL**

Voting Members present: President Lindsay Higgins, Alderman Michael Concannon, Alderman Darlene Mercer-Bruen, Alderman Joseph Demers, Alderman Joanne Campbell, Alderman Edward Tedesco, and Alderman Robert Ferullo

Absent: Alderman Richard Gately

Also present: Supt. of Schools Dr. Matthew Crowley, School Committee Chairman Ellen Crowley, and Commission on Disabilities member-elect Rosemarie Valente-Hubbard

\* \* \* \* \*

**Reading of previous meeting minutes:** Motion made by Alderman Tedesco and seconded by Alderman Mercer-Bruen to approve the minutes from the public session of the meeting of August 17, 2020; all in favor, 8-0.

**Resolve to meet with School Committee for status report on school issues:** Chairman Crowley said she and Supt. Crowley are here to give the committee an update on school-related issues. She said not much has happened this year other than a complete re-vamp of the public education system in Woburn. She said the school system is currently operating a hybrid model of in-person and virtual instruction. She said the School Committee could not be prouder of the leadership group. She said they dedicated an entire summer to plan the hybrid learning program. She said they met for 10 weeks, including weekends and nights. She said there have been no labor issues. She said there was buy-in from the stakeholders since day one. She said they had to build a learning program from scratch. She said supervised learning centers were established at the YMCA and the Boys & Girls Club. She said they had to think about students who were suffering because there was no in-person learning. She said the School Dept. is grateful to the mayor for carrying the financial load for the learning centers. She said school staff has been great and the teachers in particular have been adaptive to multiple technologies in an effort to educate the students. She thanked the City Council and the community for its support. Supt. Crowley said he has a handout that he would like to give to the members of the committee. Motion made by Alderman Tedesco and seconded by Alderman Mercer-Bruen to accept a document entitled “WPS Updates – December 7, 2020,” and make it part of the permanent record; approved, 8-0. Dr. Crowley said Chairman Crowley alluded to how collaborative the staff has been and said he is stunned by what the school system has been able to do. He said the hybrid system is not perfect but said what Woburn is doing compares favorably to what any other community in commonwealth is doing. He directed the committee’s attention to a photo on page 2 of the handout that depicts members of the school committee and administration, and members of the City Council. He said the photo was taken on February 20, 2020. He said it is mind-blowing how much has changed since then. He said every day is a crisis but there have been many good decisions made along the way. He said page 3 of the handout includes a picture of the high school grounds on graduation day with lawn signs depicting the class of 2020 graduates. He said Woburn High Principal Jessica Callanan did an amazing job with graduation. He said among

other things she had to deal with 95-degree heat on the artificial turf at the stadium. He said graduation involved the kind of thinking the administration had to do to make sure everyone was included. He said graduation was originally scheduled in June but they couldn't conduct the ceremony as planned and they had to delay it until July. He said the success of the event is a testament to Principal Callanan's flexibility. He said local communities expected 85 percent of the instructional planning would be provided by the state by mid-July. In actuality, 0 percent was provided and cities and towns had to figure out what to do on their own. He said developing an instructional model was nothing short of a miracle. He said he was very proud of the development of Woburn's model. He said he thinks the school system figured it out well. He referred the committee to page 4 of the handout and said the administration was required to provide three models of instruction. He said that was all the advice they got from DESE, outside of deadlines. He said students were at the center of all the decisions that were made. He said three models and a virtual academy were created. He said there are 450 students at virtual academies at the elementary level and 150 students at virtual academies at both the middle and high school levels. He said the hybrid model is complicated and involved in-person and remote learning. He said if members of the committee are confused now, stay tuned. Supt. Crowley referred the committee to page 5 of his handout and said the three major guiding principals of the Safe Return to School Blueprint were Connections & Support, Consistency and Organization. He said a key component was the provision of Chromebooks for students in grades two and above and iPads for students in grade one and kindergarten. He said the predominant method of instruction in grades 6-12 is via Google Classroom, and See Saw for the elementary levels, where students only have to remember a password. He said in terms of organization the administration has tried to make sure to provide a consistent schedule, so the students will know what their schedules will be. Supt. Crowley said a flow chart on page 6 indicates the roles and responsibilities of multiple committees that devised the learning model. He said they needed teachers to be part of the planning. He said they problem-solved all summer. He said they needed each school to come up with a plan. He said each school created a building-based plan. He said the process involved an amazing amount of research. Referring to page 7 of the handout, Supt. Crowley said the transportation aspect of the plan involved hand-scheduling every student and an inordinate amount of work during the summer. He said Director of School Facilities David Dunkley undertook a survey and reconditioning of the HVAC systems in the schools. He said the administration met with the WTA every afternoon to address any issues and concerns. He said there were staff members who took a leave of absence without pay and that created some complex personnel issues. He said Human Resources Director Judi O'Neil had to solve personnel issues and he can't imagine how much work there would have been without an HRD. He said the administration undertook a survey that indicated 82 percent of parents wanted their students to come back to school in some form or fashion. He said the Mass. Teachers Association has been pushing for remote learning. He said WTA co-President Barbara Locke came to a School Committee meeting to request remote learning. He said the administration and the union came together to address labor's concerns. He said the situation wasn't always Kumbaya, but it worked. He said there has been an investment in communicating with families through text messaging. He said there is a hiring frenzy that is on-going. He said there will be people coming back from leave once the pandemic is over. He said there have been a lot of moving parts and he expects it will remain that way over the entire school year. He directed the committee to page 8 of his handout. Supt. Crowley said there were nine days of professional development before school started on Sept. 21. He said there were three opening days of school.

He said he was a nervous wreck. He said he was happy they made it though the first week. He said there are three hybrid models he referred to as cohorts. He said the photo on page 8 was taken at the Boys & Girls Club. He said there are 250 students at the YMCA and the Boys & Girls Club, funded by the city on a sliding scale. He said one of the items the schools had to invest in were extension cords to accommodate social distancing. He said they had to install drop ceilings for the power cords. He said the virtual academies have allowed many families to return to work. He said new Asst. Supt. for Finance & Operations Robert Alconada has been focused on budget line items and there may be some alterations to the usual budget. He said out-of-district costs in FY '20 were spot-on and they didn't exceed the allocated budget. He said he feels comfortable with the out-of-district cost estimates for FY '21, but noted all of that can go away quickly if there are three significant move-ins. He said the School Dept. received a Cares Act grant of more than \$1 million. He said there is a standing meeting involving him, Mayor Galvin, City Auditor Charles Doherty and Asst. Supt. Alconada every Friday to review expenditures. He said running hybrid school models is not without financial challenges. Referring to page 9 of his handout, Supt. Crowley said they are often seeing English Learning and Special Education students not engaging on days they are not in school. He said there is a community liaison who has been working with the EL students, and truancy officers are checking to see if people are okay and to make sure the students are being supported in whatever way they can. He said assistant principals at the high school and middle schools are driving to houses to check on students. He said it becomes a problem if they're not engaged. He said grades at the high school are down because the students are not as engaged. He said once the pandemic ends the school system will have to account for learning loss. He said the students who are starting to read will have to undergo a multi-year process to recover from learning loss. He said they are unable to provide a normal amount of curriculum support because they do not want people coming in and out of classrooms. He said the sophomores who were supposed to take MCAS tests last year are not juniors, and they need to pass to graduate. He said he got an email today indicating those tests are going to be delayed. He said parents who have students on IEPs are getting frustrated because the school system is not providing its usual support. He said it is a challenge. Referring to page 10 of the handout, Supt. Crowley said meetings have already started to plan FY '22. He said he hopes the schools start trending toward more traditional education over the summer. He said they are going to have to budget for student support over the summer. He said the FY '21 budget cycle was complicated. He said there were cuts made, including 25 percent from educational supplies, and freshmen sports. He said he hopes some of those items are restored. He said the Goodyear and the White schools need assistant principals. He said it is a lot to ask a principal to manage those two schools because they have so many students. He said the schools may have to make more investments in technology because the Chromebooks have a life span of 3-4 years. He said there is a part-time EL director but with more than 500 EL students it is time to invest in a full-time EL director. He said the math curriculum is becoming obsolete and that will be an expense on the horizon. President Higgins thanked Supt. Crowley and the entire school staff for all the work they've done. She said it has been a crazy year. She said she commends and thanks the School Dept. She implored everyone to stick together through the pandemic. President Higgins asked if any member of the committee wished to address Supt. Crowley or Chairman Crowley. Alderman Mercer-Bruen thanked the School Dept. for its efforts. She said she has a daughter in the Woburn Public School system. She said her daughter came home on the first day of school and said everything was so organized. She said without planning the situation in the schools could have been catastrophic, and that is not hyperbole. She said

planning the school year took a lot of time and effort. She said she is glad to hear MCAS has been delayed. She said this is fantastic news. She offered to provide any assistance she can at budget time. She asked if there are any opportunities to help students with reading. She said she would be willing to do that on a voluntary basis. Supt. Crowley said any kind of volunteer work would have to be done remotely. He said there is a meeting tomorrow and he will factor in volunteer opportunities. He said if anyone on the council knows anyone who is willing to help, the School Dept. ought to take advantage of that. Alderman Mercer-Bruen thanked Supt. Crowley, Chairman Crowley and the entire School Dept. and officials for their great work. Chairman Crowley thanked Alderman Mercer-Bruen for volunteering to help. Alderman Mercer-Bruen said Woburn's educational plan during Covid-19 is a model for other communities and there are bragging rights. Alderman Campbell said developing a strategy for Covid-19 involved a lot of work and must have been exhausting. She thanked school officials for their efforts and said the city's children are the beneficiaries. She asked about a spike of cases at the high school and if there are plans to switch from the hybrid model to remote. Supt. Crowley answered affirmatively. He said there were 44 cases reported at the high school as of this morning. He said eight students and 16 staff members have to be quarantined. He said the increased number of positive tests among staff is significant. He said they went to remote learning out of an effort to remain proactive. He said the intent is to return to the hybrid model on Monday, December 14. Alderman Campbell said she has family members who are teachers and they are exhausted. She asked if Supt. Crowley foresees an exodus among teachers at the end of the year. Supt. Crowley said he does not know. He said there are eight teachers retiring at the end of the year. He said early retirement incentives may be offered. He said everyone is exhausted, and every day brings something new. He said there is nothing routine anymore. Alderman Campbell said she hopes not too many teachers leave. She asked if there is a teacher shortage. Supt. Crowley said there is no teacher shortage of which he is aware, but they do not have enough substitutes. He said part of that is on purpose, however, because they do not want more people going in and out of buildings. Alderman Campbell said Supt. Crowley indicated students are not getting as good grades during the pandemic. She asked if Supt. Crowley expects more students to be retained this year. Supt. Crowley said is generally not in favor of retaining students. He said it is a little different at the high school, but at the elementary schools students should stay with their age cohort. Alderman Campbell said she concurs with Alderman Mercer-Bruen about the delay of the MCAS tests, and she is relieved. She said she is also willing to volunteer if the School Dept. needs her. Alderman Demers said as a former member of the School Committee, he can appreciate what everyone in the school district has done to effect learning during the pandemic. He said other communities were not as prepared as Woburn was. He said it was a giant undertaking. He said he has an education degree, but there's no college course that teaches one how to educate during a pandemic. He said everyone is learning on the fly. He said one of the great themes of the pandemic is resiliency. He said he appreciates all the work school officials have done. He said he knows it is virtually impossible to make everyone happy, but the fact school officials are reaching out puts them leaps and bounds ahead. Alderman Ferullo asked about emotional support for students. He said he knows the soccer team had to cancel its last game and how that must have affected morale. He said the School Dept. team is doing a great job and what they are doing to keep the students engaged. Supt. Crowley said the social and emotional aspects of the pandemic were very much taken into consideration. He said they are sending a survey next week to middle and high school students. He said he knows it's lonely for students at home. Alderman Dillon thanked the administration and School Committee for their

efforts. He said he previously talked about food insecurity and thanked school officials for continuing to provide students with a program that offers breakfast and lunch. Supt. Crowley said the School Dept. is seeing an uptick in food service requests. He said the program has bene expanded and there will be free meals offered through the end of June. He said on Fridays the School Dept. offers three days of meals to carry through the weekend. He said the switch to remote learning at the high school has caused a pivot in the food service component because they want to make sure the high school students have food. Alderman Dillon said the School Dept. is doing a great job. He said the entire Woburn community can learn from what the School Dept. is doing. He asked what the School Dept. can do to reach out to the at-risk students during the remote learning process. Supt. Crowley said the School Dept. is expanding supervised learning centers to help older students. He said they are exploring the possibility of keeping EL students in school for a 4-day cohort. He said they explored renting space on Washington Street but the cost was prohibitive. He said the YMCA and the Boys & Girls Club have been able to meet the need, but they may have circle back to exploring more off-campus options. Alderman Concannon said he wants to echo the appreciation and gratitude his colleagues on the council have expressed for the efforts of the School Dept. He said as the council's liaison to the School Committee he has been able to observe all the hard work that has taken place. He said he is a parent of a high school student and the situation during the pandemic is not ideal but it is positive. He said he is the husband of a school nurse and he gets to see how the schools are operating from that perspective as well. He said there is an effort to make learning positive and upbeat and interesting, and from that perspective he is awed by how creative school officials have been. He said the budget process is going to be interesting. He said it is going to be a unique year. He said the mayor has indicated we're only halfway through the pandemic and there will be more budgetary challenges ahead. He said one of the good things that may come out of the pandemic is the idea that summer can be viewed as a period of greater academic opportunity. He said summer may offer an opportunity for those students who are regressing to catch up or push those who are caught up further ahead. He said what the schools are doing during the pandemic is not perfect, but it's very, very good. President Higgins thanked Chairman Crowley and Supt. Crowley for coming to the meeting, and said if there is anything they need, they should feel free to contact the council.

**Motion made by Alderman Tedesco and seconded by Alderman Mercer-Bruen to adjourn;** approved, 8-0. President Higgins asked for a moment of silence in honor of Pearl Harbor Day. President Higgins adjourned the meeting at 7:12 p.m.

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_  
Gordon Vincent  
Clerk of Committees