



# Programs & Services and Finance Committee Report

## City of Newton In City Council

**Monday, March 29, 2021**

Finance Committee: Councilors Grossman (Chair), Malakie, Humphrey, Kalis, Oliver and Noel

Absent: Councilors Gentile and Norton

Programs & Services Committee: Councilor Krintzman (Chair), Noel, Greenberg, Albright, Wright, Humphrey, Baker and Ryan

Also Present: Councilors Laredo, Lucas and Markiewicz

City staff present: Chief Financial Officer Maureen Lemieux, Comptroller Sue Dzikowski, and Commissioner of Public Buildings Josh Morse, Assistant Superintendent Liam Hurley, Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Yeo and Director of Facilities for the Newton Public Schools David Stickney

School Committee members: Ruth Goldman (Chair) and Emily Prenner

### Referred to Programs & Services and Finance Committees

#99-21

**Discussion regarding resources needed for a safe return to in-person learning**

COUNCILORS KRINTZMAN, GROSSMAN, LAREDO, WRIGHT, KALIS, MALAKIE, GREENBERG, LEARY, RYAN, BAKER, ALBRIGHT, MARKIEWICZ AND NOEL Requesting a discussion about the resources necessary for a speedy and safe return to in person learning, in compliance with the March 9, 2021 guidance from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and in anticipation of more than \$48 million in Federal Aid from the American Rescue Plan

**Action:** Programs & Services Held 7-0 (Councilor Baker not voting)  
Finance Held 6-0

**Note:** The Chair of the Programs & Services Committee explained that a number of councilors have been advocating for more in-person learning throughout the past few months. No single reason has been provided as the impediment to full in-person learning, but ventilation, staffing and the 6 ft distancing requirement have been cited. It was noted that enrollment in the schools have decreased and there have been mental health issues throughout the community. The state is now requiring schools to conduct in-person learning. For elementary schools this means they need to be back in the classroom by April 5<sup>th</sup> and middle schools need to be back by April 28<sup>th</sup>. There is no set date for the high schools at this time. This meeting is to find out if there are any barriers for the School Department to comply with these mandates and see what the City Council can do to help.

The Committee was joined by Liam Hurley Assistant Superintendent for Newton Public Schools, David Stickney Director of Facilities for Newton Public Schools, Josh Morse Commissioner of Public Buildings, Jonathan Yeo Chief Operating Officer, Maureen Lemieux Chief Financial Officer, Ruth Goldman Chair of the School Committee and Emily Prenner School Committee member.

Ms. Lemieux explained that the administration has been working with the School Department on a number of different issues to be able to open the schools for full in-person learning. She noted that the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) has just been passed but the guidelines have not been given to the city yet. The city will receive a large amount of money from this grant which can help with the expenses incurred by reopening the schools.

Councilors asked the following questions:

Q: What are the barriers for successfully reopening the elementary schools for full in-person learning on April 5<sup>th</sup>?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that there are no barriers, and the elementary schools will be open for full in-person learning starting on April 5<sup>th</sup>.

Q: What are the barriers for successfully reopening the middle schools for full in-person learning on April 5<sup>th</sup>?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that middle schools are scheduled to open April 28<sup>th</sup> and the high schools are scheduled to open on April 26<sup>th</sup>. There are no barriers to open on those dates. Additionally, Mr. Hurley explained that they are not able to open the middle schools on April 5<sup>th</sup> for a combination of reasons. This includes scheduling and negotiating with the unions on a start date. Ms. Goldman explained that for the middle schools to open the schedules needs to change, including the bus schedule. Currently the middle schools are in a hybrid model where they are in the classroom from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. It was noted that it would be difficult to change all of the students on the same day. The issue with reopening the high schools mainly deals with the Wednesday schedule.

Q: Can the School Department commit to full in-person learning for all students next September?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that this will happen in September unless there is a change in the covid numbers.

Q: What additional financial resources does the School Department need for next year?

A: Ms. Lemieux explained that she and Mr. Hurley have been working closely on this issue. She noted that by the end of FY22 the City will have lost \$30 million in revenue. The city will rely on ARPA funds to help as well as reimburse Newton for a number of COVID-related expenditures. Ms. Lemieux explained the School Department has spent approximately \$14 million this year so far on recreating education. The administration, the School Department and the School Committee are working

together to make sure that they are being reimbursed by the appropriate grant funding. The City will be picking up the costs of the ventilation project and the need for additional supplies and putting that towards either CARES or the ARPA funds. She explained that besides these grants there will be no need for additional funding.

Q: What additional improvements will the school buildings need to reopen for full in-person learning this fall?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that they have already spent approximately \$4 million on the ventilation project and that is the main work that needed to be done to ensure confidence that the fresh air is coming into the buildings. There have also been minor improvements to spaces and the city has procured tents for all schools. Mr. Hurley explained that they have had to purchase a number of chairs and desks to be able to comply with the new 3 ft distance mandate. There is no need for major facility changes before the fall besides the typical summer maintenance.

Q: What is the plan to deal with the decrease in enrollment this year?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that the School Department has lost approximately 700 students which is a little more than 5% of total enrollment. The higher percentage of students were lost at the lower grade levels. Ms. Goldman noted that the kindergarten enrollment has been decreasing even before the pandemic. The projection for next year is 12,334 students which is up from the 11,901 for this year's enrollment. The enrollment for next year is difficult to calculate because a number of families decided to home school their children or send their children to private school. The expectation is that some of these families will return to Newton Public Schools once full in-person learning returns. There is also a survey that has gone out to kindergarten parents.

Q: Has there been consideration to have summer school to help with learning loss?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that the School Department will be receiving further grants and 20% of the grant funding will need to go towards learning loss. This may go towards summer school or even programs that can happen during the fall. Ms. Goldman explained that they are planning for the learning loss this summer. The budget presentation on April 1<sup>st</sup> will also address this issue.

Q: What is the issue with the scheduling on Wednesdays for the high schools to open for full in-person learning?

A: Ms. Goldman explained that right now Wednesdays are a short day with a series of very short classes. There is also time for small group meetings. This would be difficult in a full in-person setting with classes changing every 30 minutes. The other four days have long blocks with time to pass. Ms. Prenner noted that if the state requires high school must be in-person full time all five days then this would need to be changed. The plan right now is to keep Wednesdays remote.

Q: Will the extra desks and chairs be available for the April 5<sup>th</sup> start date?

A: Mr. Stickney explained that they have ordered 2300 desks for the elementary schools. The remaining school that needs to be completed in Angier Elementary which has double block desks. The double block desks should be delivered this Saturday. He noted that enrollment does continue to change so more desks may be needed but they will be ready for April 5<sup>th</sup>.

Q: Did the city rent or purchase the tents being used at the schools?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that these tents are being rented. Commissioner Morse noted that these tents are going up and this should be finished in the next week. The tents will be used differently at each school. For example, some schools use the tents for lunch periods, others use them for mask breaks or reading time.

Q: Is it safer for the windows to be open or closed when the schools is back to full in-person learning?

A: Commissioner Morse explained that the ventilation system is providing more than adequate air exchange in the schools. If teachers would like windows can be cracked open but there are limitations such as the comfort of students and staff. There are also limitations on the ventilation system itself. For example, if all of the windows were open all the way at the Cabot School in the summertime then this could cause issues with the AC system.

Q: Will there be a survey sent to parents about sending their children to summer school?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that this is not a survey question right now. Currently, the surveys deal with who will be attending school once it is back to full in-person learning. Ms. Goldman explained that Newton has always had summer school and students are identified based on the student's performance. Educators will also be identifying students this year that will need summer school for certain programs. There can be opportunities for enrichment programs over the summer that will be advertised.

Q: The latest grant funds must be used by December 2024. Does this mean that this is the last grant that the City will receive for Covid-19?

A: Ms. Lemieux explained that this is unknown at this time.

Q: What percentage of students will continue to stay home when the schools are open for full in-person learning?

A: Ms. Goldman explained there was 215 families that changed from DLA to full in-person learning and noted that there are enough funds to accommodate these students.

Q: Will there be rules in place if families decide to go away for April vacation?

A: Ms. Goldman explained that they will be following the guidelines from the state and the Health and Human Services Department. The rates for surveillance testing do need to increase and this being worked on. The rates should be at 70% to 80% especially at the high schools.

Q: Who is paying for the testing at the schools?

A: Ms. Lemieux explained that the city will be paying for these costs and have been carrying this cost using funding from the CARES Act.

Q: Will the new desks that have been purchased be used into the future?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that some classrooms do prefer tables instead of desks for various reasons. He noted that he is unsure if these classes will revert back to tables once the pandemic is over.

Q: Is there a specific dollar amount that Newton plans on spending on social and emotional recovery?

A: Ms. Goldman explained that this will be explained in the budget presentation on April 1<sup>st</sup>. The social and emotional recovery is a top priority for the School Committee and the School Department. Mr. Yeo explained that there was also a presentation given to the School Committee at their last meeting by the social and emotional learning team.

Q: There was an email that went out to NPS staff that they were to freeze spending. How does that impact what the staff needs to be ready for in-person learning?

A: Mr. Hurley noted that the School Department has spent a large amount of funds to get the schools ready for full-in person learning. The letter that went out to staff was to be mindful of spending, but the department is still buying goods and services for the staff. The goal was just to slow things down until the department could figure out where they were at. He noted that the schools know that they can buy what they need.

Q: Is there a group or individual whose job it is to regain the confidence in the Newton Public Schools?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that they do have a re-opening group that has been meeting. The make-up of this group includes Newton Teachers Association members, teachers, administrators, principals, and School Committee members. One topic of discussion is about later start time for high school students, which seems to be working well. There is also a large amount of information on the Newton School Department webpage. Ms. Goldman explained that their goal is to increase their communication and spend more time talking to parents.

Q: If Newton does not go back to full in-person learning in the fall, would there need to be a waiver from the state to do so?

A: Matt Hills, a representative from DESE explained that full time in-person will be the law next year. A date for the high school has not been given yet but that is to come in April. Mr. Hills explained that any parent that wishes to keep their child home this year can do so but that goes away next year. There is a law that states how many hours and days a student needs to be in the classroom. DESE set a construct during the pandemic that allowed these hours to be remote.

Q: How low is the rate of surveillance testing and what is the communication plan to be able to increase the rate?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that they started out with just staff testing. This was done by a company named CIC and was done from December to mid-March. During this time 5,000 tests were given and there were approximately 5 positives. The school department has moved to JCM analytics which produces take home test kits. Currently, only high school students are eligible but the department plans to roll out the middle and elementary schools. All of the department's staff are eligible. Mr. Hurley noted that about 30% of eligible students do the testing. The goal is to have higher participation to grow confidence. There can be a campaign to get the word out to increase the rate of participation for the surveillance testing. Ms. Goldman noted that they have received feedback from Newton South students on why they were not opting into the program. Some students did not realize they could still opt in and others suggested there should be QR codes on the walls.

Q: Regrading students social and emotional health, are there any plans as the kids are going back to have any sort of screening for students that may be having a difficult time?

A: Ms. Goldman explained that the presentation that was given last Monday does explain the plan for social and emotional health. The teachers are going to ease back into the full classrooms activities so that children are not overwhelmed.

Q: Have there been any other facility needs that have been a barrier to reopening?

A: Mr. Stickney explained that the desks have been an issue with smaller elementary schools which can only fit a certain number of desks. The 6 ft mandate was also difficult to accommodate in cafeterias and gymnasium. The city has been helpful in solving these issues and there seem to be no impediments at this time.

Q: Are there any loss in Chapter 70 funding from the loss of city revenue?

A: Ms. Lemieux explained that the Chapter 70 funding is actually increasing by \$360,000 for next year.

Q: There has been a reduction in Title 1 numbers. What has happened to decrease the number of students that are eligible for free or reduced lunch?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that part of the reason the ESSER 2 funds have decreased is because this follows the Title 1 formula. The Title 1 formula is based off census data from 2010 and then the

updated 2021 allocation is based on the economic poverty level in 2018. The school is currently giving lunches for free to any families in need which has increased during this time but since the formula is based on 2018 that is why the numbers have dropped.

Q: When will we know the amount of funds that will go to NPS from the American Rescue Plan Act and did NPS have a part in applying for these funds?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that they believe it is approximately \$3 to \$3.5 million from ESSER 3 funding but they have not heard anything specific from DESE on what these funds will be. The School Department does not apply for these funds it is an allocation. Ms. Lemieux explained that they are still trying to decide if on the city-side if they will be using 2019 or 2020 census data for the fund allocation. She added that the city will be using the initial CARES funding to see what we are spending between the schools and the city. The city will also be using part of the funding allocation for the School Department. Mr. Hurley noted that they all have received a number of other grants to offset the spending needed to reopen the schools.

Q: Will next year's budget include any unusual increases?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that there will be an increase in the budget this year. He noted that the majority of the budget is for salaries and benefits. There is not any unusual increase in a particular line-item in this year's budget due to the work that has already been completed to be able to reopen the schools.

Q: How was the decision made to move to at home testing?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that there was a working group with health experts who investigated testing options. They looked at the various options at that time and went with the at-home testing. This was due to the fact it was not feasible for students and staff to be tested at NPS every week. We also had conversations with other school departments who also decided this was not feasible.

Q: When does the bus contract go to bid again and how long does the contract last? Also, can the American Rescue Plan funding be used for the contract?

A: Mr. Hurley explained the contract goes through the next fiscal year. They will be going out to bid in the early winter of next year but in the past only one company has bid - Eastern Bus. The contract is covered in the operating budget each year. Ms. Lemieux noted that the contract would not be covered by grant funds unless the city was required to limit seating to one child per seat. The city would not have enough busses to accommodate that scenario.

Q: Is the recommendation now that desks in the classroom need to be 3 ft apart?

A: Mr. Stickney explained that this is now the recommendation to have 3 ft from chair edge to chair edge. There is additional space between rows front to back so there is room to pull chairs out. There

are also markings in the corridors for when students are passing between classes. Mr. Stickney noted that the difficulty comes with the cafeterias where students need to be 6 ft apart when unmasked. The mask breaks are also 6 ft apart and now that we have nicer weather this will be easier.

Q: When the schools are done with the new desks, if these can't be recycled or resold is there a possibility of donating them to other countries that are in need?

A: Mr. Stickney explained that he believes that new desks will be continued to be used into the future and the old desks will be disposed of elsewhere. Ms. Lemieux also noted that the city has a strict surplus statute that needs to be followed. When Newton North was demolished, they needed to put the furniture out to bid to find out what it would cost the city to get rid of it. The low bidder was a nonprofit organization that was going to ship the furniture to another country.

Q: At some point would it be possible to prepare a schedule to show the sources of funding and how they are run over the current period and over the next couple of years?

A: Ms. Lemieux explained that this is possible but it may not be completed when Finance accepts these grants. This will also be a discussion during the budget presentation. She also noted that the Comptroller has memorialized this spending on the consolidated report.

Q: If we can go back to full in-person learning at the high schools for all five days in May why are we not doing that?

A: This is a question that will be brought to members of the School Committee.

Q: Is the city considering mandating that teachers and staff be vaccinated by next year unless there is a religious or medical reason?

A: Mr. Yeo explained that this would be a question for the School Department and the School Committee. He noted that he will discuss this with the city's HR Department. Mr. Hurley explained that he is not aware of any public school system that can mandate this and he would need to research this further. This is currently an open legal question.

Q: Are there any resources that are needed for the outdoor lunch plans that some of the schools have?

A: Mr. Hurley explained that the food service contractor will be providing trays for any student that need it. The outside spaces will be used in a variety of ways between schools. After the students return, if the School Department identifies anything they need the city staff will be able to get the needed items in a timely manner.

Councilors made the following comments:

There seems to be a lack of urgency to reopen all the Newton Public Schools to full in-person learning.



Parents are frustrated that the schools have not reopened yet, which causes a lack of confidence in the public schools. It is important that the city and the School Department regains this trust and confidence from the parent community.

There is a concern that the parents that chose to remove their children from the Newton Public Schools were the ones that could afford to send them to private school. This city does not want to have a two-tier system where wealthier residents are sending their children to private school and the public schools are seen as a lesser alternative. It has also been heard that the grading system is being changed which could also add to the distrust of the parents in the Newton Public School System.

There were some parents that lost confidence in the school system, but many parents kept their kids in school throughout the pandemic.

The focus on tonight's meeting should be on how the City Council can help with any financial needs or resources the School Department needs to fully re-open the schools.

Ms. Lemieux noted that the City Council does need to accept the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan Act funding.

There should be sources and uses statements given to the Council regarding CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan Act funding.

It was noted that once the elementary students are eligible for testing a notice could go in the student's take home folder.

There should be a significant investment in social and emotional health which can include adding additional staff to help students and staff deal with this transition.

Ms. Lemieux noted that there will be investments in social and emotional health but those funds will come from the preserved ESSER funds. This is approximately \$4 million. She noted that these funds can be used until December 2024. Mr. Yeo noted that social and emotional health is one of the four key principals in the Superintendent's budget presentation.

It was noted that the School Department should try to get the middle and high schools back to full in-person learning as soon as possible and not wait for the state to mandate it.

Mr. Hurley noted that the School Department's goal is to restore confidence and heal throughout the process of reopening the schools. Ms. Lemieux explained the tremendous work that has been done by city and school staff to be able to get the children back in the classroom and to address the needs of the children and staff.

It was noted that there may not be a reason to hold this item due to the fact that it is up to the School Committee to making the final decision.

Regarding the previous comment, there is a need to hold this item so that the Council can continue to weigh in on these issues.

Councilor Ryan motioned to hold in the Programs & Services Committee which passed 7-0 with Councilor Baker not voting.

Councilor Kalis motioned to hold in the Finance Committee which passed unanimously.

The committees thanked all that were present for participating in this meeting.

The Programs & Services Committee adjourned at 9:39 p.m.

**Chair's Note:** *The Finance Committee discussed the following item after the conclusion of the joint item.*

**Referred to Finance Committee**

**#97-21**      **Authorization to expend a US Food and Drug Administration Grant of \$3,000**  
HER HONOR THE MAYOR requesting authorization to accept and expend a three thousand dollars (\$3,000) grant from the United States Food and Drug Administration for the cost of electronic inspection software for restaurant inspections.

**Action:**      **Finance Approved 6-0**

**Note:**      Ms. Lemieux explained that this grant is used each year to pay for the software that is used to track the ratings of all the city's restaurants.

Councilor Kalis motioned to approve which passed unanimously.

The Finance Committee adjourned at 9:43 p.m.

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Josh Krintzman, Chair of the Programs & Services Committee**

**Rebecca Walker Grossman, Chair of the Finance Committee**