

**River Valley Charter School  
Board of Directors Meeting  
Meeting # 287  
September 20, 2022 7:00 pm**

In accordance with the Executive Order applying to MA Open Meeting Law, this meeting will be held virtually on Zoom ID: 89100045832 at 7:00 p.m.

Meeting was called to order at 7:01 pm.

*In attendance:*

Erin Bradley-Irose  
Nancy Durkee  
Denise Herrera  
Lainie Ives  
Ken Jackman  
Nina Keery  
Tim Letson  
Alfred Link  
Catherine Martin  
Tanya Murdy  
Erin Seaton, arrived at 8:00  
Eric Simone  
Albert Ting  
Anna Wetmore  
Chris Whitford  
Jonnie Lyn Evans, Director

*Absent:*

Pam Armstrong  
Amber Hewitt

*Public:*

Sara Treem  
Jill Eichhorst  
Alon Sitzer  
Amy Sitzer  
Lauren Hajjar  
Gaylen Cragin  
Megan Taffel  
Giovana Lippi  
Jane Noyes  
Rebecca Hamel  
Dan Bouchard  
Deb McCrevan

### **Montessori Minute:**

Rebecca Hamel, E1 teacher, presented the birthday walk tradition. The walks are a concrete way to represent to children their own history. Families are invited to come into the classroom and have the opportunity to share something about their child for each developmental year. The class sings a song as the birthday student travels (walks) around the sun (a candle) counter clockwise. Classmates offer compliments and make a book of hopes and wishes for the birthday child's year which is presented at the walk.

Gratitude to Rebecca for her lovely presentation.

### **Comments from Albert Ting, Vice Chair:**

Please accept bumpiness as we are back in person for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic.

The board will be inviting comments from the public at the beginning and the end of the meeting. Please don't expect a direct response, but the board will have your comments in mind as we deliberate.

### **Public comment**

Amy Sitzer read a letter signed by a group of parents. It can be found in the board packet.

Lauren Hajjar read a letter she and her husband signed. It can be found in the board packet.

Alon Sitzer read a prepared statement. A copy was handed in at the meeting and can be found in the board packet.

### **Vote: Accept August BOT Minutes and submitted August and September committee minutes.**

Edits: None

Motion: Anna Wetmore

2<sup>nd</sup>: Erin Bradley

*Yes:*

Erin Bradley

Nancy Durkee

Denise Herrera

Lainie Ives

Ken Jackman

Nina Keery

Tim Letson

Alfred Link

Catherine Martin

Tanya Murdy  
Erin Seaton  
Eric Simone  
Albert Ting  
Anna Wetmore  
Chris Whitford

*No:*  
None

*Abstain:*  
None

*Absent:*  
Pam Armstrong  
Amber Hewitt

### **Director's Report: Jonnie Lyn Evans presented report**

The Director's Report appears in the packet. Time was allowed for questions and comments.

#### *Four additional things:*

**Enrollment:** RVCS is officially fully enrolled as of today. There were ten openings as of the end of the school year. There has been concern about this in the past. It is not a concern to JLEvans; if it was, she would be looking into it. In filling the spots, the school went through all of the grades six and seven waitlists. There is one name left on the grade eight waitlist. There are 30 seventh graders and 34 eighth graders. There are big plans for advertising for the lottery, including advertising on the MBTA bus system to reach underserved communities and advertising in the Firehouse playbill.

**Accountability:** Items around compliance are getting a lot of attention right now. The tiered, focused, monitoring review looks at special education, civil rights policies, procedures, plans, facilities, etc. Kudos to Lisa Kelley on her hard work in preparing for the review. Likely there will be some citings and then there will be time to make a corrective plan.

**Charter renewal:** It is coming up. Next year there will be an onsite inspection. By August 30, 2023, we need to fill out the required paperwork. Not concerned about our ability to pass it, but it is a monumental amount of additional work this year. A new accountability plan will need to come to the board for approval.

**MCAS Goals:** Goals have been set. In 2018, a new framework was set by DESE as to how they would assess all schools. Normative criteria include scores, growth, attendance and ESL. In the past, we have fallen short on attendance. The new baseline is set by 2021 numbers. Our absenteeism goal has been reduced from 7.3 to 5.6. This has been and continues to be a struggle for RVCS. Nothing is considered an excused absence by DESE standards right now. They are counting absenteeism this year and no longer take Covid into

consideration.

*Covid 19 Response Plan Update:*

This plan is made in response to what we are seeing in the school and what we can do to move forward. It was developed after consultation with the local Board of Health, the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the MDPH Dept of Epidemiology, and our school physician.

For those who work in the school, the discussion has felt contentious and targeted. JLEvans has been reflecting on how to uphold the mission of the school. JLE was a cofounder of the school, along with NKeery. The school was founded in their desire to make Montessori available to all. It is important to understand that Montessori is multiple things, not just Montessori-trained teachers. Lessons are delivered in small, constantly changing groups. There is lots of movement, lounging of students, sharing of materials and close contact in a Montessori classroom.

In the commitment to the mission of the school, there have been many hurdles to the school's growth. To stay true to Montessori roots, teachers are needed in the school teaching and students are needed in the school learning. Attendance is critical and transmission impacts RVCS deeply. We have had 11 covid positives in one classroom. In the first 15 days of school there were 30 confirmed positive cases. Six staff members are out currently. Substitute teachers cannot deliver what Montessori teachers can deliver. For this reason, we drafted a response plan to discuss. Key plan features include:

Stay home if sick. (There has been evidence that kids have been asked to lie.)

Stay abreast of school communications.

Isolate when Covid positive for five days followed by five days of masking. This comes from the CDC.

Mask for ten days when someone is a close contact. This comes from the CDC.

If there are a certain number of cases in a certain number of days, masking will be required in that classroom early to break the cycle. The discussion of the details have been between JLEvans and KPutney. Epidemiologists recommend 14 days. That felt unreasonable. JLE and KPutney tried to decide between 2 and 3 cases in X number of days.

Lives - has been choosing to mask around full groups of students for the last six days. She has been keeping an eye on the numbers. Initially she leaned toward masking, but feels pretty safe if she has a mask if the children are unmasked when her life circumstances warrant it. Appreciates the communication within the school. To teach requires trust within the community. She puts her faith in the parents to do their part to take care of her. After briefly talking with some colleagues, she found that middle school and E2 teachers question how much masking would be needed with the amount of mixing the children do. She is comfortable with leaving the decision to those who are charged with making those decisions.

JLEvans distributed a survey with three questions to the staff. Results are:

- Do you have confidence in the plan to date? 100% said yes with one no answer.
- Do you continue to have confidence in the administration to develop appropriate plans? 100% said yes.
- Do you support intermittent, temporary masking? 88% said yes.

Approximately 40 of 55- 60 staff members participated in the survey.

Comments range from thank you, appreciation for the priority for safety, to date response has been appropriate, concern about using sick days (will be dealing with this), worry that parents won't comply

Covid numbers so far:

- K - no positive
- E1 - 1-2 per classroom, 11 in one
- E2 - 2-4
- Middle school - 4

Only one class has been asked to mask.

DHerrera - What are typical numbers for absences per day? JLEvans - Doesn't know off hand, right now approximately 30 students and six staff members are out per day.

DHerrera - Points out that DESE is giving mixed messages and feels that it's important that individuals have the data. She is concerned about masking children for an extended period, risking anxiety and other unseen problems.

CWhitford - We didn't have as big of a deal of sniffles. What put us in this position?

EBradley - Worry about the phrase "break the transmission." Covid will be around for a long time. We need flexibility. Epidemiologists study the big picture, not micro. Perhaps they aren't the best resource. Why aren't we looking into other mitigating measures?

JNoyes (E1 Teacher) - Has spent three years in the trenches. She finds that children are pretty resilient. She is worried about KPutney, as negative feedback is piling on her. She listens, she doesn't deserve this. She works too hard and Jane is worried that we will lose her due to the feedback. The kids she has worked with have all been great about the Covid requirements. The mixed messages from families and teachers is challenging for the children. While she doesn't want to mask for unreasonable reasons, she would like a plan in place for her own peace of mind. She just wants to keep people safe.

CWhitford - No one wants Kimberly to be getting a ton of flak.

DBouchard - We have been open every single day we could legally be open. Everything we decide is with the kids' safety in mind. Nothing has changed.

ESeaton - As a public school with Montessori children, we need to be true to the bedrock of Montessori. We need to be accessible and care for those in the community. There is no data in the peer reviewed community supporting damage being done by masking.

TLetson - After living in Japan for five years, he found that if someone had symptoms, those around them would wear a mask for the benefit of the community. They weren't told, they were not mandated. They did it because it was best for the community. This has stuck with him. You can make your own personal decisions, what's best for the community, might not be best for you.

NDurkee - Has a lot of appreciation for JLEvans' running of the school. Fully supports following CDC recommendations. Feels aligned with the new plan.

EIrose - Questions the CDC recommendations NDurkee refers to. There are further recommendations that apply to our smaller community.

TMurdy - Has something changed in the worry about finding substitutes from when the masks came off in March? JLEvans, yes, they are harder to find.

KJackman - How many teachers have been out? JLEvans about six per day

KJackman - What's the likelihood of a classroom actually shutting down? JLEvans, unlikely. Will contact DESE for advice if that happens. Other teachers have had to cover, etc. We do have some reliable substitutes, but also some who have not been well received.

TMurdy - Could corried parents serve as substitutes? Questions the strong wording of the new plan. Communication is key and the parents were not trying to attack KPutney. It feels as if we are back in 2020 again.

CWhitford - Questions the role of Trustee as to the vote.

ATing - We are not representatives, our job is to uphold the charter. Our number one charge is to make sure that the kids are being taught, that they can go to school and learn. We are stewards of the charter and need to make sure that JLEvans can stay true to that charter.

NKeery - In all her years, this has been the most contentious, biggest board meeting yet. She works at a public community college that does have a plan in place. Masks are optional, but depending on the situation, they will ask people in a classroom to mask for a certain amount of time. She is on the side of students and faculty who have to come to class everyday.

ALink - He hears the gratitude to staff and the frustration of parents. But what makes the school is the staff - the teachers - and we can't minimize the impact of the state of mind of staff, peace of mind and level of concern. It's inconvenient, but the tie goes to the staff.

KJackman - Perhaps this highlights the importance of communication. Perhaps this didn't have to become this contentious. Maybe we all need to acknowledge that none of us know everything. We need to evaluate where we are in this. This decision won't stop the spread of Covid. This decision can't be made without taking in the context of the world around us.

JLEvans asked us to vote at the recommendation of the lawyer as a source of protection. She doesn't actually need the Board's approval to update the plan..

**Vote: To accept the Covid Response Plan 2022-2023 as submitted with the deletion of the word "school" and "not to exceed 14 consecutive days following final exposure" from Bullet Point 4 and the deletion of the word "school" and "not to exceed 14 consecutive days following final exposure" from Bullet Point 5.**

Motion: Albert Ting

2<sup>nd</sup>: Nina Keery

*Yes:*

Nancy Durkee

Nina Keery

Alfred Link

Catherine Martin

Erin Seaton

Eric Simone

Albert Ting

Anna Wetmore

*No:*

Erin Bradley

Denise Herrera

Lainie Ives

Ken Jackman

Tim Letson

Tanya Murdy

Chris Whitford

*Abstain:*

None

*Absent:*

Pam Armstrong

Amber Hewitt

ATing appreciates our considerate deliberation. There will be other topics that will bring us together.

ATing thanks Mark Bishop for his service and time he has dedicated to the school We always

felt confident in his work. Much gratitude was expressed by the board.

### **Accountability**

The annual report update: IT IS PASSED after much work over the summer! The committee reviewed screeners (assessments that are given to students). RVCS uses both literacy and math screeners.

The audit was conducted last spring and the report is available. The committee will review and discuss it in the October meeting.

JLE highlighted the Superintendent Checklist as a potential reference for performance review.

### **Development Committee**

We have a community who doesn't have an overview of the school. We have an upcoming event with parents to help them understand what River Valley is and does. This will lay the foundation again before trying to move forward with fundraising. The event will celebrate the school. The concept to grab attention is a message in a bottle. It will look cool and different. The event itself will highlight:

- Volunteer opportunities. Tie all the pieces together of what makes RVCS a special place.
- Menu of options to donate to.
- Make an ask of one day of volunteerism in the attempt to try to bring parents back in.

Looking for teacher input for ways parents can help.

### **Finance Committee**

Please come to the annual audit at the October meeting. It is well worth your time to learn how well the school is run. It is always a great primer to learn about the finances of the school.

Cash balances are a little inflated after the receipt of cash after a delay from DESE. Four typical sources for the cash balances are:

- Transportation, which we don't receive.
- Facilities
- Foundation. Comes from the state
- Above Foundation, what districts send that is above what is required.

Cash balances are in great shape. The committee discussed a longer term list of projects including facility improvements.

### **Committee on Trustees**

Discussed goals to accomplish this year:

- Student member of the board, will bring a proposal up at the next Executive Committee



meeting.

- Perhaps starting a Trustee mentorship program, a way to share information between trustees to avoid corporate amnesia as we move through trustees.
- Director evaluation: struggling as a committee to find how it fits in the committee's duties. None of us work closely with JLEvans. How do we make it more nuanced?

**Public Comment:**

LHajjar - Sad as a parent to see a divided board. What can we do to develop shared goals? When certain groups are excluded, you may be causing kickback. We do not feel love from the administration and the nurse. She wishes school administrators would hear parents. Parents do not feel respect. More time should have been taken in deliberating the new Covid plan. Noted that her daughter didn't come to school with a cold because she was afraid that she would be sent home by Nurse Kimberly.

ASitzer - Supports the school other than in the masking regard. Interesting how we are talking as a group. Disappointed that 30 parents were not heard this evening.

**Vote: to adjourn**

Motion: Albert Ting  
2<sup>nd</sup>: Erin Bradley

*Yes:*

Erin Bradley  
Nancy Durkee  
Denise Herrera  
Lainie Ives  
Ken Jackman  
Nina Keery  
Tim Letson  
Alfred Link  
Catherine Martin  
Tanya Murdy  
Erin Seaton  
Eric Simone  
Albert Ting  
Anna Wetmore  
Chris Whitford

*No:*

None

*Abstain:*

None

*Absent:*

Pam Armstrong

Amber Hewitt

**9:19 pm Board adjourns**