

PTNO Meeting Minute July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 7:00pm

In attendance: Carrie Stoner, Mary Alice Proffitt, Renée Grzankowski, Sarah Lipton and Jill Koger

Jill shared with the group her attendance of a meeting with school board members Scott Thompson and Dorothy Naylor earlier in the evening outside the Adamant Coop. Community members were present to share questions and concerns about the schools plan to reopen. All were concerned for staff and student safety.

Mary Alice will be getting in touch with CES Principle Cat Fair to talk about setting up 4 town hall meetings in Adamant, Maple Corner, East Calais and North Calais in August. We hope to encourage an open discussion about the road for reopening the schools. We hope to step back and think of the best possible way to facilitate the best learning atmosphere for our teachers and staff, students and caregivers.

Renée read to the group “An open letter to the HUUSD community” from Superintendent Brigid Nease from the Harwood Unified Union School District: (see below minutes for full text)

A long discussion ensued after this letter was read and all in attendance expressed concerns for the operationalization of the guidelines supplied by the state of Vermont:

Mary Alice spoke of recruiting the college age teens that are looking for a way to contribute to our learning institutes. They are under-stimulated and can help out to figure out how this could work for in person learning.

Smaller staffing groups that lend to the comfort of parents/guardians.

Work together to make remote learning successful.

In an ideal world how can we school Vermont? Outside, more space, hybrid, better ventilation (A/C) in the school, shortened academic day, outdoor in afternoon and more remote learning accountability.

Renée shared a summary of previous discussions toward dissolving the PTNO and evolving into Friends of Calais. With this new group, we hope to broaden the scope of enrichment activities and programs in order to better serve and connect more diverse community members of Calais. We hope to go beyond the academic year and also include families that have “aged out” and moved onto middle and high school. This group would be a Calais dedicated 501(c) 3 that does not have equalization requirements for the unified districts. We’ve also considered the need to embrace the hamlets of Calais and celebrate the unique opportunities/facilities in our villages: Maple Corner Community Center, Kent Museum, Memorial Hall, Unadilla, and East Calais Rec Field and of course CES. We have the background to operationalize, implement and build the transformed PTNO to the Friends of Calais.

Renée motioned to vote on the evolution to begin to dissolve the Calais PTNO into the Friends of Calais until we can find sponsorship to become a non for profit organization. Carrie seconded the motion. Mary Alice opened the motion for discussion:

The role that Dinah Yessne was brought up by Jill. The role Dinah has played in the past was discussed. Carrie did inquire to her via email in July if she had any outstanding grant applications in the name of the PTNO. Dinah replied that there were none. We will see in the future if she will want to continue contributing to the Friends of Calais.

A vote was called by Mary Alice. All in attendance voted for the motion and none were opposed.

Next meeting will be August 10, 2020. Carrie will announce of FPF.

Carrie will establish a Facebook Group, email address and Renée will try to start a website for the Friends of Calais.

“An open letter to the HUUSD community”

## ***What Is Really Behind the HUUSD Reopening Plan? It's Time to Speak Out***

*July 25, 2020*

*Today is Saturday and I find myself unable to attend to anything in my life. I am consumed with the reopening of our schools - as well I should be as your superintendent. We are just 5 weeks away, or are we?*

*Public school administrators are highly trained in what to say and when to say it publicly. I find myself throwing a bit of that training aside as I write to you today. You have received several thorough, official reports from me in the past several weeks answering as many questions as I can. The truth is, like most things in life there is always much more to the story. It is time for me to speak out - to bring the community into what is really going on and engage you all in finding the solutions.*

*Let's face it the pandemic has taken such a toll on every one of us in many different ways. Let's also be honest about the changing guidance and the myriad of problems we have that appear to be without workable solutions just 5 weeks before the start of school.*

*Public school principals and superintendents have worked tirelessly all summer, foregoing vacation and family time, sweating over each and every detail about how to reopen schools safely. I don't bring this up for sympathy but to emphasize that even so, we are where we are. Why is that?*

*As you can see reopening plans for Vermont school districts started to be published in the past 10 days and they are all over the map, vastly different from each other. Why? Because basically we received only Health and Safety guidance. Under the guise of local control and the need to respond flexibly to the differences in each district, leaders were told by state officials to basically go figure it out. This is a repeat of Act 46 and Proficiency Based Learning except with even more at stake. Yes. Many superintendents and principals truly cannot sleep at night.*

*It is no surprise that as we all surveyed parents and staff throughout the summer and read and reread the results and statewide guidance, this is where we ended up. So, we are told to reopen the schools. That said, in most places, I think we are going to try to reopen school, and I think we will fail in ways that may have permanent, unrecoverable repercussions for our students, school systems, and community. And why am I making such a strong, worrisome statement? That is because this is a very significant statewide problem and it requires a significant statewide solution. The big elephant in the room is operational, having nothing much to do with the “how to’s” of safely bringing students and staff into the building based on transmission of the virus and epidemiological science. It comes down to workforce and child care issues that cannot be solved at the local level.*

*Let’s shift gears for a moment. If you were a superintendent after spending the entire summer trying to develop a reopening model with your team, and you received a one-question survey on July 22 needing immediate response that asked, “Would you support an executive order mandating that schools not begin any instructional operations (in-person, remote or hybrid) earlier than 9/8?”, would you be concerned? How about confused? Angry maybe?*

*Well, leaders and educators throughout the state received this very survey question at the 11th hour last Tuesday, for me two days before publishing our model, and for some of my colleagues after theirs had already gone out. Many superintendents throughout the state already started to delay the start of school by one week until August 31 by changing regional calendars. Why? Because we have many, many, unanswered questions.*

*So, why would our Governor be contemplating such an executive order? Could it be due to health, operational, or political concerns or all three? He has done an outstanding job with COVID and I trust his judgement. Therefore, I conclude something big is afoot to be considering this action. Maybe we will never know why or what and it may not come to fruition, but that doesn’t change the fact that superintendents are left to deal with it without explanation.*

*Oh yes, let’s not forget the big elephant in the room - having a workforce to operate. So, while I cannot provide the survey response data, I can say that out of 49 superintendents responding only 6 said no. Why? Because I am pretty certain that there is not a superintendent in this state that knows with certainty that they can staff their school.*

*Then on July 23, 2020 again at the 11th hour, the AOE published a document that states, “school boards with (typo, they mean will) have the authority to decide which of these instructional dispositions (remote, hybrid, or in-person) will be implemented in their schools.” Really? Why are we all being told this now? Secretary French was asked and replied that school boards could establish policy (which takes about 45 days by standard statutory process) or delegate authority to the superintendent to do so through administrative procedure. I think I am starting to see a picture in these connect-the-dots. So, presumably the Scott Administration is contemplating the Executive Order about schools not reopening at all until Sept. 8th, seemingly to indicate we need more time for some unknown reason, and school boards who hold labor contracts with their employees are left to solve the problem of the big elephant in the room.*

*Yesterday, I participated in meetings throughout the state, speaking with many superintendents already considering drastically changing the reopening plans they have just published. Some that published opening plans for 5 days a week are now considering a totally remote model and still others are moving closer to a more remote model. Why? Because superintendents do not think they can staff their schools. News reports are breaking on this very topic. I have included a few below.*

*Letters of resignation, requests for leaves of absence, Family Medical Leave (FMLA), Emergency Family Medical Leave (EFML), Emergency Paid Sick Leave (EPSL), Exemption status, and leave under the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA) (which provides up to 12 weeks of leave for employees unable to work because their child’s school is closed) are coming in.*

*The truth is most school employees are scared to death they will get sick (or worse), bring the virus home to loved ones, have a student in their care become ill, or experience the death of a coworker. However, the even bigger reason for leave requests is the untenable position this state has put school employees in by creating homegrown reopening schedules that do not align. Many Vermont school employees work in districts different from those they live in. They have their own children in several grade levels in schools throughout the state.*

*Here is one real example - a family of 2 teachers, one working in the Harwood district and the other in Montpelier. They live in the U32 district and have 3 children all in different grade levels. This creates 5 different schedules. Another complicating factor in all districts is many teachers have a remote and in-person day schedule different from their own young children, and the list goes on. Next, will we have and be able to maintain enough bus drivers (without 5 day a week full routes) and custodial staff to implement the mandatory disinfecting guidelines? The list goes on. Where will we find enough substitute staff? How will we manage quarantine of several staff at a time? How will families manage at 6:30 in the morning when they get the call that their child's school is closed for the day due to lack of staffing?*

*Currently, most school districts in the state do not know how many students will be returning to in-person school regardless of the model. Surveys will go out to parents again this week asking them to commit. How can they given (after what I am reporting to you today) that none of us really can know what our model is? All we can know is what we intend for our model to be.*

*Even so, many districts including ours are promising a totally remote model to all those parents who choose that (about 30%). How will that get staffed? How will the currently employed teaching workforce teach in-person some days, remote others, provide a totally remote learning experience to those families who choose that, all simultaneously, while homeschooling their own children? Should we be placing ads and hiring many more teachers as dedicated remote instructors and permanent on staff substitutes, none of which is budgeted and will increase tax rates? I am hearing from my colleagues that they are considering doing just that. The clock is ticking and it appears that desperation is setting in across the state for everyone at every level, state, district, building, staff, and families.*

*Now you know the logic of our "toe dipping" in model, whether you agree with it or not. Our plan is to operate for two weeks in the 3-2 staff days in and 4-1 student day in model while we get closer to answering all the outstanding questions, see exactly what state leaders will do, get our hands on real family, staff, and student experiences in our own district, know what we are up against with staffing, determine exactly which students will attend in-person, hybrid and totally remote, and watch and learn from around the state. Then we build up.*

*On Thursday, I held my first ever all HUUSD staff zoom meeting for 2 hours - no agenda, no recording, just like a conversation we would have in the school gym or library on a regular workday. Approximately 150 staff attended. We discussed our plan and answered specific questions. At the end I took a poll asking should we move to a 3-2 for students and a 4-1 for staff? Not a single hand was raised, and this isn't because staff don't want to come back to work or don't agree that especially younger students desperately need to be in school. It is because these problems I am sharing today seem insurmountable at the local level. I will continue to hold these weekly staff meetings as long as the staff indicate they are useful to them. Our union advisory team will begin meeting weekly, starting this week to tackle what we can. At the present time, I do not have any requests for leave, not to say I won't get them.*

*The HUUSD admin team is focused on how to have the most robust remote and in-person model for the entire school year, rather than a higher quantity of in-person days at the start that may well jeopardize the year. Our best thinking leads us to believe in adopting a "starting right to continue to last" approach. We believe starting right starts slowly, and that this will yield the greatest number of high quality in-person days along with improved remote learning outcomes overall by June 30, 2021.*

*So, the BIG elephant in the room is unveiled. School districts across the state all have published plans that they cannot guarantee they can staff, and even if by some miracle one can, it is highly unlikely they will be able to*

*sustain it. Childcare for all families AND school employees is a huge problem that crosses many district geographical boundaries. This is a significant statewide problem in need of a significant statewide solution made by those that have the authority to do so, at the top of the food chain, not individual community administrators and local school boards. This one superintendent respectfully recommends that the only way out is through, by having the Scott administration, the AOE, and the VTNEA take this bull by the horns and lean into it.*

*We all want and need our schools to reopen. We long for getting back to normal as much as we can. But this is the reality of where we are and what we face in attempting to get there. I have received over 100 emails about our plan since publishing it. While I cannot return each of them individually, I read and often reread every one. They are very helpful to me and will continue to be as our district determines what changes if any we will make to our reopening plan. I am looking forward to our Community Forums beginning Monday night and running consecutively for 3 weeks, our upcoming Q & A board meeting this Wednesday, and more information from state leaders. Our HUUSD admin team is committed to being a part of the solution in getting our schools safely open and keeping them open. As your superintendent, I do not disagree with any of the opinions shared with me via email or social media. To me this just isn't a matter of who is right or wrong or which reopening plan is best. I also feel what many of you are experiencing personally. My grandson who will be entering 4th grade attends Thatcher Brook and I am so concerned and pained about his isolation and loss of learning. I would give anything if I could just reopen these schools for all our children.*

*With warm regards,*

*Brigid Nease*