

# MASC GUIDE TO MEMBER ROLES IN RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS

As the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) prepares final guidance for districts to use in reopening schools in September 2020, many school committee members have raised questions and sought advice from MASC.

This is a time of uncertainty and extraordinary challenges for everyone associated with public schools. The COVID-19 situation imposes almost daily changes in how we plan for September. School committee members have a unique role to play not only as policy makers with fiduciary responsibilities for the education of children, but also as community leaders to whom parents, neighbors, and students turn for answers. You may join with your superintendents to provide a thoughtful and responsible information and advice to your constituents or to those who contact you.

Since the state has explained that considerable discretion will be given to districts regarding the opening of school, you should work with your superintendent to develop the plan that works most effectively and safely for your children and families.

MASC has developed this advisory to help you navigate the potentially rough and uncharted routes to a successful school opening and a solid 2020-2021 school year. We will be updating this document as members raise new questions or as events develop.

## WHAT IS YOUR ROLE and WORKING WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT

While the governor has suspended some laws for a limited time, most of the key responsibilities of the school committee for policy, budget, collective bargaining, and hiring/evaluation of the superintendent have remained in place. Your role as the voice of your community for public schools remains as a powerful way to communicate. In many communities, the school committee meeting is the only place people can hear about important developments or listen to both sides of a debate.

However, given the unprecedented number of factors that apply to reopening schools, you may want to be very economical with how you expend your authority while the safety, security and success of students are in the balance and school administrators need to focus on logistics of getting schools open successfully.

The superintendent retains authority over the operations of the school district, including supervising the staff and has discrete authority to implement the budget, policy and union contracts based on your district policies.

Questions you may wish to ask yourselves include:

- How do we work effectively with the superintendent (and other municipal agencies and personnel) to get the necessary work done?
- What governing authority, district policies, spending practices, and general protocols need to be suspended, modified, updated, or even created during the pandemic?
- What protocols do we need to have for budgeting for the next year and how do we address new funds that may be available from our cities and towns, state government or federal legislation that may flow in during the summer?
- How did we link our local, state, and federal budgets to fund schools in 2020-2021?
- What questions do we need to ask about the back-to-school process for which we do not yet have answers?
- As noted above, given that early indications are that the state will give great deference to districts as you balance the need to get back to school ensuring the safety of students and staff, how should you work with your superintendent to find that balance, and how will you let your community know your plans with a good communications strategy?

## APPROVING A BACK TO SCHOOL PLAN

DESE has asked each school district to prepare contingency plans for a) a full return to the school buildings; b) a remote-only learning plan; and c) a hybrid that falls somewhere in the middle. Your superintendent will need to forward these contingency plans, and ultimately, you will need to approve a final plan to get students back to school in September. This plan will most likely include budgeting, building safety and security, strategies for instruction including the supervision and assignments of teachers, use of technology, and the appropriate mix of in-school and remote or distance learning.

When the crisis is over, board members should be happy to find things ready to return to normal with your policy prerogatives and your budget in place.

- The school committee should be consulted on contingency plans and a final plan because of the policy and budgetary implications, and the school committee should approve the plans as they relate to budget and policy before it is submitted to DESE. Because of the short time frame for decision making, it will be helpful to meet with the superintendent for briefings and allow the administrative team to reallocate funds within cost centers as needed to open schools safely during the pandemic.
- Superintendents would be well advised to keep the school committee well informed and to identify any areas where actions impact policy.

## PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES

Many of the safety issues for going back to school come from credible sources. You may not have the authority to modify them if the state Department of Public Health or your local Board of Health issues directives. These may include rules for building cleanliness, wearing of masks, required equipment to have in school, documentation of vaccinations, social distancing, staying home when sick, or avoiding danger for persons with health risks.

## COMMUNICATIONS

Key questions to ask are:

- How is our district communicating with our families, including those who speak another language, require special education or special needs services, lack technology, have special health risks, or use transportation provided by the district?
- Are we communicating with our municipal and social services partners? Have we opened lines of communication with our municipal authorities and local agencies to address new funding (late-appropriations), facilities (use of other buildings for classes), and services (i.e., libraries)?
- What will these persons need to hear from us and how often should we communicate and what strategies do we need to provide credible guidance to parents?
- Do we have a COVID hot line, or a special, dedicated office to address concerns?
- Are community members involved in developing the back to school plan or in any changes to policy?
- Is the information sharing between stakeholders and the district a two-way dialogue to ensure that parents and students will be able to hear about and inform decision making?

## WORKING WITH THE STAFF

Your superintendent should advise you on any personnel policies that involve union contracts or district policy. Your district labor attorney can also advise on the best strategies for working with your unions on these issues.

A key question may include:

- Do we have any ability to address our special COVID related issues for which an emergency might allow waiving rules on matters like class size, the timing of evaluations, or personnel transfers and assignments?

## WHAT POLICIES NEED TO BE REVIEWED

The field of public education is already over-regulated as it is. MASC and our stakeholders have complained for years about the regulatory mandates and paperwork requirements that divert everyone from the basic task of educating children. This is not the time to make it worse by imposing excessive burdens on your school administrators who are facing the biggest and most complicated crisis in decades. When you review your policies, it would be wise to avoid going over each area in great detail, but you should check to see if temporary changes might be needed to avoid liability, grievances, or, to the extent possible miscommunication with the public.

Several areas of policy may require time-limits (temporary suspension of policies; or temporary policies for the duration of the pandemic); drafting of new policies; periodic review, revision or temporary suspension of current policies. In your own policy review, you should consider:

- General district goals affected by the pandemic.
- Student assignment
- School calendar
- Class size
- Attendance, including absence policies (including the link between attendance and grades), chronic absence policies, and accommodations for students requiring special placements
- Time on learning
- Grading and retention
- Local graduation requirements
- Special education
- Discipline and Suspension/Expulsion with home schooling rights
- Exemptions for particular groups of students (i.e., use of masks for youngest children, high risk students)
- Job descriptions
- Pregnant and parenting students
- Pivoting back to remote learning, or back to in-school instruction
- Home schooling (temporary), home-bound instruction (e.g., students with physical disabilities) and remote instruction for students in quarantine
- Public Safety Officers, including the school resource officer (MOA with the local police.)
- Eligibility for participation in extra-curricular activities, including sports
- Attendance vs. participation in events
- Visitors in schools and buildings
- Illness and contact tracing
- Transportation and busing
- Operations and plant maintenance
- Creation of a General (Interim) Policy on COVID-Related Issues

MASC will be preparing special guidance on interim policies for districts who need them. Once DESE issues new guidance on the opening of school, MASC will provide updates to this document.

## **ASSESSING THE PROGRESS OF YOUR BACK TO SCHOOL PLAN**

School committee members may wish to ask the superintendent to respond to the following questions:

- What changes to our original budget plan need to be made to accommodate the back-to-school plan?
- Do we need to revise, renegotiate, or expand our union contracts to make our plan work?
- How often do we need to review our progress getting back to school and being successful?
- Do we have a plan that blends in-school and remote learning that is going to work and how will it evolve during the year?
- How is our plan affecting the equitable distribution of resources, faculty, and opportunities for students?

The COVID crisis has taken our best plans for the last half of FY 2020 and put them in the blender. The goals that you set for your superintendent are likely to have run through the end of the school year, but many of them became outdated over the three months of remote learning. It would be a very good idea to ask yourselves, in collaboration with the superintendent:

- How can we revise the goals for the year and for next year given the extraordinary circumstances we have endured and will endure going forward?

Your superintendent would be the best source for the most appropriate standards to use. Similarly, superintendents, department heads and principals would be the best sources to revise other educator evaluation goals.