

School committee reviews \$3 million ESSER spending options MCAS scores and COVID-19 updates also discussed

By Rich Trombetta

The Norwood School Committee met on Wednesday, Sept. 22 to discuss a wide array of matters including the Town's school equity study, COVID-19 and MCAS data and possible spending plans for Norwood's \$3,059,236 Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). The ESSER money is provided by the federal government to help districts navigate through the impacts and challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

Dr. Dana Brown, director of strategic initiatives and logistics at Norwood Public Schools shared a presentation with the committee during which he outlined potential areas of funding for the ESSER funds. The options were based on input from 796 respondents to a survey made available to school administrators, teachers, parents and students.

"We want to make sure the money spent actually aligns with what the district is trying to do over the next couple of years," Brown said. "It's one thing to take the money and then go build something. But is it connecting the dots you already have in place?"

Brown discussed what the 796 responses - 681 of which were from parents and guardians with the remainder being from students and staff – indicated as the highest priorities for the district. The list contained six key items: strengthening partnerships with community organizations, supporting holistic student needs, expanding inclusion models, strengthening intervention services, purchasing and/or expanding instructional materials and increasing opportunities for enrichment programs during school vacations and the summer.

“It’s a balance between adding staff that you might be able to absorb in the next three to five years versus increasing some of the services through curriculum, training [and] programming that might not mean adding staff,” Brown said. “It’s a unique balance.”

In addition to leading the ESSER discussion, Brown also shared an update on the district’s current equity audit. Brown mentioned that in partnership with Mass Insights, a firm that works to advance equity and opportunity in K-12 education, the project remains on schedule with the next step being to engage the community through surveys and focus groups. Brown encouraged people to get involved.

“Any student, any staff person, any family member interested in participating should reach out directly to [each individual] school principal,” Brown said, adding that each principal is “planting seeds through the school” to try and attract as many staff, students and family members as possible.

Superintendent Dr. David Thomson provided an update for the committee that focused on to primary areas; COVID-19 and MCAS results.

With respect to COVID-19 Thomson shared that there were 72 cases during the two-week period of Sept. 5 to Sept. 18 with 12 of those cases coming from school-aged individuals between 5 and 18 years old. Thomson also noted that 55 percent of students between 12- and 18-years-old are fully vaccinated and that the total school population including all students, faculty and staff has a vaccination rate of 70 percent, a number that includes children ages 11 and under who are not eligible to be vaccinated; not including that population raises the vaccination rate to 95 percent.

Based on the data presented the committee discussed if and when mask use could be discontinued in the district. The group agreed that due to the fact that decisions are made by

multiple federal, state and local entities, they will operate under the assumption that masks will continue beyond the current Oct. 1 mandate but the community should be prepared for changes to current rules.

In terms of MCAS scores Thomson presented the most recent results and noted that while there was a drop in scores, the numbers appear to be within “normal variabilities” and were not as significant as in other districts.

“We did expect lower results than we had in the past,” Thomson said. “[The administration of the test] was rather hastily put together [and] there were difficulties in that we had to test everyone, even remote students, and that tended to be a challenge.”

While there were no significant budget items to report at the meeting, School Business Official Karin Sheridan did review some costs related to text book matters as well as a reminder on the warrants regarding weekly and bi-weekly payroll.

The final matter the committee addressed was the possibility of resuming a public component to committee meetings; public participation is currently limited to emails sent to members that are then read during the session. The committee agreed that there was merit to exploring how to incorporate a public component and plans to address and explore the topic in more detail on Oct. 6.

Next week the committee will participate in a workshop session and provide input for the Town’s equity audit.