



PRINCETON BOARD OF HEALTH

Monthly Meeting Minutes

September 8, 2021

Zoom Meeting * Princeton, NJ 08540

Board Members – Present

George DiFerdinando, Jr. MD, MPH

Meredith Hodach–Avalos, MD, MPH Kathleen Stillo, MBA

Mona Shah, PhD

Darrell Penn

Joanne Hill, BSN, RN

Leticia Fraga, Council Liaison

Linda Schwimmer. JD

Rick Weiss, MS

Rick Strauss, MD

Staff

Jeffrey Grosser, MHS, HO, REHS

Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos, called the SPECIAL meeting to order at 7:31 p.m. She recited the announcement in compliance with the Open Public Meetings Acct: *“This is to affirm that the regularly scheduled meeting of the Princeton Board of Health have been duly advertised and are being conducted in compliance with all provision of the New Jersey Open Public Meetings Act.”*

Roll Call was completed.

Minutes:

Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos opened the meeting by explaining the need for the extra meeting. Since there was no meeting in August, this meeting was necessary for guidance going forward with the COVID-19 variant including school operation

Discussion of School Guidance:

Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr opened the discussion as he and Joann Hill are on the COVID-19 subcommittee. During the last calendar year of the school year, NJ state operated under a Public Health Emergency which was put in place under the Public Health Emergency Powers Act, this emergency ceased in June of 2021. Under this emergency schools, public and private, were directed under NJDOH and local board of health. Now that this is no longer in place, the local BOH resumes their previous authorities which is less it was during the emergency. While during the pandemic they could have ordered action items, now they can just recommend best practices.

The NJDOH released guidance for the 2021-2022 school year that is more permissive than directive. This leaves a lot of room around things like testing protocols which need further interpretation. Health Officer Jeffrey Grosser gave his interpretation of the 2021- 2022 school guidance. The most recent school guidance has changed due to the delta variant. Increased protection in school is necessary due to high transmission rates of the Delta Variant as well as not all students being eligible for COVID-19 vaccinations. The Princeton Health Department sat in on the state testing call this past week which mapped out the implementation of school testing. Testing will allow schools to identify cases more quickly and decrease the transmission in schools as well as in sports teams by 50%. All schools in NJ are eligible to participate in school testing provided by the state. The state approved 260million dollars to implement school testing. Depending on how many schools/ students opt in depends on how long testing may last. To date, Princeton Public schools and some private have surveyed into this testing program. Once this survey closes, then the logistics of implementing this testing will be in place. To further support this program, the local and state health department will continue to provide guidance to the schools as well as share information from the state with the school systems.

Mr. Grosser emphasized the importance of vaccination for those eligible as it has proved to reduce transmission.



Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr asked about which type of testing will be implemented. Mr. Grosser referenced state guidance and noted how molecular tests will be returned to schools within 24-48 hours, antigen 15- 30 minutes, if the schools pool testing it will come back within 24-48 hours.

Minutes:

Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos opened the floor to questions from board members.

BOH Question and Answer:

Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos asked about Mr. Grosser and the Health Department role in testing procedures. Mr. Grosser responded that schools will send their procedures and protocols to the local health department and it will be evaluated and returned. As many schools already have these protocols in place, much of the guidance just now included lunch breaks, ventilation, quality of masks, and who is a close contact.

Darrell Penn asked about actions after increased infection in schools. Mr. Grosser said based on the outbreak status and infection level they would work with the NJDOH and the BOH to establish next steps of how to properly respond to the infection/ type of outbreak.

Council Woman Leticia Fraga asked about mask wearing requirements in extreme heat. Mr. Grosser responded that this would be a decision with the BOH and that it also depended on transmission rates in schools if this could be temporarily lifted. Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr reminded the group that because there is no longer a Public Health Emergency, he does not believe they would have the authority to forego the mask mandate. Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr also explained to the group that the CALI index is the case rate in a particular region and is also based on COVID-19 like illness or CLI. After looking at these numbers the positivity rate is also assessed. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos followed up how the BOH would need to further assess extreme heat in the school setting.

Minutes:

Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos opened up the floor to the public for questions.

Public Question and Answer:

A local resident asked guidance for outdoor lunch. Mr. Grosser advised that the district's plan and the Health Department's recommendation is to use when outdoor eating when possible. When there is inclement weather then students should be spread throughout the school with their cohort.

Another guest asked about timelines for testing implantation and why there is currently not a plan in place. Mr. Grosser noted that the schools have until 9/13/21 to complete the opt-in survey. Princeton Public Schools has already opted in and is likely to be in the planning phase. There was no previous plan due to the impact of the Delta Variant currently, as it previously was not recommended for screening. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos added that testing like this requires resources so the state program will be helpful and that participants are necessary for successful implementation.

A resident asked for clarification on mask breaks in school as there has been different messages provided. Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr after reviewing guidance noted that masks breaks were not referenced. Mr. Grosser noted how during lunch periods students will take their masks off while eating and then should put it back on for socializing. As far as masks breaks students should not be taking breaks indoors unless they are in distress and that can be clarified by the local health department. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos advised that questions for specific schools should be emailed to myself and/or Jeff to see how it could be addressed.

A resident asked for the contact tracing protocol as it has changed for the Delta Variant. Mr. Grosser advised that contact tracing will be different with the Delta Variant. Mr. Grosser noted how contact



tracing will be more extensive due to the variant and especially while testing is not in place. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos spoke on Test To Stay Plan. This program tests possible exposed students to remain in school rather than sending them home. This includes Test To Play with sports teams. When testing is in place and it is necessary, she can bring it up to the BOH. Mr. Grosser also gave the group his email for specific questions and mask wearing in schools for follow up.

A resident asked for clarification on if the schools were handling the guidance and recommended that public health officials should be advising this guidance. He requests more specific guidance, so all of the schools are on the same page. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos reminded the group that guidance comes from the state, not the board. Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr added that the BOH authority is in an advisory capacity. Ms. JoAnn Hill additionally mentioned how the guidance is ever-changing and that retraining because of the new transmission rates is necessary. School systems and other systems are adapting to the new transmission rates.

A resident asked for further clarification on drop off/ pick up, mask breaks, and lunch/ recess as there are many discrepancies. She requested a guideline for all of the schools to have a more uniform approach. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos and Mr. Grosser responded that they could work with schools for a more uniform approach.

Minutes: Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos rerouted the conversation to bring it back to the Board Members on their further statements. After no further statements. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos addressed the request from Council to return to in-person meetings.

Return to In-person Meetings

Mr. Grosser explained how Boards, Commissions, and Committees have all been meeting via Zoom since the start of COVID-19. Before the Delta Variant surge, Princeton and other surrounding municipalities were seeing a decrease in COVID-19 cases. Because Princeton saw a greater participation in meetings via Zoom, they were not in a rush to transfer back to in person meetings. With that, when cases were low transmission Mr. Grosser recommended that the return to in-person meetings be discussed. Since the Delta Variant surge Mr. Grosser modified this recommendation on August 18th, 2021 to postpone the return to in person meetings until transmission rates returned to lower numbers. Mr. Grosser wanted to bring this to the BOH for further discussion.

Ms. Fraga added that virtual meetings have allowed for more public participation. Hybrid modes were in discussion, but the implementation has not been clarified. Ms. Fraga also asked how to manage the public in distanced in-person meetings. Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos mentioned in person meetings are difficult with higher transmission rates and how Zoom meetings may be easier to accommodate until there are lower transmission rates. Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr added how groups meet in different rooms therefore there may be different issues in distancing. The availability of the choice of meeting in person is recommended. He also advised a mixture of transmission rates be used for further information on transmission. Mr. Grosser seconded Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr point of using various transmission rates. ~~Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos emphasized the importance for recommending resting after COVID-19 exposure.~~ Ms. Schwimmer asked for clarification on what the advice would be to give for in-person and also reminded the group the importance of equity for these meetings. As online meetings have maintained active participation, in-person meetings would limit participation from the public. Multiple Board Members added that there are various benefits for online meetings and evaluation of hybrid meetings would be helpful going forward.

Chair Meredith Hodach–Avalos asked for any other comments before closing the discussion.



Minutes: Dr. George DiFerdinando, Jr will work on a general statement to give school systems regarding further recommendations to present at the next meeting.

Adjournment

The motion to adjourn at 9:14 p.m. was moved by Ms. Linda Schwimmer seconded by Mr. Darrell Penn and affirmatively carried by all those present.