

Brian Brehm Education Writing W07

Anger, frustration on display during marathon meeting on mask mandate

By Brian Brehm

The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — Civility and decorum were often absent during the Frederick County School Board’s special meeting on Thursday night to decide if the school system should make face masks optional in county school facilities.

Throughout the three-and-a-half-hour meeting, the audience of more than 100 people frequently interrupted and heckled speakers and School Board members, largely ignoring Chairman Brandon Monk’s repeated requests for respect and civility.

The disruptions began in the lobby after every seat in the board’s meeting room was filled. Even though a remote viewing room had been set up next door, several people ignored school administrators and security personnel and entered the meeting room to stand along the walls.

A total of 24 people addressed the School Board during the meeting.

Christie Scarborough told the board, “The CDC’s [[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)] recommendations are opinions. ... On Monday the 24th, my son will be going to school free of face covering. What are you going to do about it? ... See you tyrants in court.”

David Sparkman said, “This is just a serious, angry flu or virus. We do not need to be afraid of a cold.”

Edward Sturdivant said, “We are causing our kids to fear, to have mental health issues, and this has got to stop.”

Francine LaDuca told the board, “The masks most of these children are wearing offer no protection against this virus,” adding that the masks have caused issues such as headaches, sleepiness, severe acne and are “cutting off O2 [oxygen] levels.”

The only medical professional who spoke on Thursday night was Dr. Jeffrey Feit, [Valley Health](#)’s population health and community health officer. As he talked about how the current omicron variant of COVID-19 has stretched the staff and capacity of [Winchester Medical Center](#) to its limits, audience members who oppose the school system’s mask mandate cut him off several times and challenged his statements.

When Feit said the coronavirus is too prevalent and dangerous to allow people to individually choose whether to wear masks, he was loudly booed. Minutes later, when he said COVID-19 could potentially be fatal to Frederick County’s teachers and students, an unidentified man in the audience shouted: “Sounds like business is good for Valley Health. Maybe you should pay your nurses more and hire more of them.”

After hearing from Feit, School Board member Miles Adkins said he still believed parents should be the ones who decide whether their children should wear masks in school.

“There are students out there, parents and teachers that go out and see each other at [Martin’s](#) [grocery store], see each other throughout the community, and they’re not dropping dead in the street,” Adkins said.

Perhaps the most surprising comment of the night came from School Board member Brian Hester, who publicly apologized for a vote he made back in August to allow students to attend school without face masks.

“After my initial vote, I quickly realized I messed up,” Hester said about his Aug. 10 vote, which was nullified two days later when then-Gov. Ralph Northam issued an order requiring the wearing of masks in all Virginia public schools. “... [M]y decision was not in the best interest of our school system and was negatively influenced by the events that night.”

Board member Bradley Comstock, who also voted against the mask mandate on Aug. 10, had a similar change of heart on Thursday.

“Our schools are no place for politics,” Comstock said while being frequently interrupted and shouted at by mask opponents in the audience. “Our focus as a School Board has to remain on our students and our staff. We have a duty to keep our people safe and to keep learning continuous and in person. ... It’s not just about choice; it’s about the repercussions of those choices. ... This should be about compassion.”

Cute ducklings could open doors to future careers

By Brian Brehm
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WINCHESTER — Seven-year-old Kiah Anderson sat in her classroom at Quarles Elementary School Thursday morning and held Moby Duck, a duckling she and her fellow second-graders hatched in an incubator.

Moby is one of three ducks that have been raised in teacher Nicole Hobson’s classroom these past few weeks as part of a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) learning project.

“We’ve had them since they were babies,” Kiah said as Moby Duck’s friends Duke and Ocho waddled around the room.

Kiah reads to the ducklings every day. She said their favorite book is “Duck On a Bike” by author David Shannon.

Eight-year-old Ella Trdlickova said it’s calming to come to school and spend time with the ducklings.

“They’re so cute and playful,” second-grader Ella said on Thursday, which would be her last full day with her fluffy friends.

Moby Duck, Ocho and Duke are moving today to their new, permanent home on a farm owned by [Winchester Public Schools](#) grant specialist Jennifer LaBombard-Daniels, who is overseeing the grant-funded STEM program at both Quarles and John Kerr Elementary School.

“What we’re doing with our kids is immersing them in STEM and computer science fields,” LaBombard-Daniels said on Thursday.

How do baby ducks help kids learn about computers? By teaching them about modern farming techniques that involve robotics, automation, coding and more, LaBombard-Daniels said.

Thanks to the [Virginia Department of Education](#) and the [National Inventors Hall of Fame](#), Winchester Public Schools recently received a “farm to family” kit that included devices and information to show students at Quarles and John Kerr elementary schools how modern farming embraces technology to reduce workloads and produce better food.

One of the devices in the kit was a miniature John Deere tractor the students programmed to automatically make its way around a classroom.

“They created a farm and made pathways, and then we coded the tractor to go through the farm,” Quarles computer science coach Jenny Ramsey said. “We want to show them how computer science is out there in every industry there is.”

The project with the ducklings began before they even hatched. LaBombard-Daniels said incubators were used to develop the eggs, which allowed students to follow the growth of the ducklings while they were still in their shells. The incubation process also taught the second-graders how farmers must limit the number of eggs they hatch in order to control their poultry populations.

Once hatched, the ducklings stayed at Quarles and John Kerr so the students would have an immersive experience while learning to properly care for them. That experience could be instrumental later in their lives, LaBombard-Daniels said, when the children decide what they want to do for a living.

“When we did a survey of third- and fourth-graders last year,” she said, “veterinary science was the number one STEM field that they picked. I really attribute that to these projects because they’re having hands-on experiences.”

Apart from the educational aspect, Ramsey said the ducklings provided other benefits for the students.

“Sometimes they’re having a rough morning or having a hard time in the classroom, so a lot of these ducks end up turning into therapy ducks,” she said. “The students come to the counseling corner, they sit and hold the ducks, they read to them, get their feelings back in action and go back to the classroom. Not only are they learning to raise a duck and understand the life cycle of an animal they may not see in the city, but they’re also learning empathy and caring and giving.”

It's not just the kids who enjoy spending time with the ducklings. On Thursday, LaBombard-Daniels brought in five additional ducklings that caught the attention of every Quarles teacher who passed by in the hallway.

"It's therapy, something different in the building than math and reading," Quarles instructional coach Heather Williams said.

The five ducklings brought in Thursday are being raised on LaBombard-Daniels' farm. In order for her to take the animals to Quarles, she also had to bring along a Silkie chicken who became their de facto mother after a batch of chicken eggs she was nesting failed to hatch. Since the Silkie couldn't have babies of her own, she gravitated toward the ducklings and the ducklings bonded with her immediately. The unusual brood is now inseparable, so the ducklings wouldn't leave the farm with LaBombard-Daniels unless their mother went, too.

The duckling project recently concluded at John Kerr and will end today at Quarles when LaBombard-Daniels moves the three ducklings in Hobson's classroom to her farm. LaBombard-Daniels said the ducks will live out their natural lives there and won't be used for meat, but the eggs laid by the females will be collected and appreciated.

"She'll send us picture updates and we'll send them out to the kids," Williams said.

John Kerr computer science coach Amy Thomas said the students at her school held up quite well when it was time to say goodbye to their ducklings.

"They know that the ducks need to be in a space that's more comfortable for them," Thomas said. "And it starts to get a little smelly after a while."

ASPIRE sends Handley students on an aerial adventure

By Brian Brehm

The Winchester Star

HARPERS FERRY, W.Va. — High school can be overwhelming. A swirling cacophony of academics, activities and socializing topped with a generous serving of teenage drama causes some kids to lose focus.

[Handley High School](#) offered a special outdoor adventure camp last week to give a few rising 10th graders a boost of confidence as they prepare for a new school year. The day camp was part of the ASPIRE (Accelerated Summer Program to Increase Readiness and Engagement) summer-school program, and it challenged about 20 selected students to step out of their comfort zone and participate in a series of activities where teamwork and communication were critical to success.

Karen Gyurisin, coordinator of the extended school year grant from the [Virginia Department of Education](#) that fully funded this week's ASPIRE camp, said the goal was to show students there is nothing they cannot do if they have faith in themselves and others. Hopefully, that boost of confidence will help the teens have greater academic success when they resume their studies at Handley this fall.

"We picked some students that could benefit from something in a non-school setting," Gyurisin said. "It's a great experience. ... They'll be more comfortable as they enter 10th grade, have a better start."

The ASPIRE excursion was held at [River Riders Family Adventure Camp](#). Every day last week, participating students met at Handley High School at 8 a.m. and were driven to the outdoor recreation center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where a different activity awaited each day — canoeing, whitewater rafting, climbing and more.

Thursday's adventure was ziplining through the tree canopy along the Potomac River. Fifteen of the campers took part in the nearly three-hour adventure, and while all of them were eager to glide through the air while suspended from a guide wire, most had to work hard to muster up the courage to try something they had never done before.

Fifteen-year-old Havyn Rutledge admitted she was "very nervous" as she slipped into an elaborate harness.

"Her first words when she got here were, 'I'm not doing the zipline,'" Gyurisin said.

Havyn's fears evaporated as soon as she completed the first leg of the three-hour zipline course. She could be seen smiling broadly as she glided along the steel wire 50 feet above the ground.

When 15-year-old Mailen Salas was asked if she was looking forward to ziplining, she squirmed a bit and said, "Yeah?"

Mailen, who said her favorite ASPIRE camp activity prior to Thursday had been tubing on the Potomac River, never ziplined before and admitted she was "a little nervous, a little bit."

Josiah Carter, 15, said he "kind of" did something like ziplining prior to Thursday's excursion to River Riders.

"At my cousin's birthday party, we did something with a zipline," Josiah said, but it was nowhere near as elaborate as the lengthy multi-section course in Harpers Ferry.

Sadye Zamitiz, 15, said tackling the zipline course would show her and her fellow students they can do anything they set their minds to, which she believes will lead to "a little less stress" when school starts this fall.

Gyurisin said the ASPIRE summer program continues this week at [Shenandoah University](#), where participants will learn about esports, virtual reality, drones and other high-tech subjects that could lead to prosperous careers. They'll also get to watch rehearsals for an upcoming play in the college's Ohrstrom-Bryant Theatre.

"It won't be quite as adventurous as this," Gyurisin said with a smile before putting on a harness and joining her students on the River Riders zipline course.

The 2022-23 school year for Winchester Public Schools begins on Aug. 11.