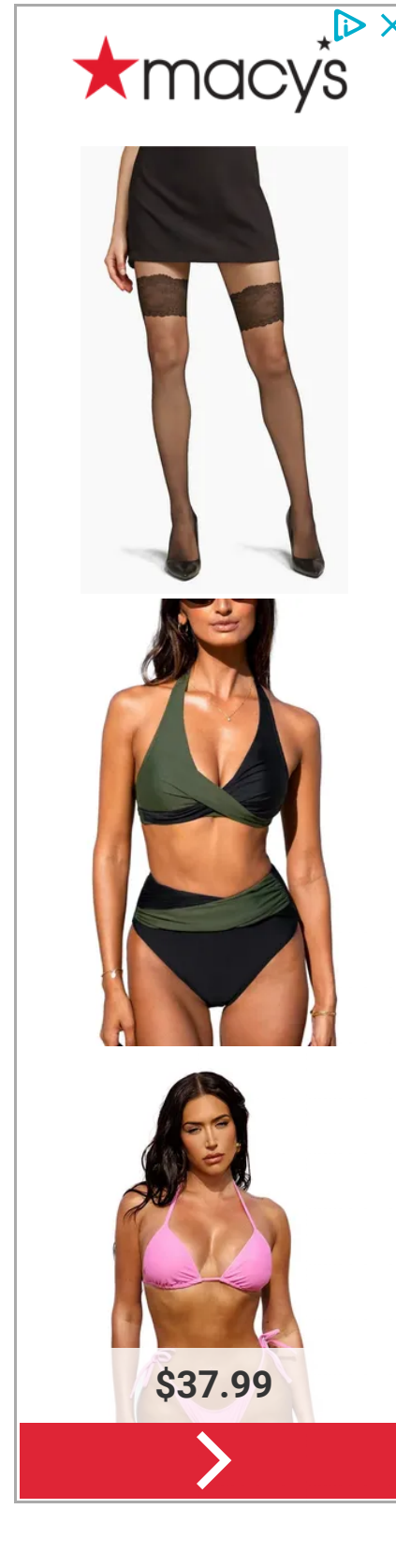


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TUESDAY, JULY 14TH, 2020

**BOE Reviews Plans for Reopening**

By **Jarret Liotta**

Despite a wide range of unknowns, Westport's new Superintendent of Schools Thomas Scarice is adamant that Westport kids should attend school in person this September.

"I encourage the community to welcome the return to school in the fall for all kids," he told the Board of Education (BOE) Monday night, citing the emotional impact of children remaining at home with distance learning.

"There is really damage to kids if they don't go back to school," he said. Still, Scarice himself expressed concern about what Bedford Middle School (BMS) will look like this year, with more than 1,100 students, plus staff, inhabiting that facility at least through October.

"I'm not convinced 100% that it's the right thing to do," he said, noting it requires "a deeper look." Gov. Ned Lamont is requiring that all of Connecticut's school districts have plans and resources in place to accommodate a full-time in-person return — 180 school days equaling 900 hours of instruction. District must also have plans for distance learning, as well as a hybrid option.

Yet the details of exactly how each district is to accomplish this — as well as specifics on what level of COVID-19 recurrence will cause each school system to revert to a distance-learning model — are not clear.

Scarice gave a long and roundabout presentation to the BOE, citing health-related facts and studies from a range of professional reports and news articles, at the same time blaming the media for fostering fear around the pandemic.

"There is an incredible amount of fear among people, among parents, among educators," he said.

While he said the pandemic was not comparable to the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, he drew many similarities with the aftermath in relation to fears, reactions and an increase in political maneuvering.

"It was a cultural and environmental change for many of us," he said. But while there was a playbook for how to deal with that aftermath, Scarice said, "this playbook is unfolding in front of us. This is not hyperbole. It's sometimes changing by the day."

He cited a study indicating that schools were at low risk for encouraging the spread of the virus.

"The school environment appears to be low risk," he said, citing "anecdotal evidence" from a study of 15 foreign nations.

"I'm not an expert on this," he said. "I'm reporting what I'm reading here and the information."

He noted new evidence from the American Academy of Pediatrics appears to show that among younger children, six feet of social distancing may not be necessary, but three feet may be adequate.

"If the evidence is pointing toward children not transmitting at the rates of adults ... then I support bringing kids back, obviously," he said.

"High school kids are close to adult bodies," said BOE member Lee Goldstein, noting that while she appreciated Scarice's positive spin on things, she still had questions that were not being answered.

"I also appreciate that the state is making this difficult," she said, asking how the district can reconcile opening schools safely with safe social distancing when the reality is that there just isn't enough room.

"We can't just keep trying to slide through," she said. "There's a number of people. There's an amount of space and it's either enough or it's not enough."

"It's not making sense to me ... as much as I want everybody back full time," she said.

She asked what the penalty would be if the district decided to not go back.

"We have an obligation to not only serve our Westport students, but the larger community of Westport," Scarice said, acknowledging her point and stating a lot will still depend on what the community virus transmission rates are at the end of August.

He and other officials repeatedly said that health and safety were the primary concern in their planning. At the same time they maintained resolve that state mandate necessitated they make the best of what they have to work with.

"One of the biggest challenges coming back full time will be social distancing," said Anthony Buono, assistant superintendent of teaching and learning.

"We will social distance to the extent possible, but in many cases that will not be six feet ... We just do not have the room to do that," he said.

"We do have contradictions that continue to emerge," Scarice said, in science, health and mandates, noting they will continue to stoke more fear and "more politics."

"In terms of physical distancing, the state guidelines are somewhat vague," said Suzanne Levasseur, health services supervisor.

"We are doing our best to meet the state guidelines ... knowing it might not be possible in all areas," she said, noting hallways are being considered in some cases to keep students apart.

"My understanding is when you can't distance, the primary strategy is around face covering," Scarice said.

He said teachers will need to be creative to foster opportunities for younger students to not wear masks, such as during social-distanced morning meetings or individual reading time.

"It feels like a herculean task," BOE member Yun Su Chao said. Buono said no masks will be required at recess and two 15-minute recesses are being planned, as well as other planned mask breaks.

"That is one of the things required by the state," he said. Buono said more than 15% of parents recently surveyed indicated they might not send their kids back at all this fall, with more than 3,200 parents responding.

He said 10% would not do so if it were even a hybrid plan, though he noted there were less details on this evolving plan available when the survey was given.

"As far as the parents, we have the power of persuasion and that's all," Scarice said.

"It is their free choice to choose to keep their child home," he said, or to change their mind one way or the other at will "technically and legally." Scarice said that representatives of the Westport Educators Association met with him and said they would likely be bargaining their contract over working conditions before returning to work in the fall.

John Bayers, director of human resources and administration, said that in terms of additional costs, there is also the potential for an increase in sick leave and health benefits relating to the pandemic.

"That could be an unknown too," he said. Meanwhile Elio Longo, chief financial officer, reported the purchase of 365 gallons of hand sanitizer, 40,000 disposable gloves, and almost 80,000 disposable masks.

He said they could technically only last three to four weeks, though the hope is that many students and staff will be providing their own cloth masks.

Scarice said he wants to get more information on the possibility of using ultraviolet lights in the schools, which are said to quell virus spread.

Also, he will ask building officials to take a closer look at the ventilation systems, which could have an impact on the spread of the virus as well, given new discoveries.

"We have significant work to do in exploring our ventilation systems," he said, calling the number of questions being raised "ubiquitous."

Buono said that as the plan continues to take shape over the next 10 days for the July 24 deadline — when it is due to be sent to state officials — school administrators will be seeking input from PTA officials.

BOE member Karen Kleine expressed concern about the start up of sports, in particular high-risk contact sports such as football.

"If our guidance principle is that health and safety of all of our students will help inform all of our decisions, I'm not sure we can have those sports," she said.

She questioned the reliability of the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC) in promoting somewhat weaker guidelines for play.

"When I look at the CIAC, I know that we as a district pay them when we have those sports, so I feel like there's a bit of a conflict of interest," she said, with other school officials echoing her observation.

In other co-curricular areas, a distance of 12 feet must be maintained for choral groups, as well as certain musical instruments — something that could largely inhibit those performance groups from meeting.

"I think we are conflating our desire," said parent Sue Herman, noting that even though it may be possible to reopen the schools, "that doesn't mean that they should."

"Would children wearing PPEs all day really pay attention to their lessons?" she said, adding that the plan at this point "most certainly doesn't inspire confidence in me as a parent."

"How confident are we in these methods to keep everyone safe?" echoed parent Harris Falk.

"There is anxiety and concern welling up from the community," noted Chao.

She and others said parents were anxious to have more details as soon as possible.

"I understand the urgency," Scarice said. "I understand the need to know (but) we don't know what August 31 is going to look like."

He vehemently praised the work of staff, some of whom he said were exhausted after having come off an intense spring of challenges.

Chair Candice Savin said she hoped that when school officials returned to the BOE next Monday they would have more details to share with parents in the way of a firmer plan.

"Right now everybody's going to our reopening website and seeing out-of-date materials," she said.

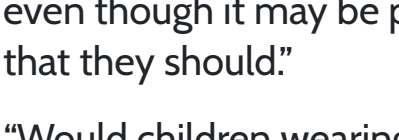
"I can assure the board and I can assure the community that just in the seven days I've been in office, we're making a lot of progress," Scarice said. He said the board and public comments he heard this evening "really illustrate that we have a great deal of fear and uncertainty."

He noted it was a divisive issue, but said he was confident that they would create a responsive plan.

"I'm equally confident that when we land with a plan it'll still be a divisive topic," he said.

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**WHAT'S INSIDE**

**PROPERTY TRANSFERS**  
Westport Property Transfers Nov. 9-13, 2020  
Westport Property Transfers Nov. 2-6, 2020  
Westport Property Transfers Oct. 26-30, 2020

**OBITUARIES**  
Margaret Deiley Dearth, 71  
Irene Marcenaro, 92  
Jeffrey Alan Shwartz, 63

**ARTS & LEISURE**

**BUSINESS**  
Comings & Goings: Pearl Restaurant Closing  
Comings & Goings: Outpost Pizza Opened Today  
Comings & Goings: 7 For All Market and Splendid Opened Today

**COMMUNITY**  
Westport COVID-19 Cases Up 16, Deaths Unchanged  
I Got It, I Got It, I Got It!  
Full Beaver Moon over the Saugatuck

**HEALTH & FITNESS**

**EDUCATION**  
Scarice: Update & the Road Ahead  
Scarice: New Cases at Saugatuck Elementary, Bedford Middle Schools  
Scarice: 4 More Cases of COVID-19 Confirmed at Greens Farms, Staples

**POLITICS**  
Westporters Celebrate Biden/Harris Win  
Westport Goes Democratic in Large Turnout  
GOP Election Evening

**REAL ESTATE**  
Westport Property Transfers Nov. 9-13, 2020  
Westport Property Transfers Nov. 2-6, 2020  
Westport Property Transfers Oct. 26-30, 2020

**SPORTS**  
Staples Volleyball Wins FCIMC Central Championship  
Undeafed No Longer  
Weckers Field Hockey Continues Winning Season

**SPECIAL REPORTS**

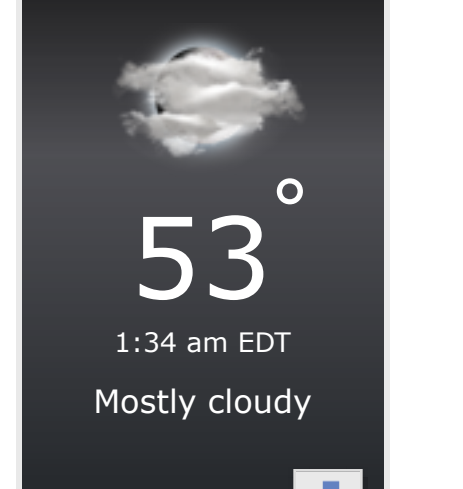
**WM SPECIAL REPORTS**

Margaret Deiley Dearth, 71  
Irene Marcenaro, 92  
Jeffrey Alan Shwartz, 63

**COVID-19 INFO**  
CT Department of Public Health  
Town of Westport Info  
CDC Info  
World Health Organization  
NYTimes COVID Roundup  
Global COVID Statistics  
Local Restaurants Delivery/Takeout  
OneWestport

**WESTPORT INFO**  
Celebrate Westport Calendar  
Metro-North Train Schedule  
Realtime Metro-North Info  
Westport Bus Schedule  
Town of Westport Website  
Westport Police Department  
Westport Fire Department  
Westport EMS  
Westport Public Schools  
Westport Library  
Westport Parks & Rec  
Downtown Master Plan  
PAL Ice Rink  
Westport Health District  
Westport Animal Shelter-WASA  
McCA Westport  
Westport Museum  
Westport Data  
Earthplace  
Sustainable Westport  
Neighbors & Newcomers  
Remarkable Theater  
League of Women Voters  
Chamber of Commerce  
Downtown Merchants Assoc.  
Levitt Pavilion  
Friends of Sherwood Island  
Compo Beach Tide Chart  
Westport Census Info  
Staples Inklings

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Westport Traffic Cams  
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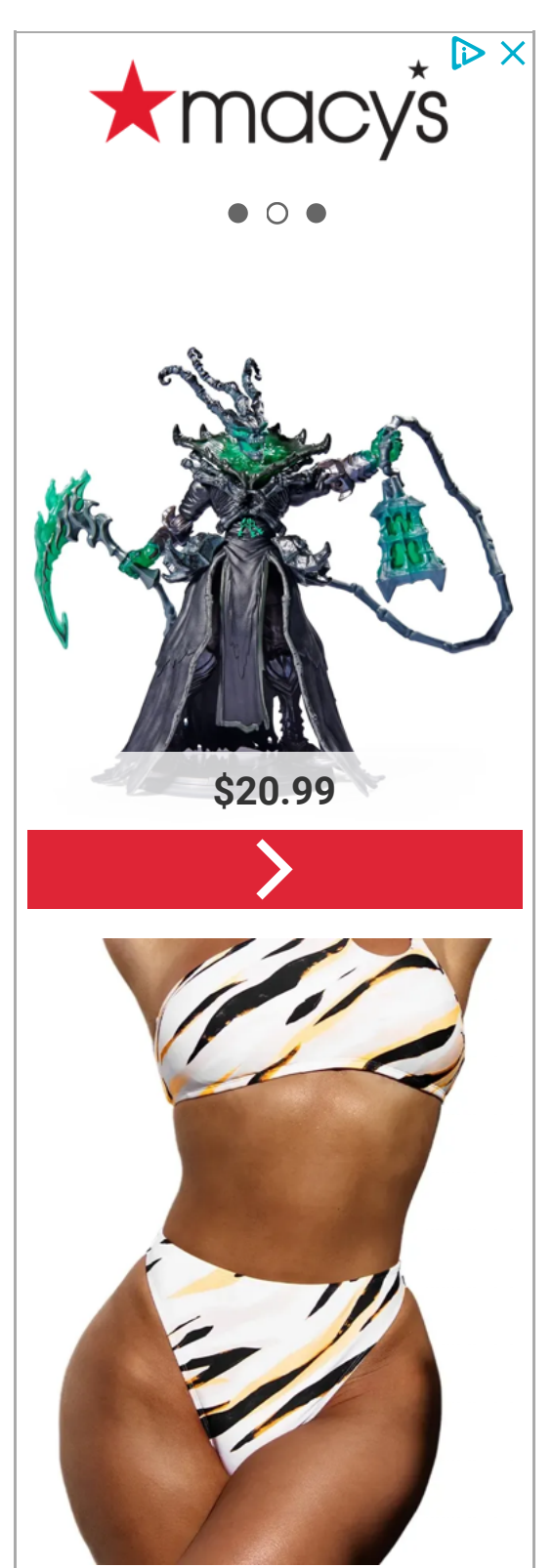
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