

STONINGTON BOARD OF EDUCATION REGULAR MEETING January 9, 2020 - Page | 1

Alexa Garvey, Chairwoman called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in the District Office Board Room, Pawcatuck, CT. Members present were, Candace Anderson, Board Secretary, Jack Morehouse, Alisa Morrison, Farouk Rajab, Craig Esposito and Heidi Simmons. Also present were Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent of Schools, Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary, Alexandra Kapell, Student Government Representative, members of the staff, and interested citizens.

Communications and Recognitions

Jack Morehouse communicated that the SEF will be having the Stonington Education Celebration on March 21st at Latitude 41 at 7:00 p.m. He added he is hopeful that more people than last year will attend, it will be a lot of fun and hopes to see everyone there.

Candace Anderson spoke on her personal health challenges for this coming year and her role as a Board member. She spoke of the referral she did as a parent in 2016 out of concern that the students would not follow up on their own. She spoke she stands with Stonington Schools and Stonington students. She noted that the caliber of the administration in the room has never been higher in the history of Stonington Public Schools, starting with Dr. Riley and Mr. Friese. She commended Mrs. LaCombe a teacher at the high school and thanked her for exemplifying the spirit of truly caring for kids at Stonington High School and students at the Board meeting tonight. Mrs. Anderson added because she believes in the students and in the high school she will do everything in her power to make sure it will continue to move forward and in ways that will put students first. She spoke that she has come to model desired behavior for the students and hopes that one day when they are faced with a challenge and think of giving up they can remember her, that she showed up for them and this will give them the will power to continue to show up for something or someone that they believe in.

Alexa Garvey congratulated West Vine Street School students who participated in the recent spelling bee and especially Eliza Dufour who won the spelling bee and will represent West Vine Street School at the state level. Chairwoman Garvey congratulated the high school boys' soccer team for their state championship on and off the field, 3.71 and a state championship is nothing to scoff at. She also congratulated Mr. Friese, his staff and students for the NEASC accreditation. Chairwoman Garvey had notes of appreciation for both the boys' high school soccer team and Miss Eliza Dufour.

Dr. Riley congratulated Alicia Dawe, West Vine Street School Principal for getting through being the pronouncer at the recent spelling bee, she was nervous but did an outstanding job. He also congratulated Tim Smith, Stonington Middle School Principal for being accepted into the New England League of Middle Schools Convention coming up in March as presenters for the Encore classes.

Comments from Citizens

Martin Vernet a graduate of Class 2019 of Stonington High School commented on the allegations against former teacher Mr. Chokas. He added that he never interacted with the teacher but heard rumors of the allegations towards the teachers in the four years at the high school. He spoke about his friends' experiences with the teacher and their concern about reporting the incidents. He commented on the manner in which the administration has handled the situation. He asked that the Board do an independent investigation.

Jessica Morrissey commented she is very concerned on how the Board is handling Alisa Morrison's standing up for the students. She said the Board needs to take into consideration that not everyone is going to follow the leader and will express their own opinions. She feels protection of our students is foremost. She asked the Board to be respectful of every member and of protecting our children. She noted she supports, Alisa Morrison, Jack Morehouse, and Heidi Simmons and hopes the Board can find a common ground to move forward on this issue.

Faith Leitner read a portion of the recent editorial and article from The Day regarding allegations against Tim Chokas. Ms. Leitner noted she too was a previous Board of Education member and acknowledged it is a thankless job and applauded everyone for taking on the job. She commented it is her fourth meeting where she has spoken to the Board regarding the allegations against Mr. Chokas. She voiced she had requested the Board conduct a private investigation and how she is upset that it has now been almost a year the teacher has been gone and administration cannot even say how horrible this is and added no talking is not getting anywhere. She urged the Board conduct a private investigation and thanked Alisa Morrison for coming forward to push and ask for a private investigation, thanked Heidi Simmons for encouraging the Board to hold a workshop to talk about the issue, sexual harassment, and Jack Morehouse for asking the questions; where, when and how this all happened. She said the Board needs to come together, if it takes retreats or consider the private investigation, but thinks this subject is not going away.

Tracy Swain commented she no longer has children in the district adding she took them out to protect them from situations as this. She voiced that the Board of Education should be protecting the kids. The union protects the employees, and noted all she sees in the newspapers is that the district is protecting the employees and should stop doing this. She commented she has recently spoken to the girls involved in this issue. She thanked Alisa Morrison for standing up for the girls involved, and thanked Heidi Simmons for asking for the investigation and Jack Morehouse for asking who, what, where and when. She voiced that the OCA report was to be completed in September and that is now passed and urged the Board to conduct a private investigation.

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Elizabeth Johnstone thanked the Board for their service. She spoke that she supports an independent investigation and thanked the students for standing up for their peers. She voiced we need closure and need to heal, it has been too long. She added it is hard for these women to come forward, we need to be their voice.

Chairwoman Garvey thanked everyone for commenting, and urged the community to stay until item eleven on the agenda for the discussion about the workshop. She hopes the community can attend the workshop on January 23rd.

Consent Agenda

- A. Minutes – December 12, 2019
- B. Checks and Bills – December
- C. Personnel Report
- D. Transfers

The following motion was made by Candace Anderson and seconded by Craig Esposito:

Motion 1: To approve the consent agenda items A-D with the following amendment to the December 12, 2019 minutes:

“Heidi Simmons commended the hiring of Ms. Eagan from the Office of Child Advocate as an important remediation step. She also hoped that the Board could give current and former students, allegedly impacted by sexual harassment, an opportunity to express their concerns and complaints to a private investigator.”

All: Aye

First Read – Curriculum - Grade 6 ELA, Algebra II, Encores: Bells of Fire, Engineering by Design, Music Technology, International Sports & Games, Uncracking History’s Mysteries

The Board had no questions regarding the curriculum. Chairwoman Garvey suggested if the Board do have questions those be directed to Dr. Riley or Mary Anne Butler and noted the curriculum will move to a second read at next month’s Board meeting.

Second Read – Curriculum – K-5 Digital Literacy- (Grade K,1, 2, 3, 4 and 5); Encore Classes: Books & Beyond, Fit for Life: Strength & Conditioning Photography: Every Picture Tells a Story; Music Composition, Citizen Science, 20th Century History through Sports

The following motion was made by Craig Esposito and seconded by Alisa Morrison:

Motion 2: To approve the curriculum as presented.

All: Aye

Stonington Middle School Final Plans, Project Manual Estimates for the Roof Replacement Project

Dr. Riley explained prior to this meeting the District’s new building committee for the middle school roof project met and approved the plans and estimates. This approval is necessary for the District to go to the state for partial reimbursement of the project.

The following motion was made by Craig Esposito and seconded by Farouk Rajab:

Motion 3: Move that the final plans and project manual(s) for the Stonington Middle School roof replacement project as prepared for bidding and dated January 6, 2020, and the professional cost estimate (complete in accordance with Level 3 of the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) Standard #E1557, Classification of Building Elements and Related Site work-UNIFORMAT II) for the Stonington Middle School roof replacement project , dated January 6, 2020, have been reviewed and approved for this site on the dates shown above.

All: Aye

Report of the Superintendent of Schools

Dr. Riley shared two school calendar items not for action, but to bring to the Board’s attention. For the current calendar year we were notified that the Board of Elections need to use Deans Mill School for the Primary Election on April 28th. He suggested exchanging March 13th of the current school calendar which is a Professional Learning Day with April 28th which is a regular school day for all schools. Students would attend school on March 13th and we would have a Professional Learning Day, no school districtwide on April 28th. This will be brought back for action in February. Dr. Riley also shared with the Board the draft of the proposed 2020-21 School Calendar. He noted that we have tried to match as much as possible with the LEARN Regional Calendar. We tried to start school after Labor Day this year but it would put us out to late in June. He suggested an August 31st start date. He noted December 23rd would be a non-school day to be part of the winter break and February 16th would also be a non-school day to make that a four day weekend. The spring break also matches the LEARN Regional Calendar. He added graduation would be on Friday, June 18th and the last day of school on June 15th with an early release and added a couple snow make-up days if we need them. Dr. Riley said this is our suggested 2020-21 School Calendar and will accept any comments before we bring it to the February Board meeting for approval. Chairwoman Garvey told the Board if they had any questions between now and then to send them over to Dr. Riley.

2020-21 Budget and Staffing/State of the District Part Four

Van explained the schedule and timeline of the budget process. He spoke on the format of the budget, explained the needs and challenges of the District, changes that have happened in the past year, declining enrollment, program equity, impact on programs and staffing. He addressed the five areas of concern and need. He outlined strategies for keeping costs down while maintaining and improving programs. He closed by saying that the 2020-21 overall budget increase is 3.48% and made note the past three year average is 2.04%. He asked that the Board send any questions they might have before the January 23rd Board meeting. Dr. Riley added Allison Van Etten will share a presentation regarding the Annex at the Board meeting in February. Dr. Riley explained which items will be supported by Title funds for the new fiscal year and explained staffing changes at each level. A copy of the entire proposed budget is available on the District website.

Jack Morehouse asked if the high school had more students than the middle school, he also added we will still have three administrators at the middle school and only have two at the high school, so why would we have three at the middle school. Dr. Riley explained we have one principal and two assistant principals at the high school and one principal and two assistant principals at the middle school. Dr. Riley commented we wanted a smooth transition at the middle school and would remove the Dean position at the middle school at the end of the year which we are doing. He recommended keeping the two assistant principals in the coming year and then reducing a position in the following year. We are reducing the Dean and half a counselor for the upcoming school year but will maintain the two assistant principals. Mr. Morehouse voiced it seems like a lot of administration for one building at the middle school.

Gary Shettle gave a line by line explanation of the 2020-21 Proposed Education Budget. He gave supporting information on each increase and decrease comparing the proposed to the current year's budget. He also reviewed the excess cost for special education costs. Dr. Riley thanked Gary Shettle and everyone who spent time on the budget. Dr. Riley noted like in the past he offered the Board members to meet with him with their questions.

Jack Morehouse commented he knows there were positions created along the way, especially at the elementary school, like curriculum coordinators that type of thing. He asked are they listed individually in the budget, how and where are they listed in the budget. Dr. Riley explained they are listed in the narrative. Dr. Riley noted it is on page seven of the budget narrative under "Federally Funded Positions". He also noted that if you don't know where they are located to let him know and he would be happy to answer the question. Mr. Morehouse added he had several Board of Finance members approach him about communication between the two Boards. He commented the Board of Finance receive monthly reports and sometimes they have questions, they would like to sit down with a representative from the school not necessarily Dr. Riley but someone he would like to have answer their questions. Chairwoman Garvey explained she has had discussions with the Board of Finance and is working on having either quarterly meetings or a one to one meeting. Also looking at having a Board representative at the Board of Finance meetings. She added we invited the Board of Finance to attend our budget meetings. We are trying to improve communications and want to do so going forward. She also noted she liked the new transfer sheet that was submitted this month on the Consent Agenda and thanked Mr. Shettle. She added it looked like more of what the Board of Finance was looking for and will follow up with them to see if that met their needs. Chairwoman Garvey noted that all of the pages of the budget will be on our website under the fourth State of the District.

Dr. Riley asked that before we present the CIP and our budget to the Board of Finance that we and the Board have a pre-meeting to make sure the format and the questions are all answered. Chairwoman Garvey added she has reached out to Tim O'Brien to make sure the documents for the CIP and the budget are laid out how they are looking for them. so the process goes smoothly. Chairwoman Garvey thanked Lynn Young from the Board of Finance for attending the meeting. Candace Anderson asked where and how are the district attorney fees covered? Dr. Riley noted these are under the Professional Technical Services budget account line. He added there was a question of what the FOI costs have been. If you have these types of questions let us know. Chairwoman Garvey asked that these expenses be broken out so we have those numbers. Chairwoman Garvey commented from now until January 23rd the Board should relay all budget questions to Dr. Riley. Chairwoman Garvey will start an email thread with Board members and Dr. Riley for budget questions.

Board of Education Title IX Workshop

Chairwoman Garvey explained last meeting we had decided we would start with a workshop. We have completed the interviews with the OCA for the investigation. Attorney Egan helped guide us so we could move forward. Attorney Egan also explained this is an issue all around the state and we are not alone in this difficult situation. The workshop will be on Monday, January 27th here at the District Office at 7:00 p.m. We will be working together with all stake holders, families, faculty, students, past and present community members to improve policies, procedures and education related to Title IX. Mrs. Van Etten will orchestrate and lead the workshop. There are five components to the workshop; policy and procedures and processes; education for community; professional development for administration and staff; curriculum and programming and relationships and trust. Chairwoman Garvey has gathered questions from the community and the Board and will use these as an outline to start the discussions and be the launch pad for the workshop. Chairwoman Garvey requested that if any community member or Board member has any other questions to add for the workshop to email them to her. Jack Morehouse noted he regrets that he will not be attending due to another commitment. Candace Anderson asked who would be facilitating the workshop. Chairwoman Garvey noted it will be Allison Van Etten, Director of Special Services. Candace Anderson asked if Safe Futures is involved in the workshop. Chairwoman Garvey said not this particular workshop. Mrs. Anderson noted she would have a problem with Safe Futures

being involved given the recent editorial in The Day, they are a reputable organization but that was not acceptable for future work. Dr. Riley explained the editorial was missed labeled and the person who wrote it was not related to Safe Futures even though it was stated that they were. Dr. Riley said the head of the organization tried reaching out to let us know they were not part of Safe Futures. Heidi Simmons explained the person who was involved was disturbed and had begun to reach out to the high school but felt that incident would disrupt the kind effort but nothing could be done to rearrange it, so it is good to begin to spread that out right now.

Alexandra Kapell, Student Government Representative asked if all students are welcome to the workshop. Chairwoman Garvey said it is an open meeting all past and present students are welcome it is not a closed session and will figure out how to put everyone's comments in there. If you have suggestions on how we can do that and reach out, we would appreciate that. Miss Kapell will bring it up at the next Student Government meeting. Heidi Simmons also commented we would include graduates as well, in our concern with connecting them with proper professionals who deal with the cultural changes. Chairwoman Garvey noted she thinks students will help significantly with helping us address climate, cultural and how to provide support. Chairwoman Garvey asked that everyone add their comments and suggestions so that we can help formulate this workshop so that it is helpful for everyone.

Monthly Reports

Chairwoman Garvey commented she saw Food Service Director, Becky Fowler's picture of a homemade meal they prepared of homemade soup and black bean brownies it looked really good and thanked the kitchen staff for the homemade lunch.

Committee Reports

Chairwoman Garvey commented from the K-12 Building Committee aspect the PCB testing was completed at Deans Mill School and West Vine Street School and results were fine and a report will follow. We have two more tests in the summer and one next winter.

Comments from Citizens Relative to Board Action on this Agenda

There were no comments from citizens relative to Board action on this agenda.

Items for Future Agendas

Update on Annex

Technology Report

Calendar for Budget Presentations

Board Comments and Concerns

Jack Morehouse voiced he appreciated Candace Anderson's comments. He commented it is not easy dealing with these issues we are all doing our best. He spoke of an incident this week in the news that relates to the current issue of Mr. Chokas. He voiced this is serious stuff and added that Mrs. Anderson feels she is doing what is right for the students, and I believe she is doing what is right for the students but he is also doing what is right for the students that is why he has taken the position of Board member. He added there seems to be a big disconnect between what the administration has reported to us and what we read in the paper and that is why we need a private investigation. We need to know what really happened. It is our duty as citizens, as Board members, if this happened over and over again we need to know. Mr. Morehouse added that Mrs. Anderson made comments of what would the school be without Mr. Friese and Mrs. Crowley, he acknowledge it would be terrible that would not be what is best for the students, they are great administrators and that has not crossed his mind. He added this is separate and he is focused on those kids that were negatively impacted. They need to know by our actions that we are honoring them, by doing an investigation that explicitly documents what happened. He asked his fellow Board members who do not share his point of view; we might do an investigation and find out that the administration did everything like just they were supposed to do it and that is great and hopes that is the case but it is important that we know.

Alexandra Kapell, Student Government Representative commented as a student she feels what is best going forward is conducting a private investigation. She strongly believes there is a lot to be uncovered from the student body and opinions of students that are being unheard that would be very pertinent of what is coming out in the news. She endorses an independent private investigation.

Chairwoman Garvey reminded all of the Board of Education meeting next Thursday the 16th with CAFE representative, Nick Caruso.

Adjournment

The following motion was made by Craig Esposito and seconded by Farouk Rajab:

Motion 4: To adjourn at p.m. 8:41p.m.

All: Aye

Candace Anderson, Secretary