

Alexa Garvey, Chairwoman called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in the District Office Board Room, Pawcatuck, CT. Members present were Alisa Morrison, Jack Morehouse, Farouk Rajab, Craig Esposito and Heidi Simmons.

Member Absent: Candace Anderson, Board Secretary

Also present were Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent of Schools, Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary, members of the staff, and interested citizens.

Comments from Citizens Relative to Budget and Calendar Items

Tracie Swain spoke on the state statutes in regards to the proposed budget, the increase over this year's budget, enrollment numbers and the Board of Finance's role in the education budget.

Budget Review, Discussion and Possible Action

Dr. Riley noted he would be answering the Board of Education members' questions that were forwarded to him regarding the budget. He also reported that we have been able to reduce the bottom line of the budget from 3.48% to 3.05%. He added this budget meets the needs of the teachers and students. Mr. Morehouse has requested staffing information that we will have ready for next week. Gary Shettle, Director of Finance also answered questions that were submitted by the Board of Education regarding various line items in the budget. Mr. Shettle gave information on tuition for Magnet, Ledyard, and New London Schools. Mr. Shettle reported a decrease in the health insurance budget line. Dr. Riley read the memo being sent to the Board of Education regarding the district field and landscaping and sharing of these responsibilities with the Town. Principal Jenn McCurdy and Principal Alicia Dawe spoke on equity between both middle schools in terms of staffing and the co-teaching model. They also reported on enrollment at each school, and the need for consistency. Principal Mark Friese spoke on staffing at the high school, class choices for students and student engagement. Principal Tim Smith spoke on the recent consolidation, consistency in programs and staffing. He also shared his thoughts on the importance of having two assistant principals. He reported on data indicators regarding school climate and staff. Dr. Riley added we are recommending to eliminate the dean position but keep the two assistant principals at the middle school level for one more year to help with the continuing transition. He suggested to bring the proposed budget for review again for the February 6th meeting.

The Board had various questions regarding the proposed budget. The administration answered their questions. Dr. Riley asked the Board to forward additional questions to him and he will answer them before the next meeting. Alexa Garvey, Chairwoman noted the Board members are in consensus to have a February 6th meeting which also gives Dr. Riley time to prepare Jack Morehouse's document regarding staffing. Chairwoman Garvey noted the complete proposed budget will be posted on the district website.

2019-20 School Calendar Change

Dr. Riley explained the change of March 13th as a school in session day and April 28th as a no school day for Professional Learning. He noted this is due to Deans Mill School being used for the primary election voting on April 28th.

The following motion was made by Farouk Rajab and seconded by Alisa Morrison:

Motion 1: To approve the revised 2019-2020 School Calendar with the change of March 13th as a school in session day districtwide and change April 28th to a no school day districtwide for Professional Learning.

All: Aye

2020-21 School Calendar Approval

Dr. Riley noted that this upcoming year as discussed Labor Day is very late and we can end up having school late in June and if we have snow days even later. This calendar coincides with the LEARN calendar.

The following motion was made by Farouk Rajab and seconded by Alisa Morrison:

Motion 2: To approve the Stonington Public Schools 2020-2021 school calendar as presented.

All: Aye

Comments from Citizens Relative to the Second Independent Investigation

Alexa Garvey, Chairwoman spoke she wanted the community to know we have not hired anyone for the investigation. This process will take one or two meetings. She added she has reached out to four attorneys.

John Nazzaro shared some of his personal background as an attorney regarding the upcoming investigation. He shared his thoughts on how the investigation should be handled and the expense the district can have with the investigation. He spoke on how the district should move forward after the investigation with regards to following policies that are in place regarding this issue. He spoke about having workshops to teach stakeholders how to report these types of cases in the future.

Noreen Kepple commented she had spoken at the August 8th Board meeting regarding mandated reporters. She added that how one person defines sexual harassment may not be what another person thinks. She commented would this be a different issue if this happened to a young man from a woman teacher. Her hope is that the workshop set for January 27th could bring closure and we can learn from it and put positive changes in place that can make our town better. She added we are making history and feels an investigation might give us the trust we need.

Faith Leitner thanked the Board for their service. She spoke of the timeline of her attendance at various Board meetings where she spoke on the issue and the need for an investigation and noted this was her fifth time speaking on this issue. She thanked Alexandra Kapell for representing the Student Government; it is great that the students are speaking up like former student Martin Vernet. She stated as residence and parent we entrust that the Superintendent and school officials keep our students safe. She shared that she is still waiting for any comments from D. Riley as far as his thoughts on this issue and looks forward to his replies.

Tracie Swain commented on state statutes, adding you have up to the age of forty-eight to bring up allegations. She also commented on the upcoming investigation and the hiring of law firms.

Kate Milde commented she advocates for the students and feels this is now a crisis due to the hesitation to do the right thing. She feels an investigation is worth every cent. She stated it is your responsibility to be transparent, and implored the Board to have an independent investigation by someone who deals with sexual assault so we can put this matter to rest.

Second Independent Investigation - Procedure of Investigation/Hiring Process

Alexa Garvey, Chairwoman commented it is a very complicated process and there will be a lot of discussion going forward. She spoke on the general process that has been explained to her by the lawyers that she has spoken to. Part of the plan is to determine the scope. This independent investigation will interview students and staff and we can stop the investigation at any time. Heidi Simmons spoke that before making a final decision of an independent investigation the Board needs to agree on purpose and scope of the investigation. The purpose would be to get a legal opinion, the scope is who would participate. She also stated we need to make sure the scope is different from the OCA investigation and whether or not it should be done by a woman. Heidi Simmons shared and recommended the name of Attorney Paula Anthony who works in Milford, CT and has worked in these types of cases. She added we need to know the details of the non-disclosure agreement. Chairwoman Garvey asked the Board to give her some suggestions. She stated that Jack Morehouse had also suggested a person but that person is not available. She asked the Board if they agree to have her and Jack Morehouse gather names and then share those with the Board. Alisa Morrison spoke she has two names from the firm Ford Harrison in Hartford along with Ms. Anthony. Ms. Morrison noted we all need to agree on the scope and be able to know the difference between what the newspaper states and what really happened. She thanked the Board for doing this, she has been asking for this since July. Mr. Morehouse asked moving forward what would be the process for this. He added it would be great if we could consolidate our ideas and pick candidates. The Board discussed the next steps. Ms. Simmons asked if they wanted to wait until the OCA report. Farouk Rajab remarked we heard the community in August and September that we need a larger investigation. We were waiting on the state for the report but I don't suggest we continue to wait for the state. Mr. Morehouse commented we know Ms. Eagan did not interview students or teachers and we know that part of the investigation has not taken place. We don't want to rush investigation, we want it to be fair, it is important to move it along. He feels we move down the pathway to hire an investigation.

The Board discussed how to proceed with the hiring of an attorney. Mr. Rajab asked as a Board can we sit in one room and come up with what we want and then based on that hire someone. Mr. Morehouse agrees we should, we have to do this soon.

Chairwoman Garvey said she will send out a schedule for the first week of February. Mrs. Simmons asked will this be a public meeting, and Chairwoman Garvey responded it has to be public. Chairwoman Garvey asked the Board if they agreed to have Mr. Morehouse and herself look into different people for the investigation. Ms. Simmons and Ms. Morrison felt the entire Board should be part of that step. Ms. Simmons added we come together and discuss it and then show the qualifications of the attorneys, she feels uncomfortable having two people make that decision. Mr. Morehouse agreed and commented maybe there be some kind of format. Chairwoman Garvey shared her check list of items on how to pick an attorney for this type of investigation. Chairwoman Garvey asked the Board for feedback as to what their hope was for an agenda at the next special meeting. Ms. Simmons feels they should meet to discuss the scope. Mr. Rajab agreed to discuss the scope and purpose. Ms. Morrison also agreed at the meeting people can bring more names of attorneys, set a timeline, a rubric can be shared, and set interviews.

The following motion was made by Alisa Morrison and seconded by Farouk Rajab:

Motion 3: To start an independent investigation.

All: Aye

Update on January 27th Workshop

Chairwoman Garvey noted that a representative from Safe Futures has agreed to attend and participate in the workshop. She outlined the four parts to the workshop. 1) Allison Van Etten will discuss Title IX Updates, 2) Mary Anne Butler will speak on curriculum, education of students and staff on sexual harassment, 3) Safe Futures will explain the new partnership that will assist students past, present and future and provide students with guidance. At the end we will take comments from the public.

Comments from Citizens

Ed Steele asked if the entire Board is in favor of the second investigation. Chairwoman Garvey replied yes.

Jim Spellman commented he highly recommends that at the upcoming workshop the expertise of DCF be utilized, where a compliance officer can set down the law that supersedes any Board or school district policy.

Board Comments/Concerns

The Board had no comments or concerns.

Chairwoman Garvey closed the meeting by thanking everyone for attending the meeting.

Adjournment

The following motion was made by Alisa Morrison and seconded by Farouk Rajab:

Motion 4: To adjourn at 8:50p.m.

Candace Anderson, Secretary