

Board of Education Special Meeting
Conducted Remotely
March 26, 2020

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 7:04 p.m. via Zoom teleconference call and opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: Board members Susan Mercik Davis, Jamie Drzyzga, Brian Fry, Melissa Finnigan, Glenn Gazdik, Scott Lingenfelter, Maureen Sattan, and Debra Dudack; and Superintendent Timothy Van Tassel, Assistant Superintendent Michelle Zawawi, Director of Special Services Diana Kelley, Business Manager Bill Hoff, Director of Technology Rebecca Osleger and Director of Facilities Larry Plano

Absent: Board member Michael Sepko

Board Chair Mercik Davis said this is a special meeting and while the public is welcome to call into the meeting to listen, there was not a public comment portion on tonight's agenda. Regular board meetings will resume beginning in April and public comment will be on regular meeting agendas. Superintendent Van Tassel thanked board members, the administrative team, staff and the Suffield community for their support during this unprecedented time. The collective efforts and advanced preparation of so many have eased these difficult circumstances. Mr. Van Tassel noted that in response to the dire need for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health care workers, community members have been making masks for first responders and Hartford Hospital health care workers. These community members are Ally Zawawi, Kate McCluskey, Kim Moriarty and Anne Kelly. So many in the community are doing so much to help in this situation. He said he is attending numerous conference calls each week with the Governor's office, the North Central District Health Department (NCDHD), the Commissioner of Education and area superintendents. The state has given a tremendous amount of guidance, and they have been very responsive to questions.

Update of District's COVID-19 Response

• 2019-2020 School Calendar

Mr. Van Tassel said this past Monday evening, the Governor directed schools to be closed until April 20th; however, the next day, the Governor publicly announced the possibility of schools being closed through the end of the school year. Superintendent Van Tassel said many parents have been asking about April vacation. He explained these days are counting as school days, and the Board has the right to keep or cancel April vacation. If the Board cancels April vacation, the last day of school will be June 11, not June 18. He shared data from 79 districts in Connecticut relative to April vacation: 57 districts are keeping vacation; 17 districts are canceling vacation; and 5 districts are still undecided. The SEA surveyed teachers on their opinion of April vacation and of the 106 responses, 82% are in favor of working through April vacation. The rationale for their decision was based on the perception in the community that they have not been working during this time. Superintendent Van Tassel's recommendation is to keep April vacation, because in the event schools reopen, it allows for another week of direct instruction. Board members Finnigan, Gazdik and Sattan preferred to cancel April vacation for

consistency and continuity in learning for students. Board members Lingenfelter, Drzyzga, Dudack, Fry, and Mercik Davis were in favor of keeping April vacation. Their thoughts were if school is back in session, students would get an extra week of direct instruction and teachers have been working very hard to implement distance learning while also caring for their own children, and the break would be beneficial for them to spend time with their families. Board member Sattan questioned whether the first week of the school closure was considered work days for teachers. Superintendent Van Tassel said a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) has been worked out and that week does count as work days for teachers. Mr. Van Tassel added that it is unfortunate that we will not know until after April vacation if schools will be closed longer. Board members discussed both viewpoints and saw merit in both sides. The decision relative to April vacation will be put on the April 7th Board agenda for a formal vote by the Board. Superintendent Van Tassel shared information he received during a conference call earlier today with the NCDHD. He said the Department of Public Health in conjunction with Yale University has created a statistical model of the COVID-19 outbreak and expects three waves of the outbreak: the first wave is occurring now, the second will occur in the fall and the third in the spring of 2021. The projected COVID-19 infection rate in our catchment area, which includes 8 communities made up of 166,000 people, is expected to be 10% in this first phase. Currently, there are only 26-30 known cases in this area.

- Distance Learning

Board Chair Mercik Davis said a tremendous amount of work has been done by all staff. Ms. Zawawi gave an update on distance learning, and she thanked teachers, staff and administration for their hard work, and parents for their patience and support. The school day will be from 8:00am-3:00pm; that is when teachers are available to students and parents. Teachers will respond to emails within a 24-hour timeframe. A help desk email will be set up and posted on our student resource webpage for help with technical issues with district issued devices. Lessons and expectations for students will be posted by 8:00am each day to the online platform: SeeSaw is the platform being used for Spaulding students and Google Classroom is the platform for McAlister, Suffield Middle School and Suffield High School students. The students' day is flexible; however, sample schedules will be posted for students to follow or students can follow their regular schedules. Printing will not be required for any assignments. By Monday, all parents will be receiving welcome letters from principals and teachers. Teachers will monitor student engagement and if teachers have concerns about students not engaging in the online learning, the teacher will notify the school counselor and administrator and one of them will reach out to parents. Email is the best method for communicating with faculty. Ms. Zawawi explained that the online learning is being instituted in three phases. Phase I was the interim materials phase in which students are currently engaged. Phase II is during the week of March 30-April 3. During Phase II, teachers are preparing whole class work and will provide feedback to students. The use of videos and interactive platforms will be optional for teachers to use during Phase II. Phase III will start the week of April 6 and will include more individualized lessons, teacher made videos and the use of interactive platforms. Teachers will collect assignments and be recording in PowerSchool. Attendance will be rolled out in Phase III. Parents will be required to fill out a Google form daily indicating whether their child will be present or absent. Secretaries will manage attendance and follow up with parents if attendance isn't completed. Student, teacher and parent resources will be posted on the website, which will go live this Friday, and the resources will continue to grow. Social emotional resources will also be provided. Rolling out the Continuity of Learning in phases was done with much thought and with the focus on not to overwhelm students, families or teachers. Mr. Van Tassel added that the district recognizes online learning is not a replacement for direct

instruction, but the work that has been done to create the Continuity of Learning plans is remarkable. Teachers will submit their lesson plans to their building administrators the day prior to posting them for students. Ms. Zawawi will send a survey to parents next week to gauge the rigor and stress level of students. Intervention services will be provided starting Monday and interventionists will use Google Meet and Google Chat for smaller group instruction. Ms. Zawawi added that all state assessments have been cancelled including the school day SAT. The June 5th SAT is still as scheduled. AP exams will be administered online and will include material covered through mid-March. Principal Blain, Mr. Brintle and the AP teachers will provide more information to students and parents as information becomes available. Ms. Kelley highlighted how the special services department has prepared for programming for special education students. She thanked the staff, administrative team and pupil services department for their productive and collaborative work. Staff members have been communicating with parents to reassure them that we will be providing services to students to the greatest extent possible. We will continue to communicate with families as we get more guidance from state relative to PPT and 504 meetings. The Board discussed attendance protocols and expectations. Teachers and administrators want to make sure students are accessing and engaging in the lessons. Student engagement will not only be measured by submission of work but also in the exchanging of ideas online. In response to a Board member's questions, Superintendent Van Tassel said at this time, teachers will not be able to access their materials in their classrooms due to buildings being closed. If we receive further direction from the health district, there may be opportunities at a later date for access to the buildings and classrooms. He also noted that we have access to many online resources and many companies are offering these resources for free now. Many of our textbooks are also online. In response to a Board member's question relative to whether professional development days will still occur, Mr. Van Tassel said that decision has not yet been made. In response to a Board member's questions relative to AP material, Ms. Zawawi said even though students will only be tested on material through mid-March, students will be taught the material through the end of the year. Superintendent Van Tassel added that the administration is already reviewing where there may be gaps in the curriculum and how to support and augment that instruction for when we return to school.

Mr. Hoff shared the breakfast and lunch program that has been put in place during the school closure. He acknowledged the cafeteria staff, paraeducators, Food Service Director Ben Gashi and Larry Plano for their work in making, delivering and distributing meals to our students. Meals are delivered three times a week and we are providing food for seven days a week. Mr. Hoff said families are very appreciative. Lunches/breakfasts are free to all students in Suffield as well as any person under the age of 18 in a household in Suffield.

Superintendent Van Tassel said the Technology Department has had a significant role in the roll out of online learning for students. He said without technology, we wouldn't be doing any distance learning. Ms. Osleger said over 335 Chromebooks have been distributed to families in the last week. She is working with her staff to help them transition to a modified in-person and remote support role. The staff is also supporting Chromebooks at home, supporting administrators, and working to get secretaries, academic support and paraeducators set up with devices to work remotely. Board Chair Mercik Davis noted that Ms. Osleger is not only managing technology needs for the school district but also for the town. Mr. Van Tassel added that Ms. Osleger's forward thinking as it relates to technology is what has helped the district be prepared for this time of closure.

- **BOE Meetings**

Board Chair Mercik Davis said the Board needs to continue its work and will be conducting all meetings remotely via Zoom until further notice.

- a) **Regular and Special Meetings**

From this point on, the Board will follow its regularly scheduled meetings. Also, the Board will begin working on a strategic plan. Board Chair Mercik Davis and the Superintendent held a conference call with Isobel Stevenson from the Connecticut Center for School for change. A Board retreat will be planned in the coming weeks and Dr. Stevenson will be in attendance for Board members to meet her and hear her thoughts on how to move the district forward.

- b) **Subcommittee Meetings**

The Board will resume the regular schedule of subcommittee meetings within reason.

- c) **Budget Deliberations**

The town is working to schedule all department, board and commission budget presentations to the Board of Finance. Mr. Van Tassel said that First Selectwoman Mack is going to get as much public engagement in the budget process as possible in spite of the Governor's executive order eliminating the requirement for a public vote on municipal budgets. As it stands, the Board of Education will present its budget to the Board of Finance via Zoom on April 6. The formal budget transmittal has been sent to Deborah Cerrato, the town Finance Director, who has forwarded the budget to Board of Finance members. The Board of Finance will have additional budget meetings on April 13, April 20, and April 27. The public hearing is scheduled for May 6; however, these dates are subject to change.

- **Collective Bargaining Update**

Superintendent Van Tassel noted that all collective bargaining groups have been fantastic to work with during this unprecedented time, and he is appreciative of their efforts. Prior to the school closure, the administration and Board were in the midst of Teamsters negotiations; however, these negotiations will have to be postponed. This will result in the Board not having this financial information during budget deliberations with the Board of Finance.

Adjournment

Dudack moved, Lingenfelter seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:45 p.m.

Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of April 7, 2020.

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Sattan
Secretary