

Board of Education Regular Meeting  
Conducted Remotely  
April 7, 2020

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 6:10 p.m. via Zoom teleconference call.

Present: Board members Susan Mercik Davis, Jamie Drzyzga, Brian Fry, Melissa Finnigan, Glenn Gazdik, Scott Lingenfelter, Maureen Sattan, Michael Sepko and Debra Dudack; and Superintendent Timothy Van Tassel

Executive Session

Sattan moved to go into executive session for the purpose of discussing the non-renewal of contracts for long-term substitutes, one-year assignments, and positions due to a reduction in force in the district, and invited Superintendent Van Tassel to join the session. Gazdik seconded the motion and all members voted in favor.

The executive session ended at 6:36 pm. The regular meeting resumed and opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Assistant Superintendent Michelle Zawawi, Director of Special Services Diana Kelley, and Business Manager Bill Hoff joined the regular meeting in addition to those listed above.

**MOTION #20-52:** Finnigan moved to alter the agenda to move Action Item A to before Public Comment. Sattan seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion carried 9-0.

Recognition

None

Action Item

- Acceptance of Donation from the Titterington Family  
The family of Josephine Titterington, SMS teacher who recently passed away, was in attendance to present a donation to Suffield Public Schools in memory of Josephine: Josephine's husband, Matt and his two children Kelsey and Colin. The Board and Superintendent expressed their condolences to the family and thanked them for the incredibly generous donation of a baby grand piano to the middle school music department.  
**MOTION #20-53:** Lingenfelter moved to accept the gift of the baby grand piano. Finnigan seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion carried 9-0.

Public Comment

None

Board Member Comment

Board member Drzyzga thanked the Spaulding and McAlister teachers who participated in today's parade as well as the first responders who helped out. It lifted everyone's spirits and was fun for the kids. Board member Dudack was also appreciative to all who participated in today's parade and said it boosted morale. Board member Finnigan said she is proud of this district and the Superintendent has done a terrific job communicating with the Board and the public.

## Reports to the Board

- Superintendent's Report
  - Superintendent Van Tassel gave an update on the district's response to COVID-19, specifically highlighting the continuity of learning that has been put in place for all students. He is aware and understands the tremendous burden that has been placed upon parents. Mr. Van Tassel thanked the Board for their support and guidance. He noted that the State has said social distancing is working and that positive cases of the virus in Connecticut are leveling off. Mr. Van Tassel is appreciative of the collaboration and partnership with town departments. The district has supplied some of its PPE to our first responders and we continue to provide daily breakfasts and lunches to students. The cafeteria program has expanded to assist Windsor Locks as they had to shut down their food service program. He expressed deep appreciation for the food service staff, Mr. Gashi, Mr. Hoff and the paraeducators who are all involved in making and serving the meals.
  - Mr. Van Tassel is anticipating at this week's meeting with the Commissioner of Education that school openings will be postponed further. He noted the Governor's executive order specific to continuation of pay for all employees. All staff are assigned to duties and responsibilities. He said Shipman and Goodwin counsel is handling the renegotiation of M&J's contract in response to the Governor's executive order relative to school transportation. This is necessary because if schools reopen, we need to ensure M&J staff are ready to provide transportation services.
  - The district has received the ASTE Compliance Review Report from the State Department of Education. Mr. Van Tassel will ask the Agriscience department make a formal presentation to the Board at a later date. He noted there were there were eight commendations and five recommendations in the report. The report stated the Suffield Agriscience program is a high quality program and model for the rest of Connecticut.
  - The Superintendent said the Board of Education budget was presented to the Board of Finance last night and he thanked Mr. Hoff, Board Chair Sue Davis, and Board member Michael Sepko for their work on the budget and helping to present it at last night's meeting. He thanked the entire Board for its support and efforts during the budget process.
- Board Chair's Report
  - Board Chair Mercik Davis thanked teachers, building administrators and staff for rallying together and working in this unprecedented time. She thanked Superintendent Van Tassel for his leadership, as well as thanking all central office administrators and the technology department for their hard work. She said she is amazed at the resiliency of all during this time and is proud of this district. She sent a letter to faculty and staff on behalf of the Board acknowledging this difficult situation and offered the Board's support.
  - A Board retreat has been scheduled for April 20 at 6:30pm to begin work on the district's strategic plan and portrait of a graduate. Isobel Stevenson, of the Connecticut Center for School Change, will be attending.
- Business Manager's Report
  - Mr. Hoff thanked paraprofessionals and food service personnel for their work. They are serving over 1000 meals a day. He also thanked Mr. Gashi for his leadership and willingness to do whatever is needed to provide meals. Meal distribution this week is Monday, Wednesday and Thursday due to the Friday holiday. The federal government has not issued applications for states to apply for reimbursement yet, but more information from the state is anticipated in the coming weeks.
- Board of Selectmen's Report
  - None
- Board of Finance Liaison's Report
  - None

## Approval of Minutes

**MOTION #20-54:** Lingenfelter moved to approve the March 2, 2020 regular meeting minutes, the March 10, 2020 special meeting minutes and the March 26, 2020 special meeting minutes. Sepko seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion carried 9-0.

## Consent Agenda

None

## Discussion/Action Items

- Discussion and Action on the 2019-2020 School Calendar – April Vacation  
Board Chair Mercik Davis said the Board discussed this topic at its last meeting. If April vacation is removed, school will end a week earlier than noted on our calendar, or on June 11, 2020. Superintendent Van Tasel shared the most recent teacher survey relative to their preference on April vacation: of the 136 respondents, 81 want to work through the April vacation and 55 want April vacation to remain in place. Board members discussed the feedback they were receiving from parents in the community and it is split similarly to the teachers. The district did not survey parents on the topic. Board members expressed their opinions: Board members Dudack, Fry, Gazdik, Sepko, Drzyzga and Lingenfelter would like to keep April vacation as they felt teachers and families need a break. Board members Sattan and Finnigan were in favor of eliminating the April vacation because distance learning was just getting started and they felt momentum would be lost; however, they acknowledged that teachers were working hard and many had their own children to help with their distance learning. Superintendent Van Tasel said he understands both sides of this discussion and has received correspondence from parents on both sides. His concern is everyone's emotional health and the stress that families are under. His recommendation is to keep April vacation for that reason. Board Chair Mercik Davis was concerned with the lack of structure for students who need it, but also understands the stress families are experiencing. Superintendent Van Tasel asked if the Board would consider moving vacation up a few weeks. The majority felt it was too late to change the vacation week. Board Chair Mercik Davis called for a motion.  
**MOTION #20-55:** Lingenfelter moved to keep April vacation as originally scheduled. Fry seconded the motion. All members voted in favor except Sattan who voted against. The motion carried 8-1.
- Non-renewal of Staff  
**MOTION #20-56:** Finnigan moved to approve the non-renewal of staff as presented. Sattan seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion carried 9-0.
- COVID-19 Response and Distance Learning Update  
Mr. Van Tasel said there has been an incredible amount of work done by administrators and teachers and distance learning is being implemented in a tiered approach. Ms. Zawawi thanked the teachers for their work in supporting distance learning for their students. A parent survey was sent out last week during Phase II of distance learning. Total respondents were: 228 from Spaulding; 207 from McAlister; 176 from the middle school; and 233 from the high school. The questions asked were generally the same for each of the four schools and the categories were parent and student comfort level with technology, clarity of expectations of activities or assignments, workload, and student engagement. She showed the results in each category from each school. Overall, survey results were positive but there is room for growth and this data will help guide our work moving forward. Ms. Zawawi shared the themes from comments received in the survey. Spaulding parents said SeeSaw was cumbersome and student work was parent dependent. McAlister parents reported they would like to see more teacher interaction, student work was too parent dependent, and Google Classroom is challenging. Middle school parents would like to see more interaction, and high school parents would like to see more

interactive lessons and more rigor. Parents expressed appreciation to teachers in all four schools. As a result of this information, the administrators and teachers are already making changes. Phase III, which began this week, has included more interactive lessons via different platforms. As an example, the high school has 79 live interactions scheduled for this week. Instructional coaches are joining classes to help manage this interactive phase and help teachers who need it. At the elementary level, lessons are being revised to be less parent dependent and have more interactive lessons. Special education teachers are joining in morning meeting to support their students. Ms. Zawawi added that attendance has begun this week to monitor student engagement. Parents have been instructed to complete a form found online if their child will be absent. Teachers are also monitoring student engagement. Mr. Van Tassel said the state may be providing additional guidance on attendance in the coming weeks. It may be that attendance during school closure will not be reported at the state level. There are several students already identified as not engaging and guidance counselors and administrators are following up with families. Ms. Zawawi said teachers will also begin grading assessments and updating PowerSchool. Quarter three will end on April 24 and the administrative team will develop a process for students to make up work that is incomplete. Standardized assessments have been cancelled for the year but AP exams will be conducted online in May and will be open book. Most AP exams are eliminating two units from each test. Teachers will teach these units during May and June. Board members and administrators discussed how grading will be handled. Superintendent Van Tassel said the leadership team discussed this topic this week and have reached out to other districts on what they are doing. The State Department of Education will be releasing recommendations in the coming weeks regarding grading. The administration decided to give letter grades for the third marking quarter and give time for students to make up any missing work. Building principals are getting input from teachers to see where their students are and what work needs to be completed for the third quarter. The team is still considering options for the fourth quarter. Mr. Van Tassel explained the concept of a dual option for grading during the fourth quarter. Under this option, all students would get grades on assignments; however, at the conclusion of the semester, a student could elect to receive a pass/fail grade or elect to receive a letter grade. The goal is to do what is best for students under this difficult situation and that it is fair and equitable for all students. Some districts have moved to a pass/fail option but many are waiting for guidance from the state.

- February and March 2020 Financial Reports

Mr. Hoff reviewed the February financial report noting the end of year projected net surplus of \$26,034. Excess cost reimbursement is approximately \$55,000 more than projected, but that was offset by increases to Special Education tuition and transportation costs of approximately \$32,000. The year to date food service loss is \$4,861 compared to a \$26,074 loss at the same time last year. Revenue is up slightly, but labor costs are lower due to more efficient use of staff. Mr. Hoff also reviewed the March financial report and noted the end of year projected net surplus of \$243,478. There was a gain in salaries of \$163,083 due to not filling two positions this year of staff who have resigned and moving approximately \$35,000 to Title I to meet minimum spending requirements. There were also savings in not filling non-certified vacancies. The district is serving as many meals or more than when in school was in session. He does not think there will be any significant gain or loss, and the district will be reimbursed at the free lunch rate. He stated a separate account has been set up to track all expenditures during the closing for reimbursement purposes. There have been some higher costs such as setting up staff to work remotely and ordering more supplies such as disinfectants, but that will be offset by not paying for substitutes during the closure and not paying 100% of the transportation contract.

- Preschool and EASTCONN Update

Ms. Kelley said students who have medication in schools will have the opportunity to pick them up tomorrow afternoon. All families were notified. Ms. Kelley said planning for restructuring

the physical space in the preschool rooms is underway. The schedule will also be restructured. There four-year old program will run two full-day sessions, four days a week with an average class size of about 16 students. The three-year old program will also be four days a week but half days; one session in the morning and one in the afternoon. In addition, we are looking to get NAEYC accreditation. Currently, we are in the process of notifying peer models for next year. In response to a Board member's question relative to the ratio of special needs students and peer models, Ms. Kelley said the special education population fluctuates throughout the year, especially the three-year old population, but we are mindful of trying to keep the balance of 50/50 ratio.

Ms. Kelly said EASTCONN has been very supportive and helpful during distance learning in providing resources for families. The team continues to meet regularly and they are currently working at reviewing transition protocols and inclusion/exclusion practices. Dr. Stein and Dr. Jaffrey are looking forward to sharing the progress with the Board. In response to a Board member's question about how EASTCONN's role has been impacted with the school closure, Ms. Kelley said since they are not in the schools, the team is focused on long-term goals to provide what students need to be successful.

#### Subcommittee Reports

April 2, 2020 Finance & Facilities subcommittee meeting – Board member Sepko said last week the committee prepared for the budget presentation. He thanked the subcommittee members and CO administrators for the work on the budget.

#### Board Liaison Reports

- CREC – Board member Sattan said CREC did not meet this month but will be holding a virtual meeting next month.
- Agriscience – Board member Fry said all the animals in the Agriscience program were placed with families prior to school closing. He noted the ASTE review was very positive and the program was compliant in all categories. Recommendations included an additional staff member, outdoor area for animals, and enhanced recruitment efforts.
- CABA – Board member Drzyzga said CABA is offering a virtual meeting this Thursday at noon to hear the Commissioner's updates.

#### Future Business

None

#### Public Comment

None

#### Board Member Comment

Michael Sepko wanted to encourage parents and students during this time.

#### Adjournment

Finnigan moved, Sattan seconded to adjourn the meeting at 9:08 p.m.

*Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of May 4, 2020.*

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Sattan  
Secretary

**Addendum to Board of Education Meeting Minutes  
April 7, 2020**

*These comments were added in the Zoom Chat during the meeting:*

- 18:46:31 From Brian Fry : Your wife and mom was loved and respected greatly. We're so very sorry for your loss. Thank you very much for your generous gift!
- 18:59:43 From Glenn Gazdik : teacher parade was great!
- 19:00:01 From Brian Fry : The parade was the highlight of my kid's day!
- 19:07:08 From Melissa Finnigan : Thank you Bill!!
- 19:42:05 From Glenn Gazdik : think teachers and staff need a break. great progress but take a breath.
- 19:53:04 From Brian Fry : Moving the break would have been more viable if it was further off in the future.
- 19:53:07 From Glenn Gazdik : agree with Mike. maybe if we were two weeks away.
- 21:08:21 From Brian Fry : Bill, I'm sorry that I neglected to mention your contribution at the BOF budget proposal. You gave great insight and clarity...thank you.
- 21:08:42 From Bill Hoff Business Manager : No problem

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