

STONINGTON BOARD OF EDUCATION REGULAR MEETING October 8, 2020 - Page | 1

Frank Todisco, Board Chair called the regular meeting to order at 7:01 p.m. Members present in person were Alisa Morrison, Craig Esposito, Farouk Rajab, and Gordon Lord. Members present virtually: Heidi Simmons and Jack Morehouse.

Also present were Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary, Lily Haghpassand, Student Government Representative, Mary Anne Butler Assistant Superintendent of Schools and members of the administrative staff.

Board Presentations

DEI Update – Mary Anne Butler, Assistant Superintendent reported on the District's work on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. She made note of a page dedicated to this topic on the district's website. A District Advisor Council has been generated and will meet a few times a year. The VOICE program and K-8 Second Step have been added that support this issue. Student Government, Lily Haghpassand commented she reached out to the vice president of Student Government and she was very active this summer in bringing awareness to what needs to be improved in our school curriculum. Ms. Haghpassand noted that the vice president really stressed that we need better representation of staff for students of color. Ms. Haghpassand continued by stating we have made a lot of effort but it is still a problem. There needs to be recognition on behalf of the students but also the staff. Though all these programs are in place we still need to make a conscious decision to intergrade this into our curriculum. Chairman Frank Todisco asked what can the Board do to enhance or support the efforts that are on underway. Ms. Butler noted one of the things the teachers would like is to have the Board's support when these things come up and suggested the Board set one of their goals around equity. Heidi Simmons noted in Mystic there is a community book group and each month we read a book on implicit bias and discuss it. It is run by the Noank Library and she noted you do not have to be a member to take part, in a week and half the group will be discussing white fragility. Gordon Lord had questions on hiring practices, and asked is diversity looked at when the District is hiring. Mary Anne explained we don't have a lot of diverse candidates, and have a minority recruitment plan.

Title IX – Allison Van Etten, Director of Special Services shared a PowerPoint presentation on Title IX and focused the presentation on new policies and changes to existing policies made this past August. (PowerPoint presentation attached) She reviewed the template in the regulation that will be used for complaints. She noted there is now a Title IX section on the District website where all the information can be found. She shared that the District now uses Safe Schools to train students and staff. Families have now been notified and informed on how to report anonymously and will start engaging parents in the advisory group at the high school. Chairman Todisco asked when staff is working with students are we doing anything to role play or show them what uncomfortable role play is with the student. Mrs. Van Etten explained yes we have done different scenarios with students and staff. Safe Schools has a training module for staff and student relationships and the high school is to participate in that this week. Mrs. Van Etten explained the procedure when a complaint is received and the investigation process. Gordon Lord asked if Mrs. Van Etten would be involved in such process. Heidi Simmons asked how is an investigation initiated, is it from an anonymous complaint, and how big does it have to be before it is a concern. Mrs. Van Etten explained, the problem with the anonymous complaint is it prohibits the investigation. We are giving students two different options either to use the complaint document or form. She added we encourage they go to whoever they are most comfortable with. Ms. Simmons asked if they can go to a peer or a group where they can appeal to. Ms. Van Etten noted they can go to the peer but it is the peer who has to report it. Jack Morehouse asked do students have an opportunity to fill out evaluations in an anonymous way, if we are having a problem with someone it can show up that way or do we survey the students in another way. Mrs. Van Etten explained every year we have the students do a Safe Schools Climate survey. We will tailor the questions and look at those questions that pertain to student safety or concerns.

VOICE Update – Alicia Dawe, SHS Associate Principal and high school teacher Anne-Marie Houle shared a PowerPoint presentation and gave a summary on the VOICE program which was started two years ago (PowerPoint presentation attached). They explained this is a K-12 program. Students will be partnering with other students in the District and the high school students will serve as role models. They shared upcoming events such as the first parent advisory group meeting on October 15th and November 4th the launch of VOICE at the elementary school. They explained the need for the program and the various activities that the students and staff will be involved in. A VOICE google classroom has also been created which includes activities assisted by the youth officer and staff to identify topics and areas of concerns that can be addressed for students. Lily Haghpassand spoke on the positive aspects of the program. Alicia Dawe thanked Ann-Marie Houle for all the time she spent on this project. Gordon Lord commented this is awesome, congratulations, and thanked staff. He added it is great, needed and timely. He commented let us not just be Stonington doing this but hopefully we are sharing with Westerly, and area schools. Ms. Haghpassand commented not only did the school read all the responses but sent a note back to each student. She asked if staff is planning on doing peer discussions as part of the program at the high school or just for elementary schools and suggested smaller groups and connecting that with the program. Farouk Rajab commented that all three presentations were great, diversity is important for all of us and our country, applauded the Title IX information and hopes that the VOICE program takes off. Jack Morehouse echoed what Farouk Rajab said, this is incredibly encouraging. He suggested that maybe the aspect of obsessive use of cell phones usage among young students be part of the VOICE program. He also spoke on the Wait Til 8th program which allows students to have cell phones but not smart phones until 8th grade. Heidi Simmons commented this program is impressive and excited to be a part of this and thanked staff for their creativity and originality.

Communications and Recognitions

The Board had no communications or recognitions.

Comments from Citizens Relative to Items on the Agenda

There were no comments from citizens.

Consent Agenda

- A. Minutes – September 10, 2020
September 9, 2020
- B. Checks and Bills – September
- C. Personnel Report

The following motion was made by Heidi Simmons and seconded by Farouk Rajab:

Motion 1: To remove September 9th minutes from the consent agenda.

All: Aye

Chairman Todisco noted the consent agenda now contains one set of minutes, checks and bills and personnel report what is the Board's pleasure.

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

Motion 2: To approve the consent agenda.

All: Aye

Heidi Simmons noted that the September 9th minutes referenced a statement that she made but would like to add her full statement to be attached to the minutes and will send the text to Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary.

The following motion was made by Heidi Simmons and seconded by Gordon Lord:

Motion 3: To have Heidi Simmons' full statement attached to the September 9th minutes.

All: Aye

Approval of Employee Health Self-Insurance Fund Budgeting and Reserve Policy MOU

Chairman Frank Todisco noted this has been in the works since he was on the Board last and the final piece was that if the working committee could not come to an agreement how would that be decided. Since the Board of Education is responsible for the largest portion of the money in that account it would be weighted towards the Board of Education. Heidi Simmons asked what changes were done to the MOU and if the Board of Finance had seen and approved it. Craig Esposito explained this was an extensive negotiation with all Boards and the major change was not the calculation but how to resolve conflicts and issues. It was difficult to come to an agreement on how to resolve disagreements. The highlighted paragraph in the MOU notes the resolution. Chairman Frank Todisco explained this was presented to the three chairs of each Board and now needs to be presented to the Board of Education for ratification so it can be executed.

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

Motion 4: To approve the Employee Health Self-Insurance Fund Budgeting and Reserve Policy MOU.

All: Aye

First Read Policy 4115.01 Evaluation and Support Program

Mary Anne Butler explained this is a brand new policy based on our circumstances of being under a pandemic. This is a one year flexibility for the evaluation process. She suggested the Board waive the second read and approve the policy. Heidi Simmons asked about the new format, goals, observation, and rating template. Ms. Butler explained the same management system will be used, but instead of a rating format there will be a narrative instead. Heidi Simmons asked if the narrative is written by the teacher or evaluator. Ms. Butler explained the narrative will be developed by the primary evaluator.

The following motion was made by Jack Morehouse and seconded by Heidi Simmons:

Motion 5: To accept Policy 4115.01 Evaluation and Support Program.

All: Aye

Monthly Reports

There were no questions on the monthly reports.

Superintendent's Report

Athletic and Extracurricular Reductions - Mary Anne Butler spoke on the memo and list of items that were included in the agenda. She reviewed the impact the cuts had to the athletic and extracurricular budget accounts at each school. Jack Morehouse voiced he read Mr. Friese's report and voiced that if Waterford and East Lyme have similar staff for athletics then he would hope that Stonington would too

and asked how do we address this and rectify the situation. Chairman Todisco recommended that at the point the Board is discussing the budget, to discuss that as well and add back those funds for all those programs.

Reopening/ Hybrid Status Update - Mary Anne Butler spoke on the accomplishments and struggles with the reopening and hybrid model at each building. Teachers have challenges delivering a distance and present model at the same time. Other challenges include attendance, maintaining interest, substitute coverage and the ability for staff to take care of themselves. Some of the accomplishments are; teachers are being creative, technology department has gone over and beyond, sports have started in an abbreviated model and parents are abiding with the distancing rules. There is an uptick of students opting to go distance learning with now 100 students distance learning and 52 students attending four days. She reported students are doing great with masks and distancing, students behavior is also great, attendance and engagement is high, students are completing their work, and arrivals and dismissals are more efficient. Lilly Haghpassand noted that technology is getting better and mics have been working better at the high school. It is getting easier and more fluid but managing the hybrid model has been challenging even though it has been helpful for a smooth transition. She added the real test is if and when we go full distance learning, marketing the schedule we have now is going to be very imperative making sure we don't lose anyone along the way. Mary Anne Butler added the intent of this hybrid is to have the minimal changes as possible and consistency in routines and if we do go full distance how do socialize in a safe way. She also reviewed attendance numbers, factors for reopening full in person, financial needs and impacts. Jack Morehouse commented he feels that the hybrid model is working well. He spoke on his personal experiences with his students with the hybrid model, commended the administration for doing a great job and the stressors that staff have of finding child care. He asked about what came of the COMO partnership. Mary Anne Butler reported we have three businesses that are partnering with us, NESS, COMO and the Mystic Seaport. Students who attend these are able to get help with the hybrid model. We have an agreement with the COMO but the number of enrollment at the COMO is still low for the need to use the district office. Gordon Lord asked if there was a specific ask of the Board from the staff. Mary Anne Butler will go back to the leadership team and get their asks and get back to the Board. Heidi Simmons remarked she is in awe of what the teachers are doing. She added I don't know if there is any way to make it perfect for teachers to communicate remotely is really hard particularly elementary because they are hands on. Craig Esposito asked if student pick up in the p.m. has been resolved. Mary Anne Butler reported it is going really well. Alicia Dawe also explained at the high school the switch at the traffic light has been adjusted for parents to leave easier.

COVID Costs Update - Mary Anne Butler spoke on the expenses and noted that they could jump if staffing changes. She also gave an update regarding State funding. Chairman Todisco noted he will be sharing this item on a monthly basis with the Board of Finance, it is better to keep them informed. Farouk Rajab asked what attributed to the jump in tech costs and do we anticipate this to grow. Chris Williston, Director of Technology explained there has been much need in software and hardware, but feels it has leveled. We are supporting 2,400 Chromebooks in the District. Mr. Rajab asked if we are allowing students to use their own device. Mr. Williston explained we used to but now we use a program called Go Guardian which is installed on each Chromebook and this makes it easier for the teacher to see what the student sees on their screen. Mr. Rajab also had questions on energy costs. Peter Anderson, Director of Operations and Facilities explained the high school and elementary schools are both up due to an increase in usage in power related to the exhausting of air 24 hours per day in the schools.

Committee Reports

The Board had no questions on the committee report.

Items for Future Agendas

Board Retreat – Chairman Frank Todisco explained we have landed on a facilitator for the retreat and will be working with Ana de Oliveira to get a date on the calendar which will probably be in October. Heidi Simmons asked that a discussion regarding a statement of support to all students and families affected by teacher's behavior be put on a future agenda.

Board Comments/Concerns


Heidi Simmons spoke according to all areas the data of Attorney Chinni revealed that the behavior and the letter dated January 11, 2019 from the Title IX Coordinator both indicated the same sexual harassment. Mrs. Simmons added our job as a Board is to make sure the school environment is safe. She spoke in regards to the Chokas investigation and how it relates to sexual harassment. She voiced she wants to make sure that moving on we are letting these girls know that we do hear them and we have heard them. She suggested as the Board we can make an official statement of support to all students and families affected by this teacher's behavior and to ensure procures, programs are all in place. She proposed a statement for discussion that can be put on a future agenda and asked that the Board add this item on a future agenda. Chairman Todisco clarified that she is referencing a letter of January 11, 2019. Chairman Todisco agreed to add this to a future agenda.

Adjournment

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

Motion 6: To adjourn at 8:59 p.m.

All: Aye


Heidi Simmons, Board Secretary