

Board of Education Regular Meeting
Held Remotely via Zoom
March 1, 2021

Call to Order

Board Chair Davis called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: Board members Jamie Drzyzga, Debra Dudack, Melissa Finnigan, Brian Fry, Glenn Gazdik, Scott Lingenfelter, Susan Mercik Davis, Maureen Sattan, Michael Sepko; and Superintendent Timothy Van Tassel, Assistant Superintendent Michelle Zawawi, and Business Manager Bill Hoff; and SHS Student Representatives Akshita Jindal and Connor Shaw

Absent: None

The Board observed a moment of silence in memory of Adam Poirier, a sixth grade student who passed away. Board Chair Mercik Davis extended condolences to the family.

Recognition

The Board of Education recognized Suffield Middle School students, Lauren Knowles and Claire Halasi-Kun, who are the recipients of the FOX61 News CHESLA Education Award. Mr. Smith, SMS Principal, said the middle school is very proud of these students' accomplishments. Mr. Mattia, SMS technology teacher, said as part of the broadcast journalism program, Lauren and Claire created a video about Kent Memorial Library, which led to them earning the award.

In recognition of Board of Education appreciation month, members of the McAlister Intermediate School band performed for the Board members via a video and messages of appreciation from other students were shown. Board members were presented with a gift in appreciation of their service to Suffield Public Schools.

SHS Student Representative

Ms. Jindal said the high school is participating in spirit week to celebrate the return of more than 60% of high school students to full in-person learning. Students also collected food items that were donated to Loaves and Fishes. Mrs. Roberts, SHS music teacher, conducted a virtual choir concert this week and high school students will be attending a virtual assembly on Tuesday. Parent conferences and course selections are also occurring this week. Mr. Shaw reported that more parents have opted for in-person learning for their children during the second 30-day period at Spaulding and McAlister schools. Spaulding is participating in spirit week in celebration of Read Across America Day. Both Spaulding and McAlister held a Super Bowl food donation drive to benefit Suffield Community Aid. Both schools celebrated the 100th day of school and students learned about Black History month in February. McAlister's student council is organizing a fundraiser in recognition of congenital heart defect month.

Public Comment

None

Board Member Comment

Board member Sepko said he is deeply saddened by the passing of Adam Poirier. He was invited to speak to the Boy Scouts about being an elected official in town. They requested more school instruments, more grass seed for the fields, a deeper sand volleyball pit and an improved basketball court.

Board member Fry said he signed up the Board to participate in the Town's 350 celebration parade. He noted legislation is moving forward proposing to phase-out school resource officers. He believes the SRO program is a great asset to our schools, and he urged people to reach out to their representatives in support of keeping school resource officers in our schools. He also noted the South Windsor Board of Education recently voted to change Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day.

Board member Finnigan expressed her condolences to the Poirier family and offered her support.

Board member Drzyzga expressed condolences to the Poirier family.

Board member Gazdik expressed condolences to the Poirier family and thanked the students and staff at McAlister for the video they created.

Board member Dudack thanked the McAlister students for the video, congratulated Lauren Knowles and Claire Halasi-Kun, and extend condolences to the Poirier family.

Reports to the Board

- Superintendent's Report
 - Dr. Van Tassel expressed his condolences to the Poirier family. District and school communications were sent to staff and families today. Counseling sessions will be provided on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during the afternoon and early evening.
- Board Chair's Report
 - Board Chair Mercik Davis attended the 2021 National School Board Association equity symposium last month. The keynote speaker was Brandan Fleming who shared his very inspiring life story.
 - At the invitation of the Democratic Town Committee meeting, Board Chair Mercik Davis gave an update on the budget, curriculum and instruction and COVID-19.
 - She thanked Board members for attending the mid-year retreat where the Board reflected on its work together and with the Superintendent.
- Business Manager's Report
 - No report
- Board of Selectmen's Report
 - No report
- Board of Finance Liaison's Report
 - No report

Approval of Minutes

MOTION #21-39: Finnigan moved to approve the Board of Education meeting minutes of February 1, 2021, February 11, 2021, and February 17, 2021. Drzyzga seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion passed unanimously **9-0-0**.

Consent Agenda

MOTION #21-40: Dudack moved to approve the following on the consent agenda: Revisions to Policy #6151 – Class Size; Policy #6177 – Use of Commercially Produced Video Recordings; and Policy #5125 – Confidentiality and Access to Student Records. Fry seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion passed unanimously **9-0-0**.

Discussion/Action Items

- COVID-19 Update

Superintendent Van Tassel said additional parents have opted for in-person learning for the next 30-day period at the elementary schools. Both the middle school and high school administration have received several requests from families for their children to return to full in person learning sooner than the next marking period. These requests are being accommodated. Dr. Van Tassel noted there has been an increase in COVID cases in the last week at the high school, which is being closely monitored. He noted he has received several emails from families disagreeing with quarantine decisions and he asked families to recognize that the district will adhere to the guidelines. He understands the frustration of parents and student athletes of shortened sport seasons being shortened further because of quarantining of teams.

Superintendent Van Tassel said last Monday the Governor announced that educators would be moved up on the 1b priority list for the vaccine, which was a change from the messaging the week before. Several meetings took place over the course of the week to discuss the vaccine supply and how vaccines will be allotted to districts. He announced the district has entered into a formal partnership with Hartford Healthcare where a vaccine clinic has been scheduled this Sunday at the Xfinity Center in Hartford. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine will be administered. All staff have also been uploaded into the VAMS system, so employees can get the vaccine elsewhere if they choose.

- January Financial Report

Mr. Hoff said the projected end of year surplus is \$626,692 which is mainly due to savings in salaries for not filling current vacancies, savings in professional services, and projected overage for custodial supplies being funded with COVID-19 relief funds. State and Federal grants changed due to moving expenditures to the BOE budget and increasing the balances in Title I and II to the maximum allowable amounts. He noted \$651,911 of expenditures remain in the Open Choice fund. Food Service had a surplus of over \$8,000 in January, with a year-to-date loss of \$109,723. The district continues to provide free meals for all Suffield children 18 and under.

- Discussion and Possible Approval of the M&J Contract Extension

Mr. Hoff said M&J has an excellent safety record and has done a great job for Suffield. Jackie McDunnah, the terminal manager, provides excellent service and is very proactive. The proposal includes extending the contract for five years with annual increases of 4.10%, 3.25%, in year one and two, respectively, and 3% annual increases for each of the remaining three years. Suffield will continue to have one of the lowest daily bus rates in the state.

MOTION #21-41: Sepko moved to approve the five-year bus contract extension with M&J Bus Company at the daily rates presented and authorized the Superintendent to execute the agreement. Sattan seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion passed unanimously **9-0-0**.

- Discussion and Possible Approval of the 2021-2022 Board of Education Budget
 Superintendent Van Tasel presented the salaries and benefits portion of the proposed budget. He highlighted the proposed personnel reductions and additions and the positions that were formerly funded through grants that will move to the BOE budget. Dr. Van Tasel shared student enrollment trends, which show an overall decline in student enrollment of 13.07% since 2014-2015 and a 9.46% decrease in staff over that same time frame. He also shared special education student enrollment and special education and related services staffing, which shows an increase in student enrollment of 12.6% and an overall special education staff decrease of 1.31%. Mr. Hoff reviewed the projected health insurance costs and the number of employees participating in the health insurance program. The proposed costs are based on a 10% rate increase using our current number of enrolled employees. Dr. Van Tasel explained the per pupil expenditure and how Suffield compares to other districts in our District Reference Group (DRG). Suffield ranked 15th out of 20 in our DRG last year for per pupil expenditures and has consistently ranked between 12 and 14 in its DRG. Mr. Hoff said Suffield ranks 5th out of the 10 most comparable towns. Mr. Hoff shared the Agriscience program's and Open Choice program's student enrollment and revenue data over the last six years. Board of Finance liaison Brian Kost asked about the cost of educating out of town Agriscience students. Board Chair Mercik Davis reported that she and Board member Dudack attended the Administrators Group meeting to discuss and agree on terms of the 210-day assistant principal, the 210-day special services supervisor and the Director of Athletics and Student Activities positions. Mr. Hoff said the initial budget request presented by Superintendent Van Tasel in December requested a 2.75% increase. Small changes, updates and corrections had brought that down to 2.45%. He discussed potential further adjustments to the budget request due to a surplus in this year's budget. One option would be to move \$390,856 in expenses from the BOE budget to Open Choice and ESSER II grant funds, resulting in a budget increase of \$489,285, or 1.36% increase. A downward revision on health insurance to 7% could bring that further down to 1.03%. Another option would be to move \$719,148 in expenses from the BOE budget to Open Choice and ESSER II grant funds, resulting in a budget increase of \$127,266, or a 0.35% increase, which would move to near zero with health insurance at 7%. This option would require significant support from Open Choice to the BOE budget in 2022-2023. Board member Sepko said he believed most previously-submitted Board budget questions had been answered. Board member Lingenfelter said he had not received a comparison of expenses and revenue over the past few years that excluded impacts from grants. Mr. Hoff reviewed the budget approval process. Superintendent Van Tasel believes this is a reasonable budget. Board members discussed the two options and the implications on future budgeting.
MOTION #21-42: Sepko moved to approve the 2021-2022 Board of Education budget in the amount of \$36,389,276, a \$489,285 (1.36%) increase. Gazdik seconded the motion. Board member Lingenfelter said he was not in favor of voting on the budget at this time and would like to see the line item budget numbers he requested and consideration of the smaller budget increase. Board member Drzyzga favored the motion, as it is more balanced over time. Finnigan, Fry, Drzyzga, Dudack, Gazdik, Mercik Davis, Sattan and Sepko voted in favor. Lingenfelter voted against. The motion passed **8-1-0**.

Subcommittee Reports

- February 8, 2021 Curriculum & Instruction Subcommittee meeting – Board Member Drzyzga said the high school administration discussed the school counseling department, reviewed counselors' roles and future growth of the department, and a proposed restructuring and strategic plan.

- February 22, 2021 – Policy Subcommittee meeting – Board member Dudack said the following policies are being placed on a 30-day read: the following are being placed on 30-day read: Policy #0521 – Equal Opportunity Plan/Nondiscrimination; Policy #1212 – School Volunteers; Policy #1700 – Otherwise Lawful Possession of Firearms on School Property; Policy #4115.3 – Evaluation, Termination, and Non-Renewal of Athletic Coaches; Policy #4118.11/4218.11 – Nondiscrimination; Policy #4118.112/4218.112 – Sex Discrimination and Sexual Harassment; Policy #5145.5 Sex Discrimination and Sexual Harassment (Students); Bylaw #9326 – Minutes. All revisions are based on statutory and regulatory changes with the exception of the Minutes bylaw, which was revised at the request of Board members. Revisions to the bylaw include addressing the use of board members’ names, linking meeting recordings in the minutes, and ensuring equity in representing board members’ comments. The Minutes bylaw will be placed as a discussion/action item after the 30-day read period instead of the consent agenda.
- February 25, 2021 – Finance & Facilities Subcommittee meeting – Board member Sepko said the committee discussed the demographic study and the middle school band room proposal. All other topics were covered at tonight’s meeting during the budget discussion.

Board Liaison Reports

- CREC – no report
- Agriscience – Board member Fry said the Agriscience department held its Green Hands ceremony last week. He said there is an opportunity for Agriscience students to get involved with the landscaping of the Bridge Street School property.
- CABA – no report

Future Business

None

Public Comment

None

Board Member Comment

Board member Finnigan said she is a co-chair of the 350th town celebration and parade and encouraged as much participation from the community as possible.

Board member Drzyzga attended the Green Hands ceremony. She said it was a great celebration and it was nice to attend in person.

Board member Dudack thanked Dr. Van Tassel for his leadership and she thanked Mr. Hoff, Dr. Van Tassel and finance subcommittee for their work on the budget.

Brian Fry would like to discuss Open Choice enrollment and look at active recruitment to grow the program. He encouraged all to get the vaccine.

Adjournment

Finnigan moved, Drzyzga seconded to adjourn the meeting at 9:08 p.m. All members voted in favor.

Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of April 6, 2021.

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Sattan
Secretary