

**BARRE UNIFIED UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT
POLICY COMMITTEE MEETING**

Via Video Conference – Google Meet
June 21, 2021 – 5:30 p.m.

MINUTES

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chris Parker, Chair (BT)
Abigayle Smith, Vice-Chair (BC)
Tim Boltin (BC)
Andrew McMichael (BC Community Member)
Jon Valsangiacomo – (BT Community Member)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

OTHER BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:

ADMINISTRATORS AND STAFF PRESENT:

Mary Ellen Simmons, Assistant Superintendent of Instruction
Luke Aither, SHS Assistant Principal
Hayden Coon, BCEMS Principal
Chris Hennessey, BCEMS Principal
Pierre Laflamme, BCEMS Assistant Principal

GUESTS:

Alice Flanders Mike Greig Carol Hebert Josh Howard Sue Paxman Terry Reil

1. Call to Order

The Chair, Ms. Parker, called the Monday, June 21, 2021, meeting to order at 5:32 p.m., which was held via video conference - Google Meet.

It was noted that the link to join the meeting will not be working this evening because the meeting ‘owner’ is not present to admit those trying to log in. Individuals may join via telephone.

2. Additions and/or Deletions to the Agenda

None.

3. Public Comment

In response to a query regarding a return to in-person meetings, it was noted that the Board plans to hold meetings in a hybrid format, such that individuals may attend in person or remotely.

C29 District Equity Policy – A community member queried regarding the necessity of this policy and the Anti-Racism Policy (C44). Policy C29 is a VSBA Recommended Policy, which means that the Vermont School Board Association created the policy, had it legally vetted, and is recommending that all districts adopt the policy. The First Reading of this policy has been approved by the Board. The 2nd and Final Reading and adoption of the policy is on the Agenda for the Board Meeting on 06/24/21. This policy is no longer at the Committee level. Community members are encouraged to share their feedback with the Board at their next regular meeting. If the Board approves the policy, procedures will be developed. Ms. Simmons advised that individuals, who have concerns regarding procedures, can contact her to provide feedback to be considered during procedure development. In response to a query, Ms. Parker advised that the Committee has reviewed this policy and has recommended its adoption as written, and that the policy has completed the process of being reviewed by the Committee. Discussion at the Committee level has been completed and will only be revisited if directed by the Board to do so. In response to a community member’s concern, it was noted that the Equity Policy was warned on all Policy Committee Agendas. All Agendas and Minutes are posted on the BUUSD web site and all meetings are warned in print and on social media. The Committee agreed to advise the Board on Thursday, that much public interest was expressed at tonight’s meeting, and that the Board may wish to send the policy back to Committee. Thursday’s Board meeting will include both an in-person option (at BCEMS in the James Taffel Library), and a remote option (video or telephone).

Policy C44 is at the Committee level and has not been sent to the Board for any Readings. This policy is on tonight’s agenda and all discussion should occur under that Agenda Item (6.2).

Brief discussion was held regarding the process for policy development and adoption. The process involves a review of the Policy Index, as well as the VSBA Model Policy Index. The Policy Committee reviews/revises policies, and makes recommendations to the Board. Only the Board can approve adoption of policies. Policies are presented to the Board twice (a First Reading and a Second and Final Reading). Board and community feedback is taken during Board discussion of policies. The Board approves policies, the school Districts' administrators write procedures to follow policies. Procedures are not reviewed or approved by the Board or discussed at the Committee level. Procedure development is not discussed publicly. Procedures are written at the school district level and are posted publicly after being written.

4. Approval of Minutes

4.1 Approval of Minutes – May 17, 2021 Policy Committee Meeting

On a motion by Ms. Smith, seconded by Mr. Boltin the Committee unanimously agreed to approve the Minutes of the May 17, 2021 Policy Committee Meeting. Mr. McMichael was not present for the vote.

5. New Business

5.1 Review of BUUSD Policy Manual Index

A copy of the BUUSD Policy Manual Index (dated 06/15/21) was distributed.

It was noted that the 'Comments' section for BUUSD policy F41 should be amended to read that the policy should be rescinded after policy F26 is adopted. It was noted that existing policies that will be replaced with new policies, can't be rescinded until the new policy is officially adopted (after the 2nd and Final Reading/Approval). To rescind a policy prior to adoption of a new policy, leaves the District without a policy on the matter.

5.2 VSBA Model Policy Index Review

A copy of the VSBA Model Policy Index was distributed.
There was no discussion.

5.3 Policy Edits Discussion

Mr. Aither advised regarding formatting for edits; underline words being added, strike through words being deleted, double underline wording that is being moved. There is an issue with Google Docs, and it appears that the double underline feature is not available, so the new protocol will be to highlight wording that is being moved/shifted within a policy.

5.4 Policies to Discuss

Copies of policies referenced under Agenda Items 5.4.1 and 5.4.2 were distributed.

5.4.1 Professional Development (B21) (Recommended)

Mr. Aither advised regarding some formatting changes and advised that some implementation sections are being removed because they are believed to be procedures. Mr. Aither is recommending that on this policy, under section 2, a line labeled "g." be added and that wording be taken from the first paragraph under the Implementation section ("Complies with State Board Rule 2000.....) for the line labeled "g." Mr. Aither suggested that additional wording in the Implementation section be reworded. Brief discussion was held. The Committee agreed to make additional modifications to the Implementation section. In response to a query, it was noted that Mrs. Poulin does not update the draft policies. Mr. Aither believes Mrs. Gilbert updates the policies. It was confirmed that this is an existing policy that is being reviewed and edited.

On a motion by Mr. McMichael, seconded by Ms. Smith, the Board unanimously voted to approve the amendments as discussed and to present the amended policy to the Board for a First Reading.

5.4.2 Selection of Instructional Materials (D32) (Consider)

This is an existing policy. Mr. Aither believes the section labeled "Implementation" should be changed to read "Materials", and that the section labeled "Teaching About Controversial/Sensitive Issues" should be labeled "Instruction". Discussion was held relating to #3 in the "Teaching About Controversial/Sensitive Issues" section. Mr. Aither advised regarding current procedures for notifying parents regarding upcoming topics that may be presented, and alternatives that may be offered. In response to a community member's concern relating to the definition of controversial/sensitive issues, Mr. Aither read the first paragraph of the "Teaching About Controversial/Sensitive Issues" section to provide clarification, and advised that there is some teacher discretion involved. The Committee received a query regarding how oversight is performed to see that teachers follow the policy. It was noted that adherence to the policy falls under procedures and there are procedures to follow regarding complaints against personnel. Mr. Hennessey provided additional information regarding curriculum meetings, team work, professional development, and other strategies that are implemented to see that policies are adhered to. It was acknowledged that rarely, there may be a slip up or violation, but much effort is put in to see that policies are adhered to. Mr. Aither suggested that #5 in this section be modified to include wording to the affect that the teacher should be unbiased. Mr. Aither also advised that the policy could be modified to indicate that students could request alternate experiences though the teacher or an administrator.

On a motion by Mr. Boltin, seconded by Mr. McMichael, the Committee agreed to approve the amendments as discussed.

6. Old Business

Copies of policies referenced in Agenda items 6.1 through 6.3 were distributed. There are two different copies of Policy F26.

6.1 Complaints about Personnel & Instructional Materials (B22) (Recommended)

Mr. Aither advised regarding the editing to the draft policy, which was returned to the Committee for addition of a section on retaliation. Mr. Aither provided an overview of the amendments, including the ‘moving’ of wording within the policy. Mr. Aither suggests adding a third paragraph that reads: “Retaliation is any adverse action taken against an individual who makes a report or participates in an investigation under this policy. The district will take reasonable steps to prevent retaliation. Reports of retaliation should be made to the Principal/Director of the accused staff.” In response to a query, Mr. Aither advised that there is some level of discretion by administration, and administrators are trained in this area. This issue falls under the ‘reasonableness clause’, e.g., If a reasonable person would connect a staff person’s response, as an adverse response, then those two items would be connected and the retaliation would be a separate incident and would be more serious, likened to ‘witness tampering’, a worse charge.

Mr. Valsangiacomo advised that this policy poses a conflict for him and he will not be voting on this policy. A community member raised concern that he believes the policy is written to provide more protection to staff than it is to protect students/parents, and reiterated that other than the retaliation piece that was just added, the policy does little to protect students/staff. It was noted that the policy advises that the purpose of the policy is “to see that complaints about school personnel are considered in a timely manner that is fair to all parties.” Mr. Aither noted that there is a separate disciplinary process for teachers. A community member is of the opinion that the policy states that the BUUSD has an obligation to ensure the rights of employees, but does not indicate any responsibility to protect the rights of students and parents.

On a motion by Mr. McMichael, seconded by Mr. Boltin, the Committee voted 4 to 0 to approve the edits as discussed. Mr. Boltin, Mr. McMichael, Ms. Parker, and Ms. Smith voted for the motion. Mr. Valsangiacomo abstained.

6.2 Anti-Racism Policy (C44) (local policy)

Ms. Simmons advised that the Anti-Racism policy is being drafted, and the process has involved holding community forums. Approximately 50 community members have attended the various forums and have report that racism is definitely occurring in the District’s schools. Racism is not acceptable and the District wants to adopt a policy to help assure that students feel safe, and are accepted members of the school community. The first step is to create a policy, the second step is to create procedures, the third step is to hold professional development. It was reiterated that even one incident of racism is too many. Racism cannot be allowed or tolerated. The above discussion occurred at the start of the meeting. As additional discussion is anticipated to be quite lengthy, Mr. Valsangiacomo suggested that this Agenda Item be tabled until a future meeting. Ms. Parker suggested that a time limit be set and that some discussion be held, with the understanding that this item will be added to a future agenda. Mr. Valsangiacomo reiterated that due to the number of those wanting to provide feedback on this policy, it would be best to hold discussion in another meeting, where there are agreed upon public meeting ‘rules’ in place. As many individuals have been unable to join this meeting (due to technical difficultie), it may be best to postpone until all interested parties can attend. A community member suggested it may be beneficial to hold a separate public forum, as she believes there are many individuals who were not aware of the previous public forums, and may wish to provide their feedback. Ms. Simmons provided an overview of the process that led to the creation of this policy, and process from which it was drafted. Public forums included approximately 50 individuals. The policy was drafted and revised based on input. The policy draft presented this evening has been legally vetted. Once the policy is adopted, the next step is to write procedures. After procedures are written, the next step is to begin professional development. Ms. Simmons advised that parents have reported that there are racial incidents occurring in the district. Ms. Parker reiterated that parents have reported racial incidents, and that even one incident is one too many. It was noted that disciplinary action taken against students for racial incidents is confidential and cannot be disclosed. Ms. Smith believes this policy is more than just a policy to strengthen protections for students and that it trying to support the entire school community in understanding that it is not just protection, but is also education to prevent further challenges down the road. The policy will help individuals understand that they will encounter diversity in their lives and that they need to be aware of how they interact with those that don’t look, or think, or feel the same way that they do, and that individuals need to be aware of how to interact with others so that they don’t accidentally abuse them, or separate them from the culture. In Vermont there is not a large diversity in the population and students don’t have a lot of chances to interact with a diverse group of people. Mr. Boltin suggested that the policy be modified such that if an incident occurs and the policy isn’t followed, that the administrators involved be fired immediately. Community members advised that they believe this topic should be discussed at length in a separate meeting. Mr. Hennessey believes this topic merits additional discussion. Mr. Hennessey reported that there are students/families within the District who have experienced racism and have been deeply impacted by these experiences. Mr. Valsangiacomo advised that the reality is that a decision relating to implementing an anti-racism policy is ultimately the Board’s decision, and that any type of community forum should be hosted by the Board. Mr. Valsangiacomo advised that when the Policy Committee takes up this policy issue, there needs to be a structure to the meeting. Under the law, a public meeting and a public forum are two different things. When a public hearing is held, it must be structured such that it is fair to all participants, but is also of a limited timeframe. Mr. Valsangiacomo believes discussion needs to be held regarding how the meeting structure will be outlined.

Ms. Parker polled the Committee and it was agreed that this Agenda Item will be tabled until a future meeting.

6.3 Security Cameras (Electronic Surveillance Policy) (F26) (Recommended)

This Agenda Item is tabled until a future meeting.

6.4 Review Prioritization List

A copy of the Policy Review Priority List (undated) was distributed.

Mr. Aither advised that discussion of this list can wait until the next meeting.

7. Other Business

Mrs. Poulin advised that in March of 2021 the Committee agreed that a summary report would be presented to the Board. This has not been occurring and Mrs. Poulin is querying regarding the Committee's intentions. Ms. Parker advised that she has been providing brief oral reports to the Board. Mrs. Poulin read from the March 15, 2021 meeting minutes, where the Committee made the decision to submit a brief written report to the Board each time policies are presented. This item will be added to a future agenda.

8. Future Agenda Items

- Security Cameras (Electronic Surveillance Policy) (F26) (Recommended)
- Committee Summary Report to the Board – For Policies Submitted For Board Action
- Anti-Racism Policy (C44) (local policy) – For possible discussion, but not for a public forum

9. Next Meeting Date

The July meeting is cancelled.

The next meeting is Monday, August 16, 2021, at 5:30 p.m. and will include both in-person and virtual options for attendance.

10. Adjournment

On a motion by Mr. McMichael, seconded by Ms. Smith the Committee unanimously agreed to adjourn at 7:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrea Poulin