

STONINGTON BOARD OF EDUCATION REGULAR MEETING October 14, 2021 - Page | 1

Frank Todisco, Chairman called the regular meeting to order in the District Office Board of Education Meeting Room, Pawcatuck, CT at 7:01p.m. Members present were Heidi Simmons, Board Secretary, Farouk Rajab, Gordon Lord, Jack Morehouse, and Craig Esposito. Members Absent: Alisa Morrison. Also present were Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary, Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent of Schools, Student Government Representative Kyle Lowry and members of the administration staff and interested citizens.

Frank Todisco, Chairman opened the meeting by requesting the following motion:

The following motion was made by Craig Esposito and seconded by Jack Morehouse:

Motion 1: To move item nine on the agenda up to after item three Board Presentations and remove item thirteen Executive Session from the agenda.

All: Aye

Board Presentation

Board Member awards – Dr. Riley recognized Board members, Jack Morehouse, Frank Todisco, Gordon Lord, and Alisa Morrison, noting that this is the last regular board meeting they will attend. Dr. Riley thanked them for their service and presented them with a plaque, which read: *“presented to “Board Member” for your years of service and contributions towards the continued success of Stonington Public Schools and the students we serve”*.

Report of the Superintendent of Schools

Update on COVID Mitigation – Dr. Riley noted there have been questions regarding masking and vaccines. He spoke of the current executive order in place and reviewed the protocols in place for mask wearing and quarantining in place until February. He noted the district follows the DPH guidelines on everything that has been done the last year and half. He added some districts are moving toward a seven day instead of ten day quarantine policy. He added he has contacted the district’s medical advisor and Ledge Light for guidance and they recommend the ten day but seven days for quarantine also if certain testing and precautions are put in place. He noted that the district is moving the close contact time out from ten days to seven and will notify parents as to what they need to do if they are a close contact. This would have students in school as much as possible. The goal is to implement this policy and have it start October 25th. Dr. Riley reported that Representative Greg Howard has sent a letter of support with this idea to the State Commissioner and Public Health Department letting them know that we have a low rate in our area and students are missing time in class. He also mentioned that neighboring states like Rhode Island and Massachusetts are becoming creative by doing a Test and Stay program to keep students in school more days. Dr. Riley will be sending a letter to the state asking if they are interested in having Connecticut join in this program, and would use our district as a pilot program.

Farouk Rajab voiced he fully supports the Test and Stay program. Mr. Rajab asked if we have considered and do we need added staff to do this program and where do we get the tests or are they supplied by the state. Dr. Riley responded the state has tests available and if we need to hire people to do it we will; we need our kids in school. Mr. Rajab added if we have the opportunity to do this, we should consider adding staffing.

Communications and Recognitions

The Board had no communications or recognitions.

Comments from Citizens

Ashley Tewell spoke on the increase of behavioral issues of students and the spike at the start of school of this issue. She spoke of the emotional and psychological effect on students due to the restrictions and quarantining and asked what should we do to mitigate this. She was pleased to see that the administration is working to get the students back to school and appreciates the steps that are being taken.

Connie Szymonik stated her concern about the Critical Race Theory and what is being taught in this country. She spoke about the code words that are used in the school system that speak of Critical Race Theory. She would like the Board to discuss it when they can, look at the curriculum that is being used and what books are being used in the district.

Meghan Blanchette thanked the Board for the work they are doing on diversity. She added students of all kinds feel safe in our school system. She spoke of her own experience with her student regarding diversity and feels we should give students the opportunity to be good citizens, adding the work that the Board is doing is good.

Bruce Szymonik spoke he is against the Critical Race Theory. He voiced the school should be concerned with what to teach. We cannot change history and we should not even start, because it is breaking everyone apart.

Kenyon Murphy spoke on the effect of COVID-19 and quarantining disrupts the family environment. He voiced we should all do what we need to keep students active. He commented on the quarantine guidelines from the CDC, and what the district is following and the inconsistency. He noted the masks are psychological damaging and do not offer enough benefit. He commented about his own students not getting mask breaks and the benefits do not outweigh the risks.

Kevin Agnello thanked Dr. Riley for the nine years of service to the town, the Board and students. He suggested the Board use an exercise that is an effective and a common methodology for superintendents and Boards to use that researches have, which ranks in order by importance a list of characteristics of a superintendent. He noted how the data is compiled and hopefully how it can help seek out a new superintendent.

Consent Agenda

- a. Minutes – September 9, 2021
- b. Checks and Bills – September 2021
- c. Personnel Report
- d. Administrators Employment Contract
- e. Policy 4118.51 Social Media Policy/Staff
- f. 9000 Series Bylaws
- g. Policy 3516.12 Asbestos Control
- h. Policy 3524.2 Hazardous Material in Schools

The following motion was made by Craig Esposito and seconded by Jack Morehouse:

Motion 2: To approve items A - H on the Consent Agenda.
All: Aye

Frist Read/Approval of Bylaws 9040, 9160, 9272, 9273, 9312, 9360, 9400

Heidi Simmons spoke on Bylaw 9312 and her suggested changes to the Bylaw. Mary Anne Butler reminded the Board that there are lawyers that craft these Bylaws. Craig Esposito spoke the policy should be reviewed by an attorney to assure they are not in violation and spoke on the procedures in submitting changes that the Board should follow. Frank Todisco, Chairman suggested that some of these Bylaws need to be discussed in a small group workshop setting. Mrs. Butler commented if the Board has specific questions to email her. Chairman Todisco encouraged Ms. Simmons to include the entire Board in those questions and email. Ms. Simmons requested a separate meeting to review the Bylaws. Jack Morehouse requested changes to Bylaw 9160 which speaks about a student representative to the Board would be recommend by the high school principal. He voiced he would like it to be recommended by a member of the council or the student representative. Mrs. Butler explained this was previously passed in 2012 and the only change at that time was item 8D. Mr. Morehouse commented in his tenure student council has made good comments and it is important that the students choose the student. Kyle Lowry, Student Government Representative confirmed the process and what his duty is to the Board and the student body through the council. Farouk Rajab supports the changes that Mr. Morehouse suggested but any changes should be run by the lawyers and the remaining language to stay the same. Bylaws 9040, 9272, 9273, 9312, 9360 and 9400 will be discussed in a separate meeting and were not approved.

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

Motion 3: To approve Bylaw 9160 with changes to read: the student representative to the Board of Education shall be the student council president or chosen by a members of the student council and insure that there is a legal review of this suggested change.
All: Aye

Farouk Rajab suggested creating a list of changes to the Bylaws for the committee to review and then share with Mrs. Butler who will share with the lawyer and bring back to the committee for discussion.

Superintendent Announcement

Frank Todisco, Chairman announced that on October 12th the Board received a letter from the superintendent about his retirement. Dr. Riley shared it was a difficult decision, it has been a marvelous experience watching the district move forward for the past nine years. He added he would like the Board to know he will stay until they have a permanent replacement and will work hard for the district until they have a new superintendent. He thanked the Board for their support during his nine years and is looking forward to the search process and moving on.

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

Motion 4: To accept Dr. Riley's letter.
All: Aye

Frank Todisco, Chairman stated the Board needs to come together and determine what they are looking for in the next superintendent. Chairman Todisco spoke about the different ways the process can be handled and the timeline involved. He asked the Board for their input but shared his personal opinion on how to move forward. Chairman Todisco voiced the existing Board should meet to talk things through and give the incoming Board a head start on the process. The Board was in consensus with Chairman Todisco's suggestions and will hold a separate meeting to discuss the process.

Report of the Superintendent of Schools

CIP – Dr. Riley noted he will be sharing backup for each item on the CIP list with the Board of Ed and Board of Finance. Peter Anderson, Director of Operations and Facilities summarized each item on the list that pertained to operations and facilities. Chris Williston, Director of Technology summarized each item on the list that pertained to technology. Farouk Rajab had questions regarding the phone upgrade. Mr. Williston responded this upgrade was for additional users. Frank Todisco, Chairman had questions regarding how often the refreshing of student computers takes place. Mr. Williston answered every four years with a self-insured policy.

Monthly Reports

Kyle Lowry, Student Government Representative gave a summary of his monthly report, and recognized his fellow student government students for all the work that has been done.

Items for Future Agendas

Jack Morehouse spoke on Facebook and Instagram and the negative impact affects it has on kids. He spoke on the "Wait Til Eight" program that does not allow kids to get a smart phone until 8th grade. He asked what can we do as a district to help but also realizes the district can't solve these problems. He noted there are districts doing things to help combat this issue. He gave an example of a teacher's exercise with students and their cell phone usage during class. He voiced how can students be an effective students with the distraction of cell phone notifications going off on a regular basis. He added he does not expect the district to solve the issue a lot falls on the parents. Mr. Morehouse suggested perhaps integrating something into our health curriculum about time management and use of Apps. He asked what can the district do to help students with anxiety. He asked that this issue be explored and perhaps get back to him or the next Board. Mr. Morehouse also would like the Board to follow up on the music and band student numbers and why they are so low. The Board shared dialogue regarding student enrollment numbers in music in all levels. Mr. Morehouse would like this to be a topic at the next meeting and to look at ways to increase student enrollment in music.

Board Comments/Concerns

Jack Morehouse had questions regarding the recent interruption of internet, whether the students have access to internet and is it up and running. He asked for information regarding the disruption around the issue we had with the ransomware. Dr. Riley shared that the investigation is still underway and repairs on being made. He also reported that the students do have internet and the typical things they usually have access to but still do not have access to 100% of their programs.

STONINGTON BOARD OF EDUCATION REGULAR MEETING October 14, 2021 - Page | 4

Gordon Lord thanked Dr. Riley, administration and Mary Anne Butler. He thanked Dr. Riley for his leadership. He noted he is proud to have four children in the district and believes Dr. Riley leaves the district in a much better place than when he got here. We as a community continue to focus on the positive; everyone is doing the best they can and need to continue to celebrate the positive. He closed by wishing Dr. Riley great enjoyment in his retirement.

Farouk Rajab congratulated and thanked Dr. Riley. He noted he has leaned on him a lot and he has been a rock in the last few months. He has learned a lot from him and his team. He will miss his leadership. He added we appreciate you and wish you the best in your retirement and will miss his fellow Board members.

Frank Todisco, Chairman spoke of his tenure on the Board noting it has been an honor to serve this community. Dr. Riley has been the superintendent for most of that time. He added he thinks he has left the district better than he found it. Chairman Todisco, spoke of his personal experience and his move into the community. He has learned a lot from Dr. Riley over the years. He commented Dr. Riley has a very talented administration and teachers that are dedicated to the students in the community. Chairman Todisco ended by stating it has been a pleasure to serve with Dr. Riley and those that carry on, he wished them the best of luck and "buckle your seatbelts".

Adjournment

The following motion was made by Craig Esposito and seconded by Jack Morehouse:

Motion 5: To Adjourn at 8:14pm
All: Aye

Heidi Simmons, Board Secretary