

Board of Education Regular Meeting
Suffield High School Media Center
and via Zoom
May 2, 2022

Call to Order

Board member Melissa Finnigan called the meeting to order at 5:03 p.m.

Present: Board members Terry Antrum, Tracy Cloyd (arrived 5:15), Melissa Finnigan, Brian Fry, Glenn Gazdik (arrived 5:15), James Mol, and Maureen Sattan (via speakerphone); and Superintendent Timothy Van Tassel, Assistant Superintendent Michelle Zawawi

Absent: Jamie Drzyzga, Scott Lingenfelter

Executive Session

Board member Melissa Finnigan moved to go into executive session for the purpose of interviewing a candidate for the Principal position at Suffield High School and inviting Superintendent Timothy Van Tassel, Assistant Superintendent Michelle Zawawi, Assistant Principal Shannon Inero, Assistant Principal Matt Dobi; and Team Leaders Carl Casinghino, Domenico Casolari, Stephannie Holland, Timothy Kudrle and Steven Wheeler. Board Member Brian Fry seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. Team Leaders left the Executive Session at 5:25 pm. The Board went into recess at 6:22 p.m. The regular meeting resumed at 6:31 p.m.

Board Vice Chair Gazdik took over as presiding officer of the meeting which opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Business Manager Bill Hoff and SHS Student Representatives Sophia Mormino (via Zoom) and Connor Shaw (via Zoom) joined the regular meeting in addition to those listed above. Board member Sattan began the meeting via Zoom and left the meeting at an unknown time, casting no votes.

Recognition

CABE Student Leadership Award Recipients: Suffield Middle School students Hannah Pixton and Ronan Sullivan and Suffield High School students John-Henry Burke and Isabella Hinkle. Ken Smith, SMS Principal, and Michelle Zawawi, Assistant Superintendent/Interim High School Principal, spoke about the qualities and leadership skills of these students.

Suffield High School 2022 Valedictorian, Sarah Whitehouse, and Salutatorian, Emily Brydges. Michelle Zawawi introduced and congratulated this year's Valedictorian, Sarah Whitehouse, and this year's Salutatorian, Emily Brydges. She spoke of the students' academic excellence, exceptional character and the many extracurricular activities they are involved in.

Suffield High School Student Representatives

Connor Shaw, Class of 2022, shared the news and events at Suffield High School and Suffield Middle School.

Sophia Mormino, Class of 2023, shared the news and events at McAlister Intermediate School and A.Ward Spaulding School.

Public Comment

Dr. Cassandre Victor-Vega, 2 Melrose Lane, said she is concerned about the racial incidents in Suffield Public Schools. She said she would like a firm commitment on anti-racism and accountability from the Board of Education.

Liz Warren, 185 N Main Street, said the BOE stated in 2020 that Suffield is inclusive and diverse enough. She said there has been enough bigotry, discrimination and racism displayed to the students of Suffield Public Schools and she hopes the BOE has had enough and seeks to become more.

Lesley Aryee, 190 East Street S, said she would like the BOE to take a position and work with the community to put policies and procedures in place to protect all students against racism and bigotry.

Amy Healy, 210 Academy Drive, said she would like a clear and specific policy on racist behavior. She said the district needs a commitment to invest in training programs that empower students and teachers to stand up to and stop racism.

Dr. Kristina Hallet, 1211 Newgate Rd, said racial trauma is the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination. She said students are experiencing this and we have been failing them. She said this needs to be acknowledged and that policies of anti-racism need to be implemented.

Maureen Taravella, 239 Halladay Ave E, said that we must remember the social and emotional health of the children affected by racism. She said implementation of specific steps to protect the black and brown children in Suffield is necessary to protect and nurture their mental health.

Jim Taravella, 239 Halladay Ave E, said it is the job of educators, superintendents, assistant principals and principals to do something to prevent racism.

Sasha Zatyarka, 3340 Phelps Rd, said racism must be named for what it is and must be addressed by the school system. She said it is time to start the difficult, uncomfortable and necessary work to eradicate it.

Ted Ruddock, 15 High St, said it is critical that the BOE have a higher level of transparency. He said the district's reputation should be based on the fact that it is willing to have challenging conversations instead of pushing things aside.

Garry Porter, 490 Hickory St, said there are clear concerns around racism in the Suffield school system. He said children in our district are facing ACEs, acute childhood experiences, relative to racism. He said Dr. Van Tasel and the BOE should engage with concerned parents to find a solution to end racist behavior within the school system and that anything short of that is a bad response.

Suzanne Richardson White, 824 Newgate Rd, said she has been aware of numerous incidents involving racist hate speech in our school system and the lack of a serious response to it. She said the overt racism in the high school, perpetuated by both students and a teacher, clearly shows that what the district is doing is not working.

Annie Hornish, 584 Thrall Ave, said she was speaking on behalf of herself and her husband Neil. She said they felt all Suffield residents should be informed when racist incidents occur in the school system so that residents can see the bigger picture. She said they were concerned that the town was making Freedom of Information requests difficult.

Board Member Comment

- Board member Gazdik thanked everyone who turned out for tonight's meeting to share their thoughts, opinions and concerns.
- Board member Finnigan thanked everyone who attended and those who shared. She said that she is committed to hearing these statements and making sure all students are safe and happy.
- Board member Mol said he appreciated everyone taking the time to come out tonight and express their concerns. He congratulated the students who received the CABA awards and the Valedictorian and Salutatorian for their grades and achievements. He thanked everyone involved in the interview process for the high school principal position.
- Board member Fry complimented the students, and their parents, who received awards this evening. He said May is Asian Pacific American heritage month. He thanked those who came out tonight and shared their personal experiences.
- Board member Cloyd congratulated the students who were recognized this evening and thanked the principal interview committee. She thanked those who provided public comment.
- Board member Antrum congratulated the students who were recognized this evening. He said he understands and hears what the public is saying. He said it is his goal to stop racism and that help is needed from everyone, including administrators, teachers and students.

Reports to the Board

- Superintendent's Report
 - Superintendent Van Tassel thanked the community members who came forward and shared their perspective, and would share more if he could and that it is not always possible. Student matters are protected by FERPA and under the advice of counsel we do not share pending personnel matters.
 - Superintendent Van Tassel said he appreciates the thoughts and ideas being shared.
 - Superintendent Van Tassel said the administration and the BOE remain steadfast in working toward a better future for our all of our students. He said there is room for us to do more.
 - Superintendent Van Tassel said two years ago the DEI Council was developed with parents and faculty representatives. He said the goal was to put forth programming opportunities for faculty and staff and that has occurred over the course of the last two years.
 - Superintendent Van Tassel said the district has engaged with a consultant that specializes in student programming.

- Superintendent Van Tasel said the district and the BOE will work in partnership with the community to address the circumstances that have occurred and to plan for the future.
- Board Chair's Report
 - None
- Business Manager's Report
 - Bill Hoff said the people who spoke this evening were heard and the message was clear that we need to act to move forward.
 - Bill Hoff said food service bids close on May 18, 2022.
 - Bill Hoff said food service meals will not be free next year as that was not included in the Federal budget.
 - Bill Hoff said a bus form will be sent to parents in the next week or so to gauge bus needs for the next school year.
- Board of Selectmen's Report
 - First Selectman Mol congratulated the students recognized this evening.
 - First Selectman Mol thanked the Suffield Sustainability Council for inviting him to the Walk to the Hart last week.
 - First Selectman Mol thanked the entire 10th grade student body and Kyle McCullough, Suffield High School teacher, for giving him the opportunity to speak about local government and capital projects.
 - First Selectman Mol thanked students at McAlister for interviewing him for their news broadcast.
 - First Selectman Mol said the Fiscal Year 2023 budget vote is May 11.
 - First Selectman Mol said the First Annual Suffield Summer Fair is being held June 17-19 behind Suffield Middle School.
- Board of Finance Liaison's Report
 - None

Approval of Minutes

MOTION #22-50: James Mol moved, Tracy Cloyd seconded to approve the Board of Education meeting minutes of April 4, 2022 and April 18, 2022. All members voted in favor. The motion passed **6-0-0**.

Consent Agenda

MOTION #22-51: James Mol moved to approve the consent agenda containing Policy 36144.1 – Exemption from Instruction. Tracy Cloyd seconded the motion. All members voted in favor of approving the consent agenda. The motion passed **6-0-0**.

Discussion/Action Items

- COVID-19 Update
- Dr. Van Tasel said cases have increased and he hopes this is a temporary trend. We will continue to monitor this.

- **March Financial Report**

Business Manager Bill Hoff reported on the projected surplus for the year, state and federal grants, and food service.

- **Family School Liaison Presentation**

Suffield Public Schools Family School Liaison, Keely Lee, shared a presentation on the Family School Liaison position. Key points covered were roles and responsibilities, outreach, truancy data, support data and SEL support. Board members held discussion around how students are identified, the caseload and how Suffield compares to other districts. Board members discussed the importance of this role and thanked Ms. Lee for her presentation.

- **Discussion and Possible Action on the purchase of Spanish textbooks for Suffield High and Middle School.**

Devlyn Bent, Suffield Middle School World Language Teacher, said the current Spanish textbooks are from the year 2000. The Spanish Department reviewed eight textbooks before selecting this one. It was determined this was the best choice for students as it was updated, culturally connected to the 21st century and provided better examples that currently relate to the students.

MOTION #22-52: All members voted in favor of the purchase of Spanish textbooks for Suffield High School and Suffield Middle School. The motion carried **6-0-0**.

- **Discussion and Possible Action on the appointment of Suffield High School Principal Superintendent Van Tassel** said BOE members had the opportunity to meet with the recommended hire and that it was a tremendous honor to bring forth candidate Carrie Apanovitch.

MOTION #22-53: James Mol moved to appoint Carrie Apanovitch to the position of Principal of Suffield High School and authorize the Superintendent to complete the terms of employment. Brian Fry seconded the motion. Board members discussed what an excellent interview process it was. Board members appreciated having all stakeholders involved in the process. The Board was enthusiastic about Ms. Apanovitch's leadership abilities and expressed confidence in her ability to do a great job. The motion carried **6-0-0**.

Subcommittee Reports

- April 21 – Policy – To be discussed at a future meeting.

Board Liaison Reports

- CREC – None
- Agriscience – Board member Fry said a group of SHS AgSci students attended AgDay at the Capital. He said the Agriculture, Mechanics and Technology Team received first place at the State competition, the first time in Suffield history. The team will attend the national competition in Indianapolis in November. Board member Fry said a group of students will attend the spring Career Development Event at the University of Connecticut on May 15. He said Molly Katzman, Class of 2023, was selected to attend the FFA Next Generation Conference in June. He said freshman AgSci students planned and participated in a day of service at Sunrise Park. He said the FFA Award Ceremony is being held on May 19.

- CABE – Board member Finnigan will be attending the Legislative Wrap Up next week.

Future Business

Future Business items:

- Student Achievement Review
- Special Education Transition Program, 504 Profile
- Nursing Review
- World Language Program Review

Public Comment

Cynthia Jennings, address not provided, congratulated the students who were recognized. She said students are our legacy and what has been said and done in Suffield schools has created a real problem and threat. She said the legislature passed a bill that said racism is a public health issue. She said it is possible to end racism in SPS. She said the district needs to develop a legal strategic plan to cope with racism, bullying, hate crimes, discrimination and retaliation. She said parents should be trained on how to access free services from Federal and State agencies relative to hate crimes and civil offenses. She said parents and students should also be trained on DCF, mandated reporting, how to file a Freedom of Information Request and how to contact police.

Amy Hawkins, 57 Third St, said SPS is harming brown and black families. She said it is time to commit to making significant changes that create powerful impacts for our black and brown students. She said a policy is needed that specifically protects students from all manifestations of racism. She said a culture of accountability is needed.

Abdilaziz Wehelie, 975 Thrall Ave, said the language he has heard regarding racism is selfish, insensitive and offensive. He said change is necessary and asked the Board where they were in the process.

Ash Richardson-White, 824 Newgate Rd, said they moved here in 5th grade. They shared their experiences of witnessing discrimination in SPS. They said a clear and actionable plan is needed now to protect BIPOC students in our school system. They said teacher training is needed. They said direct anti-bias, anti-racist, anti-ableism and anti-homophobia talks need to occur with students directly in classrooms, during Wildcat, during study halls or during first period at least once a month because it is a worsening problem.

Sonia Hill, 783 Mather St, said she graduated from SHS in 2004. She said students are trying to form a Black Student Union at SHS and she would like the BOE and Superintendent to empower these students. She said she would like parents of color included when discussing types of supports needed when dealing with racial disparity and to review the strategic plan. She would like to invite everyone to the Suffield Summer Fair, which ends on Juneteenth.

Tom Frenaye, 489 Watertown Rd, said the district needs to communicate with the entire community about what is going on in the school system. He said he was shocked by recent

events within SPS. He said the Board of Selectman has a responsibility as well because there are problems of racism within parts of the community.

Andi Prusi, 3925 Phelps Road, said racial trauma is real and is occurring daily in our schools. She said she was hopeful when the DEI Council was formed. She said clear standards need to be laid out and students need to be held accountable. She said the victims of these acts should not be asked to repeatedly relive their trauma and that the onus needs to be on the aggressors. She said any employee using slurs or insults regarding race or gender should be terminated immediately without exception. She implores the BOE to engage in real dialogue and to create a plan to combat bigotry and hate in our schools.

Dr. Cassandre Victor-Vega, 2 Melrose Ln, read a letter from an AWS parent whose second grade student was traumatized by racial comments. The letter said to please educate children on how to respect others regardless of differences. The letter said kindness, compassion, integrity and respectful actions define us not our looks. She said she was trying to partner with the district and that people are suffering and voices need to be heard. She said she is asking for accountability and safety in our schools and implores the BOE to give this serious thought and action.

Board Member Comment

- Board members Gazdik, Finnigan and Mol thanked everyone who came out to speak and to listen.
- Board member Fry suggested policy be reviewed.
- Board member Cloyd thanked all who came out. She said she attended a field trip with the 10th grade Civics class to the Capital and thanked teachers Kyle McCullough and Paul Dumais for organizing.
- Board member Antrum thanked everyone who provided public comment.

Adjournment

Brian Fry moved, James Mol seconded to adjourn the meeting at 9:00 p.m. All members voted in favor.

Click here to view the meeting: [02MAY2022 BOE Recording](#)

Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of June 6, 2022.

Respectfully submitted,

Melissa Finnigan
Board of Education