

April 20, 2020

SCRANTON, PENNSYLVANIA

The Scranton School Board of Directors held a Special Meeting for the specific purpose of the Board Vacancy on Monday, April 20, 2020 at 5:30pm via Zoom Conferencing.

President Gilmartin called the meeting to order at 5:34pm with a Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

Roll Call: By the Secretary.

Present: Directors Cruz, Fox, Hume, Malloy, McAndrew, Welby, Yanni and President Gilmartin.

Absent: All Present.

President Gilmartin announced the purpose of the meeting and has been duly advertised.

At this time Solicitor Audi explained that the position appointed this evening will hold until December, 2021 which is immediately following the November election and at that point whoever wins the November election and gets appointed in December will hold that position for the duration of this vacant term that we are filling this evening which is Mr. Tom Schuster's vacancy; that will hold until 2023 because it's a four year term.

Mr. Audi asked if there were any questions on the duration of the seat we are filling this evening.

Public Comment

Rosemary Boland, SFT President, expressed her concern that we are appointing people to vacant seats for the people who ran for election, were elected by the voters and are not fulfilling their term. Ms. Boland also expressed concern from the last voting meeting with regards to conflicts of board members relationships with preschool organizations.

President Gilmartin asked that the two candidates leave the zoom session at this time and for Mr. Audi to explain the process this evening.

Solicitor Audi explained that these are very unusual times and the candidates will be asked to leave the "room" and they will be interviewed one at a time and we will go on the honor system as we don't know any other way to do this. Mr. Audi believes we will interview in alphabetical order which means Mrs. Dempsey will interview first, followed by Ms. Viola. Mr. Audi would ask that Ms. Viola, while she is waiting, to not tune in to the webinar which is being simulcast to witness the interview with Mrs. Dempsey so she would not have the advantage to hear the questions or answers.

Ms. Viola agreed to leave the call and Mrs. Orr, Board Secretary will call Ms. Viola to let her know she is able to rejoin the zoom webinar.

President Gilmartin now asked Mrs. Michelle Dempsey to address the board.

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Mrs. Dempsey is a mother of four children in the Scranton School District and wife of a dedicated math teacher at West Scranton High School.

Mrs. Dempsey has worked in the online education industry for the last seventeen years and spoke of her experience in budgeting and her love of data and statistical analysis. Mrs. Dempsey is currently a Senior Business Intelligence Specialist and feels very strongly about becoming more deeply involved and is completely vested in the Scranton School District. Mrs. Dempsey promises to operate with respect, integrity and transparency and ultimately wants to be an advocate for change that will lead the Scranton School District through the recovery plan.

Director McAndrew asked what motivated Mrs. Dempsey to apply.

Mrs. Dempsey responded that she attended the meeting when Mr. McAndrew was appointed, and at the last work session she felt empowered and thought maybe she could be a part of this change. Mrs. Dempsey said she knows the recovery process is going to be difficult and would like to be part of the post recovery process and work towards developing the five year plan that has to be defined to PDE. Mrs. Dempsey said it is exciting to her and wants to be a part of the change and also said the dynamic on the board feels different than prior boards and for her it feels like the right time.

Director Hume asked Mrs. Dempsey what she would bring to the existing board, her skills and accomplishments and relationships in the community.

Mrs. Dempsey has a background in online education and the perspective of student experience in the classroom working with her children from Kindergarten through 8th grade and has experience with the curriculum that they worked with and she has worked with their teachers and feels she could bring that perspective across multiple levels of academics. She has the elementary experience, the middle school experience and next year she will have that high school level with the analytical viewpoint that she does on a daily basis.

Director Yanni asked Mrs. Dempsey what she feels are the top priorities in the Scranton School District at this time.

Mrs. Dempsey said that we're obviously in recovery and will have to prove they are fiscally responsible, have to get to financial solvency and figure out a way to move forward and thoughtfully implement the recovery plan. Mrs. Dempsey said they also have to be willing to look at the big picture, what we're doing with the recovery plan, and how the plan is going to impact us when we are going into post recovery. Mrs. Dempsey added that we have to look at whether we are setting a foundation on which we can build and she thinks that is one of the most paramount issues facing the district right now in terms of not just what we're doing right now, but looking to five years from now, and how we are going to continue this progress, maintain fiscal responsibility and rebuild our reputation in the community.

Director Yanni also asked if Mrs. Dempsey would consider running for election and Mrs. Dempsey said she would as long as she has the blessing from her children and her husband.

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Director Fox asked Mrs. Dempsey how the roles and responsibilities of the school board directors alter when a district is in recovery like the Scranton School District is.

Mrs. Dempsey said it depends on the severity; we are in moderate recovery status so they have a little bit more flexibility than some of the other districts she is familiar with like the Reading School District, adding that we have a little bit more insight into working with Dr. Finan, she seems to be very receptive to some ideas we might have but ultimately right now their role is to work with Dr. Finan and to implement the recovery plan, see it through so that they can get to a place where they're financially solvent and that we brought up the scores in terms of the state testing so that we're not below the state average and we show academic progress. Mrs. Dempsey believes this board is going to be responsible for developing the five year post recovery plan and has to be conscience of the future of the district as well as the current recovery.

Director Welby asked Mrs. Dempsey what she feels would be her biggest challenge as a board member.

Mrs. Dempsey said probably learning all of the ins and outs of what it takes to be a board member. Mrs. Dempsey said she's been attending meetings and the friendly amendments and "on the question" can be a little daunting but ultimately she is more excited than nervous or concerned. Mrs. Dempsey feels she is a fast learner and knows there will be some hard decisions but as long as she can make an educated decision that she has the data and information available so she can make a sound decision based on data and fact. Mrs. Dempsey knows making the decision is easy but living with the decision can be difficult but thinks that is something you face in life anyway and she is prepared for that.

Director Cruz thanked Mrs. Dempsey for her willingness to step forward at this time and asked how she believes board decisions should be made; based on data and research, sentimentality and public opinion or a combination of both.

Mrs. Dempsey said she is a data person and inherently does her research and is more of a fact based person. Mrs. Dempsey said she is able to listen to constituents' wants and needs and at the same time can make an educated decision that is responsible.

President Gilmartin now asked Mrs. Dempsey to leave the session and Mrs. Orr will contact her when she may rejoin.

Director Welby now said that she will be asking Mr. Audi about the potential conflict of interest with Mrs. Dempsey's husband working in the district.

Mr. Audi said they will address that.

Ms. Amber Viola now rejoined the meeting and addressed the board.

Ms. Viola thanked the board for this opportunity and she is currently a student at Marywood University and will be graduating next month and in the summer going on to get her Master's degree in Social Work. Ms. Viola served in the U.S. Navy for 8 years and received a lot of managerial experience whether in budget and finance, managing multimillion dollar buildings and equipment and she was also an instructor of

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approximately 600 students. Ms. Viola said while in the military she learned she has a heart for service and wanted to serve her community and became a victim advocate and started working with sexual assault victims and for her it showed her how much of an impact everyone has on each other and when people are struggling it affects everyone.

Ms. Viola has a 3 year old daughter who will be starting Preschool this year and she remembers her mother was very involved in her education and she wants to be that for her daughter and involved in her schooling to make sure she has a good education and also be involved for the sake of the community and serve.

Ms. Viola said there are a lot of under privileged kids in Scranton and she thinks not all of their voices are being heard and she wants to lend a voice to those children and their families and to be an example for them.

Ms. Viola said she loves this city, it has been amazing for her and she wants to do the same for the younger generation and hopes they have the same experiences she did and wants to help impact that.

Director McAndrew thanked Ms. Viola for her service and asked why Ms. Viola applied for this opening and if she would be willing to run for election after this appointment ends.

Ms. Viola said she would be willing to run for election in the future and her reasons for applying is that she has a 3 year old daughter and she was planning to enroll her into school here, was excited about it and as a mom she started getting more involved and she wants to help as she is one of the parents whose child is in private daycare and though she can afford it right now she wants to make sure that everyone else has the same opportunity she does. With her service in the military and now working with local veterans in the community and for her as a mother, social worker and a veteran she applied for this appointment and wants to help the community.

Director Hume thanked Ms. Viola for stepping forward and asked what skills and accomplishments and her own self and character does she feel would complement the existing members of this board and what contribution she would make that would be unique.

Ms. Viola thinks she could bring a different perspective just being an African American woman and also a single mother, she is raising a daughter on her own and that in itself is a set of circumstances of challenges, triumphs and victories and that is definitely a voice that needs to be heard in this area because there are people who are just like her out there and that needs to be heard. Ms. Viola is also a social worker and thinks that set of skills would help in this low income urban school district.

Ms. Viola responded that aside from the challenges we're facing now with COVID-19 she thinks there is old infrastructure that is falling apart with the asbestos and lead issues as well as graduation rates have fallen and it is important to her to keep high school students engaged and that they want to stay in school, graduate, go on to college in Scranton and become amazing members of society.

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Ms. Viola really wants more social workers involved because there is not enough parental engagement and most students in the district are at poverty level and are at a disadvantage which is a concern for Ms. Viola because sadly for those students, education is not the first thing on their mind going to school in the morning; it is survival and where can they get warm and get something to eat.

Director Fox asked, to her knowledge, how the role and responsibility of a school board director alters when a district is in recovery like the Scranton School District is.

Ms. Viola said from what she has read and heard is that the board works under Dr. Finan and she is in charge, in control and has the final say in decisions so as a board collectively, they are to follow the recovery plan with her but amendments can be made and there are ways for everyone to be involved and if they do not follow the recovery plan then the school district goes into receivership with the state and the board has no say and loses all contracts.

Director Welby asked what she feels would be her biggest challenge as a board member.

Ms. Viola said the same challenges she faces with every endeavor she chooses to conquer is bringing her 3 year old along with her because she is a single mother and balancing their schedules would be her biggest challenge. Ms. Viola added that the learning curve would be a challenge and she is willing to study and learn from fellow board members to make sure she knows what she is doing.

Director Cruz thanked Ms. Viola for applying at this time and asked how she believes board decisions should be made; based on data and research, sentimentality and public opinion or a combination of both.

Ms. Viola thinks it has to be a combination of both because you can look at numbers but numbers don't tell the whole story which is why qualitative research is important because you need the stories behind the numbers for example the reasons behind trancies; it could be transportation or other needs the children don't have. Ms. Viola thinks data is important because you need that to create an action plan to move forward but in order to conquer those challenges you have to know what the underlying issues are.

President Gilmartin thanked Ms. Viola and once again asked her to leave the call and we will reach out to her shortly to rejoin.

Ms. Gilmartin now asked board members to text their candidate choice to Mrs. Orr who will share the choices with Mr. Paul Dougherty and Mrs. Sarah Hall, and will come back to them but before Mrs. Orr gives them the person who they will vote, they will address the potential conflict of interest and understand that when both candidates are back in the meeting.

Director Malloy asked if there is an "On the Question" following the interviews.

Ms. Gilmartin explained there is an "On the Question" when we essentially nominate the first person.

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Mrs. Orr received tallied the results, shared the results with Mr. Dougherty and Mrs. Hall and contacted both candidates to rejoin the meeting.

After confirming both candidates reconnected, Director Welby asked Mr. Audi to provide some clarification regarding Mrs. Dempsey's husband teaching in the district and whether it is a conflict of interest or not.

Mr. Audi said there is absolutely no conflict of interest with Mrs. Dempsey serving as a board member while her spouse is employed by the district. Mr. Audi added the only conflict that would be apparent is if Mrs. Dempsey either participated in negotiations or was in the room while the board was discussing negotiations as that would hamper other board member's ability to speak freely. Mr. Audi further said other than that, it has been approved by the Ethics Commission for spouses to sit on a board.

Ms. Gilmartin asked Mrs. Orr for the tally.

Mrs. Orr announced the tally is six for Mrs. Dempsey, 2 for Ms. Viola.

Ms. Gilmartin asked for a motion for Mrs. Dempsey.

Director McAndrew made a motion, seconded by Director Malloy.

ON THE QUESTION:

Director Cruz thanked both candidates for stepping forward at this critical time. Ms. Cruz nominated Ms. Viola because she not only possesses the intelligence, knowledge and partiality needed at this time but in a district where more than half of our students come from culturally diverse backgrounds and many students have experienced or are experiencing some form of trauma she believes her personal and professional attributes would bring a much needed perspective to this board and will allow students to begin to see themselves reflected in our districts leadership and for this reason she will be voting no on this nomination.

Director Malloy told Ms. Viola that she is an extremely impressive candidate and he wishes they were filling two seats this evening and he asked that when there is another opening or at the next election that she please consider putting herself forward.

Director Welby echoed Director Malloy and asked that she please consider running in the next election because she will be a great candidate.

Director Hume said they have two outstanding candidates and while she knows Mrs. Dempsey will bring a great deal to the board, she will be voting no because she thinks as a board, they have passed up an opportunity to add a member to this board that brings diversity and can represent the underrepresented group of people in this district. Ms. Hume added there is a heavy African American presence and thinks Ms. Viola is an outstanding candidate and the board has ignored the possibility of what Ms. Viola could have brought to the board.

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President Gilmartin echoed the rest of the board members comments and expressed to Ms. Viola that she has twice felt what she is feeling this evening and thinks this community needs to get to know her and that she needs to run, she needs to learn all there is to learn about this district and the citizens and this community need to have the opportunity to talk with Ms. Viola and learn everything there is to learn about her and what she can bring to the table. Ms. Gilmartin hopes to see Ms. Viola's name in the running for the next election and wished her all the best.

The motion to appoint Mrs. Michelle Dempsey passed with six (6) affirmative and two (2) negative. Directors Cruz and Hume voted in the negative.

At this time, Mr. Audi swore in Mrs. Dempsey to the Scranton School Board.

There being no further business a motion to adjourn was made by Director Welby, seconded by Director Cruz and the meeting adjourned at 6:53pm.

By: _____
Secretary