

April 30, 2015

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on Thursday, April 30, 2015 in the Board Room of the high school.

- Call to Order** President Phelan called the meeting to order at 6:20 p.m. A roll call indicated the following members were present: Thomas F. Cofsky, Dr. Steve Gevinson, Dr. Ralph H. Lee, Sharon Patchak Layman, John Phelan and Jeff Weissglass. Also in attendance was Steven T. Isoye, Superintendent; Tod Altenburg, Chief School Business Official; Michael Carioscio, Chief Information Officer; Amy Hill, Director of Assessment and Learning; Philip M. Prale, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction; Nathaniel L. Rouse, Principal; and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/Clerk of the Board.
- Visitors** Board elect Jennifer Cassell, Sara Dixon Spivy, Fred Arkin; and Kevin Peppard and Tom Layman, community members.
- Public Comments** Kevin Peppard, resident of 715 Thomas, Oak Park, thanked Ms. Patchak-Layman for her years of service on the OPRFHS Board of Education. He read “Years ago, he learned about the legend of Cassandra who was a tragic figure in Greek Mythology. Cassandra was granted the power of unerring prophesy by Apollo, but when she refused his advances, was spat upon by him, and cursed that she was never to be believed. That matches the story of Ms. Patchak-Layman to a tee. She never gave into anyone’s seductive political lures, and was fiercely independent. At times, she was scoffed at, but her policy suggestions were later heeded, or will be. She warned of the District’s excessive accumulation of cash. Her position on where to put the pool, which had received meager support once, was what actually happened. She wanted to move the discipline system away from pure punitive measures long ago. To honor Sharon, I am going to engage upon what I call the Cassandra Project”. Sharon once asked this District, “What if we reduced the tax levy to the minimum this year? What would the long term projection look like?” She was told, “that would take four hours of work.” She replied, “That should only involve a few mouse clicks.” She was refused, because the District does not have its own financial model, and has to go outside to have its simple Excel computations done. That is rank incompetency. The Cassandra Project will give ordinary citizens and the press better information.”
- Personnel Recommendations** Mr. Phelan moved to approve the personnel recommendations as presented including new hires, call backs, resignation, retirement, and status change; seconded by Dr. Lee. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.
- Open & Closed Minutes** Mr. Phelan moved to approve the Open and Closed Minutes of April 23 and 27, 2015 and a declaration that the closed session audiotapes of October 2013 are destroyed and a declaration that the closed session minutes from January 1, 1987 through April 2015 shall remain closed; seconded by Dr. Lee. A roll call vote resulted in five ayes and one nay. Ms. Patchak-Layman voted nay. Motion carried.

**Acknowledgement of
Canvass of Vote**

Mr. Phelan moved to acknowledge the election of the following new Board of Education members who would be installed in the organization meeting to follow: Fred Arkin, Jennifer Cassell, and Sara Dixon Spivy; seconded by Dr. Lee. A voice vote resulted in all ayes.

**Recognition of
Retiring Board of
Education Members**

Dr. Isoye recognized Ms. Patchak-Layman, Dr. Lee, and Mr. Phelan for their years of service on the Board of Education. Collectively, they gave 20 years to the District. They served as officers, committee chairs, liaisons and spokespersons for the District, and challenged the administration in its work. There was never a doubt that the students came first no matter whether it was policy, TIF, instruction or discipline. The focus was the students. As superintendent he knew them differently because not only was he in the Board room with them but he meets with them individually. They have a passion for OPRFHS and for the students.

Mr. Weissglass spoke of his appreciation for what he had learned from Ms. Patchak-Layman, and her perspective on the school's history. He found it valuable. He admired her commitment to principles and the principle of equal access to education and he noted that he would do his best to carry that forward.

Mr. Weissglass met Dr. Lee through the Collaboration on Early Childhood Care and Education and his help in moving the District toward its commitment with that entity. Mr. Weissglass appreciated Dr. Lee's continued devotion to that as well as his perspective of the Board's history. Both of them worked on many projects together and the one thing he took from Dr. Lee was his perspective on race relations in the school.

Mr. Weissglass found saying thank you and goodbye to Mr. Phelan was difficult. He had learned so much and he appreciated the work Mr. Phelan brought to this Board of Education. He found that Mr. Phelan's commitment to building trust within this institution, within the bodies of Oak Park and River Forest, and the foundation he left was incredible. Mr. Weissglass learned about leading meetings and admired Mr. Phelan's graciousness in acknowledging differing points of view through the public comments, Board of Education members, staff members, all the while recognizing their deep passions. He expressed his deep gratitude for all that Mr. Phelan had given to the community.

Mr. Cofsky appreciated and was always remember Ms. Patchak-Layman's insight, her deep passion for students, and her representation of the community. He appreciated Dr. Lee's perspective as a former teacher and for keeping the long-term at the forefront of conversations. Mr. Cofsky thanked and applauded Mr. Phelan for his leadership, acknowledging the tremendous challenge of hearing all of the opinions, bringing consensus to the diverse interests. He had learned much. The Board of Education should remember Mr. Phelan's experience in the future as the Board of Education will now have much inexperience. All of the retiring Board of Education members will be missed.

Dr. Gevinson reflected that he did not know of anyone who had been more conscious or committed to board work than Ms. Patchak-Layman. It was awe-inspiring, deeply caring, and an unflagging commitment to the school. In his mind no one could match Ms. Patchak-Layman's service.

He had enjoyed listening to Dr. Lee mind at work since being colleagues on the faculty, as it is original and courageous. Since becoming a Board of Education member, he appreciated it much more with regard to the long view. Dr. Lee has given much thought to how people work together and to student behavior both academically and socially. Dr. Lee is deliberate in his independent thinking and the Board of Education will not be the same.

Dr. Gevinson was enormously impressed with Mr. Phelan's leadership. He has been one of the most effective leaders, he is really smart, and he pursued keeping the District on sound financial footing.

Dr. Lee reflected on one of the most memorable times for him was the debate the Board of Education had in 2008 about whether dealing with the achievement gap should be a top priority for the District with one expert from Northwestern University showing why there should not be any discussion about race: the goal should be to be one color. While Dr. Lee felt that was nice, he did not believe it reflected reality. Several years the Board of Education determined that racial inequities should be a discussion. For that he was grateful to all of the Board of Education members with whom he had served.

Ms. Patchak-Layman made the following statement: "Many have called my departure from the school board a retirement. That terminology just seems too old for me. My mother is 93 still traveling and raking her own leaves, so by my family standard, I'm still pretty young. I think I'd rather define this change as graduation. Graduation was one of my favorite activities as a board member. It was an opportunity to hear students remember their past and get excited about their future. So, I think I will join the graduating class of 2015. Having spent the last 16 years in school, I believe I've now completed the equivalent of a college degree in school policy and community service. And like many graduates, who are reluctant to leave, and need a gentle push to move on, I thank the community for giving me that little push. Bittersweet, for sure, but understood.

"And in true graduate fashion, let me reminisce. As many of you know, I started my Board service with District 97. In 1999, I was a candidate for the Board on the same ballot as the referendum to build new middle schools. After much research on school size, programs and finance, I opposed the building of the new schools. The community approved the referendum 51-49. I was elected. It was a long time ago now, the schools are built and a new IB program is starting. But how I prepared for those board meetings continues to this day. I research each agenda item, ask questions and talk with parents, community and staff and listen, especially to those who felt that no one heard them.

"Years ago I read an article in Education Week by an author who said it was the job of a school board to ask questions on behalf of the community. I took that advice to heart. I always hoped that by asking a question, it would beg a new question by a Board member and the conversation would begin. Sometimes this happened. Sometimes not. I recently reread this article published in Education Week. 'A Culture of Questions' by John Ramsey, who at the time was a school board member in Minnesota. In his comments, he stated 'Boards are elected to ask questions and deliberate about the quality of the answers to those questions.

Questions trigger the process by which a community can come to understand its school. Absent the questions, the data, the reasoning, and the consideration, a district becomes so many factions of disgruntled taxpayers, rather than a community of informed citizens.’

“Like all school board members, I came on the Board to provide the best education for each of our students. I was fortunate in that I had taught preschool, worked with elementary students and supervised teens. I could understand the facets of childhood development. I had done community work in city neighborhoods. I recognized, felt and saw the imbalance between races and class. I knew how to read a budget and the school code. I thought I had the knowledge. But I was mistaken.

“My education and understanding really expanded when I started to learn from these passionate student and family advocates. I am forever grateful for the guidance I received from Wyanetta Johnson, Burcy Hines, Kimberly Werner, Mary Bird Murphy and Lynda Puckett.

“My education and understanding expanded again during the work on the strategic plan with our faculty and staff team members. And with faculty and administrators during the CCAR summits and conferences. And every time a student, teacher or staff spoke during public comment.

“I want to extend my thanks and appreciation for the work done by each employee in the district. It is a complete package, one employee group cannot do their job without the help and support of every other employee group.

“I want to thank my fellow board members, the administrators and staff that have sat with me around this table. You have provided me with an excellent education. One that I will treasure. Thank you for continuing to support and nurture our students.

“I want to thank the communities of Oak Park and River Forest for supporting me during my 4 terms as a school board member. It has been a privilege to work for you in service to this community.

“I want to thank my husband Tom and my children. Their everyday has been defined by my school board meetings and school events. And they have gone along without complaint.

“And finally, I extend to the new board members, good luck, work hard and enjoy.

“What will my future hold as I “graduate”? Besides a clean sweep of hundreds of board packets from my house, I will continue to advocate for a just and fair educational system, to help student and family advocates navigate the educational system, increase the speed of institutional change for schools and count down the remaining days until the TIFs end in Oak Park and all educational tax dollars go to schools for students and not the village of Oak Park bank account.”

While Mr. Phelan choose not to run for the Board of Education again, his department was not less sad: It is bittersweet. When one retires he/she gets their time back, but being on the Board of Education is an extraordinary opportunity to have these discussions.

Mr. Phelan thanked Ms. Kalmerton who has done an exceptional job of keeping the Board of Education prepared, on task, and preparing the minutes. He also thanked Dr. Isoye for his tremendous work to the District and to the school. His leadership style, while not what is expected by some, fits the school well with all of its diverse and outspoken perspectives. He thanked the administrators who have done tremendous work and who have helped the District and the school continue. He, too, thanked all of the Board of Education members for their extraordinary and diverse skills and for following their agreements. They are interested in the students, and interested in hearing the opinions of others. He thanked the new members who will continue the service to improve the institution for as long as the people in the community value it, and care for it. That is what the new members are stepping up to do and he was grateful.

Adjournment

At 6:52 p.m., Mr. Phelan moved to adjourn the Special Board Meeting; seconded by Dr. Lee. A voice vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.

John Phelan
President

Dr. Jackie Moore
Secretary