

MINUTES OF THE WORK SESSION
OF THE TENAFLY BOARD OF EDUCATION
MONDAY EVENING, JUNE 7, 2021

TENAFLY HIGH SCHOOL MEDIA CENTER
VIRTUAL MEETING VIA ZOOM VIDEO CONFERENCE

*Motion to go into Closed Session at 6:00 p.m.
Moved: Ms. Juhng Second: Mr. Aronson
All in Favor*

1. **Closed Session**

Be it Resolved, that the Tenafly Board of Education determines it is necessary to meet in Closed Session on June 7, 2021 to discuss Legal, Personnel and Student matters; and
Be it Further Resolved, that these matters will be made public when the need for confidentiality no longer exists.

*Motion to go adjourn into Open Session at 7:58 p.m.
Moved: Ms. Juhng Second: Mr. Salaski
All in Favor*

2. **Open Session**

The public meeting was called to order at 8:06 p.m. by Board President Jocelyn Schwarz

3. **Call to Order/Adequate Notice Statement/ Roll Call/Pledge of Allegiance**

Board President Jocelyn Schwarz read the following statement:

In accordance with the Open Public Meetings, N.J.S.A. 10:4-6 et. seq., adequate notification of this meeting has been provided by having the date, time and place thereof posted in the Board of Education Hegelein Building, the Borough office, Tenafly Public Library, the local press and on the district's web site.

The following Board members were present:

| <i>Board Member</i> | <i>Present</i> | <i>Absent</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Mark Aronson | X | |
| Inbal Israeli Miller | X | |
| Michelle Merchant | X | |
| Yelena Meytes | X | |
| Paula Newman | X | |
| Edward J. Salaski | X | |
| Michael Wilderman | X | |
| Jane Juhng, Vice President | X | |
| Jocelyn Schwarz, President | X | |

4. **Board President Report** – see attached
5. **Trustee Inbal Israeli-Miller Statement** – see attached
6. **Superintendent Report** – see attached

ADMINISTRATION

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| RESOLUTION A-1 | APPROVAL OF THE SUSPENSION OF BYLAW 0164 |
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7. **Resolution to Suspend Bylaw 0164**

ADMINISTRATION

RESOLUTION A-1 APPROVAL OF THE SUSPENSION OF BYLAW 0164

BE IT RESOLVED that the Board hereby suspends the agenda requirements set forth in Bylaw 0164 to combine the two public sessions into a single public session to afford the public ample time to address the Board this evening.

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|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| <i>Resolution – A-1</i> | | | | |
| <i>Moved: Ms. Juhng</i> | | | <i>Second: Ms. Newman</i> | |
| <i>Board Member</i> | <i>Ayes</i> | <i>Nays</i> | <i>Abstain</i> | <i>Absent</i> |
| Mark Aronson | X | | | |
| Inbal Israeli Miller | X | | | |
| Michelle Merchant | X | | | |
| Yelena Meytes | X | | | |
| Paula Newman | X | | | |
| Edward J. Salaski | X | | | |
| Michael Wilderman | X | | | |
| Jane Juhng, Vice President | X | | | |
| Jocelyn Schwarz, President | X | | | |

8. **Public Comment – Agenda Items and Non-Agenda Items**

- Due to the overwhelming statements and comments for this meeting – please view the video on the TPS website.

PERSONNEL

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| RESOLUTION P-1 | APPROVAL OF THE APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRINCIPAL AT MAUGHAM SCHOOL |
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PERSONNEL

RESOLUTION P-1 APPROVAL OF THE APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRINCIPAL AT MAUGHAM SCHOOL

BE IT RESOLVED that the Board approves Heidi Chizzik, who holds the appropriate NJ Administrative credential, to serve as the Acting Principal of Maugham School, effective June 7, 2021, at a salary of \$130,000 pro rata.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that Ms. Chizzik will return to her Staff Developer-Gifted and Talented position upon the conclusion of this reclassification.

| <i>Resolution – P-1</i> | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| <i>Moved: Ms. Meytes</i> | | | <i>Second: Dr. Wilderman</i> | |
| <i>Board Member</i> | <i>Ayes</i> | <i>Nays</i> | <i>Abstain</i> | <i>Absent</i> |
| Mark Aronson | | X | | |
| Inbal Israeli Miller | X | | | |
| Michelle Merchant | X | | | |
| Yelena Meytes | X | | | |
| Paula Newman | X | | | |
| Edward J. Salaski | X | | | |
| Michael Wilderman | X | | | |
| Jane Juhng, Vice President | X | | | |
| Jocelyn Schwarz, President | X | | | |

Meeting adjourned at 10:25 p.m.
Moved: Ms. Meytes Second: Ms. Juhng
All in Favor

Respectfully submitted,

Shauna C. DeMarco

Shauna C. DeMarco
 Acting Board Secretary

Superintendent's Report

Thanks Jocelyn and Board Trustees. And thanks to all of you for being here this evening.

I want to echo a few of the key points Jocelyn just made and add a little more detail on what we are doing to address this incredibly unfortunate, and very serious, series of events.

I too would like to apologize to the community, to our parents and families, to the Jewish community members, and to the family involved. The school system did not serve this community as it should have in this instance, and for that I am truly sorry.

I also want to say that I am sorry for the lack of clarity in our communication on June 1st, as that communication was indeed premature. While based on the facts as we knew them to be at that time, the communication led to the belief that the situation was being excused and the investigation concluded. This was not the case at all.

Let me add a little more information and context around what happened in the early days of the investigation. Three of our important guiding principles as we embarked on a mission to understand what happened were (1) to maintain the integrity of the fact-finding review while communicating with the community (2) to uphold all privacy right laws and (3) to protect the child at the center of a barrage of national media attention.

In attempting to execute those goals, we issued a statement last Tuesday which was based on the facts as we understood them at the time. It was clear very early on that the child who completed the project did not have any anti-Semitic intent behind it, so the Board and I were eager to communicate that and attempt to stop much of the vitriol directed at this young person, particularly on social media outlets. All I can say is that our statement clearly missed the mark, and upset a lot of you and that is the last thing we wanted and we feel terribly about it. Again, I am sorry about that.

But after more work, more interviews and more investigating, it was clear that action needed to be taken. As I said in my letter Thursday, in an attempt to individualize the project, the child received instructions from the teacher that were inconsistent with our curriculum. And the principal allowed the offensive work to remain displayed publicly, after knowing the offensive effect it was having on members of the school community. As soon as that became clear, we took the appropriate action to suspend both educators pending the outcome of the ongoing investigation.

Because the investigation remains ongoing, we are limited as far as specifics of what we can share. It's important we make it very clear that this was not an act of antisemitism. This was a project that went sideways because of inappropriate instruction and poor judgement at the school. What happened was inexcusable, and as Jocelyn said, the hard work of fully understanding what happened and how we will make sure it never happens again remains ongoing.

Trustee Israeli Miller's Report

When I first learned about the exposure of some of our elementary school students to Holocaust-related content, I was horrified, especially given the context in which this content was presented.

I was born and raised in Israel, a 3rd generation to Holocaust survivors. All four of my grandparents had lost their entire families during the Holocaust and have suffered great torture themselves under the Nazi regime.

I do not remember the first time I've learned about the Holocaust, simply because I cannot remember a time in my life in which I did not know about the Holocaust – I was born into the memory of the Holocaust, the painful memory of all the family members we have lost there, the heroic ways in which my grandparents were able to survive that horror, and the unwavering determination to remember and not forget - NEVER AGAIN!

I remember the effects this intimate knowledge of the Holocaust had on me as a young child. I am proud of the sensitive way our district introduces the Holocaust to our students at the middle school. As upset as I was to hear this topic was discussed at the elementary school, it was clear to me from the very first moment that the child who presented it was not to blame, and neither were her parents.

We've learned about this whole ordeal on the Friday of memorial day weekend – a 4-day weekend in our district, during which our schools are out of session and our teachers and staff have legal time off. It was clear that this was a frailty of those in our school who let it happen, and that we would need to wait for school to resume on Tuesday for us to be able to properly investigate the situation. It was also clear that our students were not in any present or immediate danger, and no harm would come to them from our district while we take the necessary time to investigate.

Never in my worst nightmares would I have imagined that adult residents of this town will endanger the wellbeing of our student by wreaking havoc on social media and crying Antisemitism where there weren't any. Trust me, if there was a whiff of Antisemitism, we would have been all over it.

These are children's lives we are dealing with, and they need to be dealt with caution and confidentiality, which is why we, as a district, operate discretely every time we need to investigate an incident. Our students' lives are not to be handled through social media, definitely not by an angry mass of people who spin themselves into a tornado!

Never in my wildest nightmares would I imagine that adult residents of our peaceful town would, in the name of righteousness, bring upon us local media to lurk outside our schools and enhance the wrath of individuals all across the world, which would bring potential harm to an entire elementary school which needed to be assessed for safety by the Tenafly Police Department and the Bergen County Sheriff's K-9 Unit.

This was the doing of irresponsible adults who forget we do not live in an instant virtual world where their every demand can be immediately satisfied. In the real world there are people with lives, and there are rules to follow, not just rules of operation that are determined by law, but also rules of engagement, and as adults, we all know the dangers of irresponsible use of social media.

In this sea of anger, I also heard some voices of reason – people who said “wait a minute, don't be quick to judge, let them investigate first”, but those voices were quickly drowned in another wave of anger.

It was terribly frustrating for me to watch this play out in a span of a couple of days, not being able to say anything to stop it as it might compromise our pending investigation, which would expose our district to litigation that could potentially cost our residents a hefty some of money.

There needs to be a basic trust between us – you the public and us the trustees of the Board of Education – a trust that everything we do, we do for the good of our students and the betterment of our community, including the entirety of Tenafly residents. This is why we are here, this is why we volunteer our time and hard work – for YOU. When you think something wrong is going on, and you've complained up the chain of command of our district and feel like you've exhausted your options – call US, the board trustees. We are always here to listen.

Indeed, in this case, a parent called us on the Friday of Memorial Day Weekend and let us know about this incident, as they should. And we thanked that parent and told them we are going to take care of it. Sadly, instead of allowing us to do our job discretely, that parent chose to post on Facebook.

Our handling of this matter and our investigation did not waver because of the public scrutiny. In fact, the results of our investigation would have been the same regardless of public knowledge of the incident, and we would have let the public know of such results at the conclusion of our investigation, as we did, when appropriate, in the past.

This was a failure at the building level; The best and appropriate person to handle such an investigation is the superintendent, just as she always does, as this is one of the superintendent's responsibilities.

The only thing this Facebook posting achieved is the devastation of a little girl and her family, the threatening of an entire elementary school, and the global slandering of our prestigious school district which, may I remind you, is the main source of attraction for new residents to town and what drives the prices of our homes.

I truly hope that from now on, people will exercise patience and allow us the time we need to do our job properly.

This is not the end of our district's response to this entire situation. Jocelyn has outlined the ways we plan to move forward to alleviate the stress that was caused to the students that were part of this incident and expand our existing curriculum and professional development to ensure this sort of incident never happens again.

I really hope we, as a community, can now finally begin to heal.

Thank you,
Inbal Israeli Miller

Board President's Statement – June 7, 2021

Good evening. Thank you for being here and for everything each of you does to help improve the education and the lives of our children. I will begin this evening with a statement to address the events of the last week, followed by a few other board members who would like to speak, and Superintendent DeMarco. We will then move to the public comment portion of our meeting where each person will have 3 minutes to address the board.

It has been a difficult, emotional and taxing 10 days for our community.

On behalf of the board, I want to start by saying I am sorry to this student and their family, and am absolutely heartbroken that they have been put in an untenable position and were not served well by the school. I am sorry to the Maugham families who have been personally affected by this and to our Jewish community members who have been forced to endure a conversation about a topic that's incredibly painful for so many.

I also want to apologize for what we acknowledge was an unclear and confusing communication last Tuesday - one that took an already charged issue and made it worse. For that, I am truly sorry. The goal was to keep the community informed and to protect the student after confirming there was no antisemitic intent. The message failed to make clear the ongoing nature of the investigation and that the initial findings could change as we gathered more facts. In hindsight, we should have waited until we knew more and we should have been more thoughtful in tone. This is something that I personally take responsibility for. We will be more deliberate in our communications moving forward. Superintendent DeMarco will talk more about the investigation shortly, but it's important we apologize for how we communicated with you in the beginning days of all of this, and I just ask that you please allow us to move past this as we do the work necessary to continue the investigation.

As I said last week, this has all struck me to the core, as I know it has many of you. I have heard from many of you in the community over the past week and I can feel and hear the pain and anger that you have experienced. I have been a Tenafly resident for most of my life. I grew up in Tenafly, graduated from Tenafly High School, and always knew I'd come back here to raise my family. I have always been proud to live in a diverse, accepting and tolerant community. Racism, hate speech or antisemitism have no place here, and that's especially true for our schools. We plan to pass a resolution at our meeting next week, condemning antisemitism and affirming the district's commitment to an inclusive school environment for all. This resolution will be specifically in response to the recent rise in antisemitism across the nation, and the world.

I want to reiterate that the student and family involved in this terrible situation did not have any antisemitic intent. As Superintendent DeMarco said in her letter Thursday evening, we've found that the curriculum and learning standards were not appropriately implemented, and an attempt to individualize the project resulted in the student receiving misguided instruction from the teacher. The posting of the resulting project was offensive and inappropriate and directly violated the school Board's policies. Policy making is one of a school board's most important roles, and any violation of those policies is something we take very seriously.

That finding is what led to the suspension of the teacher and principal involved pending the outcome of the investigation. I also want to make clear that these actions are not the result of the public outcry, intense media coverage, or social media. These actions are the result of the superintendent launching an investigation as soon as she was made aware of the situation. This is a school level issue, and one that Superintendent DeMarco is fully equipped to look into and report back on. In fact, it is her job as Superintendent of Schools.

The fault here does not lay with the student or her family, and we have an obligation as a community to be there for them during an extremely challenging time. In that spirit I would ask everyone to think about them before posting on social media, particularly any comments or images related to the student. We have to take care of each other and I am concerned posting anything further will only increase the hardship for this student and their family.

I want to reemphasize that the investigation is still underway and Thursday's suspensions are not the final say on the matter. It's essential we understand where mistakes were made and determine how we can strengthen our processes to ensure this never happens again. We will of course share the outcome of our findings when appropriate.

Until that time, I would respectfully ask for patience – as hard as that can be in a situation like this – and space for Superintendent Demarco to get to the bottom of this situation, and present a clear plan forward.

Looking ahead, we have already begun to engage leaders in the Jewish community in discussions around how we can enhance our Holocaust curriculum, and we look forward to diving deeper into this in the weeks and months ahead. Holocaust education is infused in our district's curriculum in an age appropriate manner and is formally introduced in 6th grade after we first alert parents.

The district and the board are committed to looking at diversity, equity, inclusion, racism and social justice and have committed time and resources to these difficult and important issues in the past year. We are also actively looking to identify an external partner. In addition, we have a student centered social justice kickoff event on Wednesday evening at 7pm where we will hear directly from students.

Before I hand it over to Superintendent DeMarco for a few remarks, let me say again how much we value and take seriously the feedback we've received over the past 10 days. While I have not yet been able to personally respond to every email, I fully intend to. The school board is here to serve the community, and ensure all our kids get the best possible education in a safe and nurturing environment. Your input is critical to that mission, and we look forward to continuing to engage so we can always improve and do better for our kids.