

Board of Education Regular Meeting  
Suffield High School Library Media Center  
and via Zoom Webinar  
March 4, 2024

Call to Order

Board Chair Sattan called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: Board members Josh Barrows, Tracy Cloyd, Debra Dudack, Melissa Finnigan, Brian Fry, Glenn Gazdik (arrived at 7:31 p.m.), James Mol, Sam Toskin and Maureen Sattan; and Superintendent Timothy Van Tassel, Ed.D., and Business Manager Eric Remington

Absent: None

Recognition

*Board of Education Appreciation*

Superintendent Van Tassel began by saying that Connecticut Boards of Education are recognized in the month of March for their commitment to improve educational programs and services for students as well as families. Superintendent Van Tassel thanked Laura LaFlamme, Ed.D., Suffield High School Agriscience Director, and her students for creating the beautiful dish gardens for the Board of Education members. Agriscience students Bella Brannan, Class of 2025 and FFA Chapter Sentinel, and Alice McCoy, Class of 2026, explained how the soil, plants and containers were selected to create the gardens. Brannan thanked the Board members for providing Agriscience students the opportunity to participate in the upcoming international field trip.

Suffield High School Student Representatives

Milo Graham, Class of 2024, shared the news and events at Suffield High School and Suffield Middle School. Student Representative Graham said the Suffield High School Volleyball Marathon event will be held on March 22 and the musical *Into the Woods* will be performed March 15-17. Suffield High School students have been challenged to a composting competition by Spaulding School students and the winning prize for the most compost collected will be a giant rubber chicken. Suffield Middle School will hold parent-teacher conferences March 6-8. The Suffield Middle School Drama Department had a successful showing of *Beauty & the Beast, Jr.*

Keila Silva, Class of 2025, shared the news and events at McAlister Intermediate School and A. Ward Spaulding School. Student Representative Silva said the elementary schools celebrated Black History Month by learning about Black innovators and entertainers. Both schools recently celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> day of school and this week they are participating in Read Across America. Spaulding School preschoolers are learning about friendship and kindness. McAlister held a school-wide Kindness Assembly where students learned how to be kind in their day-to-day lives. McAlister recently held a Family Fun Night where families of students participated in different challenges in order to see which family has the most spirit and cooperation. Spaulding students challenged Suffield High School students to a composting competition.

Public Comment

Milo Graham, Suffield High School student, said commentary at the February 5, 2024 Board of Education meeting was harmful. He shared his personal coming out experience and the fears associated with it. He said encouraging ignorance is encouraging a divide within the community and education will begin to close that divide. He read the material that was deemed explicit and found that for the first time in his life, he was reading a book about someone like himself. He said having diverse educational material available to students can be life-changing and even life-saving.

Samantha Parnin, Suffield High School student and President of the SHS Gender Sexuality Alliance Club, said she is part of a non-traditional family. She said she has many transgender and queer friends who have helped her with her own journey of self-love. She said the curriculum and books of this college level course allow students to see families from another lens and excluding material from it would be a disservice to the community.

Beatrice Marcavitch read a statement from Selene Silva, Suffield High School student and UConn ECE Intro to Individual and Family Development class participant. In the statement, Silva said she believes the topic of transgender people is something everyone should learn about. She took the course to learn more about experiences of other individuals. She questioned how students can feel safe, understood, and loved in a community where people are trying to limit learning and get rid of books that help others understand experiences of people who break societal norms.

Christina Vega, Suffield High School student and UConn ECE Intro to Individual and Family Development class participant, said transgender people and their stories are not adult subjects and questioned if Suffield is pushing homophobic and transphobic rhetoric despite having LGBTQ students in the district. She said it is a shame to consider the topics taught in this elective college-level class as adult and scandalous. The syllabus was received during the first week of school and did not hide what would be taught.

Erika Baron, 97 Brandywine Lane, said she is a teacher by profession and is a proud parent of three students in the Suffield Public Schools. She said her son is a well-rounded, productive member of the school community and is transgender. She thanked the UConn ECE Intro to Individual and Family Development teacher for including books featuring transgender characters in the syllabus. She said she had a hard time believing the content of these books is any more explicit than anything the students are exposed to in a cisgender, heterosexual young adult book. The experiences in the course novels allow transgender students to feel visible and validated. Transgender students experience misgendering, harassment, violence and discrimination in their daily lives. The suicide rate of transgender children is between 40-50% with the number one cause being lack of support from families, schools, and communities. She thanked all the teachers and staff who have provided support to her son, their empathy and kindness is saving lives. She welcomes Board members or parents to have a conversation with her and her son about what it is like to be a transgender student or the parent of a transgender student.

Dr. Cassandre Victor Vega, 2 Melrose Lane, quoted the Suffield High School Mission Statement. She said she was proud of the students who spoke during public comment. She reviewed a June 2021 Suffield Observer article in which Superintendent Van Tasel remarked on the district's efforts in charting a path to a more welcoming, equitable, and inclusive public school district. She said the article discussed establishing a Board of Education goal on diversity, creating a DEI Council, listed bulleted accomplishments, and recognized that the evidence of lasting change can only be proven with time. She questioned where the district was today with its DEI efforts.

Neil Hornish, 864 Thrall Ave, thanked the students who provided public comment and encouraged them to keep speaking up. He said if the Board was considering removing a book from a course that it would be a disservice to the students and community.

### Board Member Comment

- Board member Finnigan thanked the students who spoke during public comment and said the information they shared is important.
- Board member Dudack thanked Student Representative Graham for sharing and for being a representative to the Board and thanked all other public speakers. She said Board members need to be mindful of the impact of their words and actions and should always follow the proper chain of command. Comments made at the last Board meeting had a tremendous impact as evidenced by what was heard tonight. She said it was her opinion that no Board policies were violated through this teaching, this highly respected teacher did nothing wrong, and to her knowledge there is no plan for the Board to review the course or the book. She applauded the teacher for being courageous in teaching a challenging topic such as transgender issues. She said there is a Board goal to enhance the climate in the district and that we need to do better. She suggested having a Board retreat with teachers and students to learn together and co-create a path forward to a more inclusive culture.
- Board member Barrows thanked all for coming. He said his comments at the February 5, 2024 Board of Education meeting were the result of several concerns that were brought to his attention. His concern was for a student who felt uncomfortable with material that was handed out and was, in their opinion, explicit in nature. It was not the topic of the book that was of concern, but the explicit material inside the book. He said other students were afraid to come forward for fear of retaliation and backlash. He said his question was whether the teacher had the authority to hand out the material. He did not say the teacher should be reprimanded, disciplined or fired. His comments were out of concern and were not meant to make students feel insecure. He said he is tasked with ensuring Suffield students remain focused on education and respecting parents' rights. He said if anyone had a problem with him bringing this forward, he apologized for causing them grief.
- Board member Cloyd thanked the Agriscience students. She appreciates those who spoke and their bravery. She was not at the February 5, 2024 Board of Education meeting but watched the recap and felt things were taken out of context or misconstrued. She takes the Board goals seriously and recognizes all students should feel like they have a space and are heard.
- Board member Fry said it is Women's History Month. He thanked the Agriscience students for the beautiful dish gardens. He said the Board does periodically have books brought to them for review and he described the Board policy covering the reconsideration of materials. He thanked the public speakers, especially the students, for speaking tonight and would like them to know they were heard. He said as a member of the medical community he is aware of the added level of risk that some of our students face. He said, speaking for himself, every student in the district has his support regardless of where they are coming from.
- Board member Mol thanked the Agriscience students for the beautiful dish gardens. He thanked the public speakers and appreciated them coming forward. He echoed Board member Dudack and Board member Fry's comments and personally plans to read the two novels from the UConn ECE class.
- Board member Toskin thanked the Agriscience students and all public speakers who came out tonight. He is glad to have a community where we can voice our concerns, hear each other out, and treat each other with kindness and respect. He appreciated all comments.

- Board Chair Sattan said she realizes the Board has an important role in the district and would like to reiterate that decisions are made for the best of all students, and she would ask that they try to find a way forward.

Keila Silva, Suffield High School student and Student Representative to the Board of Education, said she is a member of the LGBTQ community and that her experience at Suffield High School has been as a B class citizen. She said she faces discrimination in school on a daily basis. She said the struggles people face are real and, although she is not a student in the UConn ECE class, she feels the books are vital to the LGBTQ community. She said the district promotes kindness and respect but there is nothing kind about the way that she has been treated. She wanted to use her position on the Board to be a voice and that comes with a responsibility to speak on matters like this. She said it is not right that she and others in the school have faced mistreatment, and that people within our schools should be respected and treated as equals.

***Melissa Finnigan left at 7:21pm, returned at 7:24pm  
Keila Silva and Milo Graham exited the meeting at 7:34pm***

#### Reports to the Board

- Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Van Tassel thanked Keila Silva, Milo Graham and all the students who spoke. He thanked the parents and public who came out to speak tonight. He has had productive conversations with Board members, faculty, and administrators following the February 5, 2024 Board of Education meeting. He noted his appreciation for the Suffield High School Gender Sexuality Alliance Club, and he supports and will listen to the LGBTQ+ community. The work of the Board and the district goals provides opportunity to further discussion toward a common goal. He thanked everyone for joining tonight's meeting and for the comments shared.

Superintendent Van Tassel acknowledged the Scouts for their work with the district Leadership Team on developing special projects for each school and thanked Mr. LaValley and all the Scout leaders. Justin Kaput, K-12 Science Instructional Coach, along with a team of teachers, will hold the district's first annual Bio Blitz on May 22 and May 23 hosting second, fifth, and eighth grade students. He thanked the Board for their work on the FY25 Budget. He shared how the district's schools celebrated Black History Month and said each of the schools worked with stakeholders to provide students with many enriching experiences. March 20, 2024 is confirmed for the Board of Education to present the Suffield Middle School Building Project proposal to the Board of Selectmen. Superintendent Van Tassel thanked the Board of Education members for their time and appreciates the work they are doing.

- Board Chair's Report

Board Chair Sattan said she has represented the Board, sometimes with other Board members, at a graduation planning meeting, a Board Leadership meeting for the possible building project, the Suffield Middle School Student Achievement meeting, and a legislative forum at the Hartford Capital. Any Board members wanting further details should reach out to her. The McAlister Read Across America event is happening Tuesday and she and Board member Finnigan will be participating. The Suffield High School Principal Committee will begin work this month, interested Board members should reach out to her. All Board members are involved in the final step of the hiring process and are the ones who make the final appointments to administrative positions. The Board of Education will be hosting the Board of Selectmen for the Suffield Middle School walk thorough on March 20 and she encourages Board members to attend.

- Business Manager's Report

Business Manager Eric Remington reviewed the January Financial Report. He reported on the general operating budget, federal and state grants, and food service. He is projecting a surplus for the year of about \$115,000. Demolition of the Spaulding playscape will begin tomorrow. Board members discussed the year end projected surplus and student lunch debt.

- Board of Selectmen Liaison's Report

None

- Board of Finance Liaison's Report

None

Approval of Minutes

**MOTION #24-36:** Dudack moved, Sattan seconded to approve the Board of Education meeting minutes of February 5, 2024 and February 12, 2024. Sattan, Dudack, Finnigan, Barrows, Cloyd, Fry, Gazdik and Toskin voted in favor. Mol abstained. The motion passed **8-0-1**.

Consent Agenda

None

Discussion/Action Items

- Discussion and Possible Approval of the 2024-2025 District School Calendar

Board Chair Sattan thanked the Calendar Committee for their work. She said the proposed 2024-2025 District School Calendar changed from 182 student days to 180 student days which leaves no wiggle room to forgive days. 180 student days are required by the state and would be a significant change from the district's past practice. Last year's calendar had five early release days for professional development, all on Fridays. This year's proposed calendar placed some of the early release days for professional development on Tuesdays because teachers are contractually obligated to stay one hour later on Tuesdays, essentially gaining them more professional development time. The first day of school, and the dates of winter break and April break were determined at the February 5, 2024 Board of Education meeting.

Board Chair Sattan suggested discussion regarding the many calendar options before any motion. She said the Board needed to decide on the number of student days; how many early release days to have and whether they should be placed on Tuesdays or Fridays; Indigenous Peoples Day identification on the calendar; Jewish High Holy Days; and the proposed cutoff date before consideration is given to reducing April vacation. Board members discussed keeping 182 and 181 student days; whether to add Indigenous Peoples Day to the Columbus Day holiday; whether to add Rosh Hashanah or request the Calendar Committee add that to its consideration for the 2025-2026 school calendar; placing the cutoff date at June 18, 2025. Board members expressed concern with the professional development piece staying as recommended. Board members discussed union contracts specifically naming Good Friday and Columbus Day.

**MOTION #24-37:** Fry moved, Mol seconded to accept the proposed 2024-2025 District School Calendar with the following modifications: removing the proposed October 15, 2024 No School Professional Development Day and the March 18, 2025 Early Release Professional Development Day, bringing the total number of student days to 181; renaming the October 14, 2024 holiday to Columbus Day/Indigenous Peoples Day; confirming Saturday, June 14, 2024 as the Suffield High

School Graduation Date; and making June 18, 2025 the end of school cutoff date on the proposed 2024-2025 District School Calendar.

Barrows, Cloyd, Dudack, Finnigan, Fry, Gazdik, Mol, Toskin voted to accept the proposed 2024-2025 District School Calendar. Sattan voted against. The motion passed **8-1-0**.

***Eric Remington left the meeting at 7:44pm, returned at 7:49pm***

- Discussion and Possible Action on Fiscal Year 2025 Budget

Board Chair Sattan said Superintendent Van Tasel presented his proposed FY25 Budget months ago. Since that time, adjustments have been made to assumptions and expected expenses have been trued up. The revised proposed FY25 Budget went from a 4.19% increase to a 3.05% increase.

Superintendent Van Tasel said a deeper dive was done with the Finance and Facilities Subcommittee. He shared the insurance information savings and reviewed turnover factors. Mr. Remington reviewed some potential risks of having a lean budget for FY25. Superintendent Van Tasel said the revised budget includes a 1.0 FTE CTE teacher at Suffield High School. Shannon Inero, Suffield High School Assistant Principal explained class size numbers for some electives, including the CTE courses. Superintendent Van Tasel said enrollment in art courses at the Suffield High School has dropped and 1.6 FTEs currently teach art there. Assistant Principal Inero said filling art courses is challenging.

Board Chair Sattan said the revised budget included two academic support positions at Suffield Middle School, one for English and one for math. The Finance and Facilities Subcommittee, with the support of SMS Principal Smith, suggested hiring a 1.0 FTE certified math teacher as an alternative to two academic support staff. Superintendent Van Tasel reviewed the math and literacy curriculum program costs for the elementary level and said the programs could possibly be paid with FY24 funds. Board Chair Sattan said the BOE approved budget will designate funds for new programs generally, which the district can allocate to specific curriculum programs, as needed. Board members discussed the merits of the middle school positions. Board members discussed funding for training in support of their Safe School Climate and Culture Board goal, and a retreat with teachers, students and Board of Education members. Board members discussed funding the reading and math programs with FY24 funds, and possibly reducing the .6 FTE art position at Suffield High School and the McAlister Physical Education position. Superintendent Van Tasel recommends budgeting \$15,000 for the climate and culture training and retreat. Board members discussed adding a 1.0 FTE CTE teacher added to the budget to help support students, especially those who may wish to enter the trades after high school.

***Josh Barrows exited the meeting at 8:30pm***

***Maureen Sattan left the meeting at 8:53pm, returned at 8:56pm***

***Tracy Cloyd exited the meeting at 9:16pm***

***Brian Fry left the meeting at 9:19pm, returned at 9:22pm***

Mr. Remington recapped the proposed changes to the revised proposed FY25 budget, adding the CTE position at the high school, the math teacher at the middle school, and \$15,000 for Climate and Culture initiatives. The academic support positions at the middle school and the elementary math and reading programs were removed. Board Chair Sattan said the Board had a reasonable and defensible budget. Mr. Remington said that in defense of the budget, this year the district is absorbing fire code work, special education overages, and Department of Public Work costs.

**MOTION #24-38:** Sattan moved, Mol seconded to approve the 2024-2025 Board of Education Budget as presented in the amount of \$39,672,389 which is an increase of 2.96% over last year. Board Chair Sattan called for a vote. All members voted in favor. The motion passed **7-0-0**.

- Discussion and Possible Approval of Increasing Educator Diversity Plan as Required by Connecticut Statute

Board Chair Sattan said Connecticut legislature has created a mandate saying Boards of Education must submit an Increasing Educator Diversity Plan no later than March 15, 2024. Superintendent Van Tassel assembled a team and created a draft plan. A request for an extension will be filed so that Board members will have time to review the plan. Board Chair Sattan introduced the plan to Board members and asked that they review it as she would like to add it to the upcoming Board agenda for discussion and possible approval.

#### Subcommittee Reports

- February 23, 2024 – Community Engagement and Public Relations Subcommittee Meeting – Board member Dudack said the subcommittee discussed promoting work as a Board and for the district. The Suffield Middle School building proposal was discussed.
- February 27, 2024 – Curriculum and Instruction – Board member Finnigan said the subcommittee discussed the two programs currently being piloted for K-5 math.
- February 22, 2024 and February 28, 2024 – Finance and Facilities – Board member Gazdik said the budget was the focus. Principal Smith joined the February 28 subcommittee meeting and shared his thoughts on supporting the math curriculum and the support of the students.

#### Board Liaison Reports

- CREC (Capital Region Education Council) – Board member Toskin said the meeting was pushed back to March.
- Agriscience – Board member Mol said his marketing presentation will be shared at the April Board meeting. Congratulations to Celia Wagner, Suffield High School Agriscience teacher, who was recently certified as a UConn ECE Marine Science instructor. March 14, 2024 is the second annual FFA Alumni Agstravaganza beginning at 6:00 p.m. in the Suffield High School commons. For next year, 47 new students were accepted into the Agriscience program and will be attending an Accepted Student Day on March 22. Save the date for the Agsci Expo happening on April 3 and 4.
- CABE (Connecticut Association of Boards of Education) – Board member Finnigan deferred to Board Chair Sattan who said the Legislative Breakfast was an informal meeting and discussions were focused on funding.

#### Future Business

None

#### Public Comment

None

#### Board Member Comment

Board member Finnigan said we are all here to do what is best for students of the district. She is looking forward to working with staff and Board member Dudack for future planning to promote kindness and understanding of people's differences. She thanked everyone who spoke and voiced their opinions. She thanked the Agriscience students for the beautiful succulents.

Board member Dudack thanked the Agriscience students for the arrangement. She thanked the Calendar Committee for the huge amount of work they put into the calendar this year and in years past. She thanked the Board for being willing to move forward with Indigenous Peoples Day and she feels it is a step in the right direction. She looks forward to the new math and reading curriculum.

Board member Fry thanked the Finance and Facilities Subcommittee for their work on the budget. He thanked the Board for their support of Indigenous Peoples Day and he thinks it is a decision they can be proud of.

Board member Gazdik echoed the previous Board member comments.

Board member Mol thanked Keila Silva and echoed the previous Board member comments.

Board member Toskin thanked the students who came to the meeting and recognized Board member Dudack for creating a fantastic flyer for the Suffield Middle School building project.

Board Chair Sattan said the Finance and Facilities Subcommittee took on a lot on this year and she thanked them. She thanked Brian Kost, Board of Finance Liaison, for his added value. She is supportive of the \$15,000 budgeted for student climate initiatives and wants to use that allocation to better the experience of all district students.

Adjournment:

Fry moved, Mol seconded to adjourn the meeting at 9:39 p.m. All members voted in favor.

Click here to view the meeting: [04MAR2024 BOE Meeting](#)

*Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of April 1, 2024.*

Respectfully submitted,

Debra Dudack, Secretary