

Special Meeting  
Board Retreat  
South Orange-Maplewood  
Board of Education  
May 18, 2020

A Special Meeting of the Board of Education of South Orange-Maplewood was held using the online video conference platform on May 18, 2020.

Board President Annemarie Maini called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m.

Adequate written notice of this meeting of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education was sent to the Township and Village Clerks, The Star Ledger, the News Record, TAPintoSOMA.net, villagegreennj.com and all schools.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Motion made by Board Member E. Baker, seconded by Board Member Joshua to allow distance participation for this Special Board meeting during the COVID-19 emergency.

Motion passed 8 yes, 0 no.

ROLL CALL: Present: Board Member E. Baker, Board Member Cuttle,  
Board Member Joshua, Board President Maini,  
Board Member Mazzocchi, Board Member Siders,  
Board Member Wright Board Member Zubieta,  
Student Representative Lily Forman

Absent: Board Member R. Baker

8 VOTING MEMBERS AND ONE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE PRESENT

*The Board held a moment of silence to reflect on those in our community that we have lost to or who are suffering from Coronavirus. Board President Maini also took a moment to acknowledge and recognize the stress and toll this phase of virtual learning has taken on our students, teachers, staff and their families who are facing concerns about what this looks like now, in the immediate future as well as what is coming in September. The Board also took a moment to acknowledge that we all want what is best for every single child.*

BOARD PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT

The School Board meeting is a business meeting in public not a meeting with the public. Oftentimes it may appear to members of our audience that the Board of Education takes action with very little comment and in many cases a unanimous vote. Before a matter is placed on the agenda at a public meeting, the Administration has thoroughly reviewed the matter with the Superintendent of Schools/Chief School Administrator (CSA). If the Superintendent of Schools/Chief School Administrator is satisfied that the matter is ready to be presented to the Board of Education, it is then referred to the appropriate Board Committee. The Members of the Board Committee work with Administration and the Superintendent to assure that the members fully understand the matter. After the committee discusses

the matter, it is presented to the full Board for discussion before any action is taken. Only then, is it placed on the agenda for action at a public meeting.

#### HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

##### NAME

##### COMMENT/QUESTION

Elissa Malespina            Why has the District learning plan not been made public prior to today's vote?

***Board Member R. Baker joined the meeting at 7:08 p.m.  
9 Voting Members Present***

Nathan Marinoff            Mr. Marinoff submitted the following letter signed by over 200 other parents.

We appreciate all the time and effort you dedicate to the cause of education and are reaching out to you in a spirit of collegiality and good faith.

We are confused and increasingly concerned by the failure of the South Orange-Maplewood School District to institute virtual remote instruction by the school district's teachers during the pandemic. Comparably-sized neighboring school districts (including East Orange, Livingston, Millburn, Summit and Verona), have implemented comprehensive plans that include daily live video instruction by teachers for their students. This has been accomplished in the face of equivalent (or greater) challenges to those to which our district is subject.

Each of us is a SOMSD parent. Collectively, our children attend every school in the District. As we hope will be evident, our intent is not to divide, disadvantage or deprive anyone, but to make sure that all of the District's students receive adequate, legally-required instruction during the crisis.

With this in mind, please provide answers to the following questions:

1. What *specific* plan does the district have to resume direct instruction and meaningful individual feedback to students by their teachers during the time that school buildings are closed as a result of the pandemic?
2. In correspondence, Dr. Taylor has instructed that the district, "recommends," that teachers engage classes online and that, "if teachers choose to do live lessons or interactions, *that is their choice.*" Why is this only a recommendation and left to the choice of the teachers?
3. Is the Board aware that its recommendation-only directive has led to dramatically different learning opportunities for students within the district, ranging from meaningful direct instruction to no actual teacher-provided instruction at all?
4. Will the Board direct the administration to provide a plan that remedies this unequal provision of direct instruction?
5. Why have teachers not been provided with a unified plan for what constitutes meaningful instruction for students, or with training and professional development to ensure provision of a consistent service throughout the district?

6. In correspondence, the Principal of Marshall School has instructed that the District has chosen to deny students live virtual instruction to students due to equity and access concerns, and that "live instruction would *limit* the ability of many children to access their daily lessons." Does the Board agree that denying all students live virtual instruction provided by their teachers is an appropriate way to respond to equity concerns?
7. The NJ Department of Education has advised that an updated remote learning plan is due and must be approved by the Board and posted on the district's website by May 22, 2020. Will the district meet this deadline?
8. Who will be held accountable if the foregoing deadline is not met? Who, specifically, is working to develop and institute a long-term, comprehensive remote learning plan?
10. If a long-term plan is being developed, does it provide for direct virtual instruction of the district's curriculum that includes live interaction between teachers and students?
11. What compensatory instruction will be provided to the district's students to make sure that our students can catch up to their peers in neighboring districts where students have been provided direct virtual instruction for months while SOMSD students have been denied direct instruction?
12. What resources will the Board provide to remedy individual issues already arising from the district failure to provide appropriate direct instruction during this crisis?
13. If full time in-person education is not possible by September, will the district provide daily virtual instruction to all students by or before the 2020-2021 school year? What plans are being made to this end?
14. The district has instructed parents that simply introducing a new concept - even without the teacher actually providing direct instruction to teach the concept in question - satisfies its obligation to provide an education. Does the Board agree that posting a worksheet or a video from YouTube constitutes the provision of an appropriate education?
15. Per N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8.3, "a school day shall consist of not less than four (4) hours of actual instruction, except that in an approved kindergarten one continuous session of 2 1/2 hours may be considered as a full day." Without actual instruction on a systemic level, how does the District justify its claim that it is fulfilling its mandate to provide 180 days of public school instruction a year?
16. Has the Teacher's Union been engaged to assess the current situation and to contribute to the design and implementation of an appropriate plan?
17. Finally, does the Board feel that the district's failure to provide students direct virtual instruction provided by their teachers is acceptable? If not, what will the Board do to remedy this situation as soon as possible?

Abigail Murtagh

Ms. Murtagh submitted the following letter to the Board.

I am very concerned about a curricular decision that is affecting all students at Marshall Elementary. Currently, no math lessons are being

created, recorded or delivered to students. Instead, students are receiving links to brainpop and youtube videos.

This is in stark contrast to reading and writing lessons, which are created and recorded by teachers. These lessons are amazing. They are tailored to our students and lead to specific learning outcomes. Teachers present ideas, ask questions, model the process and give students time and space to think, answer and participate.

Brainpop and youtube videos provide none of this. They are generic, cannot possibly fit the specific students, or be adjusted if students need more or different instruction. There is no conversation in these videos, no opportunity for active learning, no human connection. While the material of school is so important, I think even more important, especially at the elementary level, is the connection to people our student are missing. A generic brainpop does not provide this.

Finally, the other elementary schools ARE providing teacher-created math lessons. This district stresses consistency as a means of achieving equity. Just as important as getting a chrome book in everyone's hand is making sure that we are not creating a situation in which some students learn from teachers while others learn from brainpop. If you walked through a school and saw this happening in the classroom, you would address it immediately. It needs to be addressed here.

I reached out to Ms. Horn who said the decision to teach math through online videos was made with the district math supervisor, Ms. Beane. I reached out to both Ms. Beane and Ann Bodnar. While Ms. Beane has not yet responded, Ms. Bodnar explained that the district has specified the MATERIAL students must learn, but have given flexibility in terms of the MODALITIES used to teach that material. Surely, flexibility that leads to this much discrepancy between schools needs to be addressed.

Let me stress that this is not a criticism of teachers, who are creating amazing lessons and making great efforts to stay connected to their students during this crisis. I am so grateful for them.

I do not expect math curriculum teaching to change this year, but I do think we should work hard to improve our system over the summer in case we are still home. I strongly request that if we are at home in the fall at least the majority of math lessons given to elementary students be created and taught by our teachers. And that this be consistent across the elementary schools.

Rachel Fisher

Ms. Fisher submitted the following letter signed by Rachel Fisher, Rhea Beck, Susan Bergin, Christine Houseworth, Ronni Brecher Schwartz, Sally Unsworth, Kathy Greenstone, Mary Ellen Dawkins.

As district parents who have been equity advocates for many years, we sent a full letter to the Board sharing our thoughts about the relationship between equity and distance learning.

In summary, we believe equity means prioritizing those with the greatest needs and being willing to provide each child with the distance learning that will work for them.

Unfortunately, it seems that a genuine desire for equity on the part of the district has been presented as the reason for inhibitions on the ability of educators to provide creative instruction to students, including special education students, in ways that would support them. It appears that due to equity concerns many teachers are not conducting (or are not permitted to conduct) direct or live instruction outside of passive "office hours" when they may take questions.

We think that citing equity as a reason to withhold meeting the needs of special education children is a false binary, and counter-productive. Equity means providing each child with what they need while prioritizing those who need the most.

The reality that access can be challenging means that we need to make sure everyone has the same opportunity to access what is offered, not that we close off access to instruction for everyone. The district has done impressive work providing food to those who need it and providing technology to those who need it. We firmly believe that, with continued support, every family in this district would make it a priority to access distance learning instruction if it were offered flexibly (live and/or recorded lessons depending on subject matter, age group and special education classification).

We support SEPAC's request that the District to do better at fulfilling its obligations to classified students, and add that it is in fact a request to reach equity and not something counter to the equity goal. That is why IEPs exist, to put true equity into practice by providing special needs children with a Free and Appropriate Public Education.

What distance learning looks like will need to vary according to the age, classification, and circumstances of children. Teachers will need support and training in both pedagogy and technology in order to offer true differentiated education in a distance learning context.

We urge you to think creatively about how to reach true equity in a distance learning context, which should prioritize the provision of equal access to educational opportunity, the flexible availability of instruction, and appropriate differentiation for special needs students.

Thank you for all of your dedicated work during this time.

Silvia Rodriguez

For all the students at risk of incomplete grades for the fourth quarter, effectively extending the nightmare of the current situation into the following year, what teacher will be responsible for instruction that hasn't been provided.

Dr. Taylor will respond to questions and comments submitted during tonight's Hearing of Individuals and Delegations.

Dr. Taylor made the following statement:

*Hello to our South Orange and Maplewood School District Family.*

*Thank you for taking part in our evening to view and participate in our special meeting. Our Board will be considering our school health related closure plan, which is in response to our Governor's Executive Order closing schools for the remainder of the school year. I would like to formally recognize the endless hours of effort put forward by all in our school community, teachers, administrators, students and parents etc., as we have all worked to do the unthinkable; to redesign the school district on the fly, while taking into serious consideration all of the ancillary challenges of equity and access, food insecurity, health and wellness, connectivity, mandates, special services accommodations, grading, anxiety, culminating activities, learning standards, evaluations and of course the traditional daily teaching and learning that our students and teachers are normally thoroughly engaged in.*

*Like most in our society we as a District Family, have of course been significantly impacted by COVID-19. The uncertainty of our first mandated emergency two week plan, devastating loss of District family members, the realization that our traditions, rituals, routines and culminating celebrations are now much different, we recognize the pain, anxiety and fear that this trauma has placed on all of us. We've heard directly from many parents who are overwhelmed with distance learning. We've also heard from those who strongly advocate for our educators to adjust their practices with more or less rigor. What I believe is a fair statement, is that none of us are experiencing what we want, which of course is normalcy, comfort, familiarity that has come from well over 100 years of what we knew as formal K-12 education. Please take solace in knowing that we are indeed hearing your voices and continue to adjust and do all we can to continually improve our practices for our current circumstances and also for our future, including this summer and fall.*

*We have not yet heard firm plans from our State leaders regarding distance learning standards for this summer or fall, however please know that we are moving forward with multipronged planning for a brick and mortar traditional setting as well as a distance learning setting and even possibly a hybrid. These details are being finalized and we are working to be as nimble as possible, so that we can move quickly between the aforementioned options.*

*Lastly please be aware that tonight's plan that the Board is considering has several purposes. Of course the document more than fulfills the requirements of the New Jersey Department of Education checklist that has all of the mandates for distance learning. It also captures our District's efforts and milestones through our distance learning journey via various lenses including equity and access, curriculum and instruction, special services, food insecurity, etc. This plan also gives a status report of what is being considered for culminating activities and possible summer educational and enrichment programming. It also serves a reflection tool to assist in future planning for what we know is an uncertain future.*

*Thank you to our School Leadership Team and other District teachers and administrators who contributed to this document through your work over the last several weeks.*

## DISCUSSION

### EXTENDED SOMSD SCHOOL HEALTH-RELATED CLOSURE PLAN

The Board reviewed the Extended SOMSD School Health-Related Closure Plan. Board members had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the document. Board Members expressed concern regarding the lack of live instruction and engagement with students. The Superintendent acknowledged Board member concerns and clarified that SEPAC is being taken into consideration as the task force convenes to prepare the learning plan for the fall.

## ITEMS FOR ACTION

Motion made by Dr. Taylor seconded by Board Member Wright that the Board approves the following:

4016. Approves the Extended SOMSD School Health Related Closure Plan.

ROLL CALL: Motion 4016 passed. YES: E. Baker, R. Baker, Cuttle, Joshua, Maini, Siders NO: Mazzocchi, Wright ABSTAIN: Zubieta

## FUTURE MEETINGS

The Board of Education will meet on Monday, June 22, 2020 in Public Session at 7:30 p.m. via the online video platform WebEx. Action will be taken.

## BOARD RETREAT

Charlene Peterson, Field Representative for New Jersey School Boards Association facilitated the Board Retreat. The retreat focused on the Chief Administrator Evaluation Process and Tool as outlined below.

### Chief Administrator Evaluation Process

- Legal Guidelines
  - Ethics Reminder: A Board member whose relative works in the district may not take part in the evaluation process.
  - Accountability: Evaluation of the Chief School Administrator is the Board's means of oversight and appraisal of the effective management of the school district.
  - Legal Guidelines: N.J.S.A 18A:17-20.3a and N.J.A.C. 6A:10-8.1
  - QSAC requirements
- Evaluation Process
  - Sample Evaluation Process Calendar
  - Evaluation Process
    - District Goal Setting
    - District Goals Progress Updates
    - Superintendent Evaluation Pre-Conference
    - Superintendent Completes District Goals Self-Assessment and Evidence for 6 leadership standards

- BOE Completes Individual Superintendent Evaluations
  - Non-conflicted Board members meet to review compiled Superintendent Evaluation Results and Develop Majority Opinion Annual Performance Report
  - Non-conflicted Board Members meet with the Superintendent to Discuss Annual Performance Report
  - Board President and Superintendent Sign and Date the Annual Performance Report by July 1.
- Annual Performance Report Evaluation Tool

MOTION made by Board Member President Maini, seconded by Board Member E. Baker to adjourn 9:27 p.m.

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Paul Roth, Board Secretary