

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

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

Board President Annemarie Maini called the meeting to order at 7:12 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 President Maini, seconded by Board Member Zubieta to allow distance participation for this Special Board meeting during the COVID-19 emergency.

Motion passed 9 yes, 0 no.

ROLL CALL: Present: Board Member E. Baker, Board Member R. 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: None

9 VOTING MEMBERS AND ONE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE PRESENT

Board Members held a moment of reflection in honor of Juneteenth. The celebration of Juneteenth began One hundred and fifty years ago, when the final enslaved African Americans in Texas learned of their freedom from the dehumanization of slavery. This year's Juneteenth commemorative comes at a crisis moment in our nation, as communities across the country, led by our youth, wrestle with the reality and legacy of institutional racism. Recent brutal killings captured on video are only a part of a long history of acts of violence and intimidation against black people. The time demands that we commit ourselves to rejecting racism in all of its forms. I ask that we collectively take a moment to contemplate how we can all do our part to eliminate structural and overt racism and other forms of discrimination in our schools, communities and country.

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.

*Dr. Taylor thanked President Maini for the thoughtful statement she made regarding Juneteenth.*

#### HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

Elissa Malespina:

How do you plan on addressing and remedying the fact that you did not have public speaks at the last meeting?

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Scott Sinkler:

Once you get started, could you announce how many participants are online since we can't see that?

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Nicole Stewart:

Thank you for reviewing my feedback along with the rest of our community members. I hope you take our words to heart and they spur some actionable items. It's hard to know where to start, as my concerns with the district span from social-emotional to curricular to budgetary to support of children with special needs. That leads me to believe there is a more systemic issue and a lack of leadership or organization. Essentially, I see SOMSD as disorganized and all talk but no action. It seems like there is always something "about to change on the horizon" but then no visible changes. Disciplinary actions feel like something out of the 1950s with no account for social-emotional needs or developmental appropriateness.

Distance learning has allowed me to see the curriculum more closely - my son is a kindergartner and his unit on time consisted of: Day 1 - learn the parts of a clock; Day 2 - learn time to the hour; Day 3 - learn time to the minute; NEXT UNIT. Those skills span multiple grades (up to 3rd grade!), and there is no way that any 6 year old is learning to tell time to the minute in a 3-day lesson. Add in if your child has an IEP or needs accommodations that were not addressed in that 3-day lesson - our district is failing our children with special needs big time with immeasurable goals, party lines on what a child needs and non-specific accommodations or modifications on what is supposed to be an INDIVIDUALIZED education plan.

The budget also seems to be a constant concern, but yet, there is a lack of transparency and it feels like we pour money into outdated school buildings, administrators who are ineffective and Powerpoint presentations that theorize on what could happen in the district. These are just a few of my concerns, but highlight examples from across departments and demonstrate the lack of cohesiveness at the heart of the district.

I urge the BOE and Dr. Taylor to increase accountability, transparency and a goal-driven mindset from the top. The district needs leadership that inspires and motivates. Right now, we see leadership that passes the buck, and talks more than works. Distance learning has brought a lot of these issues to light, and shown how ineffective our district's and school building leaders are. I respect that all the concerns of the

community will not be solved overnight, but lots of rain drops make an ocean. Starting somewhere and making objective, measurable goals, no matter how small will have a greater impact than the current MO. This concept will also go a long way into restoring trust within the district.

Success starts at the top, and that we need to hold the BOE and the superintendent more accountable, and not let the shortcomings fall on our teachers. I am hopeful for a better future in SOMSD and to see growth, transparency and greater learning.

Thank you very much for your time.

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Ellen Thornton:

I would like to know 1) when the BOE and superintendent plan to address the petition with over 2000 district parent signatures that raises our concern with the remote learning plan and demands better for our children, and 2) when the SOMA community will see the results from the district survey on distance learning and how the BOE and superintendent will address the survey results.

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Gretchen Fancher:

In this parent's experience the district leadership this year has been deeply disappointing. While the circumstances of the pandemic are extraordinary, leadership seemed to be in denial about the probable length of the school closure from the beginning. This precipitated a failure to prepare a coherent plan or provide useful guidelines to teachers and other support professionals. An enormous amount of teaching was offloaded onto the shoulders of parents without regard to their ability, availability or capacity to carry that burden.

What planning there was seemed to focus on meeting the minimum legal requirements for the generation of gradable work and the taking of attendance. When students apply this principle to the completion of their assignments, what grades do they receive? What this unprecedented situation requires is a creative approach to using the available tools to present engaging, meaningful work and regular access to some form of real time interaction with teachers and classmates. I have heard many stories from other parents of exceptional teachers in the district who were able to do just that, keeping their students connected and engaged. My child did not have any of those teachers. These are the teachers who need guidelines and clearly stated expectations or they will fail to reach their students.

Given the uncertainty about when it will be safe for students, teachers and the rest of school staff to return to their schools and the responsibility of district leadership to provide guidance about keeping everyone healthy when they get there, I have profound misgivings about continuing to send my child to school here.

The poor leadership that I have witnessed in the past several months does not inspire confidence that either basic health needs or educational obligations will be met.

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Marian Cutler:

Superintendent Taylor and BOE Members,

As a mother of four, with two still in District, I want to share my family's experience with distance learning and gain some appreciation for how things will change should we find ourselves still displaced in September.

Since moving to distance learning, I have been struck by the rapid descent to "good enough" as the threshold the District, Superintendent and BOE accepted as our new norm. During the first three weeks, when we all expected schools to reopen in early April, being able to "check the boxes" could be a defensible position in terms of investment, professional development and student equity. But, as distance learning became our shared reality, as our two towns moved mountains to quickly establish Wi-Fi throughout our District and as Chrome books were delivered to families to ensure access, the level of instruction and engagement took a nose dive. And, the chance of any academic recovery designed to "empower and inspire each student to explore and imagine, to pursue personal passions, and to collectively create a better future" was quickly scuttled when this body approved on May 18th an updated Distance Learning Plan with no live instruction requirement.

The narrative that the BOE had to approve the plan - even though they hadn't been given ample time to review or amend it - because of the state required timeline is a fabrication. What should have happened then - or any time in the THIRTY-ONE days since approving such an inadequate plan - was one of three things:

- The BOE should have stopped all other business on May 18th and dedicated the time to line edit the proposal right then and there.
- The BOE should have demanded an emergency meeting for the next day - to keep with the state-imposed timeline - and line edited the proposal
- Or, at absolute worst, the BOE should have met, repeatedly since to build out and improve the proposal.

Any one of these things would have evolved the initial plan into the standpoint, all-inclusive, equity-based and access-driven plan this District deserves. That none of this was, or has been, done speaks volumes for the lip service of "an excellent education for every student" is reserved for election-cycle conversations only.

Using my home as a single data point, I am deeply concerned at the harm our policies are causing throughout the District. NJ state law says a school day has to be 4 hours long (or 240 minutes) to count as a full-day of instruction. During the past 30 days, my kids averaged 102 minutes of self-directed, daily instruction which is half of what's required. That's a failure, by any one's measure. If even a quarter of our District had the same experience as my family, what exponential damage lies in your wake?

What are you prepared to do to rectify the mess your policies have created? How can you assure the District that, should September open with us still in distance learning, you will show up better for every single one of the 7,200 kids entrusted in your care?

Your policies are damaging. And, you watched it happen and did little to stop it.

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Scott Sinkler:

Yesterday afternoon, SOMa Families for Effective Instruction, which is a group of 844 parents, students, teachers, and community members who advocate for better teaching and learning in the district, posted a poll on its Facebook page for members to prioritise the issues they care about most. About 100 members took the poll and these are the priorities in order of votes cast:

Distance learning: 71 votes  
Accountability for grossly ineffective instruction: 53  
District transparency and communication: 49  
Curriculum: 35  
Board of Education transparency and communication: 33  
Teaching quality: 29  
Equity in instruction: 24  
Staff supervision: 20  
Special needs instruction: 18  
Recognition of exemplary teaching: 10  
Board of Education elections and candidates: 10  
Staff evaluation: 9  
Staff professional development and training: 9  
Public forums for input: 6  
Parent, student and teacher surveys: 6  
Parent involvement: 5  
Student involvement: 3  
Effective leadership: 4  
Community involvement: 3

Obviously, distance learning is a huge concern and we know that the district is working on it. However, it has been three months and two days since our schools locked their doors. Many teachers have risen to the challenge and are impressing families with their innovative solutions to what surely is a very difficult challenge for them. But we have heard from parents as recently as this week who say that their child has seen virtually no teaching in this almost 100 day period of time. It's a total crap shoot and all depends on who your teacher is.

We've seen the plan submitted to the state, and we've heard some rather vague statements about future plans, but we really need to see some tangible improvements and we want to hear more about your vision and what might be in store. Maybe all kinds of great things are in the works, but the communications that are put out have been pretty unspecific, with the exception of attention paid to kids with special needs, which is fantastic. But that's not everybody. Please let us know what's going on, and please try to ensure some consistency in what our kids can expect to learn.

Thank you, Scott Sinkler, SOMa Families for Effective Instruction

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#### Future Meetings

The Board of Education will meet in Closed Session on Monday, June 22, 2020 at 6:30 p.m. via the online video conference platform (Webex) to discuss personnel and legal issues, negotiations and other matters to be

announced at a later date. Immediately following the Closed Session, the Board of Education will meet in Public Session at 7:30 p.m. via the online video conference platform (Webex). Action will be taken.

Motion made by Board President Maini, seconded by Board Member Joshua to adjourn to Executive Session to discuss legal matters, litigation and the Superintendent's Evaluation.

Motion to adjourn to Executive Session unanimously approved at 7:40 p.m.

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Paul Roth, Board Secretary