

**INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 625  
Saint Paul, Minnesota**

**COMMITTEE OF THE BOARD MEETING  
360 Colborne Street  
Saint Paul, MN 55102**

**March 4, 2025  
4:30 p.m.**

**MINUTES**

**1. CALL TO ORDER**

The meeting was called to order at 4:31 p.m. by Vice Chair Ward.

**2. ROLL CALL**

Board of Education: H. Henderson, U. Ward, E. Valliant, C. Allen, J. Vue, C. Franco, Y. Carillo

Staff: Superintendent Thein, K. Walker, S. Dahlke, S. Gray Akyea, T. Sager, K. Thao, M. Sullivan, A. Collins, E. Wacker, J. Danielson, K. Morris, S. Schmitt de Caranza, H. Nistler, N. Páez, K. Kimani, C. Green, D. Moser, P. Pratt-Cook, Y. Vang, P. Matamoros, A. Kunz, B. Schmidt, C. Anderson, D. Payne, D. Abrams, M. Eustaquio, J. Williams, S. Lee, M. Hadi, A. Adriana RiosDessalet, H. Pierson, S. Reyes, D. Ransom

Community: M. Wall, S. Thao, M. Moua, S. Her, B. Yang, K. Lee, J. Ting, R. Chapman, L. Vang, Y. Yang, G. Nyia, T. Ceballos, J. Yang, L. Bhane, F. Hawj

**3. APPROVAL OF THE ORDER OF THE MAIN AGENDA**

**MOTION: Director Ward moved approval of the Order of the Agenda. The motion was seconded by Director Henderson. It passed by acclaim.**

**4. SUPERINTENDENT'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Superintendent Thein noted he is aware of the weather and the amount of snow projected, and that the team is planning to meet later tonight and early in the morning at 4:00 a.m. to assess.

He also spoke about the budget update, and that District Administration is working hard on a budget adjustments. There are many unknowns out there, and with the current events at the federal and state levels, they have a direct influence on what we do and how we act. Our goal is to protect our programs, and to protect our students for the education they receive and deserve, and also so that staff can feel comfortable. The expenditures are easier to work on, yet difficult with revenue. We are proud that enrollment is close to 34,000 students, which is a significant increase and a direct impact on our work. Administration is working on the budget, and to prepare for the federal changes, with setting aside resources for our students and families, with flexibility for the Board and for our new superintendent.

## 5. H.M.O.N.G. Project

Core members of this team, including Sai Thao, Ber Yang, Gao Nyia, Mee Moua, and Shela Her, then introduced this presentation.

The H.M.O.N.G. Project is a HMong Motivated On-Going Needs Goals project. Parents and members introduced themselves and their background and connection to this work. They share in the mission of SPPS, and discussed ways in which parents are invested in SPPS. They also shared the history of the HMong community and members over the years in Minnesota, as well as education data of students who identify as HMong over the years. They went on to share about HMong leadership in SPPS, including those on the school board. HMong programming and its history was also presented throughout the years in SPPS.

The group also shared what is at stake and discussion about equity in SPPS. The H.M.O.N.G. Project was born out of many inequitable experiences that HMong students, HMong staff, and HMong parents in SPPS were subjected to. Experiences and implications were also shared.

Details of this item were also discussed, including that the H.M.O.N.G. Project is committed to shaping and influencing the future education for HMong students through:

- Gathering information
- Establishing guiding goals that provides clarity for support
- Embracing culture, identity and values

The phases of this work were also detailed.

### Phase 1

- Create vision and purpose
- Establish core workgroup
- Identify resources and partners

### Phase 2

- Create subgroups
- Develop surveys
- Implement Survey and in-person Engagement

### Phase 3

- Analyze data
- Identify needs and establish goals
- Create guiding principles
- Present resolutions to the board

Accountability of the Board was also noted.

The proposed timeline was also discussed:

- March 2025 - Present at Committee of the Board
- April 2025 - Gather resources, create subgroups to develop survey questions
- May 2025 - Implement surveys and in-person engagement

- June-July 2025 - Analyze data
- August 2025 - Resolution for adoption brought to Regular Meeting of the Board

The group also grounded the Board in a quote by Toni Morrison, which stated, “The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”

The group also shared their recommendation to the Board to “Adopt H.M.O.N.G. Project to articulate the needs of the HMong community SPPS serves today. Effectively, the needs will identify goals that develop both short and long term equitable access moving forward.”

The full presentation can be found in the BoardBook.

### **QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION:**

- Director Vue requested information about what’s at stake for sending students to SPPS. Parents responded that growing up in SPPS, there were very few HMong educators, and now we have a great number of them, and we want to retain them. Their parents brought them to America for opportunity and they want to continue that tradition for their children. Parents also shared that leadership is not building opportunities for staff, and they are leaving the district, and there is no representation for HMong students. They also feel there is less and less support from the district for programming, and to support teachers to ensure they have the materials for the programs. The HMong community is an asset and there needs to be investments in programs, so that families see and return to SPPS to access these programs. Another parent shared that she has 4 children, each with an IEP, and she wishes there were parents like this 15-20 years ago advocating for their students to the Board, and asking for support. It pains her that when she asks her 12th grader who his best friend is, that he cannot name one person, and that hurts as a parent. The learning is at stake, and the identity, culture - it’s all diminishing.
- Director Vue shared that he has attended many board conferences, and sees other urban school district present the great things about their district, and their innovation - there isn’t a lot that differentiates districts in many aspects. What makes SPPS unique though, is the language and culture programs. He recently attended a conference in Arizona, and a district is only just starting what SPPS started 20 years ago - this is a testament to the innovation within SPPS.
- A parent also shared her experiences, and reminded the Board that after 6 months of engaging with the community, they are the brave spokespeople to bring it before the Board.
- Director Henderson noted that the Board will not be voting on this item, but this is a starting point for conversations and collaboration. She thanked the families, and noted the beginning of this exciting work. It feels intense, and there are a lot of emotions, but we will work together to determine how to do this work differently. The tension is natural and we will work together.
- When you envision the collaboration with the Board, what does that mean and look like? Is it the adoption around the needs assessment, or other ways for collaboration? Response: It is working on the scope and project timeline, with building the core group and then after a lot of community engagement, to determine the vision and purpose, with ideas to bring back to SPPS. We really want to survey and be working with parents, families, students and staff to determine the questions, and then surveys, and then results to put together a resolution to bring to the Board. Another parent noted the feelings around lack of support and not knowing where to start. We want to work together

to send surveys and engage families in the community, and see this process similar to the cell phone policy process, but are looking for leadership.

- Director Henderson noted the flexibility of the timeline, and stated that the timeline is not one to which they can commit, and in wanting to be realistic the August 2025 timeframe is not sustainable. Response: When we devised the timeline it was 3-4 months ago and hoping to engage with the community by the end of the school year, for a plan in place by the next school year.
- When envisioning the needs assessment, what is the question to answer about the education opportunities for HMong students? Response: SPPS is a great district and our students have the opportunity to grow and become successful for their highest potential, but there are also things we don't see and are hidden, and we need to hone in on those - such as lack of support in academics or language, and gaps. Our students are examples of the leaders in SPPS, and there are professionals in the community who grew up in SPPS and we want to retain them, and hone in on the gaps and areas that are missing. We'd also like to identify the barriers and address them, and determine what is working and what is not, such as forms in multiple languages, cultural celebrations, and cultural liaisons. A parent also noted the differentiated stories and narratives from parents - there may be an assumption of a language barrier, and parents show up to meetings and events and are treated condescendingly.
- Director Henderson noted a personal interest in being able to hone in on the educational experiences for students, and the disparities and ways to address them, and to ensure they are centered in the assessment.
- Director Carrillo thanked the group for their bravery and stepping forward with these concerns. He appreciates the commitment and timeline, as well as the history and proposed process. He would like to commit to working with the HMong community and to work on the areas that need to be addressed. St. Paul has a long history of segregation and damage to our communities of color, and those who have moved to St. Paul and chose it as their home. We are listening to the HMong parents, and not only the elected officials of the school board, but of the city as a whole, and this will require the work of everyone, and creativity from all of us and we will commit to doing it well.
- Director Allen thanked the group for their work and for their stories. She also requested information from Administration on the recent financial investment in cultural programs in the District.
- Director Franco echoed the other board members and the appreciation of time spent organizing. He also thanked the group for their vulnerability and story-telling of the challenges they experience within the district. He sensed a lot of frustration, and encouraged the group to communicate to the Board on barriers or roadblocks as we work through this process. We need to continue to move the needle for forward progress.
- It was noted that the information garnered from the needs assessment may be able to be expanded to other groups as well.
- A parent noted that previously in looking at equity within SPPS, it took a long time to understand that this was "happening to us, not with us." Once that was understood, we went to community.
- Director Henderson noted that we need to do this work differently, and a way in which we engage with communities. A parent noted that they are not invisible, and they see and appreciate the work of the Board, and grateful for the advocacy and work they can provide. The tension is natural, and the determination of how it will look for all invested to do the work differently.
- Representative Kaohly Vang Her then provided her experience and challenges of her children when they were students in SPPS. She noted the challenges of her children as they were not EL students, but the district insisted they be coded as such. She expressed frustration at the lack of commitment to the timeline presented, and that Asian Americans are hyper invisible, and they are screaming for help yet no one recognizes it. It was noted that the budget is a statement of priorities, and the facilities master plan needs to include items that parents want and need. She also noted her work at the legislature to advance SPPS and help with funding. She also encouraged the Board

to work with families to determine a reasonable timeline and incorporate these recommendations into the budget.

- Representative Ethan Cha also provided his experience and perspective as a former student of SPPS and current legislator. He shared his journey as a refugee to lawmaker.
- A parent noted that there is a lot of trauma, and they are grateful for the state representatives to advocate for students.
- Director Henderson noted that for the timeline, it will require staff time from REA and we will need to determine the staffing.
- Director Vue noted the colors within the presentation represent the HMong community, and acknowledges the hardships that have occurred, and he takes the role of school board director seriously and apologized if he had not provided Administration with clear enough guidance. As a HMong father, he also feels the disappointment. He seconded Director Henderson that we are here to find a path forward for our HMong students and families. He also thanked parents for sharing their experiences.
- Superintendent Thein shared that it takes courage to stand up and speak the truth, and there are always priorities in the district and it was clear that the HMong community is a priority. He noted that although his tenure as interim superintendent is short, his passion is great. He also thanked Representative Vang Her.
- Director Ward noted that more one-to-one conversations may be helpful from a restorative perspective.
- Superintendent Thein noted this topic will also be discussed at the Senior Executive Leadership Team meeting for a path forward.
- Director Vue shared a story about meeting a former student of SPPS and asking him when he graduated from Johnson, and the former student said that he didn't graduate, but dropped out. The timing and age of the former student would have meant that he dropped out around 2021 - in the time of the COVID pandemic and distance learning. Director Vue noted that we cannot afford to guess what students need anymore - the answers are right in front of us, and we need to work with our students and their families to find out what they need, and to see the data. There cannot be more guessing - we need to know.
- Director Carrillo noted the pain and insensitivity of some of the processes and systems, including Public Comment.
- A parent noted that the experiences brought forth are only a small part of the community, and they were not meant to disparage the District, but to understand the need for a needs assessment.
- It was also noted that while this was a small percentage of the HMong community who spoke about their experiences, the majority of the community feels the same.
- Director Ward requested details from the parents about what a needs assessment might look like and the objectives. Parents noted determining how to thrive in SPPS, and a sense of belonging, and personal growth for students. They noted the scope and end goals of the needs assessment. Another parent noted the understanding of the HMong stories and history, culture and language, and the hope that students from the HMong community will be able to identify who they are, and where they are from - they can't move forward if they don't know who they are, and to be successful adults. They hope to develop the questions together, and speak with communities together. Another parent noted the closing of disparities, and moving the needle to match the state average for graduations to match. Another parent noted the retention of talent in the district, and the children are the future - the community needs the district to invest in their children. They love Saint Paul, and the conversation is emotionally-charged because of the care. The end results for students are important and they may become the next mayor, city council member, representative, and other officials. They want to be seen and heard and valued. This is their home and they want to be

proud of their school district and champion for it. They do not want to walk out, but may show their absence by walking out of the district if they are silenced and pushed aside.

- Board members noted the length of the survey and the goal to obtain a wide array of concerns felt in the community. It was also noted that parents and families from other PACs present to the Board about their needs. The needs of the HMong community are not that different than those of the LCD PAC or the American Indian Parent Advisory Committee. There may be adjustments, but align to the needs and priorities.
- Director Henderson noted it is not the responsibility of the families to determine the outcomes, but to collaborate on the questions and the data. She is comfortable with the fluidity.
- Director Ward noted the frustration of the parents in trying to build trust with the district, and it isn't established. He noted working with the group on a plan to move forward in which they are comfortable and accept.
- He also noted questions about the process with the impending budget. Response: We are coming to the district and working with the district to develop surveys, and support and ensuring that families, students, and staff are receiving the survey with engagement by the parents in the core group. Engagement is not being told, but providing information and listening to that information that is processed. They would like to collaborate through an investment and stabilization through the H.M.O.N.G. Project.
- Director Henderson noted it will be helpful for her and a couple other board members to meet with the group and discuss timelines and scope, and how to work together. Director Valliant agreed to also be a part of the workgroup, as well as Director Vue.
- Director Allen noted it will be important to not to draw out the conclusion, which will perpetuate more harm. We cannot zoom through this work, but it is important to be clear in the process and timeline.
- The Board then discussed the proposed timeline, as well as the full scope of the project and alignment with the current plans. Director Franco noted moving forward with the ideas and recommendations as outlined, and questioned the district resources to commit to this work, including to a survey. Director Henderson noted there will need to be more discussion on the project plan, and to proceed as quickly as possible, but the goal is not to promise something and not be able to deliver on it. She agreed that it needs to be done as quickly as possible and the next steps to adoptions, but to ensure there is a clear plan in place from this presentation to the action items tentatively planned for August. A parent also provided their perspective on the engagement with HPAC and the timeline, with the understanding that the Board may adjust the timeline. Overall, the consensus was that the Board is willing to move forward once the logistics are determined. The April Regular Meeting seemed to be the most truthful, and over the upcoming weeks to gain more clarity on the scope and continued discussion on the timeline.
- It was noted that there is also a request by HPAC for a leadership training.
- Director Henderson noted the plan to schedule a meeting with questions from the Board in terms of scope, and update the group on preliminary timelines with the proposed presentation at the April Regular Meeting. Director Valliant and Director Vue will also serve on the workgroup for this item, with help from the Board Administrator to schedule the meeting.
- Director Henderson thanked everyone for their hard work, asking to trust the Board and hold them accountable, and that they are here to do the work, and do it together.

## **6. POLICY UPDATE**

The full presentation for each policy update and draft of the revised/new policy can be found in the BoardBook.

a. Policy 401.00 - Equal Employment Opportunity

Superintendent Thein introduced Maria Eustaquio, Director of EEO, to present this policy change.

It was last updated in 2019. As policies are reviewed and updated, we will be transitioning to a new policy format – policy purpose and statement of policy. No substantive changes to the language in the policy. The police now cross references Title IX Grievance Procedures - 102.00.01.

**QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION:**

- Director Henderson noted that by adding the purpose statement, the purpose has not changed.
- Director Ward noted a suggestion to a more general term instead of “Executive Chief of Human Resources” within the policy in case that title should change.
- Overall, the Board is comfortable with moving this policy forward to the three-reading process.

b. Policy 408.00.5 - Pre-Service Training

Superintendent Thein then introduced Dawn Ransom, Assistant Director of Educator Development, to present this item. Changes to the policy purpose were reviewed, as well as changes to the student teaching and practicum section, field experiences, and changes for the outdated requirements and added language to align with state statute regarding required cooperating teacher pre-service training.

**QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION:**

- Would this change the district practices or procedures? Response: No, we are currently following the requirements of state statute, and these changes would bring the policy up to date with statutes.
- Overall, the Board is comfortable with moving this policy forward to the three-reading process.

c. Policy 425.00 – Nepotism

Superintendent Thein introduced Kaying Thao, Board Administrator, to present this policy update.

It was last revised in 2008. The policy purpose was added, as well as clarification when family members or business partners can not be involved in or influence decisions related employment status – hiring, termination, promotion, etc., performance situations or work assignments, as well as definitions for “nepotism”, “family member”, “business partner”, and “direct supervision”. Exceptions were also added to the policy, and reporting expectations and the complaint process.

**QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION:**

- Director Valliant noted a point in the policy draft for family members and business partners, and if it should be the same in the following paragraph.
- Director Carrillo noted a question about an employee determining a contract that involves a family member, and that may fall into Conflict of Interest.
- Director Valliant noted questions about “romantic relationships” within the family member area. Director Henderson added onto this question with a question about close friends. Director Franco noted his rationale for keeping the language due to the power dynamic in workplace situations. “Other Relationships” may be another category that could be added. Director Franco agreed that conversation about close friendships and hiring should be discussed.
- He also noted questions about contracting for athletic coaches and the process for those hirings, as well as management.

- Director Ward noted a similar suggestion that refers to a specific title. A suggestion was to change it to “Superintendent or Designee”, since the Board directs the Superintendent.
  - Overall, the Board is comfortable with moving this policy forward to the three-reading process.
- d. Policy 419.00 - Professional and Respectful Workplace

Superintendent Their introduced Dan Wells, Assistant Director of Labor/Employee Relations, to present this item.

SPPS is committed to promoting and maintaining a workplace environment where every individual is treated with civility, dignity, and respect. Responsibility of all district personnel – employees, board members, volunteers, contractors. The policy outlines the expectations and responsibilities of district personnel.

Definitions, including “district personnel”, “civility”, “incivility”, and “disrespectful behavior” were included in the policy, as well as information on the complaint process, both informal and formal.

The Meet and Confer Process was also reviewed, including with the bargaining units on February 3, 2025. Overall, the feedback and discussion on the policy was positive, with a few recommendations for small edits.

**QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION:**

- Director Ward noted the District has a no retaliation policy, to be clear when engaging in an investigation against a supervisor or potential witness.
- Director Henderson requested clarification on parents or parent-volunteers as outlined in the policy.
- There was also discussion on adding language around implicit bias.
- Director Henderson requested information on the definition of “civility” and that it can be a range of behaviors, and can be subtle or overt, and leaves space for nuance. There was confusion around the “yelling or screaming” language, as to whom the yelling or speaking in an elevated tone was directed towards.
- She also noted further details under “uncivil conduct” and tone that is hostile, threatening, or intimidating, and situations where a staff member may be speaking about a situation to another, or previously engaged or busy and may raise their voice.
- Director Carrillo noted the section about allowing divergent points of view in relation to job performance and the power dynamic.
- Director Henderson noted the section of disrespectful behavior, and the possibility of false reports, and the language needs to be clearer to not leave room for doubt.
- Director Vue noted that this policy should be encompassed instead within the strategic plan, within Positive School and District Culture and Climate. Superintendent Their noted that it is difficult to define, but we do need a policy like this, but may need more details. This created guardrails and a structure.
- Director Franco noted the current practice of 415 reports, but there is not a good way to address concerns. This initiates a process to investigate, and labor groups also had positive feedback.
- Director Valliant noted that in Section 2, for the area that details responsibilities and expectations for stakeholders, parents, volunteers, contractors, and visitors, that the majority of the policy feels staff-directed, and the placement of the expectations for those groups feels off.
- There was also a request for clarification on the stakeholders in the policy, and if it only pertained within Section A. It was noted that the remainder of the policy refers to HR and HR processes.
- The Board also requested clarification on the disrespectful behavior and clarification on definition and what may be offensive.

- Director Valliant noted that some groups may not know to look to this policy for expectations and responsibilities, such as parent-volunteers, and this may set unrealistic expectations for them because they wouldn't know about them, have seen them, or interacted with this policy.
- Profanity and microaggressions were also noted, and how to define them.
- Director Franco noted that it seems like there are a lot of changes and his policy may need to go back to the Policy Work Group to review section by section.
- Further details were requested on the formal complaint process, and the confidentiality statement.
- Director Vue suggested that the PWG consider to what extent this policy is redundant, and what it covers that Policy 415 does not, and what this accomplishes that the strategic plan object does not.
- There was further discussion on the 415 process, and forms when sent to the correct places, and complaints to the correct spaces, which currently does not exist. There were questions on the utilization of the 415 form and modification on that policy. There may be complaints that don't warrant a 415 form, and this policy has a formalized process. The Superintendent noted that there is one staff member who handles 415 forms, and that 415 covered protected classes, whereas, this policy covers more interactions between employees. This policy gives staff members a structure for appropriate workplace behavior.
- Community members and their involvement in this policy were also discussed, with board members noting that engagement with the community is part of their job, and it may be outside this policy.
- Director Valliant requested information if it is the same language in the family handbook and expectations for parents. Assistant superintendents noted that all communication is to ensure a safe learning environment for students. There may be interactions in the office, in front of students, and families in hallways and within close range of student where interactions can have a different tone. The EEO office reviews all 415 forms, and those complaints that don't fall under that form, then are forwarded to HR, the assistant superintendents, or ombudsperson. All complaints are addresses even if there is not a formal complaint or policy.
- There was also discussion if parents should be included in this policy, and it's difficult to define public decency. It was noted by Administration that any reference towards parents was removed based on union feedback.
- Director Carrillo noted that the concern is for the employees to follow as directed by the Superintendent, but the concern with parents is that they have free speech rights, and that we cannot suppress the speech of parents if there is a legitimate complaint of a school, staff, or Administration. There have been instances where Administration may have been offensive to a community, and they have reacted accordingly. Board members noted concerns about including parents in the policy to not suppress speech, but to seek real engagement with the community, and it is a balance. They agreed with the policy to have purview over employees, but the concerns of limiting the speech and opinions of parents and community members. Another board members noted that parents vary, and may show up in certain ways.
- The Superintendent noted this is a backstop and adds awareness for good judgment.
- Director Valliant noted she believes this is a policy we should have, but there are areas that need clarification.
- There was also further discussion on the parent language and parent-volunteers, and how it will be difficult to know if a person is acting as a parent, parent-volunteer, or parent who is also a staff member.
- Overall, the Board agreed this policy should not move forward with the three-reading process yet, and instead go back to Policy Work Group for more discussion.

## 9. ADJOURNMENT

**Director Ward moved to adjourn the meeting. Director Franco seconded the motion. It passed by acclaim.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:02 p.m.

For clarity and to facilitate research, these minutes reflect the order of the original Agenda and not necessarily the time during the meeting the items were discussed.

Prepared and submitted by:

Sarah Dahlke, Assistant Clerk, St. Paul Public Schools Board of Education