

**MINUTES OF BOARD OF EDUCATION FORUM MEETING
HELD SEPTEMBER 16, 2019 AT 7:00 P.M. AT TOWN HALL-COUNCIL CHAMBERS**

Board Members Present: Kathryn Hallen-Chair; Anne Harrigan -Vice Chair; Anthony Perugini-Secretary; Adam Grippo; Richard Gusenburg; Marléna Soble; Neeta Vatti

Board Members Absent: None.

Administrators Present: Jeffrey F. Solan, Superintendent of Schools, Marlene Silano Assistant Superintendent of Schools; Vincent Masciana, Chief Operating Officer; Tracy Hussey, Director, Pupil Personnel Services; Kelly Lenz, Coordinator-School/Community Relations

1. CALL TO ORDER – 7:30 P.M.

- A. Roll for Quorum. The roll was called and a quorum determined.
- B. Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.
Ms. Hallen led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

2. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Ms. Hallen welcomed all to this third forum to discuss school climate. She said tonight they will provide an update on the progress that has been made. Members of the audience may address the Board or the Superintendent with their questions and concerns.

Superintendent of Schools Jeffrey F. Solan welcomed everyone and stated, “We do a lot of things incredibly well, but you can never support students enough. In that vein, we are constantly looking at the programs we offer and we're always trying to find ways to improve on that.” He noted kids cannot be successful unless their basic needs are met. Our students are achieving at record high levels, but we need to make sure we are meeting the needs of every individual child.” He said they have increased their efforts around communications with families regarding what can and cannot be shared per law. Solan said officials have taken the feedback received from families and students in an attempt “to improve ourselves as a school system.” The Superintendent stated that the public can find data on the district website regarding the School Climate Survey. In addition, he said data regarding discipline over the last three years is also included. He noted that last year, the school district reported 207 disciplinary infractions. He said tonight is not about his making a presentation, but to hear feedback from the community.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Tim White, 11 Colonial Court. Mr. White stated his daughter started kindergarten 2 weeks ago and absolutely loves it. He said of the 600 staff, the overwhelming majority are good, although there may be a few who are not good. He recalled about 15 years ago a teacher was arrested and although the Board and Superintendent wanted to take action, the union leadership was defending the member. He said he understands and respects the process but there is a time when that does not cut it. He said if students are in fear of a

teacher or, hypothetically, if a teacher got in trouble for an altercation with a police officer that the Board stand resolute and make that change.

Mr. Solan responded that there could be misconstrued information. He said they have a supportive and respectful relationship with teacher union leadership and that Connecticut law dictates employment issues, not the union, so that would be the first place to look.

Jeff Natale, 512 Cardinal Lane. Mr. Natale stated that back in June, Ms. Hallen stated she did not feel comfortable holding the meeting until they received the Safe School Climate data. He asked if that data would be discussed tonight.

Mr. Solan responded that there is more data than just the safe school climate information. He said he did not have a formal presentation and that the information on the website is very clear. Ms. Hallen said that all of the Board has the data and there was no spike in the number of incidents but noted that the Board has not discussed it as a group. She said they could present at an upcoming Board meeting, possibly October.

Liz Linehan, 405 Sycamore Lane. Ms. Linehan said she was here to speak about an upcoming community conversation on the opioid epidemic to be held on September 26th in Town Council chambers.

Chris Affie, 204 Peck Lane. Mr. Affie said after hearing parents speak at the March forum, he hopes that everyone continues to be an advocate for their child. He thanked Highland School for the care and support they have given his son who is new to Highland this year.

Marty Rauch, 33 Ives Hill Court. Mr. Rauch said he commends the school Board, staff and students as we have one heck of a school system - not perfect, but close. He said life is not perfect. His children attended Cheshire Public Schools and received an excellent education and now his grandchildren are receiving an excellent education. He announced that he is putting together a program with Tracy Hussey and Coach Dan Lee to promote kindness, happiness, compassion and gratitude in the schools. He advocated working cooperatively and focusing on the positives.

Mary Burnham, 45 Tress Road. Mrs. Burnham said her son grew up in Newtown many years ago and when he had a problem with a student, the Assistant Principal handled the problem. Ms. Burnham questioned whether the current legislation discourages parents from lodging a complaint because of the amount of paperwork that needs to be done. She said her granddaughter in Doolittle had an incident last year that was addressed. Her daughter was given the option of lodging a bullying complaint through the State, but agreed that going through the process would be a nightmare for all and wouldn't accomplish what was actually accomplished without reporting it to the state. She asked if someone could explain the law and if there have been changes, what they are.

Superintendent Solan replied that immediately following the March forum, he made sure that all of the information to make anonymous or direct reports of harassment or bullying is available on our website. It is a very comprehensive process. He said legislation has changed the definition of bullying, but that legislation does not go into effect until next year. Currently, a verified act is something that is repeated. If verified, both parties are notified and asked if they would like to come in for a resolution meeting. He said as a Principal, he tried to handle things as expeditiously as possible, but now there is a lot of documentation, which could be a good thing, but also cumbersome. He said it is all explained on the website.

Mrs. Burnham asked if that is a help or a hindrance. Mr. Solan said they don't want people to feel discouraged about making a report because of the amount of paperwork, and that people can just make a call instead of filling out the paperwork.

Ms. Linehan said this is the reason why legislators worked to change the law. She said they spoke to many parents, both of children who were bullied and those that were labeled a bully. The concern is after an incident is reported. They changed the definition from repeated acts to being just one act, if severe. The purpose of the investigation is to see if there is a child in crisis, not only the child who bullied, but also the one who caused the act. She said there will be more training and a collaborative was formed to try to alleviate problems. They are trying to eliminate reporting to the state. The goal is to have all kids happy and safe in school.

Mr. Solan said there were more reported incidents of bullying this year and asked if it was a good thing. He said they investigated more incidents and noted that some districts reported no incidents at all. Ms. Linehan said that is true and that is not possible.

Mr. Perugini said one of the biggest frustrations is whether there is a one-time incident or several over time, parents ask why this student is still in school or still in the same class. He asked if there will be some relief for the reporting party to find out what actions have been taken. Ms. Linehan answered that FERPA will not allow for that information to be released. She said they can be told that everything that can be done has been done, and under the law, parents have the right to go to the State Department of Education to appeal a decision.

Fiona Pearson, 100 Strathmore Drive. Ms. Pearson said she is on the task force for sexual assault and bullying at Central Connecticut State University. She said there are no bullying processes in higher education or in the workplace. She said at least in K-12 there is a process, however onerous it may be. She admitted that sometimes a process discourages people from reporting because of the paperwork that has to be completed. She thanked the Board for the steps they are taking.

Superintendent Solan repeated that he did not want people thinking the process is going to be too difficult and if there is a problem, please reach out to your principal or an administrator.

Mr. Gusenburg said he was a principal for over 30 years and that people assume when there is a problem between two students, it is bullying, but there are many gray areas. He said it is not uncommon that when an incident is reported to a principal, it does not reach the level of bullying, but the principal still handles the issue. He stressed that parents and administration need to talk and really determine what is really going on, instead of labeling it as bullying.

Jami Ferguson, 105 Copper Beach Drive. Ms. Ferguson asked how staff helps to solve these conflicts before it gets to the reporting stage. Mr. Solan answered that there are developmentally different needs from a 6 year old to a 16 year old and depending on the situation, it could look significantly different. Most of the time, when two parties are involved in a situation and there is a back and forth, they work with each student individually, and then collectively, to try to resolve the problem. The principal, mental health team, teachers and parents are involved and they try to resolve the issue.

Sam Rosenberg, 299 Greenbriar Drive. Ms. Rosenberg commended Cheshire for always being at the forefront of being restorative. She said Cheshire has been at the forefront of Responsive Classroom before it became the thing to do. Her daughter is biracial and was the subject of name calling and comments. She asked the administration to handle the issue and they had restorative conversations. Her daughter has bloomed because she was taught how to handle the situation. Ms. Rosenberg congratulated the Board and Superintendent for the SBAC scores she saw today as Cheshire moved from 10th to 5th in our DRG.

Mr Solan said not every child knows how to handle it if they are going through a tough situation and not every child can be a strong self-advocate. He encourages parents to reach out if they have questions.

Joe Bango, 171 Cornwall Avenue. Mr. Bango said one of the difficulties is we have to teach kids how to interact with society and deal with each other, and who they can reach out to if they have a problem. He asked if there is any type of mechanism to make it easy for parents to receive data. He said a number of years ago his son was threatened by three students who said they would bring knives to school in a backpack. His son did not receive counseling and received no support from the principal or Board. He filed a FOIA request and was told by the Assistant Superintendent that there were no acts of bullying or acts of violence. He asked if they will make it easy for parents to see what acts of violence happen at each individual school.

Superintendent Solan answered that because of FERPA they cannot make personally identifiable information available, and when there are 5 or less incidents in a school, he cannot make the data available.

Mr. Bango asked why then can he get a report from the Police Department. Mr. Solan answered that the police follow a different set of laws than FERPA. Mr. Bango asked if

they can report on the website if the police have been called to a specific school. Mr. Solan said Mr. Bango would have to speak to the police department about that. He noted that we have School Resource Officers in our schools every day. They do not have to call police. Mr. Bango next asked how parents would know if a weapon was brought to school. Mr. Solan answered that they may not, unless it impacted students directly. He said he has worked in the district for over 15 years, and does not recall an incident where a student has brandished a weapon.

Mr. Bango asked if FERPA applies to School Resource Officers. Mr. Solan said that if there was an arrest, they would fall under juvenile protection, but SRO's are not an agent of the school system, so FERPA does not cover them in a school setting.

Gary Riccini, 27 Eastridge Court. Mr. Riccini said he has a student at Chapman and they are doing a phenomenal job. He asked for some tangible activities happening at the ground level to combat the problem of bullying. The Superintendent responded that they are focused on two programs that dictate culture in the schools - responsive classroom at the elementary level and restorative practices at the middle and high schools. He noted that the showcase meeting at the middle school last year focused on restorative practices.

Judy Villa, 1020 Danard Place. Ms. Villa said she has been on both the Board of Education and Town Council in Cheshire and also taught at Quinnipiac University for a number of years. She said many students came to the university with academic and social issues that had not been dealt with at elementary, middle or high school. She ran a workshop called "Practicing without a License." She said when you scratch the surface of the students who are having problems, they are usually dealing with social issues. She encouraged people to buy into kindness and collaborativeness and to understand social emotional learning. She said we cannot continue to play the blame game in our society.

Alison Fisher, 95 Bellamy Road. Ms. Fisher asked if we survey staff. Superintendent Solan answered yes, and said he can put that on the website also, as long as it is not personally identifiable. She asked how often the Safe School Climate report is updated and how is it assessed in terms of compliance? Mr. Solan said it is updated annually. The individual buildings are in the process of finalizing theirs now. They meet with individual building teams and that will be posted on the website. After that, they are reviewed at the district level with the district team. She asked if there is 100 percent compliance. He said it is not so much compliance as there are adjustments; it is a fluid process.

Jean Caplan, 40 Sorghum Mill Drive. Ms. Caplan said she spoke at the March forum last year with a serious issue. She thanked Superintendent Solan and new principal Amy O'Brien and said she is very happy with the outcomes. She said the system has gone above and beyond for her daughter.

Joseph Bango, 171 Cornwall Avenue. Mr. Bango asked if there is a program in place for teacher bullying, a whistleblower policy for teachers. Mr. Solan said he would have to

review our policy on that. He said he does not remember any formal complaints made against staff members. Mr. Bango said he had heard of an incident at Darcey. Superintendent Solan said he was not aware of an incident or any circumstances or comments surrounding it.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS:

Mr. Grippo read a prepared statement and began by thanking the parents who came this evening. He said this went a little different than what he was expecting. He praised the school district's mental health staff. He said "More often than not our children's needs are met on a daily basis," but said there is still a disconnect and a need for the district to be accountable and responsive to the community. He said he pledges to hold Mr. Solan accountable but also to work with him to improve real and perceived weaknesses in policy.

Ms. Harrigan thanked all who came out tonight. She encouraged people to research responsive classroom and restorative classroom. It shows what we do to support our students.

Mr. Gusenburg said he wants to stress the word "communication." He said it is essential that you immediately contact the school if your child is having a problem. Two-way communication will solve many problems before it reaches the point of bullying. He urged everyone to focus on what is best for the children.

Ms. Vatti said she completely agrees that communication is very important. She thanked everyone for coming this evening. She also thanked Ms. Linehan for coming tonight and explaining what is happening on the state level.

Ms. Soble said she agrees with Ms. Vatti about this being a collaborative process but disagrees with Mr. Grippo about some of his comments regarding following policy. She thanked all who came out and brought suggestions and criticisms.

Mr. Perugini also thanked all who attended this evening and also those who came out at other meetings. He said the highlight of tonight was hearing that Ms. Caplan's issues have been taken care of. He said being a data person, that portion of the meeting for him was underwhelming and he would like more data. He said by no means is this over, let's keep the conversation happening. He would like more data and more info about incidents by school. Mr. Perugini asked Mr. Solan to share links that the Board received with the public.

Chairman Hallen said she is very happy there is a much more positive feel to this forum than prior ones. She said she hopes it is an indication that the public understands that the Board and Administration are taking this issue seriously. She said we have a great community and we must stay positive. She said that positivity will filter down to the children. Ms. Hallen called for less division and more productive conversations.

Superintendent Solan said that he appreciates all who came out tonight. He said he wanted to recognize administrators and teachers and paraprofessionals who work to make sure our students have a positive experience. He said he is also proud of the academic success our students recently had being 5th in the state on achievement testing. For the students to show that success is very impressive and he attributes the results to social-emotional learning and complex thinking.

Ms. Vatti said she also wants to acknowledge Mr. Rauch and hopes to hear more about his initiative with Mrs. Hussey.

4. **ADJOURNMENT**

On a motion by Ms. Soble, and seconded by Mr. Grippo, the Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathryn Hallen, Board Chair

Attest:

Carol K. Jesensky, Board of Education Clerk

Filed at the Town Clerk's Office, Town Hall, Cheshire: 10-1-2019.