

**MINUTES OF CHESHIRE BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL MEETING  
HELD IN TOWN COUNCIL CHAMBERS ON DECEMBER 6, 2023 AT 6:30 PM**

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Board Members Present: Marie Cullinan, Mark Ecke, Adam Grippo; Anne Harrigan, Anthony Perugini, Anne Samantha Rosenberg, Timothy White

Board Members Absent: None

Administrators Present: Jeffrey F. Solan, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools, Vincent Masciana, Chief Operating Officer, Marlene Silano, Assistant Superintendent of Schools

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1. **CALL TO ORDER – 6:30 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.*

Superintendent Solan explained that this meeting is different from others as the new slate of officers has not been elected, therefore, he will be presiding as Chair. He then led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

2. **AUDIENCE**

Faith Ham, 633 Cortland Circle. As a former Board member, Ms. Ham spoke against the Right to Read legislation and asked the legislators to work to correct or rescind the bill.

3. **DISCUSSION REGARDING LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES WITH LOCAL AND STATE LEGISLATORS.**

Dr. Solan noted that the following legislators were present: State Representative Liz Linehan, State Representative Lezlye Zupkus, Senator Jan Hochadel and Senator Rob Sampson. He said State Representative Jack Fazzino sent an email explaining he was not available to attend this evening.

Representative Linehan and her colleagues thanked outgoing Chair, Mr. Perugini, for all his work and presented him with a flag. She explained that the flag was flown over the State Capital and the State Capitol police saluted the flag in honor of Mr. Perugini. The legislators presented the flag and certificate to Mr. Perugini. Mr. Perugini thanked the legislators and thanked the full Board for their support.

**Existing/Potential Mandates Impacting Education**

Dr. Solan noted he had 50 pages of mandates for education. He said he understands they are not the only four people who write legislation, but any consideration for a period where legislation can be evaluated before it is written into law would be appreciated as things that go into the implementer bill make it difficult to respond. He would like to set up a pathway to review mandates that have been on the books for many years.

Representative Zupkus said the Education Committee said they have heard that districts want to get rid of mandates, but no one is telling them which ones. She encouraged Dr. Solan to provide a list of mandates. Senator Sampson said it is especially important that they hear from them what mandates they want supported and which ones they do not.

**Kindergarten.** Public Act 23-159 Section 3 changes the kindergarten entry age from age 5 by January 1, to age 5 by September 1 of the entry year and requires implementation in fall of 2024. The statute provides for a parental request to waive the age/date requirement and an assessment as to whether the early entry would be “developmentally appropriate” for early admission to kindergarten. Dr. Solan noted they are in support that children must be 5 to begin kindergarten. Unfortunately, the implementation was so expedient that families were not prepared.

Representative Linehan said it is difficult for working families who do not care if it is school or daycare but there are few spots in daycare in our state. Dr. Solan explained the Board’s hope to set up a transition program for those students who were previously eligible for kindergarten and were born in that 3-month window. It would be a bridge program available for one-year only for a potential of 60 students.

Ms. Silano said legislation has put districts in an awkward position stating if a parent wants a waiver, we will conduct an assessment. There has been no guidance from the state and no good assessment tool found. We would like to have them remove the waiver process. Ms. Rosenberg added that this could have been avoided if we had a longer implementation timeline. In addition, she asked for flexibility in teacher’s certifications as some teachers are certified PreK only and some are K – 3.

Representative Linehan asked if they cannot get the waiver, would an across-the-board assessment tool from the state work? Senator Sampson said he believes it should be up to the districts to make these decisions, not the bureaucracy of the Department of Education. Ms. Harrigan said she agrees with the start date but disagrees with the waiver. Mr. Perugini suggested that part of the problem is that the State Department of Education is very understaffed.

### **Special Education Cost Grant**

Dr. Solan explained the cost of special education has risen astronomically. Our district has built in-house programs to better support our students for several years, not only because of the cost, because we believe we can provide services better, more efficiently and in our children's home neighborhood, which is meaningful for families. However, the cost has continued to grow. The State has an access cost grant share program when the cost of student's education exceeds four and a half times the per pupil expenditure and for Cheshire that is roughly \$80,000. The money, in excess of the \$80,000, goes to the State and the State theoretically gives us that money back. Providing full funding for that excess cross cost grant would be beneficial.

### **Indoor Air Quality**

Dr. Solan explained that the complexity of assessing and remediating the infrastructure of schools, the need to address air-conditioning and year-round use of schools, the difficulty in estimating individual project costs, and the significant cost of annual inspections all point to a series of recommendations that require a longer time commitment, and an expectation of significant construction costs. He said they all believe that providing high quality air for our students and staff community is important. However, the timeframe really is not reasonable. He said they ask to address the issue of sufficient time (up to 3 years) to efficiently study, design and execute remedial plans that often include supply chain issues and cooperation from utilities. This should significantly reduce the costs associated with the tremendous demand from Connecticut school systems against the limited number of qualified firms doing this work.

### **National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs - Free and Reduced Meal Thresholds**

The Superintendent said the national programs are tremendous and we appreciate the opportunity to offer them, but the thresholds for annual gross income for a family to qualify for free meals, the annual gross income must be below \$39,000. In Connecticut, that is not reasonable. If you live in a community like Cheshire, and you are making \$40,000 with a family of four, you do not qualify for free lunch. In addition, to live in a Cheshire community with \$40,000 is almost impossible. Dr. Solan said they respectfully request that you consider a substantial increase in the income threshold for Connecticut to ensure that students who need access to free or reduced priced meals have it.

Representative. Linehan said they are considering it, last year they recommended using the United Way Alice method (Asset, Limited Income Constrained, Employed.)

### **Prevailing Wage**

The State's threshold for prevailing wage is set at \$1M for new construction and \$100,000 for renovation projects. With tight budgets, we have historically used renovation projects to maintain our infrastructure rather than new construction. The costs of labor and materials have increased to a point where a \$100,000 threshold is simply too low to incur the added costs of prevailing wage requirements. Dr. Solan said we respectfully request that you consider elevating the prevailing wage for renovation projects to at least \$500,000. The legislators said that every year they put that in, but do not expect anything to come of it.

Regarding Prevailing Wage, Senator Sampson said he and Representative Zupkus put the bill in every year and asked Representative Linehan for bipartisan support.

### **Right to Read**

Dr. Solan gave a presentation on this legislation. The Cheshire Public Schools has embraced "the science of reading" as one of the most important educational initiatives of the last 50 years. We have been focused on addressing the tenets of the science of reading

as outlined by the National Reading Panel through curriculum design and professional development since 2007. He said that Cheshire's waiver was rejected on the grounds that our district's curriculum resources that we designed, were not on the approved list. He explained that Cheshire has spent the last 20 plus years constructing and refining the curriculum and resources that reflect the science of reading. We use supplemental resources to further enhance our programming. Cheshire's third grade reading performance on the Smarter Balanced Assessment with respect to the percentage of students performing at the goal level or above Cheshire is 7<sup>th</sup> in Connecticut overall. Dr. Solan provided more data showing that our program is effective. The implication of changing our program is financially significant. It would be a \$535,000 investment for K-3 grades only and for K- 6 adoption, it is roughly \$700,000. He said the State should never have said it is this or nothing.

There was extension conversation between the Board and the legislators regarding this and the other legislative priorities. The legislators agreed to bring these issues to Hartford. Board members thanked the legislators for listening to their concerns.

Representative Linehan told the Board she has great concerns about sports hazing and bullying.

4. **ADJOURNMENT**

On a motion by Ms. Rosenberg, and seconded by Mr. Perugini, the meeting was adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

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Jeffrey Solan, Ed.D. Superintendent of Schools

Attest:

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Carol K. Jesensky, Board of Education Clerk

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