

Board of Education Meeting
June 6, 2016

Call to Order

Board Chair Gee called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m. in the Suffield Middle School Media Center. Present: Board members Natalie Semyanko, Jeanne Gee, Kendra Wiesel, Susi Keane, George Beiter, Matt Service, Michael Sepko, Lori D'Ostuni, Superintendent Karen Berasi, Assistant Superintendent Brian Hendrickson, and Business Manager Bill Hoff.

The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Recognition

Superintendent Berasi introduced the Suffield High School CABE Leadership Award recipients: Holly Corcoran and Kinser Bonner. She congratulated both students and highlighted their positive leadership and character traits.

Mr. Canny gave a brief introduction of the newly created Unity Team . Students representing the team were Caelie Flanagan, Destiny Gonzalez-Delgado, Giancarlo Isotti, and Katelayn Eudovic who spoke about the Unity Team which focuses on uniting the school, encouraging school spirit, and creating a safe environment in the school. The students highlighted events they held this year such as World Kindness Day, attending sporting events and the International Café and would like to expand them for next year. Board Chair Gee thanked the students for coming and for the example they set for their peers.

Ms. Berasi introduced the 2017 Suffield Teacher of the Year and Paraeducator of the Year: Cynthia Pfaff and Megan McCoy, respectively. Ms. Berasi acknowledged Ms. McCoy's dedication to and hard work with students. Ms. Berasi said Ms. Pfaff is the epitome of student and teacher growth and she educates the entire child. Ms. Pfaff said it is a pleasure to work with children, their families and at Suffield Middle School. Suffield is surrounded by great people who encourage and support one another, and she is very grateful to be a part of it.

This year's retirees were introduced by building and Central Office administrators. Nancy Taylor introduced Molly Baumann, SHS school nurse. Molly has been with the district for 22 years, and she is very knowledgeable and knows what to do in difficult situations. She makes great connections with her students. Ms. Taylor shared a poem written by a student about Ms. Baumann. Larry Plano introduced Bob Lowell who has served 33 years in the district as much more than a head custodian. Some of Mr. Lowell's accolades are: awarded many community awards, is a member of the Suffield Volunteer Ambulance Association and is an EMT, has cycled across the U.S. for charity, donated a kidney to co-worker, and served as advisory to many clubs at SHS: Robotics, Ski Club, and the Debate Team. Mr. Plano said he is the spirit of Suffield High School and emulates the motto "service above self". Mr. Moccio introduced Allyson Kehoe and highlighted her work since joining Suffield in 1990. Mr. Moccio said she is very organized and adept at filling substitutes in for teachers. She has been vital in the transition of the new high school administration. Mr. Moccio wished her well in her retirement. Mr. Moccio recognized Barbara Klaus who joined Suffield High School 2001 as a special education teacher. Ms. Klaus has given SHS 15 years of wonderful service including teaching summer school and serving as the Best Buddies advisor. She is a strong advocate for inclusion of special education students, and is open and honest. Mr. Moccio next recognized Nancy Lombard who has 35 years of service in

Suffield Public Schools. Ms. Lombard has a lot of energy and has served in many roles in the district, including long-term substitute, teacher of life education and PE, class advisor many times, in addition to running volleyball each week for the last 11 years. Mr. Moccio wished her well on her retirement. Karen Carpenter-Snow recognized Kathy Wagar, McAlister's school psychologist, and she has been with Suffield Public Schools for 15 years. Ms. Wagar has served as the Special Education team leader, written grants, run the homework club, brought Unified Sports to McAlister, and been a member of the Sunshine Club, Job Core, and SIT Team. She is joyous and child centered; she is an anchor at McAlister and will be missed. Ms. Carpenter-Snow wished her well and said Ms. Wagar leaves a legacy at McAlister.

The Board took a brief recess at 7:09 p.m. The regular meeting resumed at 7:24 p.m.

Public Comment

Melissa Mack, Suffield First Selectman, was invited to speak tonight and welcomed the collaboration with the Board of Education. She was present to speak about the Parks and Recreation summer day camps in response to a letter she received from concerned parents relative to safety at Sunrise Park for special needs children attending the school's summer program there. Ms. Mack stated that Sunrise Park is not appropriate for all children and that the decision by the school district to fully integrate with the Parks and Recreation Department this year was premature. However, she and Town Departments will work with the district to roll out an effective summer program for students with special needs. She noted staff from the DPW and Parks and Recreation have been working with school administration to provide a safe and appropriate program. She provided details of the summer program including staffing and training, the ages and number of campers, hours of the camp, and activities provided. Ms. Mack noted several improvements that are being made at Sunrise Park to increase safety. The program at Sunrise Park is well organized and well managed, and there is constant supervision of campers in the water. Board members asked for clarification on campers attending the program and holding student camps there in the past. Ms. Mack said she was confident that the supports are in place for all children to succeed at the camp. Board Chair Gee thanked Ms. Mack and Town officials for attending tonight's meeting and their collaborative work with the school district. Superintendent Berasi also thanked Ms. Mack and Town departments on their collaboration with the administration. In response to a question, counselors use cell phones to communicate but walkie-talkie radios will be used as well.

MOTION #16-37: D'Ostuni moved, Semyanko seconded to enter the First Selectman's presentation into public record. All members voted in favor. The motion carried 8-0.

Ross Davis, 42 Wisteria Lane, was appreciative of the First Selectman's presentation. However, it ignored the way the summer program was rolled out and how parents were first informed during PPT meetings. He asked the May 16, 2016 Board minutes be amended to accurately reflect the Superintendent's statement, "due process is a privilege". He noted due process is not a privilege to parents but a burden, and the cost to parents is approximately \$25,000-\$36,000. Due process is a right but to only those who can afford it, and not representative of the special education population. In addition, there is no evidence that a student's education improves after due process. Due process deteriorates the relationship between families and educators and takes an emotional toll on families. He asked for collaboration and a student-centered district so special education students can become contributing members of society, not a burden.

Dawn Metcalf, 49 Cedar Crest Lane, would like to see improved communication. This year, the second public comment at board meetings has been eliminated, special education parents have been told they can only speak to case managers, classroom observations have been limited, responses to parent emails have been delayed, and SPED-PAC meetings have been delayed.

These new procedures have contributed to feelings of parents being left out of the process. She requested meetings be filmed and archived, compile accurate minutes and amend the May 16, 2016 minutes to reflect the Superintendent's statement, "due process is a privilege", stop using terms that create divisiveness (i.e. educational team), and create communication protocols. Due process should be the last step, and the issue that special education parents being treated differently (i.e. not able to speak with classroom teachers, only case managers) needs to be addressed.

Debra Dudack, Prospect Street, spoke about the need for transparency and respect giving an example of the cuts to the preschool program and the decision to hold the ESY program at Sunrise Park even after many parents expressed concern with the safety of the venue. She thanked Ms. Mack for her presentation.

Kristin Allard, 1167 Mountain Road, said she was astounded at Ms. Berasi's comment about due process. Special Education parents want to work with teachers and administrators. She asked the Board to reflect on what the Superintendent said and how it relates to their beliefs. She said up until recently she had little concern, but now too many incidents have occurred that impact her child's safety due to oversights. She is receiving conflicting information about her child's academic capabilities. She asked the Board to think about direction in which the district is going.

Sue Davis, 42 Wisteria Lane, said as a parent of a special needs child she would describe herself as proud, tired and honored, but privileged is not a word she would use. The statement that due process is a privilege of special education parents is offensive. Factors leading to her frustration and dissatisfaction this year are: poor communication by administration, PPTs being cut short, information on IEP's not agreed upon, no response to her emails, plans for the ESY program not being communicated to parents until it was written in their child's IEP, unilateral decisions made without parental consent, and IEPs including less service hours and there is no correlation between data and objectives and goals. She thanked Ms. Mack for her presentation but Sunrise Park is not appropriate or safe for all children; and not for her child. She noted a child with extensive needs will run away when they are feeling stressed. Parental involvement this year has been non-existent resulting in parents having to refuse the IEP and file due process. Due process is not a privilege; it's a nightmare. There has been a large outcry for reform.

Amy Hall, 95 Heritage Trail, agreed there is a lack of transparency. Her son was recommended for the ESY program but she did not find out until May 6 even after asking many times throughout the school year what the plan would be. She has not received any communication about the program and has little confidence that anyone has considered the needs of her child. She has been frustrated with the lack of communication and the effort she has had to make to get information. She asked that the district refrain from using the term "educational team".

Jill Caron, 574 Halladay Avenue, was concerned with the changes at Spaulding in practices for dealing with behavior issues. She noted teachers cannot send students to the office for disciplinary issues so now students are sitting in hallways unattended or in the entryway with an iPad and duty clerk. She noted her concern with the practice of evacuating all students from a classroom when a student deregulates; it is disrupting to the learning environment. She also noted she found the due process comment offensive.

Rob Michalman, 719 East Street South, said he disagrees with Board Chair Gee's previous comment that how programs are designed are operational issues and not the purview of the Board. He said it is the Board's responsibility to ensure the safety and security of students. Board Chair Gee said by State statutes, the Superintendent has operational control and the Board has oversight.

Geoff Hoyt, 91 Broadleaf Circle, expressed his support for all who had voiced their concerns as they are legitimate. He sees opportunity for collaboration among parents, administration, and the Board. He asked that the barriers be removed, listen to parental concerns and then create action plans based on those concerns.

The Board opened public comment up to dialog to address the concerns expressed this evening.

Superintendent Berasi said she did not mean to offend anyone by the word “privileged” when referring to due process. The definition of privilege is the right to a particular person or group of people. Her intent was to say that the district supports parental rights in special education as they are given by state and federal law. The district wants to negotiate a compromise at PPTs when there are disagreements, and we want to have parents as equal partners. She noted the recent special education parent survey showed that 90% of special education parents feel they are active participants; the goal is to get to 100%. We are not increasing our litigiousness in this district. In 2013-14 school year there were five mediations; this year to date there has only been one mediation. She also noted the initial part of due process does not cost parents any money. Parents can request another PPT, request a resolution meeting, or file a complaint with the State, all at no cost to them. They can even have a mediation at no cost if attorneys are not present. The Special Education Department is making efforts to be more transparent; one way is evidenced by longer minutes on IEPs. Minutes should reflect if a parent disagrees with recommendations in an IEP. Legal fees are not only associated with special education but also for expulsion hearings and expulsion settlement agreements, review of policies, and trainings by attorneys. Ms. Berasi said our purpose is to work with families for the benefit of the students. Board Chair Gee said the Board’s intent is to support all children in Suffield. It is never the intent to say something painful to anyone. The Board has statutory obligations that can result in a disconnect with the public.

Karen addressed Ms. Caron’s comment relative to difficulties with student behaviors at Spaulding. Ms. Berasi has held focus groups with special education and general education teachers from both Spaulding and McAlister. These groups will develop standards and procedures for behaviors and address social emotional learning.

Ms. Caron asked for clarification for parents who want to opt their children out of SBAC testing. The Department of Education has an opt-out form on its website, but the district has said students cannot opt out of the test. Superintendent Berasi said the State is administering the SBAC and they have been very clear that students cannot opt out. Ms. Berasi asked Ms. Caron to send her the form and she will call the Commissioner of Education directly. Board Chair Gee added that at a meeting she attended earlier this year the Commissioner said the State does not provide direction to any districts to help parents opt their children out of the testing. However, Board Chair Gee noted there is no provision in law for punitive measure to parents who opt their children out of the SBACs. Mr. Hendrickson noted the State outlined very clear directives to districts relative to financial penalties for less than 95% completion rate.

Jackie Mahannah, no address given, said that funding is very small and the State would never take it away from districts because it is used for disadvantaged families. Ms. Berasi said the State’s message to districts was much stronger this year than in the past.

Ms. Caron asked how to get the minutes to last meeting amended. Board Chair Gee explained the process.

Mr. Davis asked for the process beyond due process. Superintendent Berasi said the IEP can be amended and another meeting would have to be conducted to do that, however, only a few areas of an IEP can be amended.

Ms. Davis said she appreciated the Superintendent's apology, but the ESY programming was not an error. It is difficult to move on when the same things keep happening. Human error is one thing, but unilateral decisions are not appropriate and need to be changed immediately.

Ms. Hall said part of the issue of the ESY program is little information was given about the program when it was presented at a SPED-PAC meeting. Parents received more information tonight from Ms. Mack's presentation than parents received from the school district.

Melissa Sullivan, 20 Mountain Laurel Way, said she and Ms. Vicedomini are co-chairs of SPED-PAC and are working to bring CPAC to the district next year to help parents understand the IEP and PPT process.

Board member Sepko thanked the parents and said concerns are being received. He said these concerns are looked at against district goals. He is interested in creating a district-wide dashboard with key performance indicators, steps to achieve goals, and a way to track progress over time.

Doriana Vicedomini, 9 King Fisher Lane, thanked the Board for having the conversation with parents tonight and is looking forward to SPED-PAC being used as an advisory board.

Board member Beiter encouraged parents to call board members with concerns.

Approval of Minutes

Semyanko moved, Beiter seconded to approve the May 16, 2016 minutes. Wiesel moved to amend the minutes to change the Superintendent's comments under Public Comment to include "due process is a privilege for special education parents", Beiter seconded the motion. Wiesel, Semyanko, Beiter, Service, Gee and Keane voted in favor of the amendment. D'Ostuni and Sepko abstained. The motion carried 6-2-0.

Semyanko moved to approve the amended minutes, Wiesel seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion carried 8-0.

Consent Agenda

None

Discussion Items

- Special Education Communication
Board Chair Gee asked the Board if they were interested in holding a workshop to better understand the special education program and process. The workshop would focus on communication, legal issues, the role of SPED-PAC, and the PPT process. Board members were in agreement to have workshops on special education.
- District Professional Development Report
Mr. Hendrickson presented the professional development report for this year. All major areas of work were aligned to SPS goals. He highlighted the total 2015-2016 professional development offerings by school/group. Board member Service asked on average how many staff received in district or out of district PD, exclusive of early release days. Mr. Hendrickson said he would get that information to the Board. Board member Beiter asked if the district is turning down any requests. Mr. Hendrickson said yes but it is very rare. He reviewed educator growth goals for the 2016-2017 school year.

Reports to the Board

Superintendent's Report

- Ms. Berasi shared a proposal to change school start times next year to address the issue of students arriving at SMS before teachers. This is still a draft as M&J is being consulted to verify the feasibility of the changes.
- Ms. Berasi said the FFA State Convention on Saturday was spectacular and the students were outstanding.

Chair's Report

- None

Business Manager's Report

- Mr. Hoff said vestibules are on schedule to be completed by the end of June.

Subcommittee Reports

- May 17, 2016 HR/Personnel (Negotiations) Subcommittee Meeting – Board member Service said the next meeting is Thursday, June 9 and they hope to come to an agreement with the nurse's union.
- May 31, 2016 Teaching and Learning Subcommittee Meeting – Board member Semyanko said other information was previously covered and the curriculum cabinet meets tomorrow at 7:00 a.m.

Future Business

- Stakeholder feedback and focus groups for parents with Board members and administration
- Board discussion of adding public comment to the end of board meetings

Executive Session

Service moved, Wiesel seconded to go into executive session at 10:08 p.m. for the purpose of discussing personnel matters: Superintendent's evaluation and Central Office non-union staff salaries. All members voted in favor. The motion carried.

Wiesel moved, Service seconded to come out of executive session at 11:00 p.m.

Adjournment

Service moved, Wiesel seconded to adjourn the meeting at 11:01 p.m.

Minutes are subject to approval at the next meeting on June 20, 2016.

Respectfully submitted,

Lori D'Ostuni
Secretary