

**Revised**

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Well-Being Committee met in special session on Monday, February 8, 2021 at 4:00 PM remotely.

Committee members present: Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Moore and Mr. Roraback

Committee members absent: Mr. Hicks

Board members present: Mrs. Booth

Community members present: Mrs. Olszewski and Dr. Stephan

Student Advisors present: Nora O'Connell and Gage Rovelli

Teacher Advisors present: Mrs. Schmidt

Teachers Advisors absent: Mrs. Schaefer

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools

Guests present: Mrs. Watson, Mrs. Koba, Mrs. Gohagon, Pastor Forni

Mrs. Caramanello called the meeting to order at 4:00 PM.

**Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

**Public Comment**

None.

**Approval of Agenda**

*Mr. Roraback made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to approve the agenda, as presented.*

*In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Mrs. Caramanello, Mr. Moore and Mr. Roraback. Motion carried unanimously.*

**Approval of Minutes - December 8, 2020**

*Mr. Roraback made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to approve the minutes of December 8, 2020, as presented.*

*In favor of approving the minutes of December 8, 2020, as presented: Mrs. Caramanello, Mr. Moore and Mr. Roraback. Motion carried unanimously.*

**Introduction of members and Doug**

Dr. Schuch introduced himself to everyone and stated that he is thankful to be in the district and is enjoying all the great people he has gotten to meet. He is not enjoying having to make decisions about school in the snow. He is anxious to learn what this committee is working on.

The other members of the committee introduced themselves.

**Diversity and equity update and draft policy discussion**

Mr. Moore had sent a draft policy out to the administration and the board, but he has not received that feedback yet. He explained the process of getting a policy adopted by the board. The towns have started a community discussion about race as well.

Dr. Stephan felt that the part of the policy about achievement gaps is very specific to race and thought it might be a little more encompassing to reflect the definition of diversity. Mr. Moore explained that the part she is referring to was written by the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and Mr. Moore's draft is the shorter one. He added that they are going to form a small committee to work on definitions.

Mrs. Gohagon felt that the second sentence of the first paragraph reads that the district won't be discriminatory, however that is just one part of equity with the other being representative and actively doing things. She suggested saying anti-racist instead of against racism in order to be proactive instead of working against something. She also suggested saying diversity, equity and inclusion training rather than just diversity training.

Mrs. Watson asked what was meant by instructional materials that encourage the study of our diverse communities. She believes that some of the communities aren't diverse. Mr. Moore felt that the board should encourage the study of all diversity and communities throughout history. He felt that the word "our" was more in a national sense, rather than just in Durham or Middlefield. Mrs. Watson also asked to eliminate the word "minority" and explained that Middletown is now using "historically marginalized." Mrs. Schmidt suggested changing the word "our" to "collective" to be more national. Mrs. Gohagon also asked if it was just the instructional materials or the environment that would be more inclusion and welcoming. Mr. Moore explained the difference between the board's role and the superintendent's role.

Mr. Moore asked everyone to take a look at the draft policy and send him any comments. He also asked Dr. Schuch how he felt the policy fits in with what he has had at other schools. Dr. Schuch felt that this is a perfect time to focus on this issue and does not feel there is anything fundamentally flawed in the policy. He would prefer to see these equity principles embedded in the strategic plan and not seen as something separate. Dr. Schuch felt that schools have been set up to exclusionary in nature. He believes that a policy around equity is a good place to start, but they need to talk about changing mindsets. He doesn't feel that this work will be easy and gave an example from another district he worked in.

Dr. Friedrich felt that Dr. Schuch just gave them a vision and the policy will authorize Dr. Schuch to work towards that.

Mrs. Gohagon explained that her child is mixed-race and every single year and there have been racialized experiences that have caused her harm, one just in the past week, and she feels the sense of urgency needs to be greater. She felt that a policy would hold everyone accountable. Mrs. Gohagon would like her child to feel safe like her other classmates do. Dr. Friedrich feels that the impetus to action comes from the board and parents. He realizes this has been a problem for a long time and has affected many generations of students.

Mrs. Schmidt asked if there could be subcommittees made up of staff and students to work on this on a more regular basis with specific tasks. Mrs. Caramanello explained that Mrs. Schaefer is the staff liaison and has shared that there is a staff well-being committee as well, but Mrs. Schmidt was speaking specifically to equity, racial and diversity work.

Mr. Moore mentioned Mrs. Gohagon's daughter's presentation and she stated that, while she is to very proud of her daughter, she does not feel it's her responsibility as a child.

Mrs. Watson stated that Mrs. Koba had emailed a link to Groton schools who have like eight different committees based on these subjects and have over 100 members. She encouraged everyone to take a look at that link. Dr. Stephan agreed with the ideas of the subcommittees, but also felt that they need something now so that these issues can be addressed. Dr. Friedrich hoped that anyone who has had a personal experience would share that with Dr. Schuch. Dr. Schuch explained that he is currently in a very intensive information-gathering/relationship-building phase and would welcome any information. He offered to have focus groups set up or speak with individuals. Dr. Schuch does agree that passing a policy sooner rather than later is important but changing mindsets is a marathon rather than a sprint.

Gage Rovelli felt that some progress has been made this year and they have a new class about inequality. He noted that a lot of kids make jokes about it and he suggested that every student be required to watch a video. Mr. Roraback suggested a possible mandatory class and he would also like to see some professional development on this. He also suggested that this be a theme at convocation next year. Mr. Roraback felt that honest discussions are very valuable to gain perspective and do away with unconscious bias. Dr. Friedrich added that they have heard that teachers would like training and guidelines in how to manage those conversations.

Mrs. Schmidt felt that de-escalation strategies can be done all year long in faculty meetings and hoped that they could do the same with diversity, equity and inclusion. She explained that she felt unprepared walking into Strong School the day after the capitol riots. She felt that short bites of information would be helpful.

Nora O'Connell felt it was important to make equity more of a normal conversation. There is time to add it into education and it is necessary. She felt that it could be made into a unit or part of a history class. Mr. Roraback also mentioned that Dr. Miguel Cardona from Meriden will be the next Secretary of Education and can provide some direction at a national level.

Mrs. Gohagon explained that she works in Middletown Public Schools and leads the racial/equity training for the district. She offered to provide some direction. She explained that she formed a book group after the George Floyd murder and over 20 teachers from RSD 13 joined and stayed in for more than six weeks. They stated that they wanted more professional development and felt that it wasn't a priority in the district. They also felt that they wouldn't be supported by the administration if they brought these issues to the classroom and families would push back.

Pastor Forni mentioned the community conversation about Confederate flags at the Durham Fair and noted that there is a vocal perspective that doesn't understand that Confederate flags are a hate symbol. She felt that a safe space needs to be created for people who are being attacked and also give folks space to change perspective. They also need to understand that some people will not change their perspective.

A monthly event called Community Conversations will be happening over the next year about race. They are working to do that through the libraries and they will discuss podcasts, book readings, film and will be done through Zoom. This is a collaboration from the Middlefield-Durham Racial Justice Team and the libraries. Pastor Forni also felt there are a number of community residents who would be very happy to be a part of some kind of discussion through the education system.

Dr. Stephan added that she felt younger students are open and willing to change, but she doesn't feel that is the case at the high school because those kids may be more influenced by what is in their home. She wondered how they can work with the community to change the adult mindsets. Dr. Stephan mentioned the child who drives around the high school with the Confederate flag in the back of his truck and how they could address that.

Mr. Roraback related that back in the day, people wore a Confederate flag on their shirts for Lynyrd Skynyrd and he didn't think anyone wore it as a symbol of race. He does not agree with that now. He felt that the community is changing for the better and younger kids totally reject those ideas. The way to change parents' mindsets is to chip away a little bit at a time. Dr. Stephan asked if they would be able to hold parents responsible for their child's action. Gage Rovelli felt that the First Amendment allows some things, but felt that there should be some sort of limit. Dr. Stephan agreed and felt that that was the challenge.

Mrs. Schmidt commented that other districts have policies in place regarding clothing. She noted that it's been a challenge regulating Biden and Trump masks and shirts this year. Dr. Friedrich thought that might be something the board should look at and explained that the subject of dress has been the subject of many court cases. He thought they may want to have the lawyers look at that. Dr. Schuch felt that there was quite a bit of legal precedence on this and they could be challenged on those kinds of regulations. However, those policies could also get compliance from people on school grounds. He is worried that that just leads people to remove the symbols once they approach school property and he would rather get people to change their mindsets about those values. Dr. Schuch noted that January 6<sup>th</sup> was shocking for him, yet also revealing in that there's a problem. Again, he believes that it is good to have a policy as an anchor point but they need to move beyond the law and order side of equity. Dr. Friedrich summarized that what they want is for mixed-race children to get the least amount of crap immediately as well as in the long run.

Dr. Stephan explained that she would like a definitive policy because she doesn't feel that the teachers are supported enough. Mrs. Gohagon agreed that policies can't address everything, but felt that the board needs to make a statement. Mr. Moore felt that it is very important for the board to make this statement now and people can see that they are working on this. Mrs. Watson noted that her children are also mixed and recently had issues at Strong. She was surprised to find that there was not a clear policy. Mrs. Watson wants to make sure that school is a safe environment for her children.

Mrs. Caramanello summarized that the policy should be first and foremost and asked if the policy should also include penalties. Mr. Moore did not feel that they belong in there. Dr. Friedrich felt that policies need to be goals and standards, but are tools for the superintendent. Dr. Schuch felt that there could also be a Code of Conduct or discipline manual that can be pretty specific. He noted that they need to strike a balance between protecting everyone and not violating anyone's First Amendment rights. He asked if the district can currently discipline students for using the N word or punching someone in the face. Gage

Rovelli felt that that would be covered under core values. Mrs. Gohagon also felt it was important to recognize that it is not just student to student and may not even be overt racism, but could be a teacher's unconsciousness in relation to what race is. She felt that half of the harm that her child has experienced came from adults and the hardest thing to navigate is community that to the school.

Mr. Moore asked everyone for their feedback on the policy and it will then be moved to the Policy committee. The board will then have a full discussion on the policy. Mr. Roraback will send out the revised draft and everyone can work from there.

### **Student well-being update**

Gage Rovelli felt that teacher-student chemistry has been good, but communication between teachers might need to be a little bit better. He feels like the teachers aren't really communicating about when there will be tests and quizzes and they seem to be always scheduled for the same day.

Nora O'Connell added that everybody is finally transitioning, but everybody is lacking social interaction. Kids are exhausted, unmotivated and bored. She felt that they need to find ways to implement social interaction for both students and teachers. Gage Rovelli mentioned all of the group activities they had last year with the Chinese students and thought maybe they could do something like that in home room.

Dr. Schuch summarized that the students are separated due to the COVID restrictions, but school is getting monotonous and boring because of the lack of activities. Gage and Nora agreed.

Dr. Stephan asked if there are any interactions with the students in cohort C and Nora stated that she has a few friends who are remote and it sounds really awful. The kids in school at least have the social interaction while passing in the hallways. Gage stated that online school days are really boring and they get headaches from staring at the screen. Dr. Stephan suggested having a community-based scavenger hunt with a prize at the end. Nora felt that would be awesome. Gage talked about the freshmen Olympics that used to be held and thought that might be able to happen while being socially distanced. Dr. Stephan mentioned the pep band and Gage stated that that was lost this year.

### **Faculty well-being update**

Mrs. Schmidt explained that she's been on maternity leave for about a month, but has been working with Mr. Sadinsky. She reported that things have been offered on Wednesday afternoons for staff and there are opportunities for PLC and staff meetings as well as walks, hot chocolate events and others. Mrs. Schmidt felt that there has been progress and hoped that options continue.

### **Sports and music and extracurricular activities**

Gage Rovelli reported that he is on indoor track and in band. He felt that the band plays a lot better with Mr. Fisher. Sports rotate safely between the gym, the auxiliary room and working out outside. Mr. Moore was wondering if there was anything else that could be done after school.

Dr. Stephan noted that Show Choir rehearsals have started and Nora O'Connell stated that a bunch of other clubs are meeting as well. She stated that those things help the students to feel a little more normal.

**Public Comment**

Mrs. Caramanello asked if the committee should try to meet again in March and Mr. Moore felt that there should be regular meetings.

Mrs. Schmidt introduced her son, Max, to the committee. Max is two weeks and a day old. Everyone sent their congratulations.

**Adjournment**

*Dr. Friedrich made motion to adjourn the meeting.*

*In favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Moore and Mr. Roraback.  
Motion carried unanimously.*

The meeting was adjourned at 5:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

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