

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Well-Being Committee met in special session on Wednesday, March 16, 2022 at 4:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Committee members present: Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schmidt, Dr. Stephan, Mrs. Paoletti and Mrs. Penney (in place of Mrs. Schaefer)

Committee members absent: Ms. Betty and Mrs. Schaefer

Board of Education members present: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone and Mrs. Petrella

Student Advisors present: Ben Carroll, Nora O’Connell and Gage Rovelli

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Warner, Principal of Coginchaug Regional High School, Mrs. Gonzalez, Principal of Strong School

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

None.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Dr. Stephan, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schmidt and Dr. Stephan. Motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Minutes - February 1, 2022

Dr. Stephan clarified that she had “...asked the students if they felt that the limitations of certain teachers they have always had difficulties with have been more exacerbated during COVID...” and she has sent that modification to Mrs. Maloney.

Dr. Stephan made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to approve the minutes of February 1, 2022, as amended.

In favor of approving the minutes of February 1, 2022, as amended: Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Ms. Schmidt and Dr. Stephan. Motion carried unanimously.

Review of policies:

- A. Equity 0523**
- B. Bullying 5131.8**
- C. Student Discipline 5114**
- D. Non-Discrimination - Students 5146**

Mr. Moore noted that they looked at the existing policies and many of them have been updated as recently as 2019. All of the policies are referred to by state law and have been developed by attorneys, reviewed by the Policy Committee and the full board over time. Mr. Moore felt that it was important to note that there were a number of forms that go along with these policies about how to report an incident and how to

react. He felt that some teachers and faculty may be unaware of the protections they have to take action. There are forms available for students to report issues that they witness as well. Mr. Moore felt that it was important that everyone is made aware of these policies and that they are talked about.

Mrs. Schmidt felt that definitions that would be helpful and felt that the equity policy is missing those definitions of things that are referenced in the policy. She felt the policy is very short and almost has the word diversity in it more than equity. The bullying policy goes far in depth and she felt that the students would be able to understand that, but not with the Equity policy. Mrs. Schmidt hoped that definitions could be included to help create a better picture of what the words mean. She noted that the Bullying policy is about 15 pages.

Dr. Stephan summarized that updates made to one policy have to happen with all other connecting policies as well, so other policies can be referenced. Mrs. Schmidt added that the 21 student ambassadors started looking at definitions yesterday and came up with 21 different definitions. She hoped that there could be one definition across the board that the students feel work for them.

Mrs. Dahlheimer mentioned that all of the policies are on the website for everyone to access. Mrs. Keane mentioned some navigation concerns with the website. She also wondered if it might be advantageous to actually hand out these policies in paper form. Mr. Roraback felt that the old-fashioned way of signing off on handbooks was very difficult and the online form wasn't much easier. He also felt that something could be provided to teachers to help.

Mrs. Keane agreed with operationalizing the definitions. Mrs. Schmidt stated that they were going to take a look at them and Mr. Moore encouraged her to be sure that if any edits are made, that they are not different than any of the written policies which are based on a variety of laws. Mr. Moore suggested they offer an amendment to the policy and the board can consider that. Dr. Stephan asked if it was a really a matter of defining something on paper or having a conversation to understand that each individual thinks of the word diversity. She thought maybe time should be put into that in classes to have open discussions.

Dr. Schuch felt that that could happen, but felt that the policies are derived from state and federal laws. He felt that the equity policy is more aspirational and what we want to be and how we want people to treat each other. He acknowledged that there may be difficulty in getting people to agree on what some of the terms should or shouldn't be. Mrs. Schmidt added that they can't have those conversations until they have a clear idea of what they're talking about. Teachers may be uncomfortable about saying the wrong thing.

Mr. Moore felt that there are two different subjects - one of understanding and committing to diversity and the other is enforcement of the rules. He felt that some of the enforcement has been missing. Teachers have all been through diversity training, but not necessarily on their responsibility in dealing with discrimination, bullying or anything else in the policies.

Mrs. Gonzalez stated that SERC had recommended that she let teachers know that she expects them to address these issues and that she will help them figure it out. SERC did give them some good strategies to use, including interrupting, questioning, educating and echoing. She acknowledged that teachers are not always able to address the situation in the moment, but they can at least interrupt it and make it known that it is unacceptable.

Mrs. Paoletti understood the need to be clear as it is difficult to confront a student if you are not sure. She suggested some type of graphic in the classroom that the teacher could just silently point at. She does feel that discussions are truly important because this is not an RSD13 problem and is more of a Town of Durham community problem. She was grateful that a letter was sent to parents and the teachers need to know that everyone will help them, especially the board and administrators.

Nora O'Connell felt that if a teacher hears something, they need to address it with the entire class and the lesson needs to become about what happened. Mrs. Gonzalez agreed, but felt that interruption is necessary to say it's unacceptable. She also felt that teachers can come back to the issue the next day and should also touch base with the student who was the target.

Ben Carroll agreed that have these conversations is important, but issues with equity and discrimination, not just with race, happen every day at all schools. He felt that people suffer every day from injustices happening in schools. Another comment was made that these things are happening because people are afraid to use the resources that are available. Mr. Moore noted that he used NCCJ in his last job for training, with every worker going through a five-day training, and it was very effective.

Mr. Roraback felt that the first hurdle for teachers these days is "with-it-ness," figuring out how to accomplish everything they are expected to do, being aware of what's happening, knowing the content and realizing they just can't be aware of everything. He felt that teachers need to create a climate where students feel comfortable.

Mrs. Petrella agreed that it is extremely invaluable to have conversations with students. Mrs. Gonzalez explained that when a teacher is aware of a situation, they need to interrupt it but it also needs to be reported immediately. Administrators would then start looking at it and verify it. Students will also report some issues. She too cautioned about the definitions as they are legally prescribed. Mrs. Gonzalez noted that the law says that teachers have 24 hours to report an incident and then 48 hours to get it in writing.

Mrs. Keane felt that they absolutely need to have the conversations to get to the operationalized definitions that staff and students will be supported with. She has witnessed times when people stand up and say something, but then get called to the carpet for having those conversations and are not supported. As a district, a board, a community, teachers and administration, Mrs. Keane felt that they need to have the hard conversations about supporting teachers.

Mr. Mennone commented about the communication that was sent to parents about the responsibilities of staff and the fact that they will be supported. He asked Mr. Moore and Dr. Schuch to explain more about that communication. Dr. Schuch offered to supply a copy which is very similar to what the parents got. They felt it was important to give the staff the information first and then let the families know that they had done that. The core message was that the staff will be supported and what the policies are. The message they were trying to get across is that doing nothing is not acceptable.

Mr. Moore summarized that Mrs. Schmidt would be happy to try to develop some definitions that the board can consider adding to the equity policy, making sure that they are consistent with the legal definitions. He asked if it would be helpful if board members held policy discussions at faculty and/or PTO meetings. Mrs. Gonzalez felt that administrators could do it, but it would be nice to know that the board is behind them.

Faculty and staff responsibility in bullying and racial incidents and role in prevention and response

Mr. Moore reviewed that they had discussed this, but prevention is also necessary. Discussions on diversity and equity will help prevent issues.

Dr. Stephan felt that it would help to create an environment where these conversations can be had. The issue of privacy kind of ties teachers' hands behind their backs. Students who are being bullied are told not to share information from an event. Dr. Stephan felt that the district is sometimes protecting the wrong people because of concerns about privacy. She asked if that was specifically defined for the teachers.

Mr. Warner felt that that is one of the biggest challenges in trying to help mitigate ongoing issues related to bullying. They need to protect the student who faced the bullying while interpreting the definition of bullying. The privacy aspect is about trying to support the student who was targeted moving forward. The students need to know that they can come to school, feel comfortable and have a person to talk to. Mr. Warner has communicated to teachers to make them aware so that they can be on the lookout, without going into specific detail.

Dr. Stephan asked if the teachers are informed of who did the bullying and Mrs. Gonzalez added that teachers who have that student in class are informed. She felt that all teachers need to be aware, not just those that are teaching the student. Mr. Warner felt that the most important thing is to get the student back in school and to make sure they are safe. Dr. Schuch explained that FERPA (Federal Education Right to Privacy Act) is real and those laws are there to protect everybody. He believes that administrators feel much safer about informing the individual teachers rather than alerting the whole faculty due to that. He acknowledged that often the word is already out, via the rumor mill or on social media, but if the district confirms that, they are in violation of the law.

Dr. Stephan understands FERPA, but felt that it is general information and everyone should be on the lookout for this. It was mentioned that it doesn't always happen in the classroom. Mrs. Keane added that she would like to hear how they can be more proactive, having conversations, doing training and what is needed to support the students, staff and parents. The social media training was phenomenal, but there were not very many people there. She felt that both communities need to be involved to support the students and their families.

Mrs. Dahlheimer would like to see these issues brought to the teachers and administration instead of being posted on social media. Those conversations need to start happening in the community.

Mrs. Schmidt felt that while core ethical values are talked about in the younger grades, they seem to get forgotten about in the older grades. She does believe that Reimagining Education will lend itself to that, but an atmosphere of inclusion in the schools has to be built. She felt that advisories could be used for that. The more the students are empowered to not accept it and stand up against it, the better it will be.

Mr. Warner felt that agenda items 6 and 7 (faculty and student roles) can't be separated. Teachers need to be empowered to intervene, however they can't do it as an adult telling a kid what to do because kids don't listen to adults. Instead, they need to believe in the sense of community in their building and to know that teachers will have their back. Lately, most of the issues have unfortunately been race-related

which is something that needs to be addressed right now. Teachers are in the hallways of the high school having conversations. Mr. Warner felt that the community needs to be clear about what they believe in, what will not be tolerated and what steps will be taken. Without common understanding with the students, teachers and administrators will basically put the targeted student in the spotlight by forcing the conversation. Mr. Warner emphasized that they need to get everyone engaged in the conversation and follow the kids and how they think because they are the ones that can motivate one another.

Ben Carroll stated that he has not heard anything about consequences. He felt that the consequences need to be outlined and explicitly listed. Kids need to know that it's not okay. Mr. Moore explained that consequences are provided in the policies.

Student role in prevention and response to bullying and racial incidents in middle and high school

Nora O'Connell felt like there has been a lot of conversation about aspiration, but enforcement needs to be talked about. She would like to say that an assembly would fix everything, but it won't. She felt that that could be a start. She suggested utilizing advisories as well. Nora did not feel that many kids at the high school know about the equity policy, so having these conversations, maybe even adding a class, would be helpful. She felt that there are racist kids in the district who are discriminating in the world and that isn't a good look for the district. She would also like to blame the parents, but believes the school is just as much at fault.

Ben Carroll added that it just can't be tolerated because that shows that they can get away with it.

Someone else wondered what is done to support the kids who have been disciplined in the sense that they are likely to come back to school and how their actions will have changed. She also noted that these same kids may be good kids that made a mistake and need support as well.

Dr. Stephan stated that she needs to see how the kids who have been targeted will be brought back to school safely before worrying about the bullies, depending on the level of hatred. They are still the responsibility of the district, but the primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of the child who was bullied. There have been incidents when a child of a different race has left the district. Dr. Stephan felt it is a matter of priority.

Mr. Moore added that part of the policy provides for student involvement in this and it calls for student peer training. He didn't feel that the district has ever had a student group that helps other students. He encouraged the students on the committee to be the leaders on this. Mr. Moore suggested that members of the National Honor Society visit Strong School to address the students on this issue.

Mrs. Keane stated that in terms of consequences, actions plans and students returning to school, those things all happen but it is the law that those things are completely confidential. She acknowledged that they may not happen to the level that everyone might want, but it is part of the policy and the law.

Mr. Mennone agreed that there is a reason to protect the offender as well and those policies are in place for that. It was also agreed that it is difficult to maintain confidentiality while trying to educate the students. Mrs. Schmidt reiterated that some kids may be inclined to act this way but that may change if

there is constant, explicit teaching of what is acceptable and what's not. It should start in kindergarten and not stop until they graduate.

Draya Gohagon explained that she was afraid to come back, but was very sad to not see her teachers and her friends. She felt that no sixth grader should ever feel like that because of kids who are racist. Schools need to stop racism and, when it happens, it needs to be ended right away. Draya's family let her come back to school yesterday once they felt that the students, teachers and community supported her, especially Mrs. Gonzalez and Mrs. Keane.

Another student felt that they were talking very abstractly, but haven't really suggested anything concrete that can be done tomorrow. She supports Mrs. Caramanello's point that explicit training should be provided and Nora O'Connell's point about the equity policy not being known to everyone. She felt that students who are being bullied would feel more empowered to go to a teacher and know that the teacher will support them. She also suggested a database of resources for this kind of thing that could be introduced in advisory. To Mrs. Dahlheimer's point, she understood that bullies need to be supported but felt that keeping troublemakers in the Guidance office is not the way to deal with it. She suggested utilizing school psychologists, guidance counselors and social workers to help.

Mr. Moore asked if it would help if they were to give students forms to file complaints. Nora O'Connell felt that it wasn't being communicated because it is so prevalent. After the last Board of Education meeting, she and Ben were at lunch and were air-dropped a photo basically mocking LGBTQ but didn't even think to report it. Kids need to be made aware that these things need to be reported. Mr. Roraback asked if turning the Wi-Fi off at lunch would help, but it was felt that that shouldn't have to happen.

Mrs. Caramanello asked if the policy could be posted in every single classroom of every single school and whether or not core ethical values are posted in every classroom as well. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that if the community doesn't know about the services that are offered, it just looks like they just come back into school.

Mrs. Paoletti felt that the idea of a positive classroom climate is key. These issues need to be talked about on day one. If kids are afraid, they won't be able to learn. Mrs. Paoletti felt that the adult learners are the ones that can change this. They can change prejudice that exists in their families. It is the job of the administration and board to listen to what the students need. Everyone needs to know who to go to and how to handle it. Mrs. Paoletti felt that it needs to involve everyone, not just the classroom teachers. She mentioned particularly coaches, as they all handle students in such different ways. She encouraged the students to tell the adults how to be better listeners and how to support them.

Gage Rovelli felt that there was a difference between telling kids what's right and wrong and having them actually realize it. At a certain point, kids don't listen very much. If adults go to an AP class, the students will listen but a lower level class may not. He felt that having an assembly with a guest speaker would be very effective.

Mr. Roraback asked if the classification of a lower level class might be perpetuating this behavior. He acknowledged that it's always been this way in high school with groups and cliques.

Corinna stated that they talk a lot about what policies mean, but a lot of this goes on in the home. She felt it was important to extend this idea out to the parents because if they were more aware, they could talk to their children about it. She suggested that these issues be announced to the community in a proper way. Mr. Moore asked if she would be willing to host a meeting with parents and the students agreed to do that.

Draya Gohagon felt that kids need to be more aware of the consequences. Another student agreed and noted how school is such a safe space for some people.

Alyssa felt that a lot of kids will do things knowing that they will only be lightly disciplined and discipline should be made greater.

Another member of the public brought up an anonymous reporting app because she felt that kids will not fill out a form. Mr. Moore explained that there are provisions for anonymous reporting to the principal or teacher with the only requirement being that the teacher or administrator follow up to verify the information.

Julia explained that she went to school in Hartford for three years and they had to do a month-long project every February on black history and racism. She noted that nothing like that is done here and she felt that a lot of kids are misinformed about black history. She was curious about why that happens in Hartford, but not here. Mrs. Booth stated that it is done in the elementary schools and the sixth grade is doing that right now. Mr. Roraback added that it can be embraced within the subject matter of each class as well.

Mrs. Booth added that it was important for kids to know that if they see something, they need to say something. If they don't feel comfortable immediately, they need to go to a teacher or the principal after the fact. She added that if they do not do that, they are just as bad as the person who was doing it and it will not change unless they do. Mrs. Booth also felt that it should be included in the agenda books. Mrs. Booth felt that a child can be bullied without even realizing it.

Mrs. Gohagon asked how much legal counsel has been approached about the privacy issue because when students become victims of acts of hate, the decision to violate their privacy needs to be made. She felt that they were able to get what they needed for their child because they violated her privacy. She would want to ask the legal counsel what type of consent victims can give to disclose to teachers because she would have preferred teachers knew rather than having to go to social media. She also knew of other districts passing more punitive policy around acts of hate and asked if District 13 could be talked through something like that. Mrs. Gohagon agreed with Draya that there needs to be consequences because both kids and adults do what they are allowed to do. She wondered what the consequences are for teachers who do not respond.

Draya Gohagon added that they watch movies in school and talk about bullying, but they never explain why they do it.

Laura, who is an attorney, explained that there are waivers that the parents of the victim can decide how situations are handled. She felt that there should be more communication with the parents of the victim. It was noted that waivers would have to be provided from both sides of the situation, but Laura felt that

perpetrators didn't necessarily have to be named. She did not feel that the district should hide behind legal issues and should be more concerned about the victim than a lawsuit from the perpetrator.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that it was the district's responsibility to treat every student with the core ethical values, no matter what the incident and not so much the threat of a lawsuit.

Draya added that students have come up to her and said what the student did was wrong and they were glad they got the consequences they got. She is sometimes uncomfortable with that because she doesn't know what to say to that as she doesn't want students to talk bad about other students. Mr. Moore summarized that there needs to be a way for the victims to come back to school and how to talk about it.

Alyssa felt that half the battle is the people who were involved spreading information about what happened. She told of an incident with the cheer team that was spread and she was getting questions asking what happened. She had been instructed to not say anything, but somehow it was felt that she had spread information. She got attacked for saying something when she did as she was told and didn't say anything.

Draya noted that kids go on social media and word gets around and gets twisted. There's no way to completely control that, but it can be turned down.

Mrs. Schmidt felt that consistent messaging going out to students would be helpful, outlining what is expected and what is not expected. Consequences don't have to always be negative and consequences for expected behaviors can be something great. She felt that that would yield positive and punitive consequences. She felt that there needs to be a statement that says we do not tolerate racist acts in the building; they do not tolerate racist words; they do not tolerate negative words about anyone who is different. Mrs. Schmidt also noted that they need to support the students in all ways, not just getting As in class. She felt that the stress level is out of control for 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds and they need to know that school isn't just about getting an A.

Mrs. Petrella confirmed that Mrs. Schmidt taught at Strong School and she agreed with expectations and consequences. Another important piece is developing self-esteem in those students as well.

Patrick Holden stated that he wished he was half as brave as the students at this meeting because when he was at school, the culture was so toxic that victims were being punished far more than the perpetrators. They were afraid to speak out because they felt that they would get sent to the office or suspended. Students need to know that they will be supported in order to speak out. He encouraged them to build an environment that is supportive and not as toxic as it was.

Mrs. Dahlheimer added that her own children know that they can tell her about something, but she tells them that they need to say something when it happens. She doesn't feel that's reinforced in the schools.

Dr. Stephan felt that cause and effect is very important. That is difficult at the high school level because of a number of reasons. She felt that a number of parents are looking for something definitive as to what would happen. One of the students felt that just telling students that it is okay won't work; they need to be shown that it is okay.

Dr. Schuch felt it was easy to say that the kids should tell some adult, but if there isn't a trusting relationship it doesn't really matter. That needs to be part of any strategy. The kids feel a risk when talking to anyone. Dr. Schuch felt that, at a certain age, what the adults in a child's life says to them is the most important thing but then peer influence is more important. Nothing will be reported if the learners don't trust the adult. He felt there needs to be a concrete strategy to make people more trusting of the adults.

Mrs. Schmidt felt that advisories should be used for inclusion and acceptance and be more of a student-run atmosphere. She felt it would build cohesiveness in the advisory group and hopefully a connection with the adult.

Julie Maletta explained that her wife graduated from the district and they are now the parents of a first-grader at Brewster. She was very disheartened to hear of the prevalence of discrimination in the schools. She sees this discussion as the first step in addressing these concerns, but failing to enforce the policies is worse than not having them at all. It is important to make sure there is common understanding of the purpose of equity and nondiscrimination policies. They should identify and limit barriers and protect people from harassment and discrimination. Effective policies must specifically name those that they aim to protect. Mrs. Maletta was not sure who the current policy actually means to protect and it seems to go out of its way to protect groups or beliefs that are not commonly considered marginalized or legally protected classes. She did feel, however, that the nondiscrimination policy is pretty clear. She felt that they must dedicate ongoing time and resources to mandatory equity training for all staff. Mrs. Maletta is the school psychologist for Middletown Public Schools and have that training every other week. She also felt that an equity approach needs to be applied to curriculum design. She acknowledged that teachers are walking on eggshells about these issues. Mrs. Maletta felt that these issues can be discussed in a very appropriate way at every age.

Mr. Moore summarized that they have heard a lot today and there will be other meetings. There's a role for words, teachers and students. Mr. Moore will work to arrange a parent meeting for the students to talk about these issues.

Adjournment

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting.

In favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schmidt and Dr. Stephan. Motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:03 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First