

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Well-Being Committee met in regular session on Tuesday, April 5, 2022 at 4:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Committee members present: Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Paoletti, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer and Mrs. Schmidt

Committee members absent: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Keane, Dr. Stephan

Board of Education members present: Mrs. Dahlheimer

Student Advisors present: Ben Carroll, Hayden Gonzales, Nora O'Connell, Gage Rovelli and Julia Talbert-Slagle

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools and Mrs. Gonzalez, Principal of Strong School

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

Ray Johansen and Aaliyah Watson, both seventh grade students, stated the following: "Speaking on policy 0523, the equity policy, it says 'the district values diversity in our schools and communities and seeks to develop the capacity for cultural competence in empowering learners to thrive as global citizens,' but in our schools we barely touch on the subject of race, never mind more serious topics such as cultural appropriation, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia, and other subjects that would very much diversify our schools.

In one of the bullet points it claims that procedures for ensuring an equitable school community would be adopted, yet very little is put forth to educate on the things mentioned such as religions, cultures, races, and genders. For a start on education, it would be as simple as putting more diverse books in our libraries, and starting the conversations in classes such as social studies.

More needs to be done to educate the staff of RSD13 so that they are able to make better decisions when speaking on diverse matters and handling situations that involve things like the blatant racism that exists within our district. A teacher workshop day dedicated to this would be a good start, and assigning resources would be beneficial, not only for teachers, but also students.

The policy says that equity of opportunity would be ensured, yet kids are left out because of miniscule things like their skin color all the time. In my experience I was told that I wasn't allowed to like vanilla ice cream, I was only allowed to like chocolate because I am biracial. Although it is difficult to see all instances of this, teachers must keep an eye out, and intervene when they see things like this happen, which makes education that much more important.

In regulation 5146 it also says that students, Board employees, and third parties are expected to adhere to a standard of conduct that is respectful of the rights of all members of the school community, yet if you were to sit through a class, or walk through our hallways, it is clear how untrue and unenforced this is, whether from a lack of knowledge or it just not being dealt with appropriately.

It also states that students wishing to file a complaint regarding discrimination may obtain a copy of the Board's complaint procedures and complaint form. But from my experience I was never given the opportunity to read the complaint procedures.

In the eighth step of what an investigator should do in regulation 5146, it says that 'ensure appropriate corrective action is taken' yet in my experience, this has never been done. Although it might be taken as me just wanting something harsher for my harassers, I believe a talking to is not enough punishment for these kids when they have called me several slurs, and my ongoing harassment in Strong school is paid no attention to, even though it has happened in front of several teachers. Last year I reported several cases of in classroom harassment at my expense, yet not once was I offered a discrimination complaint form.

To wrap up, we came today because we think that the policies always get overlooked and are not pushed out to teachers and people who need them enough. In fact some of our teachers didn't even know that the discrimination complaint form existed. Even though these policies are good guidelines for handling discrimination and harassment, they aren't followed enough to do any good, and still don't seem to handle the severity of some incidents. The form needs to be easily accessible to families who need to find it, instead of buried at the end of a pdf. We think the forms should be located somewhere on the homepage."

Approval of Agenda

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

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Paoletti, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer and Mrs. Schmidt. Motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Minutes - March 16, 2022

Gage Rovelli made a motion, seconded by Ben Carroll, to approve the minutes of March 16, 2022, as presented.

Mr. Moore explained that there were a number of names left blank in the minutes and he has found them and will forward that information to Mrs. Maloney.

In favor of approving the minutes of March 16, 2022, as amended: Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Paoletti, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer and Mrs. Schmidt. Motion carried unanimously.

Status of staff training on board policies on bullying and discrimination and availability of incident reporting forms to staff and students

Dr. Schuch acknowledged that staff may not have enough knowledge about the policies that are in place and those policies have been reinforced through written correspondence, faculty meetings and grade level meetings. The district does not feel it is acceptable to ignore the policies and they have to be enforced. Employees now realize that and many appreciate knowing that they will be supported in enforcing policies. Staff members have also come forward asking for help in understanding how to talk about difficult issues, like racism, and do it in a way that will not get them in any kind of trouble.

Dr. Schuch has heard from some learners that these things have not just started happening in the last couple of months or years. Learners have experienced this throughout their time in the district. Dr. Schuch felt it was troubling to hear learners say it happens so frequently that it almost becomes part of the background. He believes the district has a lot of work to do and it will not get done overnight. They are planning an assembly with an expert speaker during the first week in May, focusing on the middle school and high school. The speaker will address both schools together at Cuginchaug and then spend time with employees at both schools after school. He will also hold a community forum. Dr. Schuch noted that one day dedicated to this work will not suffice, but will hopefully be a good start. They have also contracted with SERC for training learners in how to engage their peers.

Dr. Schuch also reported that SERC has connected the district with a group that specializes in training leadership on how to properly apply policies. He did note that there had been energy around this work prior to the pandemic, but it needs to pick back up again. Dr. Schuch summarized that he has had a hard time listening to some of the criticism because he doesn't feel anyone's heart is in that place and because he has been championing this work before equity was even a term. He acknowledged that this is an issue in the schools and they are committed to improve. Dr. Schuch recalls being told when he came here that there's not a lot of diversity in the community and that does not really represent the outside world. He has now heard some tragic stories of what some of the young people here have experienced.

Dr. Schuch reiterated that some of the staff have felt less than in the eyes of the community and he received a statement from Craig Bradanini, a teacher and president of the Region 13 Education Association which he read to the committee, "The members of the Region 13 Education Association wanted to share that we stand together with the Superintendent and Board of Education to confront racism in our school district and stop it in its tracks. Every child deserves a high-quality education and it is every public school educator's right and responsibility to teach students about their world through an honest, fact-based, age-appropriate curriculum, even if some lessons are difficult and uncomfortable. Combating racism, erasing inequities and advancing racial justice are critical to every aspect of our society, including and perhaps especially education. To achieve success, we must collectively and proactively oppose racism, prejudice and discrimination and promote diversity, inclusion and equity in our schools and our community. Thank you."

Mr. Moore noted that they had done work in 2018 with Independent Day School and some folks from Middletown in a several-day session that carried into a group that met every couple of months. That work did stop during COVID.

Mrs. Petrella asked about a book club at the high school that was connected with Middletown High School and that also disbanded during COVID.

Nora O'Connell asked the name of the speaker for the assembly and Dr. Schuch noted that it was Calvin Terrell. One of the things that Mr. Terrell pointed out was that families will be allowed to opt their child out of this work. He has worked with all types of groups.

Status of work on bullying and discriminatory definitions with JoAnna Schmidt

Mrs. Schmidt worked with several students and teachers to develop some definitions. They also worked with some information from Reimagining Education. She felt that "cultural competence, culture, school

culture and positive school culture” are all important facets of what is included in the policy. She distributed and reviewed their proposed definitions and why they felt they were important.

Julia Talbert-Slagle had asked for a definition for culture because she felt it could be interpreted in a lot of different ways.

Mrs. Schmidt felt that thinking about inclusion is important for both staff and students. They did go back and forth about the definition of culturally-responsive instructional practices.

Mr. Moore asked how Julia Talbert-Slagle decided to work on this and how she felt about the definitions. Julia felt the definitions were good and it was good to get different perspectives on them. Nora O’Connell added that she thought they were easy to understand. Mrs. Schmidt added that they have started talking about operationalizing these definitions and would like to start with at least one definition. She thought that culture might be the right place to start. Mr. Moore asked how that gets moved out of their CARE group and to everyone. Mrs. Schmidt felt that they should start by getting the definitions out to the teachers and then all over the building. Julia Talbert-Slagle added that they could find ways to get these into advisory and talk about them. Dr. Schuch added that the learners he met with also felt advisory was an under-utilized resource and also that the skill set of the people who run advisories may vary. One student felt that advisories are usually about the same topics. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that some stuff in advisory goes over the heads of some of the kids.

Mrs. Gonzalez stated that one of the things they would like to change at Strong is to give students more voice in helping create the lessons or even lead the lessons with teachers. Mrs. Schmidt noted that Julia Talbert-Slagle had started a document for Strong’s CARE students to contribute to about advisory topics. She would like to continue to use student leadership in that role.

Julia Talbert-Slagle added that she recently had health class where the teacher talked about having students from Wesleyan come in and that inspired her to think about high school students talking to the middle school students as well.

Mrs. Paoletti stated that she hasn’t heard a lot in the discussion about supporting teachers and asked where the teachers will find time. She felt that teachers will require time, money and priorities. Mrs. Schaefer added that she has heard concerns about protecting students and how to take care of that immediately. She would not want to see teachers not having these discussions because of not being empowered or supported. Mrs. Paoletti added that teachers need time to reflect on and share those incidents with other teachers. She felt there needs to be a lot of conversation, support and reflection which takes time and money.

Mr. Roraback reviewed that, at their last meeting, they had discussed creating a protocol which can be posted on the wall in school. A student also commented that having teachers take a moment before reacting will also teach kids how to respond to those situations.

Mrs. Dahlheimer would like to see something sent out to the parents to let them know what to do if they are seeing this type of thing happening as well. Mr. Moore asked if that could be included in the assembly and Dr. Schuch stated that the speaker has a set program for assemblies and faculty, but he would start by engaging the community group and gear that session to that. Dr. Schuch added that it’s

easier to say stop everything and address the situation, but teachers need to make the decision about when is best to deal with it.

Mr. Roraback felt that much of this stems from social media and he would love to see students saying they don't need to partake in it. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that kids are afraid they will be targeted. It's happening at youth sports as well and she feels that there are gaps where it becomes acceptable. She would like it to be clear what is acceptable to the district.

Mr. Moore summarized that there are things that the district can do, but others that they cannot. He would be happy to work on a list with anyone who would like to participate. Dr. Schuch has talked to people at the State Department of Education and one of the things they reinforced was that the district can't fix everything. The district's job is to make school a safe and nurturing place, but the challenge becomes when part of that experience exists in the digital space where the lines are more blurry. As an educator and parent, Dr. Schuch stands on the side of teaching and trying to inform responsible use.

Mr. Moore suggested that the board adopts these definitions applicable to the equity policy at a future board meeting, recognizing that they were developed with students and researched.

Gage Rovelli felt that inclusion should be applicable to all experiences, not just learning. He suggested adding the word social as well. He also felt that accessibility should include culture. Mrs. Schmidt asked if the committee wanted students to take a look at a protocol and Mr. Moore felt that the more students take on, the more real it will be. Mrs. Petrella felt that there may be things in the curriculum that already address these issues which can be expanded upon. Gage Rovelli also felt that this can be developed into a more continual process.

Mrs. Gonzalez felt that the most important protocol is the relationship between the teacher and the student. Mrs. Schaefer agreed that safety is the biggest priority, but making sure that the board knows that if a step in a protocol was not taken, the teacher would not get in trouble is important as well. Dr. Schuch explained that the incident response protocols are now up to about 600 pages and wondered whether a flow chart would actually be helpful in this case or would it be more nuanced.

Mrs. Petrella hoped that the focus would be on what is expected, not on what they don't want to see. She would like to see positive things posted everywhere. Mrs. Paoletti suggested a poster with things like be kind and listen so the teacher could just point to it. She also commented on the difficulty with the community and noted that DMYFS had sponsored a great program for parents on cyber bullying, but not many went. She felt that they need to figure out how to engage the parents in this and also involve youth sports and other activities.

Mr. Moore summarized that Mrs. Schmidt will look at comments from tonight and he and Mrs. Petrella will bring it back to the next board meeting for adoption.

Strong School plans and actions on “creating an inclusive and caring community”

Mrs. Gonzalez has been thinking about how to create an inclusion and caring community and started by engaging team leaders and Mr. Fitzgerald. She felt that they have shut down all opportunities for students to take leadership roles in school and they don't feel a sense of responsibility. They started having eighth

graders share their science projects with the sixth graders. They are talking about having older students tutor younger students next year and working on how to set up those relationships. They are looking at morning announcements, students creating or leading advisory lessons and having a principal's advisory committee with kids that have different viewpoints. She does expect that they will come up with more things as they move through the Reimagining, but felt that the more students have leadership roles, the more important it is.

Mrs. Gonzalez stated that they do Spartan recognition where teachers recognize students for following one of the CEVs and she has started putting that in Friday emails. They are looking at monthly grade level meetings for next year so that they can recognize students. They will look to create a bigger community amongst the grade level as well.

Mrs. Gonzalez added that she feels that it's important to revamp disciplinary referrals, looking at what's teacher-managed vs. administrator-managed and documentation. The referrals right now have the name of two principals ago which just shows it hasn't been looked at in a long time. She does believe that the lowest level handling the discipline is the most likely to get the change. Mr. Roraback mentioned that he has a parent contact book and when he opens that, the behavior stops. Mrs. Gonzalez agreed that parent contact is important.

They are looking at advisory lessons for this year and will focus on anti-bullying and kindness. Mrs. Gonzalez did acknowledge that they are not reaching everyone. She felt that the important thing in advisory for the beginning of the year is to build the community in that group. They are also looking at having Looking Glass Theater again next year.

Mrs. Gonzalez explained that they began talking about these things in team leader meetings and will talk about it again. She believes that students will help with guidance from adults.

A parent stated that she felt that parents get lost once their students go to Strong and they don't know the teachers as well. She suggested having various informal nights when parents come into school. Mrs. Gonzalez felt that a lot of that stopped because of COVID, but they already have a night planned for fifth grade parents to come in and meet with some teachers and administrators. They will also have an open house in the beginning of the year. Mrs. Schaefer added that she agreed with the parent and parents are more receptive to phone calls if they know the teachers.

A student believed that advisory should not have people who have had problems with each other in them as they will not feel comfortable. Julia Talbert-Slagle did not disagree with that, but felt advisory should include people with different beliefs. Mrs. Schmidt suggested they send a form out at the beginning of the year asking students to name three peers that would make them feel comfortable in advisory as well as their top three classrooms.

Mrs. Petrella felt that the board could help by taking some time at their meetings to showcase some of the positive things happening in the district at different grade levels. She felt that would emphasize the positive and recognize students as well. Mrs. Gonzalez noted that she has been trying to show something positive in her Friday emails as well. Mrs. Dahlheimer suggested using the school's Facebook page or Instagram to highlight positives as well.

Mrs. Schaefer added that the board has spent money to have two staff members trained on restorative practice which is about building community. She and Mr. Fitzgerald are both trainers and have been trying to get into the other schools to train teachers. They have trained 10 teachers at the high school, but she feels that this is needed at the kindergarten level. Mrs. Schaefer reiterated that she has seen it work in many spaces. She felt that relationships need to be built and people need to feel comfortable. Mrs. Petrella was surprised to hear that restorative practices isn't out there more.

A student felt that creating a newspaper would be helpful in sharing positive experiences, creating a community and enhancing student leadership at Strong as well as parent involvement. She felt that parents would be interested if it was created by students. Everyone felt that the Devil's Advocate was a wonderful addition to the Town Times. Another student stated that there is an existing Strong newsletter and Mrs. Gonzalez explained that Mr. Sinusas runs that program.

Role of "Reimagining education" strategies in support of student to teacher trust and well-being

Dr. Schuch noted that most people at the meeting have been through a Reimagining gathering and noted that another has been scheduled for May 17th.

Dr. Schuch is hearing that they are trying to shoe-horn all of this stuff that needs to happen into the existing system which is not a bad thing, but if they are not serious about rethinking the whole system and having safe, nurturing environments and relationships at the core, nothing will really change. He felt that the district needs to acknowledge that they are willing to rethink how things are currently done. Every learner would be able to come to school and feel like they have a high sense of belonging and that they are known and respected for who they are as individuals. Dr. Schuch felt that that is somewhat random right now.

The current education system really focuses on academic disciplines and he felt that teachers may feel that they didn't sign up to be relational, run advisories or have in-depth conversations about racism and culture. Dr. Schuch believes that they have to convince everyone that they can teach a subject a lot better if they have relationships with their learners. There are currently six strategy action teams, one of which is primarily focused on establishing connection teams and learning coaches.

Dr. Schuch is blessed to have grown up in a family structure that was safe and nurturing and he never once felt unsafe. He understands that that is not the case for everyone and if school can be the place where they can feel safe, that would be incredible.

Julia Talbert-Slagle asked what Reimagining Education actually is and Dr. Schuch explained that it is his attempt to start a conversation to get people thinking about creating a new education system, compare it to what is there now and how to redesign it. Everyone encouraged her to get involved.

Community support

Mr. Moore stated that he will try to bring some community members into the committee.

Adjournment

Mr. Roraback made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

In favor of adjourning the meeting: Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mrs. Paoletti, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer and Mrs. Schmidt. Motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:41 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First