

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in regular session on Wednesday, April 1, 2020 at 7:00 PM remotely.

Board members present: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Serino, Superintendent of Schools and Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance.

Mr. Moore called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Mr. Moore noted that he had received two comments from the public at the last meeting. One was from Michelle DiMauro who volunteered to help in any way and Heidi Pizzo who thanked everyone for all of their work.

Approval of Agenda

Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Dr. Taylor, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion carried unanimously.

Next Board Meeting - April 6, 2020 at 7:00 PM

School Closure Update

A. Health Director/Governor Conference Call

Dr. Serino explained that they have calls every week and provide information that most people are aware of through the news. There have been 19 executive orders since March 12th, with a new one coming just last night. The governor predicted that there will be an apex in the cases in the next two weeks. The Commissioner of Education anticipates that, by around April 10th, they will be able to make some decisions regarding the extension of school closure. Dr. Serino felt that it will be highly unlikely that schools will open after April 20th and will probably remain closed for the remainder of the school year. The Commissioner wants to be sure to have all the information that districts will be looking for, including graduation requirements before sharing a decision to extend the closure.

The conversation with the Health Director included talking about congregating in public places and Dr. Serino, Mrs. Francis and Mr. Bailey have agreed that, as of Friday, they will temporarily close Allyn Brook Park, Peckham Park, the school playgrounds and basketball courts. The walking track at Cuginchaug will remain open.

B. Legislative Changes and Executive Orders

Dr. Serino reviewed that the latest executive order was issued last night to continue funding for Boards of Education with payment of public school staff and preservation of student transportation services and special education providers. Dr. Serino will share all 19 executive orders with the board. This latest order means that the district will continue to receive ECS funding and that all school staff will continue to be paid through the end of the school year. The district will also continue to pay for outplaced students so that staff members there will continue to receive salary and benefits as well. The district will also continue to accept tuition for MTA. The actual percentage of payment and tuition will be addressed soon.

Dr. Serino had asked Mrs. Manning to join the meeting this evening as she has been organizing any changes that impact the district's employees, including FMLA, extended sick leave and issues related to COVID. Mrs. Manning explained that they have stayed in consistent communication with employees and work in real-time to stay updated with Shipman & Goodwin and Blum Shapiro for guidance.

Mrs. Manning reviewed that President Trump signed the Families First Corona Response Act that has two components: one to provide care for family members with COVID-19 and extends FMLA and the second is to provide 80 hours of emergency paid sick leave for employees to recover from and/or prevent the spread of the coronavirus. That information was shared with employees last week. Anyone employed by the district for 30 days or more will now be covered by the new FMLA-plus law. The additional paid sick leave will be on top of any sick leave already existing. This also includes intermittent FMLA. Mrs. Manning explained that this act runs through December, 2020. She did mention that no one has requested any of this leave at this point and all employees have been given assignments and are currently working remotely. Mrs. Manning will share the overview document with the board.

C. Transportation

Dr. Serino explained that there are transportation considerations included in this last executive order. Mrs. Neubig explained that outplaced tuition also applies to the transportation and the transportation companies will need to provide to and attest to the fact that they are only charging actual and reasonable costs. She has had numerous discussions about this and districts will be requesting cost breakdowns from their vendors. Mrs. Neubig felt that there could possibly be a 20 percent discount on the remaining transportation contract. She reviewed that there is about \$400,000 remaining on that contract, so that would be approximately \$80,000 that could be held back.

Special education providers will also have to provide attestation that they are only charging the hourly rates that were in force prior to the order.

D. Employee Responsibilities and Compensation

Dr. Serino reported that MOUs have been created with the six bargaining units, including teachers, support staff, custodians, administrators, nurses and food service, as well as agreements with non-union employees. Distance learning is up and running and support staff are in place to support both students and teachers. Over the next two weeks, they will look at all employees to see how their skills can address the district's needs. They have talked about flexing some of the hours for support staff to help support students who need additional help. They are also looking at providing enhanced professional development for support staff.

In terms of custodians, it has been decided to close the buildings to staff for about two weeks. Mrs. Gaudreau and Mr. Croteau have identified a number of tasks that can be done, i.e., cleaning the auditorium, power washing the bleachers and clean under them, clean and paint the dugouts, clean out storage areas, clean garages and custodial areas in addition to cleaning and sanitizing all classrooms and offices.

In terms of nurses, Mrs. Branciforte has been an invaluable resource to Dr. Serino and has worked with parents who have questions and people who need to pick up medications. The administrators have continued to work and food service have been working on the grab and go meal program. Lunches are now available on Mondays and Thursdays and they will begin rotating staff through the food distribution.

Dr. Serino also noted that Mrs. Branciforte compiled a donation to the Durham and Middlefield first responders, including face masks, clothes, goggles and gloves. All of the staff is eager to help in any way and are grateful for their maintained salaries and benefits.

E. Distance Learning

Dr. Serino felt that it may be a good idea to have a student achievement meeting at the end of April or in May to understand what's happening with distance learning. They will have received feedback from students and parents by that time.

They have asked the parents for feedback and will reference it to the current practices so the program can be continually refined and improved. Dr. Serino added that Mrs. DiMaggio has done an outstanding job and will share the student expectations and parent support document with the board. Dr. Serino stated that one of the most common questions is if and when the district is going to move away from asynchronous connection with students. The district made the decision to do it this way primarily due to skill of the teacher, privacy and safety issues, and the ability to roll things out correctly and once. Other districts have waited a full week before rolling out a Google Hangout type of experience where teachers can be with an entire classroom. Dr. Serino isn't sure that the district will move toward that, but they are seriously looking at it. However, they are doing that for students who receive special education services who can work one-on-one with their teacher or service provider. The largest size group so far has been about five to eight students who receive special education support.

The district wants to do this safely, maintaining all student privacy considerations and to be sure they are doing it correctly and not overloading the teachers. Many of the teachers are working 12- and 15-hour days. Dr. Serino is extraordinarily proud of what's been happening in special education and all areas.

Dr. Serino also noted that SAT and SBAC testing has been canceled and AP testing will be administered to students online.

F. Board Meeting Platform and Community Participation

Dr. Serino explained that they are using the Town of Durham's Zoom account for meetings and thanked Mrs. Willett and Mr. Pietrasko for all of their help. There have been some issues about security in terms of student data privacy. Dr. Serino has reached out to Shipman & Goodwin and they explained that the use of Zoom with board members does not conflict with student data privacy laws or FERPA as long as no identifiable student information is disclosed.

Mr. Yamartino stated that it had become apparent that the board needed to provide a way for the public to provide input on the budget and he suggested that they use an online form, which would include name, phone number, street address and email address. The form could include specific categories, by budget item, and the public could then submit input on various items. He also felt that a paper version of the form could also be sent out. Mr. Yamartino explained that the executive order from the governor gave broad privileges to the towns and the board regarding the budgets. The two towns are looking to adopt the town budgets on June 2, 2020 and the school budget would need to be by June 1, 2020.

Mr. Yamartino felt that the first step would be to present a draft budget to the community and allow a week or so for public comment. The board can then have discussion and adopt what they believe to be the final budget and then allow for comment. After that point, the budget can be ratified. He felt that they would look to get a draft budget out in the first week of May to follow that time line, with a final draft around May 15th. The hope would be to formally adopt a budget by the end of May, first of June.

Mr. Moore asked if anyone had any other thoughts and offered to prepare a draft questionnaire to send out to the board members. Mr. Yamartino did try to send out a rough draft prior to tonight's meeting, but it did not send. Mr. Yamartino felt this approach would help the board to categorize the input and put it into a single report. Mr. Moore added that they would include the process that the board is going through on the form as well.

Dr. Friedrich suggested that there be a place for comments that are not about specific line items. Mr. Yamartino explained that there will definitely be a place for that.

Dr. Serino felt that if they receive the information about school closure by April 10th that would give her and Mrs. Neubig time to do the projections. Dr. Serino also stated that she will reach out to Mrs. DiMaggio about having a student achievement meeting. Dr. Serino asked Mr. Yamartino to send the draft to her and she will review it with Mrs. Maloney.

2020-2021 Budget Discussion (any surplus projection and possible cuts)

Dr. Serino reviewed that they are working on a number of scenarios to try to get to a zero budget increase. They are looking at things that need attention now that were not budgeted for, but funds could possibly be made available for and there may be some areas where they would ask the board to approve a transfer of funds. They are also working to try to project where any under-expenditures might be and what impact that could have on next year's budget. They are also going to look at the proposed budget and will take a critical eye to see if there are any changes that could be made.

Mrs. Neubig explained that she and Dr. Serino have been reviewing year-to-date expenditures and how they compare to the budget. She explained that fixed items, such as insurance and debt service, will not be affected by the shutdown. She is not including transportation and outplacement services in the line items for planning purposes at this point. They are still evaluating other services to see if they can even be provided during a shutdown.

Other areas will experience increases, such as legal and storage of prepaid fuel. Assuming school does not resume this year, Mrs. Neubig does feel there will be a surplus in salaries (mainly due to substitutes), custodian overtime, athletic stipends, snow removal, purchased services, electricity and fuel, a possible small savings in transportation for magnet schools, travel and dues and memberships. Right now, the savings total up to \$655,000.

Looking at the revenue side, Mrs. Neubig explained that they will not receive all of the preschool tuition, pay-to-participate fees, buildings and grounds rental, MTA tuition, parking passes and food service revenue. She also noted that the excess cost grant could go down if the district isn't paying full tuition. Mrs. Neubig feels that that would produce a total net surplus of \$528,000. She also noted that things can still change in either direction.

Mrs. Neubig felt that they could put part of this anticipated surplus toward the 2020-2021 budget. She created various scenarios for the board to review. The first is to allocate the total estimated surplus to the fund balance, though she does not recommend that. Mrs. Neubig feels that the second option of taking a portion of the surplus for the fund balance with a portion to be applied to 2021-2022 is a better option. A third option would be to allocate a portion of the estimated surplus along with cuts to expenditures. She did explain that some big cuts would be needed to get to zero.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the administrative team is meeting on Friday and they will look at the proposed budget. She asked the board to keep in mind that they had budgeted a vacancy factor of 5 percent with the intent to use the existing fund balance. She felt that they should leave some of the excess fund balance in place in case they go over that 5 percent.

Dr. Friedrich asked if they have thought about the possibility of continued social distancing and that the next school year may start just like it is now. Dr. Serino explained that they have thought about that, but have not had a robust conversation. Mrs. Neubig added that the biggest portions of the budget are salaries, benefits and transportation which are all still in play through executive order. She did not feel that it would be a big difference if they were to not return to school.

Mr. Yamartino added that they will make their best guess around June as to what next year will look like. He did not feel they should budget any differently than they usually do. Dr. Serino felt it was important that the board still have the discussions about items in the proposed budget. She would like to dedicate time on Monday night to the budget discussion and she will have met with the administrative team by then and have some possible adjustments. Dr. Serino reviewed that it is never their goal to meet a specific number, but more about meeting strategic goals for the district. Dr. Serino asked the board members to get any questions or comments about the budget to her before Friday's meeting with the administrative team.

Dr. Taylor is a little annoyed about the messaging that the budget needs to be lowered that didn't even come from the board. He wasn't sure that the board even agrees that changes need to be made to the budget as they haven't had those discussions yet. He wishes that the board at least had initial discussions before receiving the message to reduce it. Dr. Taylor felt that these discussions should occur at the board meetings and not through extraneous discussions.

Mr. Moore explained that that was a request that came out of a discussion with the selectmen and boards of finance chairs from both communities. The issue for both selectmen was that they felt there would be a hardship for many residents and it may delay their ability to pay taxes. Mr. Moore merely forwarded their request to the board and explained that he has not agreed to anything. He felt that the board needs to look at the COVID-19 impact to their budget as well as the communities' budgets. Mr. Moore did feel that it was appropriate for the staff to look for ways to decrease the budget but no one has stated that the budget will get to zero.

Dr. Taylor wished that the discussion at the last board meeting would have been to decide if the staff resources should be dedicated to decreasing the budget. He did not feel that the board made that decision.

Dr. Taylor felt that things were being done outside of the normal meeting process and asked that they are careful what is said and done when meeting with town leaders without the full board present. Mr. Moore explained that the full board is not present at a lot of meetings and noted that these issues came up with regard to how to act with regard to the virus.

Dr. Serino felt that it was appropriate to talk about these kinds of issues and that the commitment to the town leaders was to take a look at it, not to make a decision. She added that she felt that they should leave any transportation savings out of the equation for this year.

Mr. Yamartino explained that he did not believe they were being mandated nor had they agreed to go to zero. He felt that the board and the administration would take a look at what could be done to reduce the budget. He felt that they should wait for a few weeks to get firmer numbers. Mr. Yamartino felt that this is a far different budget year as the full adoption of the budget lies with the Board of Education and it will not go to referendum. He felt it was imperative that they consider community input in all forms, including input from the Boards of Selectmen and Boards of Finance. He reminded everyone that those boards will also be adopting their budgets without a public vote. Mr. Yamartino explained that Middlefield's budget is based on over a 99 percent tax collection rate, but that may not be met this year. He would support having a meeting on Monday to further discuss the budget.

2020-2021 Budget Adoption Schedule

Mr. Moore reviewed that there will be a meeting on April 22nd, when they will try to adopt the budget. If not, it can be done on April 29th. That budget would then go out to the public for comment. The hope would be to adopt a final budget by June 1st. He reviewed that there will be no public hearing or referendum.

Communications

Mr. Moore reported that he had received a letter from Phil Augur who felt that they should not make any decisions until the last possible time and that he wasn't confident that the education the kids are getting is equivalent to regular education. He also received a letter from Donia Viola asking the board to lay off any non-essential workers. Chuck Stengel also asked the board to talk about the process for referendum. He has also received communication from the chairs of Board of Education and CAFE with regard to a whole series of issues, including the governor's executive orders. Mr. Moore has also received lots of feedback on distance learning and the kids seem to be getting accustomed to it.

Mr. Moore encouraged the public to email him and he will include any comments in the minutes of the meeting.

Dr. Serino stated that Monday's agenda will have some standing items, but will basically be for budget discussion.

Adjournment

Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Mr. Hicks, to adjourn the regular meeting of the Board of Education.

In favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion carried unanimously.

Meeting was adjourned at 8:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz
Alwaz First

Public Comment Received Via Email

From:
To: rmoore@rsd13.org <rmoore@rsd13.org>
Sent: Wednesday, April 1, 2020, 5:44:27 PM EDT
Subject: Re: Public Comment

On Wednesday, April 1, 2020, 5:38:39 PM EDT, < > wrote:

To the RSD 13 BOE members,

Most definitely the COVID 19 virus has wreaked havoc upon the world's population and, unfortunately, has made it nearly impossible to sustain any kind of normalcy. The facts are such that I would like at this time to address the persons assigned to various jobs throughout the district. Since the schools remain closed and we can't be certain when they might reopen, I think it would make financial sense to lay off those workers who are not essential to furthering the education of the students. Cafeteria workers, librarians, psychiatrists, custodians, support staff such as counselors, aides and some office staffers might all possibly be given a "pink-slip" because they are not performing their roles as such. The savings realized might even illustrate to the citizenry that we all are in this situation and what monies are realized could allow for a better outcome during this budget deliberation. It certainly may be a bitter pill to swallow but the taxes paid by the residents does ensure that the students enrolled are given some of the best opportunities which, at this time, are not readily available to them.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Donia Viola
Durham, CT 06422

From:
Date: April 1, 2020 at 7:51:54 PM EDT
To: rmoore@rsd13.org
Subject: Referendum for Changes in District Plan Referendum

Bob,
Any news that you can share about the District Plan Referendum?

Chuck Stengel