

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in regular session on Wednesday, February 9, 2022 at 7:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mrs. Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education, Mrs. DiMaggio, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, Mr. Brough, Human Resources Specialist, and Mr. Pietrasko, Director of Infrastructure and Security Technology

Mrs. Petrella called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

### **Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

### **Approval of Agenda**

*Mrs. Booth made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the agenda, as presented.*

*In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.*

### **Public Comment**

Nicole Ercolani, from Durham, asked that the board consider removing the mask mandates in schools once the executive order expires. She noted that she is an RN and has worked on the front lines of the pandemic. She believes that the pandemic is nowhere near the intensity that it was and so much more is known about the disease. Numbers are down in the community and vaccine is available to those who want to take it. She would like to see the board move on to the next phase and allow the children the option to wear the mask if they feel comfortable, but not require it. Ms. Ercolani also noted that she has heard Mrs. Booth advocate for masks in the past and asked about the healthcare background of the board members and their involvement during the pandemic. Ms. Ercolani felt that healthcare has come a long way and there are more treatments available now.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, stated that it is great that the public can watch this meeting, but felt that the district really needs to be able to allow public comment. The townspeople are paying over two-thirds of their taxes to support the school system and while they can't be at every meeting, they should be able to speak.

Melissa Massaro, a Brewster parent from Durham, had emailed the board about John Lyman School. The school has not closed and the HOT/ID program no longer exists, but she is concerned that the point was to have Brewster and Lyman be on the same path. If that is the case, she did not understand the logistics of K-2 at Brewster and K-4 at Lyman. Parents aren't sending their children to Lyman for the HOT/ID program anymore, but there are still buses going from Durham to Lyman. She wondered why Durham students wouldn't go to Brewster and Middlefield students to Lyman. Ms. Massaro doesn't see how it is fair that her third grader will be at a middle school next year and starting an hour earlier than the same aged students at Lyman. She realizes that COVID put a halt on a lot of the logistics, but wonders what the

plan is now. If the district is going to streamline and make it fair for everyone, should Lyman students also go to Memorial for third grade?

Mrs. Caramanello agreed with the past speaker and acknowledged that Mrs. Petrella responds for the board. Ms. Massaro understood that. Mrs. Petrella reiterated that the chair does respond to emails for consistency.

### **TOY Introduction and Recognition**

Dr. Schuch asked Mrs. Keane and Mrs. DiMaggio to introduce the teacher of the year. Mrs. DiMaggio announced that the Regional School District 13 teacher of the year is Kristin Allen, who was nominated by Chris Davis and fully endorsed by staff and administration. She has influenced teaching and learning at all grade levels, from preK through Coginchaug. She has also influenced other educators from around the state. As an Orton-Gillingham trainer, she has provided professional learning to reading interventionists, special education teachers and tutors as well as provided K-2 teachers with professional learning in reading and structured literacy. Her commitment to the profession and the district's learners extends to supporting legislation in the area of reading as well as her role as president of the International Dyslexia Association of Connecticut.

Mrs. Allen often quotes Maya Angelou, "do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better." She is also doing better and encouraging everyone to do better for learners, staff and the community.

Mrs. Keane went on to explain that Mrs. Allen is a consummate professional who has dedicated herself to professional excellence, lifelong learning and sharing her wealth of knowledge. She is a superior special education teacher and an advocate for student rights and educational improvements. She educates students, staff and the community to promote best practice teaching methods, especially in reading. On top of that, she embodies the intrinsic qualities that make an educator truly outstanding. She is passionate about learning and teaching. Her enthusiasm is contagious and her colleagues are energized by her and her students are truly engaged.

Mrs. Allen thanked the board for the recognition and the truly unbelievable honor. She grew up wanting to be a teacher and this nomination is like a dream come true. To be part of a district who has supported her and taken the lead in embracing a more effective way of teaching reading for all learners has been remarkable and something to be proud of. She also thanked her parents, husband and two children, her brother and his family and her in-laws who all mean the world to her.

Mrs. Allen is often asked how she does it all and she doesn't know how to respond. However, when asked why she does what she does, the answer is easy: she does it for the learners. Learners have always been her number one priority and are the source of her inspiration. While content is an important part of being an educator, she truly believes it is not what the learners remember most. They remember when someone connected with them and made them feel special or taught them lessons that carry them through life. Despite all the stress and feelings of being overwhelmed, she believes everyone should step back, take a deep breath and remember that people will forget what you said and what you did, but will never forget how you made them feel. She believes that everyone needs to make the top priority ensuring that the learners feel supported and inspired.

**CRHS Reporters - Nora O'Connell, Logan Palardy and Rebecca Tobin**

Nora O'Connell reported that the related arts fair for the eighth graders went well. Chamber Choir and Jazz combo performed and various clubs shared information. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Course registration is beginning soon for grades 9-11. The French Honor Society is holding a Valentine's Day Spirit Day. Everyone can support the CRHS tennis teams by visiting Carmine's in Durham on February 23<sup>rd</sup> from 5:00 to 8:00 PM. The senior trip to DC is in six weeks. Mr. Coginchaug, hosted by DECA, will be on March 17<sup>th</sup>. Ocean Bowl won their last competition and will head to the nationals for the first time in a decade. Spanish Honor Society is doing a food drive for St. Vincent De Paul food bank in Middletown in February. Model UN went to Boston this past weekend with two seniors taking home awards.

Logan Palardy reported that boys' basketball team is currently 2-12 and will play North Branford tonight and have senior night this Friday. Girls' basketball is currently 7-8, with a win against Hale-Ray this past Monday. Their senior night was held last Friday. The boys' hockey team recently won their first game. Girls' hockey won its first game against Hamden a few weeks ago. The Lyman Hall-Coginchaug Co-op Swimming and Diving team has done very well, currently at 4-3. Boys' indoor track scored 115 points to win the Shoreline Conference championship this past weekend. Multiple athletes received First Team All-Conference awards and multiple Second Team awards as well. The Class S state meet will be this Saturday. The SMR team is once again looking to qualify for nationals. Girls' indoor track team placed fourth at Shorelines. Sophomore Allison Vigue broke the school record once again for pole vault, jumping 10'3". Two athletes won Second Team All-Conference awards.

Rebecca Tobin reported that they are currently in rehearsals for the musical, Emma, the Pop Musical. Regionals happened this past weekend and several students performed. The Jazz Combo will perform at Perk on Main on February 17<sup>th</sup> from 6:30 to 8:30 PM in honor of Black History Month.

**Vote to approve textbook**

Mrs. DiMaggio introduced Rachel Mann to talk about the anatomy and physiology book that they would like the board to approve. Ms. Mann explained that she teaches science at the high school, including anatomy and physiology. She asked the board to approve the textbook as she is revising the curriculum to make it more engaging for everyone by providing more authentic experiences. They will apply their knowledge to case studies, individualized projects and explorations of careers in healthcare. The Hole's Essentials of Human Anatomy is a perfect complement to the toolbox of resources to accomplish that goal. The units integrate body systems by function and also integrates the Next-Generation science standards. It also provides case study examples and career connections. The organization of the textbook is appropriate for high school students and Ms. Mann would like to make the course available to more students, by eliminating the chemistry prerequisite. The textbook has a great introductory chapter to provide that chemistry background. Biology would continue to be a prerequisite.

There is also an online version of the textbook, so books can remain in the classroom which will prolong the life of the books. Ms. Mann's favorite part of this is Anatomy and Physiology Revealed, a 3-D modeling virtual dissection tool that enhances visual learning and complements the hands-on dissections that are done in the classroom. It will also give students an alternative to live dissections. The textbook also comes with a lab manual that includes 34 hands-on labs. Both 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students will be

able to take this class as an elective, with mostly 12<sup>th</sup> grade students at this point. Ms. Mann is requesting 24 textbooks.

Mr. Roraback asked if the chapters are in PDF format and Ms. Mann stated that she has found it very easy to use and you can just click on chapters. This includes 24 student printed editions, online access for six years, the Anatomy and Physiology Revealed for six years, free teacher manual and free lab manual for \$4,019.76. Mrs. DiMaggio noted that there is money in the budget and they are not asking for additional money.

*Mr. Mennone made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Dahlheimer, to approve Hole's Essentials of Human Anatomy and Physiology, McGraw-Hill textbooks.*

*In favor of approving Hole's Essentials of Human Anatomy and Physiology, McGraw-Hill textbooks: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.*

### **Approval of Minutes**

Mrs. Petrella asked if everyone would be agreeable to approving all four sets of minutes in one vote. Mrs. Booth asked what was revised in the December 15<sup>th</sup> minutes and Mr. Roraback explained that he had been listed as voting twice.

- A. Board of Education Special Meeting - December 15, 2021 revised**
- B. Board of Education District Meeting - January 5, 2022**
- C. Board of Education Special Meeting - January 5, 2022**
- D. Board of Education Regular Meeting/Retreat - January 22, 2022**

*Mrs. Booth made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stone, to approve the minutes of the Board of Education Special Meeting on December 15, 2021, as revised, District Meeting on January 5, 2022, Special Meeting on January 5, 2022 and Regular Meeting/Retreat on January 22, 2022.*

*In favor of approving the minutes of the Board of Education minutes of the Board of Education Special Meeting on December 15, 2021, as revised, District Meeting on January 5, 2022, Special Meeting on January 5, 2022 and Regular Meeting/Retreat on January 22, 2022: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried, with Ms. Adams abstaining.*

**Next Board Meeting - February 23, 2022 in the CRHS Library at 7:00 PM**

### **Committee Reports**

- A. Well-Being Committee Meeting - February 1, 2022**

Mr. Moore reported that the teachers and students talked about their stress and their conflicts about COVID and school. The teachers felt acceptance, recognition and affirmation is necessary. Both students and teachers felt that they needed to time to take a break and talk. The committee also discussed the social media issues from the beginning of the year and they felt that Mrs. Gonzalez dealt with it and it

seems to have slowed down. Mr. Warner gave a summary of the high school and how his first three months have been.

**Communications**

Mrs. Petrella stated that she received emails from Nicole Ercolani dated January 13, 2022 requesting copies of emails referred to at the January 12<sup>th</sup> meeting which she referred to Dr. Schuch. She also received a forwarded email from Caitlin Brady, dated January 19, 2022, questioning the 2022/2023 calendar. There was another forwarded email from Brandon Jubriet of CT Flag Football, dated January 20, 2022, requesting to distribute an information flyer for their upcoming spring season which she forwarded to Dr. Schuch and Mr. Petronio. There was an email from Heidi Pizzo, dated January 26, 2022, expressing concern about a lack of communication from the superintendent. Mrs. Petrella received an email from Nora O'Connell dated January 29, 2022, about appointing new students to the Well-Being Committee. There was an email from Phil Augur dated February 4, 2022 questioning was school was closed that day. She received an email from Melissa Massaro dated February 8, 2022 expressing her concerns about the ongoing issues regarding the two elementary schools in the district. She also received an email from Maya Perry-Lis dated February 9, 2022 expressing concerns over the masking policy.

Mrs. Booth received an email from Donia Viola asking about outside food for students and faculty which she forwarded to Mrs. Petrella.

Mrs. Dahlheimer received an email from Leslie Paoletti asking whether she was on the Well-Being Committee or not.

Mr. Roraback spoke at length with Middlefield resident Alma Elder who asked for clarification on last night's referendum which was confusing to a lot of people.

**John Lyman Referendum Results from February 8, 2022**

Mrs. Petrella reported that 194 Middlefield residents voted yes and 187 voted no. Durham had 99 yes votes and 763 no votes, with a total of 293 yes votes and 950 no votes.

Mrs. Petrella summarized that the board has a dilemma. They do not have the power to close Lyman School or to maintain it.

Dr. Schuch felt like there are three elephants in the room, this issue, the budget and the governor's announcement on the mask mandate. He believes there are five options that the board has with regard to John Lyman. One would be to address the capital maintenance issues through the budget by adding funds to do some or all of what was in the bonding package, though he did not include that in his preliminary budget. Option two would be to put it out for bonding again, at a lower dollar amount. Conversely, the board could go back to referendum to close the school. Other options would include seeking legislative relief and/or judicial relief. Legislative relief would mean appealing to the state legislature for potential action and judicial relief would mean closing the school and hoping that the district would prevail in any potential lawsuits. Dr. Schuch intends to explore all five of the options, especially the last two, but didn't have anything specific to share tonight.

Dr. Schuch believes that they are now at the point where they have to explore all options. Laura Francis was at the Chamber meeting this morning and pointed out that the inability for the board to close a school

is unique to regional school districts. Dr. Schuch felt that Mrs. Francis didn't believe that was the intent of the original framers of the district.

Mrs. Petrella asked the board if they would like Dr. Schuch to continue to explore the options. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that they needed to know every option and be open about it. Mrs. Booth felt that it needs to be done. She felt that if someone voted to keep Lyman open, then they should have voted yes to the bonding. She also reminded everyone that the board was not allowed to say what it would cost to keep the school open on the referendum in November. She also felt that this is taking up a lot of time and money that could be spent on something else.

Mrs. Caramanello added that there are a lot of families that want to know what will happen with elementary school kids and how they will make it an even experience for everyone as fast as possible. Mr. Moore felt that all five options should be pursued, but a decision needs to be made as to what happens next year. He reviewed that the board voted two-and-a-half years ago to have a single program and Reimagining Education will have a single program district-wide and the board needs to make sure that people understand that.

Ms. Adams suggested a small work session where a short version of the history is reviewed so everyone knows how they got where they are. Ms. Adams went back and read everything, starting in 2014, and the real issue seemed to be more about the programming. She received a lot of questions, even before she was elected to the board, and felt maybe a quick history would help. If everyone could agree on the facts, they could communicate them better to the public. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that many families have moved here since Korn School closed and she agreed that an introduction/history should be given.

Mr. Stone agreed with exploring the options, primarily the fourth and fifth options, and felt that it would be difficult to change the bonding amount. Ms. Betty agreed and felt that another bonding referendum would be shot down since most of Durham wanted to close the school and will not vote to allocate money to it. Mr. Mennone agreed and felt that they need to concentrate on four schools and making them state-of-the-art.

Ms. Adams would encourage the board to challenge the attorneys about some of the conclusions they have been given before. She felt that they could have asked two questions at the same time, but only one could have been binding. She reminded everyone that the attorneys work for the board and the board should tell them how they want it to come out. Mrs. Caramanello noted that they did ask the attorneys because most of the board wanted exactly that. Mr. Mennone agreed with Mrs. Booth in that if you voted to keep the school open, you needed to vote to fund it. He felt that it was important for the board to move forward and make a decision quickly. Mrs. Caramanello asked what the time frame would be because she felt it would hold the board back even more. Mr. Stone agrees with getting information out because he was told just yesterday that the district is still running the ID program.

Dr. Schuch stated that he will move as fast as he can. Mrs. Caramanello would like to know if her incoming kindergartner will be K-2 or K-4 as many other families would. Mrs. Booth stated that there was no way that Lyman could be closed after this year because there is not enough room for the kids at the other schools. Despite the fact that Lyman should close, it can't close for at least one to two years because additions need to be made to Brewster. Mrs. Booth also reminded everyone that it was the bond counsel who said that it could not be done the way they wanted to because of the Bridgewater case where

they closed a school and were sued. She also noted that her fifth grader is only in Memorial School for one year so that is disruptive as well.

Mr. Roraback agreed with Mr. Mennone about having the four best schools that the district can afford. He likes the idea of another vote in November to coincide with the gubernatorial election which will get the greatest participation.

Mrs. Petrella summarized that there is unanimous support for Dr. Schuch to explore all of the options. She added that she could certainly feel everyone's frustrations over these issues.

### **Fiscal Year 2022-23 Budget Proposal**

Dr. Schuch began by acknowledging Mrs. Neubig's work on so many things, including this budget. They have titled the budget "Navigating to a Brighter Future." Dr. Schuch believes that the pandemic will be less of a pressure on everyone. He also noted that there is new board, with four more up for re-election in May. The leadership is new at the high school and middle school as well and the district is trying to reimagine a better way to do education.

Dr. Schuch felt it is important to frame the next two years with the budget and noted that they don't see a lot changing in the next school year. Programming and grade level configuration will probably not change until they are sure what is happening with the campuses. A lot of planning is happening in reimagining and they hope to start taking significant steps in the 2023-2024 school year. He also believes that that will be the year to revise grade configurations. They had talked about declining enrollment, with some decline in staff, but the two don't really match. This budget maintains the same staffing levels, but Dr. Schuch believes that they need to seriously take a look at that. He feels that that will result in not needing as much staff as there is now. Typically, 75 to 80 percent of a district's budget is staff and if enrollment is declining, hard decisions will have to be made. Dr. Schuch doesn't feel this is the year to try that because they are currently reimagining the future, don't know how many buildings there will be and the new board and administrators are just getting a handle on things.

Dr. Schuch wanted everyone to know that they are committed to the learners and their future. Academics are a focus, but wellness, employability and citizenship are important as well. These are based on what they heard from parents about what they would like their children to leave the district with. He reiterated that this is a planning and exploration year and he encouraged anyone to contact Mrs. Maloney to be part of it.

Moving on to specific strategies, Dr. Schuch explained that they want learners to progress through a personalized, competency-based education system. They hope to leverage all the resources that are available, but support will be needed. They are working to make sure that every learner feels a connection to at least one adult in school. Dr. Schuch also noted that he has repeatedly heard that part of the plan has to be educating the community, engaging the community and getting the community to understand.

Parts of the plan have not yet been drafted, but the six strategies will be developed into action plans with specific resources and timelines. All of the information will be made public and will constantly change. There will be measurable outcomes for the plan and the plan will be adjusted based on those.

Dr. Schuch reiterated that there are no changes being proposed to full-time equivalents. As a result, the budget has a significant increase from last year with most of the money in people. There are salary increases and a huge health insurance increase. With the impact of COVID, Dr. Schuch feels that they need to celebrate what the teachers and staff have done every day to do in-person learning last year and this year. He believes it would be a slap in the face to reduce staff after those efforts. Dr. Schuch did say that they will reduce staffing if that's what the board tells them to do. He also mentioned that the state has finally given regional school districts the permission to set aside up to 2 percent of the budget for capital reserves and that is included in this budget. Dr. Schuch also mentioned that he would like to finish the stadium project. He noted that the turf field, track, bleachers and parking are all great, with a roughed-in thing that just sits there. He feels that the project shouldn't have been done if the district wasn't committed to completing it. Therefore, they have set money aside in the budget to do that.

Mrs. Neubig then explained that she had emailed the budget books to everyone on the board and it will be posted to the website tomorrow morning. She thanked Tippi Popp and Robin Golembieski for their help as well as all of the administrators and administrative assistants. Mrs. Neubig added that she will send a Google Doc to everyone tomorrow to get everyone's questions and comments. She also explained that there has been a change in how things are reported and both building expenses and special education expenses are now reported and therefore budgeted at the building level, rather than the district level which resulted in some very large increases and decreases in specific items.

Mr. Roraback asked if Mrs. Neubig has had a conversation with Bob Yamartino about the towns having reserves for the district. Mrs. Neubig stated that she has and it is an ongoing conversation and will not happen in this budget cycle.

Moving on to the budget, Mrs. Neubig had estimated an increase of 4 to 7 percent at the retreat. The budget being presented includes a 4.56 percent gross budget increase, with a 4.96 percent net budget increase. The difference is that the net is expenses less any revenue. The reason the net budget is higher is that revenue is lower this year than last year.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the major increases are in salaries and benefits, representing 74 percent of the total budget and 1.57 percent of the 4.56 percent. District-wide capital needs, including the high school stadium project and debt service, represents 6.1 percent of the total budget and 1.91 percent of the 4.56 percent increase. The rest of the budget increases make up 1.08 percent of the 4.56 percent increase. The decrease in revenue of approximately \$200,000 is in MTA, with seven RSD13 students enrolled in the program which leaves less room for outside tuition. That is the largest number of students the district has ever had going to MTA.

Proposed mitigation strategies include budgeting salaries at 97.5 percent. This year was budgeted at 96.5 percent and is very close. Mrs. Neubig stated that the renewal for ConnectiCare is a 22 percent increase this year. The loss ratio is at 131 percent and they cannot get another insurance company. The proposed budget assumes their planned mitigation strategies will happen and if they do not, Mrs. Neubig will come back with revised numbers. They are looking at a couple of scenarios, including the two towns and not. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that Durham has stated that their insurance is decreasing, but Dr. Schuch felt that they are looking at the same options that the district is. He explained that the two options they are pursuing are much larger pools than with just the two towns. Mrs. Neubig added that they acknowledge that there are contractual requirements with the unions to provide a plan that is the same or better. Mrs. Neubig reminded everyone that the district saved \$1 million by going to ConnectiCare for a two-year



contract. She also mentioned that they have used the current year surplus in the past to offset any increases. It is too early to know what surplus would be available, but she did not feel it would be very large.

Capital reserve is very big in the budget and is maxed at the 2 percent (\$740,000). This includes turf replacement (\$27,500), unanticipated repairs and maintenance (\$50,000), Pickett Lane paving (\$582,500), and Strong School brick replacement and repair (\$80,000). Mrs. Neubig explained that she pulled out the money for the pump house in order to do Pickett Lane paving. She also noted that there is nothing saved for end-of-life systems at Strong and Coginchaug. If the board decides not to go this route with capital, they will need to look at another bonding referendum but Mrs. Neubig would need the board to direct the action to be taken should the bonding referendum fail.

Mrs. Neubig went on to review debt service and then noted that, since 2015, the budget has gone up \$1,192 million or 3.2 percent. The per pupil expense has increased by \$5,400 per student or 28 percent. This is due to decreasing enrollment with spending not decreasing at the same rate.

Looking at town allocations, Middlefield went from 33.26 to 35.50 percent and Durham decreased from 66.74 to 64.50 percent based on student numbers. The district received notification today that the ECS grants were proposed to be a little bit higher for each town. The bottom line net increase in the budget for Durham is \$331,000 and Middlefield \$1.3 million.

Mrs. Booth asked if Korn School is included in this budget and Mrs. Neubig explained that there was nothing included for Korn. Mrs. Booth was concerned that the sale has not been finalized yet. Mrs. Neubig reiterated that this budget is necessary. Dr. Schuch noted that he and Mrs. Neubig both talk with other districts and they are all having significant increases in their budgets this year. Mrs. Neubig explained that they are in a consortium to purchase fuel and paid \$1.99/gallon this year and it is up to over \$3.00 this year.

Everyone agreed that prices are going up everywhere. Mrs. Petrella also noted that they have saved the maximum amount every year for capital and this follows that pattern. Mrs. Neubig reminded everyone that there were COVID grants last year that was spent on a lot of supplies, so that is up this year as well.

Mr. Moore stated that a long-term capital plan was developed several years ago and they had looked at maintaining debt service at around \$1.5 million a year. The debt service will drop again in a couple of years. Mrs. Booth added that the district owns Pickett Lane and no grants are available for repaving. Mrs. Neubig noted that they are getting a grant for the culvert, but not for the repaving.

Mrs. Petrella encouraged everyone to review the information and submit any questions or comments to Mrs. Neubig.

### **Superintendent's Report (if applicable)**

#### **A. COVID Update**

Dr. Schuch felt that the three elephants in the room (John Lyman, the budget or COVID) will all divide the community. On Monday, Governor Lamont issued a recommendation that the state mask mandate for schools be phased out at the end of the month. The House will debate the issue tomorrow and the Senate

on Monday, with the governor's executive order set to expire on February 15<sup>th</sup>. Dr. Schuch believes that this phase-out will go through.

Dr. Schuch has talked with staff and his position is that if the state mandate is lifted, the district should allow each individual to decide if they want to wear masks or not and the district would stop enforcing it except where required by law. Dr. Schuch also believes that if the local health director sees something that is concerning, that may change as well. He has requested a meeting with union leadership to find out how they feel about this and he suspects that their membership may be divided on this. The superintendents' group has scheduled an emergency Zoom meeting for tomorrow as well.

Dr. Schuch feels that unless you believe the mask mandate will be forever, there has to be a date and a time when it stops. He doesn't know what masking will look like on buses or how quarantine return rules will change. Dr. Schuch is aware that there will be criticism regardless of which way the district decides about this. The current board policy empowers the superintendent to make this decision, but Dr. Schuch does not want to stand alone on this issue and would like the board's input.

What they have been hearing is that the harm to employees, learners and families on the social-emotional side is starting to outweigh the perceived good. Dr. Schuch does imagine that different districts will take different positions on this and those rules will apply to our students when visiting those schools.

Mr. Moore reviewed that the current policy authorizes the superintendent to comply with state mandates and guidance from the local health director, State Department of Health, the CDC and Connecticut State Department of Education. Mr. Roraback found it quite unbelievable that they were requiring N95s and COVID testing kits a month ago and are now in a completely different place. Dr. Schuch noted that Connecticut is one of eight states in the US that has a school mask mandate and almost all of them are moving away from that. He believes that public sentiment has changed and were it not for Delta and Omicron, it would have changed a long time ago.

Ms. Adams felt that there are a lot of good reasons for giving people personal choice. The DPH folks have been on the money most of the time and are now saying they will lift the mandate. She feels a lot more comfortable than she did a couple of weeks ago and would support Dr. Schuch's recommendation.

Mr. Mennone agreed and felt that children and parents should have the choice. Several other board members agreed and Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that she has been on every DPH call for the past four months and DPH has pushed back in the past. They are now supporting lifting the mask mandates and that is huge. She would love to see the kids all have a normal spring, with athletics, musicals and band and chorus performances. Mrs. Dahlheimer would support lifting the mask mandate on February 15<sup>th</sup> if the executive orders expire, but at least on February 28<sup>th</sup>.

Mrs. Caramanello stated that this is overwhelming and she struggles with the timing of this. Her family just recovered from COVID and it took a lot out of them. She is concerned that there are some staff members who are compromised or older and it would take a lot to convince her that they would not be jeopardizing them. She wondered what steps would be taken if children are showing symptoms and spreading germs. Dr. Schuch felt that if students were showing symptoms, they would be sent to the nurse, the parent would be called and testing would be recommended.

Mr. Roraback spoke at length with his 10<sup>th</sup> grade class in Hartford and their fear was being ostracized if they choose to continue to wear a mask. Dr. Schuch felt that that is a good point, but that could happen now with other things. He added that it is currently happening outside of school anyway. It was also agreed that this has to start with the adults in the community.

Mrs. Petrella is comfortable with Dr. Schuch's recommendation, even being in a vulnerable age group, and feels that it should be an individual choice. Mrs. Caramanello felt that, being a public school, they have to go with the State DPH's mandate. Mrs. Booth stated that she is a healthcare worker for 18 years and has been on the front lines. She has lost family members, friends and patients and COVID is real. Things may be better, but numbers in the district have been very high. Mrs. Booth feels it is very important to ask staff how they feel. She has already given her kids the option to wear a mask or not. If the district decides to unmask, she feels that it needs to be part of the social-emotional learning for the kids and they need to know it's not appropriate to pick on a kid who is wearing a mask. Mrs. Caramanello noted that there will be kids who will be anxious about taking off their mask. Ms. Betty agreed that it should be the families' choice and her daughter has told her that none of the kids want masks on.

## **B. Other Updates**

Dr. Schuch congratulated and welcomed Rebecca Adams as the newest board member. He also reported that there is now a signed sales agreement with Durham for the transfer of Korn School. Sometime around late May is when it is projected to actually transfer. He also announced that the Benchwarmers have asked that one of the new scoreboard in the gym read "Donated by the Benchwarmers in Memory of Bob Grenier" instead of just "Donated by the Benchwarmers." His family-owned business continues to provide flowers to graduating seniors at senior days. Dr. Schuch explained that they have researched the policy and this does not require a vote, but he wanted to make sure the board was aware before he grants them permission.

Mr. Mennone, a Benchwarmer himself, explained that the Benchwarmers are strongly behind this and it couldn't go to a more deserving guy.

## **Director of Finance's Report**

Mrs. Neubig reported that the district's financials are running on track.

## **New Business**

### **A. Vote to accept audit report**

Mrs. Neubig introduced Dave Flint, from Blum Shapiro which was recently bought out by CliftonLarsonAllen. The audit consists of a series of field work, interviews and information passed back and forth.

Mr. Flint reviewed the financial statements and reported that they have issued an unmodified opinion which is the best opinion possible. There were no findings on internal controls. He highlighted that at the end of the 2021 fiscal year, the district had assets of \$40.1 million and total liabilities of \$11.5 million. The total net position is \$26 million, most of which is invested in capital assets. Fund-based financial

statements show four major funds, including general, cafeteria, special school grants and programs and capital reserve fund. The general fund ended the year with a balance of \$1.65 million, the cafeteria fund had a small deficit of \$21,000, special school grants and programs fund did not have a fund balance as was expected, and the capital reserve fund had a balance of \$883,000. All non-major funds had a total of \$297,000. The district had a total of \$2.8 million across all funds.

In the prior year, the district had two agency funds, Student Activities fund and the Middlesex Consortium fund. With the new GASB requirements, agency funds no longer exist so the Student Activities fund was moved to the non-major funds and the Middlesex Consortium fund is now called a custodial fund.

Looking specifically at the general fund balance of \$1.66 million, \$542,000 was allocated for encumbrances. The remainder of the fund balance is unrestricted. Total revenues exceeded the budget by \$833,000. The district used \$2.1 million of the existing fund balance to balance the 2021 budget. Total expenditures came in \$336,000 under budget.

Mr. Flint reported that the district now has a net pension asset of \$453,000 compared to a net pension liability of \$1.4 million in the prior year. The district's pension is actually 104 percent funded. This is not something that is typically seen in a municipality and is something the district should be very proud of. The district's healthcare plan had a total liability of \$4.46 million which decreased from \$5.75 million in the prior year.

A federal single audit was prepared this year due to the increase in COVID funding. An unmodified opinion was also issued on this audit, with no compliance findings or deficiencies in internal controls. The district had a total of \$1.4 million in federal rewards.

A state single audit was also done and an unmodified opinion was issued with no compliance findings or deficiencies in internal controls. The district had a total of \$402,000 in rewards.

Mr. Flint explained that the financial statements include some significant estimates, including the net pension assets and the useful life of the district's capital assets. There were no disagreements with management while performing the audit nor were there any difficulties in performing the audit. There were also no uncorrected mistakes or independent issues.

Mr. Moore recognized Mrs. Neubig's work to not even have a management letter attached to the audit. Mrs. Booth added that the district is very lucky to have Mrs. Neubig.

*Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to accept the audit report dated June 30, 2021, as presented.*

*In favor of accepting the audit report dated June 30, 2021, as presented: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.*

**B. Vote to set high school graduation date to June 17, 2022**

Mrs. Petrella asked what happens if there are more snow days. Dr. Schuch explained that graduation date can be set as long as there are 180 days programmed for the graduating seniors. The intention would be to lock in the graduation date for 2023 in September. June 17<sup>th</sup> will be the last day of school for everybody, but if there are more snow days the seniors would not have to go beyond that day but the other grade levels would.

*Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to set high school graduation date to June 17, 2022.*

*In favor of setting the high school graduation date to June 17, 2022: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.*

**Public Comment**

Nicole Ercolani, from Durham, requested that the board look into providing the ability to comment publicly while watching meetings virtually. She was also very excited to hear the discussion on lifting the mask mandate. The mandate was put in place based on science and for health purposes, not to make anyone feel safe. That has now scientifically changed and she doesn't feel that anxiety and fear are reasons to have children continue wearing masks if there is no health benefit. Mrs. Ercolani reiterated that wearing masks should be an option and the board should not mandate it either way. She also felt that children should be encouraged to be respectful, independent thinkers and stand up for themselves. Mrs. Ercolani mentioned that she understood that Mrs. Booth is a physical therapist and that the training is a bit different, but Mrs. Booth stated that this was inappropriate and she should move on.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, felt that the field house/stadium project completion/storage building is excess space with additional cost for maintenance as well. He believes it is really pushing the envelope to even think about it this year with all the other necessary expenses.

Nick Faiella, from Middlefield, stated that his first reaction to the proposed budget is wow. There hasn't been that kind of increase in a long time, but they also haven't had inflation like this in likely twice as long. Inflation is currently running at more than 7 percent and everything is more expensive. He is okay with teachers' salaries increasing and it is not surprising that healthcare costs have increased. Mr. Faiella firmly believes that the teachers deserve the best healthcare the district can afford to give them. He also feels that the increase in the capital reserve account is long overdue and the district needs to stop fixing things with zip ties and duct tape. Support from the board for student athletes is needed now during the budget cycle. Mr. Faiella applauds the superintendent and the finance manager for submitting a reasonable budget, given the economic cycle.

Nicole Ercolani asked to speak for her last 30 seconds, but Mrs. Petrella asked her to send an email instead.

**Adjournment**

Mrs. Petrella felt that, despite differences, they are truly fortunate to be living in two very special communities.

*Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to adjourn the regular meeting of the Board of Education.*

*In favor of adjourning the special meeting of the Board of Education: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.*

Meeting was adjourned at 9:35 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz  
Alwaz First