

MINUTES OF THE REMOTE REGULAR WOODBRIDGE BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING

Monday, February 28, 2022

Via WebEx

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Meeting Number: 2499 588 7231

Meeting Password: 3P3npP5i2ZB

CALL TO ORDER: Ms. Piascyk, Chair, called the meeting to order (7:05 PM).

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Ms. Lynn Piascyk, Chair; Dr. Jay Dahya; Ms. Sarah Del Prete, Secretary; Ms. Brooke Hopkins; Mr. Jeff Hughes; Dr. Maria Madonick, Vice Chair; Dr. Michael Strambler (7:31 PM); and Ms. Erin Williamson.

STAFF: Dr. Jonathan Budd, Superintendent; Richard Huot, Interim Director of Business Services / Operations; Cheryl Kiesel, Special Services Director; Analisa Sherman, Principal; James Sapia, Assistant Principal; and Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board.

GUESTS: Sheila McCreven, BOS Liaison; Joi Prud'homme, PTO; Daniel Cowan, Darrell Brooks, Kristen Turkosz, Jeffrey Luck, community.

CORRESPONDENCE

The Board received a letter from the WEA President regarding WEA representation and two parent letters pertaining to mask choice.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Daniel Cowan – spoke against the closing of school, biased actions of the Board, masking policies and politicizing a public health issue. The science has not changed and masking decisions should have been left to the parents from the onset. The Board was urged to focus on academics and the facility. The Board was asked to remove all Covid-related policies from the district policy manual and return all decisions regarding masking to the parents without exception.

Darrell Brooks – parent of Open Choice student of color. Concerns were expressed for the lack of affirmation for students of color, their well-being and welfare as students in Woodbridge. How will students of color, particularly those in the Open Choice program, be engaged, reaffirmed and feel safe? He shared a personal experience of his child, whom he believed experienced a discriminatory practice first-hand, was violated, and who has yet to receive an apology from the student involved. All children should have a safe place in the Woodbridge school system.

Kristen Turkosz – thanked the Board for their deliberations on making masks optional. It was not clear why Woodbridge made a different decision than other BOWA districts in implementing when masks could become optional. As in other districts, test kits could have been sent home prior to the Board rendering any decision. In the future, these types of decisions should be made with more thought for how they will affect families with children in multiple schools, as the week delay was unfair to families. It was questioned whether students received a definition of “non-binary” prior to participating in the 5th and 6th grade DEI survey. How was that term explained to 10 year olds in a school setting when some may have never heard that term prior to taking the survey?

Jeffrey Luck – Why was the DEI survey given to students? How do these students know how they identify? How was the survey actually broken down? Why was the survey only given to students in grades 5 and 6 and not to parents throughout the whole school to see what the grade 5 and 6 classes were being asked about their gender, identity and how they are being treated? The responses received indicate that many children were not sure how to answer or what to answer. All parents should have been given the opportunity to see what was being asked. Greater parent participation in meetings and discussions was advocated. The focus should be on teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic in classes, and on hiring the right person for the job instead of hiring for purposes of diversifying.

Board of Selectmen Update – Ms. McCreven apprised the Board that the Board of Selectmen had reduced the town budget request from \$56.8 million to \$55.4 million, which would increase the mill rate to 44.95, a 5.42% increase. The Woodbridge Board of Education received a \$45,000 reduction to their 2022/23 proposed budget, reflecting an 8.92% increase. The Board of Finance will review these recommendations in the coming week.

CONSENT AGENDA

MOTION #1 – CONSENT AGENDA

Move that we approve the consent agenda as presented.

Dr. Madonick

Second by Mr. Hughes

UNANIMOUS

REPORTS

Superintendent's Report / Safe Return Plan – Superintendent Budd indicated mask choice will be implemented on Monday, March 7. Administration is in the process of developing a database metric to be used to determine when the Board might need to reconvene to assess reinstitution of the currently suspended mask policies. In addition, it is anticipated that the CDC will be providing updated recommendations based on community levels. The Connecticut Department of Public Health and QVHD will also be updating their guidance as well.

Dr. Strambler arrived (7:31 PM)

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Presentation – Superintendent Budd, various members of the Diversity Committee, and two grade 6 students presented an overview of committee work as well as the results from the survey given to students (Grades 5 and 6 only), parents and staff. This initiative is woven throughout the curriculum, daily activities, class projects, field trips, as well as professional development. While this presentation might highlight certain things, it is important to know and understand that these things occur all year long. The survey was developed by the committee, with opportunities provided for students to share individual concerns and perspectives. Gender and race questions were optional. This is an ongoing process with the BRS community fully vested in its work. The work of this committee will focus on continuing to ensure all members of the BRS community are affirmed. In addition, it is anticipated policies on the topics of DEI will be developed and collaboration with future Town activities will continue.

Questions were raised regarding how the survey questions were presented to students, identification of the next steps, balancing forward progress, tracking growth, maintaining inclusiveness as the primary goal, the perception and interpretation of “differences” to avoid conflict and tension, and integration of this work in all areas of the BRS community. It was noted that students were not provided with definitions nor explanations prior to taking the survey.

BRS Update – Ms. Sherman noted the school-wide 2-2-22 celebration of tutus/ties/tennis shoes; the grade 6 Amity transition meetings and upcoming parent informational night; the scavenger hunt created by Grade 3 for Kindergarten students; and the inspirational acts of kindness signs that have been hung throughout the building.

Facilities Committee – Mr. Hughes reviewed the February 15 meeting which noted replacement of the JACE and monitoring of a leak in the Superintendent's Office.

Finance Committee – Dr. Dahya reviewed the February 23 meeting which focused on the 2021/22 budget and the anticipated surplus as well as the proposed 2022/23 budget and potential reductions. Superintendent Budd presented reductions to the 2022/23 budget reducing the overall increase from 9.1 to 8.9% as well as increasing the PreK tuition. The PreK program currently operates on a 4-day model. It is being recommended that this program move to a 5-day model, similar to that of other BOWA and surrounding districts. While the program remains free for students with special needs, the tuition for each of the ten (10) typical peers would increase to \$3,250 for the 5-day model.

MOTION #2 – PreK TUITION INCREASE

Move that we authorize an increase in PreK tuition for the 2022/23 school year to \$3,250 based on a 5-day model.

Ms. Piascyk

Second by Dr. Dahya

UNANIMOUS

Superintendent Budd presented possible reductions to the 2022/23 budget that would reduce the overall increase from 9.1%, to 8.9%. Discussion ensued regarding utilization of the Excess Cost Grant. Presently, this grant is returned to the Town not the Board of Education. In most districts, the revenue generated by this grant is applied to the Board of Education budget to offset special education costs. Several Board members indicated that this revenue should be applied as a credit to the Board of Education to offset the actual budget increase.

MOTION #3 – EXCESS COST GRANT

Move that the Superintendent and Business Office go forth and investigate and provide more information on the processing of the Excess Cost Grant especially with respect to its application to our budget fiscal year 2022/23.

Dr. Dahya

Second by Dr. Madonick

It was clarified that in accordance with statute these monies are reimbursed to the treasurer of the Town and that there is not a direct/actual transfer of funds to the school district. However, a credit could be applied towards the Board of Education budget process. It was also noted that the Open Choice program also generates revenue through reimbursement for transportation. It was also pointed out that the intent of the law, in applying the funding of the Excess Cost Grant, is in the current year with payments issued by the state twice a year. It was also stated that historically the budget has been developed based on only known costs at the time versus unknown. A friendly amendment was offered to eliminate “Excess Cost Grant” and replace it with “all revenue.”

MOTION #3A – EXCESS COST GRANT

Move that the Superintendent and Business Office go forth and investigate and provide more information on the processing of all revenues, especially with respect to its application to our budget fiscal year 2022/23.

Mr. Hughes

Second by Dr. Dahya / Dr. Madonick

UNANIMOUS

It was noted that the Board of Finance will have an initial conversation pertaining to all Town budgets on Thursday, March 3 at 6:00 PM.

Policy Committee – Dr. Madonick reviewed the February 3 meeting which entailed review of two policies associated with moving the municipal elections from May to November and a student policy on Harassment.

MOTION #4 – POLICY ADOPTION 9110 AND 9321

Move that we adopt Policies 9110 (Number of Members, Terms of Office, Election of Members) and 9321 (Time, Place and Notification of Meetings) as revised.

Dr. Madonick

Second by Ms. Williamson

UNANIMOUS

MOTION #5 – POLICY ADOPTION 5145.52

Move that we adopt revised Policy 5145.52 (Harassment) as revised.

Dr. Madonick

Second by Dr. Dahya

UNANIMOUS

It was noted meetings of this committee will occur on March 15 and April 5 at 7:00 PM with review of the corresponding harassment policy for staff at the March meeting.

CABE Liaison – Dr. Madonick reviewed various CABE activities that Board members have attended during the past year. Upcoming events include a March 8 webinar on Maintaining Civility in Meetings, CABE Virtual Day on the Hill on March 10, CABE Affinity Groups, and the April 25 the Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Virtual Training.

Upcoming Meeting Presentations: Technology – The presentation will include utilization of technology infrastructure within the BRS building as well as technology education for students. The presentation should include specifics as to what grades are receiving technology education, what the technology education is, whether the technology being provided is sufficient, the status of providing coding education, future enhancements and growth, and the recycling / disposal of equipment.

Chair Piascyk reminded everyone of the regular Board meeting on March 21, the Finance Committee meeting on March 15 at 4:30, and the Policy Committee at 7:00 PM on March 15.

NEW BUSINESS – None

PUBLIC COMMENT

Tom Handler – It is important to understand that the Excess Cost Grant was designed to defray unexpected special education costs and you cannot use that funding to offset what is going to happen in the next budget year. Also, the relationship between the Board of Education and the Town has been studiously worked on to be very cordial with the goal of creating a budget that accurately reflects as much as possible what actually happens. There are going to be unexpected things that will occur and the Town has been responsive in supporting the Board with special appropriations whenever that has happened. In other Towns, the Board of Education is expected to find the funding within their own budget. The Board was urged to tread carefully given the unusually cordial relationship that currently exists between the Town and the Board of Education.

Josh Gelder – supported the parents receiving a permission slip prior to the students participating in the survey. It is hoped that if there are any further plans to teach these topics in schools, parents have the same opportunity to opt in or out of that. Some of the topics are challenging for students and parents should have a say whether their child should be part of those discussions.

Jeff Luck – expressed frustration with the lack of parent participation and felt that the high level of parent participation in the DEI survey was because they did not want their child hearing this information. We are losing focus. The focus in school education should be on teaching reading, writing, and math. It should be up to the parents if they want to teach their child about LBGTQ. In a three-hour meeting this evening, nothing about education was even discussed. If you want more parents involved, stop having three-hour meetings rambling about how good you are.

James Turkosz – asked for clarification on what explanation was given to students regarding the definition of non-binary in the survey. There are children who do not know what that means and the onus should be on the parents and family for providing that information. There appears to be a lot of emphasis placed on the survey. Legislation also appears to be pushing mental health concerns, which has recently become a common theme. Caution was urged in Woodbridge developing its own set of metrics and mitigation strategies. It was noted for clarification that students who participated in the survey were not provided with a definition of non-binary.

The Board entered Executive Session (10:17 PM).

MOTION #6 – EXECUTIVE SESSION

Move that we enter Executive Session to discuss a matter which would result in the disclosure of records exempt from disclosure based on attorney-client privilege discuss matters concerning security strategy, the deployment of security personnel, and/or devices affecting public security, and invite the Superintendent to join the Board for both topics, and the Interim Director of Business Services and Operations to join the Board for the first topic.

Dr. Madonick
Second by Ms. Del Prete
UNANIMOUS

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Ms. Lynn Piascyk, Chair; Dr. Jay Dahya; Ms. Sarah Del Prete, Secretary; Ms. Brooke Hopkins; Mr. Jeff Hughes; Dr. Maria Madonick, Vice Chair; Dr. Michael Strambler; and Ms. Erin Williamson.

STAFF: Dr. Jonathan Budd, Superintendent and Richard Huot. Mr. Huot left the meeting (10:35 PM).

The Board discussed the disclosure of records exempt from disclosure based on attorney-client privilege discuss matters concerning security strategy, the deployment of security personnel, and/or devices affecting public security.

MOTION #7 – RETURN TO PUBLIC SESSION

Move that we return to Public Session (11:05 PM).

Dr. Dahya
Second by Dr. Madonick
UNANIMOUS

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Ms. Lynn Piascyk, Chair; Dr. Jay Dahya; Ms. Sarah Del Prete, Secretary; Ms. Brooke Hopkins; Mr. Jeff Hughes; Dr. Maria Madonick, Vice Chair; Dr. Michael Strambler; and Ms. Erin Williamson.

STAFF: Dr. Jonathan Budd, Superintendent; Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board.

Chair Piascyk called the Public Session back to order (11:05 PM).

MOTION #8 – SECURITY

Move that we authorize the Superintendent to pursue the short-term recommendation related to security strategy, the deployment of security personnel, and/or devices affecting public security, as discussed in Executive Session.

Dr. Madonick

Second by Ms. Hopkins

UNANIMOUS

MOTION TO ADJOURN: (11:06 PM)

Dr. Madonick

Second by Ms. Hopkins

UNANIMOUS

Recorded by Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board