

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR WOODBRIDGE BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING

Monday, December 16, 2024
Town Hall Main Meeting Room

CALL TO ORDER: Ms. Lynn Piascyk, Chair, called the meeting to order (7:06 PM).

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Lynn Piascyk, Chair; Dr. Jay Dahya (7:56 PM); Sarah Beth Del Prete, Secretary; Dr. Laura Francese; Jeff Hughes; Steven Lawrence, Vice Chair; Dr. Michael Strambler, and Erin Williamson.

STAFF: Vonda Tencza, Superintendent; Analisa Sherman, Principal; Cheryl Tafel, Assistant Principal; Carrie Borcharding, Special Services Director; Donna Coonan, Director of Business Services/ Operations and Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board.

CORRESPONDENCE – Ms. Del Prete acknowledged receipt of an email regarding the school calendar which is available in BoardBook.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Tahera Paravez – urged inclusion of Diwali and Lunar New Year in the 2025/26 calendar to send a positive and powerful message to the community that reflects the changes in demographics in Woodbridge and embraces the core mission of BRS.

Shruti Desai noted that Woodbridge is a diverse community and she hoped the Board would recognize Diwali, Eid Al-Fitr and Lunar New Year as holidays in the 2025/26 calendar. These types of celebrations help to develop inclusiveness in children who are exposed to diverse cultures in school and in the community.

Moheni Ranganathan, a former BRS parent, asked the Board to recognize Diwali, Eid and Lunar New Year in the 2025/26 calendar. It is not a reflection of which holiday is more important but rather holidays that represent the current population of the school. Not recognizing these holidays leads to some degree of cultural invisibility and it is possible to erase that. The Board was urged to treat this situation as an opportunity and not a challenge and lead the way to make this change for students.

Atul Kulkarni noted that Diwali is an important festival celebration and this is an opportunity to carve out a school holiday to recognize this festival celebration as well as support within the community for inclusion of this holiday.

Linda Chen an Amity High School Junior, advocated for inclusion of Lunar New Year as a recognized holiday in the school calendar. She noted challenges of cultural disconnect within a community and experiences of having to choose between academics and family celebrations. School is a place where we grow academically and individually as a person as well as socially.

Richa Sharma voiced support for inclusion of Diwali as a recognized holiday in the school calendar. Through the sharing of traditions, we gain commonality and it would be great to have a day dedicated to this celebration.

CONSENT AGENDA

MOTION #1 – CONSENT AGENDA

Move that we approve the consent agenda as presented.

Mr. Lawrence
Second by Mr. Hughes
UNANIMOUS

Superintendent Report – Superintendent Tencza reminded everyone that when BRS is in session it is a matter of safety that community members should not be walking on the grounds and especially during construction. Report cards are now electronic and available to parents as of December 9. A space utilization matrix was recently shared with the Town BRS Infrastructure Upgrade Building Committee by Antinozzi and Associates. As part of their dissemination process, the same information will be shared with various stakeholder group. Community workshops have been scheduled for January 15 and February 3 at 6:30 PM.

Special Education Update – Ms. Borcharding provided an overview of the services offered and the number of students receiving services. The level of need is greater and vastly different from the spring of the 2023/24 school year. At the start of the 2024/25 school year, students are requiring more mental health supports and related services than in prior years. It is anticipated these service needs will continue over the next several year.

2025/26 Calendar Draft – Superintendent Tencza presented the 2025/26 calendar which includes a full week for February vacation. It was noted that both Amity and Bethany deferred action on the calendar at their meetings last week. Orange is meeting tonight it is anticipated they will not be including a full week of vacation in February and will opt for the 2-day long weekend. Holidays and professional development days identified in the document are similar to past calendars with no additional holidays included as the majority of designated holidays are contractual obligations. It was noted that should the BOWA calendars not align, daily transportation costs in the range of \$3,800 could be incurred. The results of the parent survey were provided where a majority requested a 2-day long weekend in February, not adding additional holidays and inclusion of Veterans Day and Diwali as holidays.

MOTION #2 – 2025/26 CALENDAR

Move that the Woodbridge School District calendar returns to a 2 day holiday for the February winter break and recognizes one day holidays for Diwali, Eid Al-Fitr and Lunar New Year.

Mr. Lawrence

Second by Dr. Francese

It was noted that the only impact of additional days to the calendar would be Diwali (*October 20, 2025*) as Eid (*March 20, 2026*) and Lunar New Year (*February 17, 2026*) were already designated as days off. Discussion ensued for whether to defer action until Amity renders their decision as that has a direct effect on families with children in both systems. It was noted that there have been long-standing traditions of recognizing Christian and Jewish holidays, however, the demographics have the Town have changed since then and the current calendar favors holidays that are not reflective of the present-day Woodbridge population. The Board has an opportunity to take the lead and demonstrate that this change is important and to send a signal to the larger community that this has value to our community.

Dr. Dahya arrived (7:56 PM).

Also acknowledged was the recent passing of new laws in New York recognizing Diwali, Eid and Lunar New Year. It was also expressed that in-school teaching enhances the student learning experience rather than it just being another day off. The start of the school year is crucial and already has several days off. Perhaps we should wait to add additional holidays until there is more momentum within the community as it remains unknown what other holidays may come up. While there may be minimal impact in adding three holidays in the 2025/26 calendar, there is no guarantee for future years and it is important we ensure our approach is balanced.

MOTION #2A – 2025/26 CALENDAR AMENDMENT

Move that for the 2025/26 school year the Woodbridge School District calendar returns to a 2 day holiday for the February winter break and recognizes one day holidays for Diwali, Eid Al-Fitr and Lunar New Year with the school year ending on June 11.

Mr. Lawrence

Second by Dr. Francese

IN FAVOR: Dr. Dahya, Dr. Francese, Mr. Lawrence, Dr. Strambler and Ms. Williamson

AGAINST: Ms. Del Prete, Mr. Hughes and Ms. Piascyk,

MOTION PASSES 5-3-0

BRS Update – Ms. Sherman noted instrumental music tryouts at Amity Middle School, Career Ambassador Week, the Whale mobile in-house field trip and faculty room snacks sponsored by the PTO, the parent communication survey, Grade 5 Island projects, Grade 6 cell analogy projects, the Kindergarten reading project around the theme of community and her hosting of two student principles for the day.

BRS Infrastructure Upgrade Building Committee Update – Mr. Hughes noted this committee meets via Webex at 3:30 PM on the first and third Thursdays of the month.

Curriculum Committee – Dr. Strambler reviewed the December 5 meeting which focused on the revised DARE program with updates on the STEAM and Math programs.

Policy Committee – Ms. Williamson noted that the policies approved this evening under the Consent Agenda for 30-day were reviewed at the December 2 meeting with no substantive changes and the language changes made were updated to align with the reality of today.

CABE Liaison Report – It was noted several Board members attended the Leadership Conference as well as several webinars on an assortment of topics and the scheduling of the legislative breakfast is in process.

Upcoming Meeting Presentations – The regular January meeting will be held on January 22 in the Main Meeting Room at Town Hall and will include presentations on Literacy and an update on Math. Committee meetings will be held as follows: Facilities on January 2 at 7:30 AM and Finance on January 14 at 4:30 PM. Approval of the 2025/26 budget will occur on January 6 or January 7.

Finance Committee – Mr. Lawrence noted that the approximate projected deficit is currently \$7,800. It is anticipated that this could increase as there will be an out-of-district placement that was not known previously. Questions were raised regarding the use of CSDE grant funding to offset this cost.

2025/26 Superintendent Budget Proposal – It was noted that the overall increase would be 4.52% without the four (4) additional sped paras and the additional grade level teacher added in August. Questions were raised regarding utilities and rates, medical insurance coverage, furniture replacement cycles and the public benefit charges charged by UI and Eversource. It was suggested that it be clarified in the presentation that the four additional sped paras were added because we are legally mandated to provide that service for students, specifying that the additional teacher was because of increased enrollment over the summer, identification of what cost savings have been built into the budget and inflation percent changes be denoted. Board members were asked to forward any questions regarding the budget to Superintendent Tencza prior to the January 6 meeting.

PUBLIC COMMENT – None

MOTION TO ADJOURN: (9:17 PM)

Mr. Lawrence
Second by Dr. Strambler
UNANIMOUS

Recorded by Marsha DeGennaro, Clerk of the Board.