

Suffield, Connecticut

Approved by Bd. of Ed.

Board of Education Regular Meeting  
Suffield Middle School Auditorium  
and via Zoom  
September 7, 2021

Call to Order

Board Chair Mercik Davis called the meeting to order at 6:32p.m. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: Board members Jamie Drzyzga, Debra Dudack, Melissa Finnigan, Brian Fry, Scott Lingenfelter, Susan Mercik Davis, and Maureen Sattan; and Superintendent Timothy Van Tassel, Assistant Superintendent Michelle Zawawi, and Business Manager Bill Hoff; and Suffield High School Student Representatives Connor Shaw and Sophia Mormino

Absent: Board members Glenn Gazdik and Michael Sepko

Recognition

The Board recognized staff members who retired at the end of the 2020-2021 school year: Ron Kilby, Mary Hryniewicz, Debra Marinone, Karen Pakula, Anet DiLorenzo, Debi Stone, Penny D'Aleo, Linda Breen, Terry Nejfelt, Jeffrey Toft and Tom Kulas. The Board thanked them for their many years of service to the Suffield Public Schools.

SHS Student Representatives

Sophia Mormino, SHS junior, introduced herself to Board members and thanked Superintendent Van Tassel and Board Chair Mercik Davis for the opportunity to serve as the student representative. Connor Shaw reported a smooth start to the school year at all four schools. At the middle school, intramurals begin this week and students will be taking STAR ELA and math assessments next week. At the high school, the new athletic director has started, many clubs have begun, students are preparing for Suffield on the Green and community service projects. He thanked the Board for approving funding to renovate to the high school courtyard, and students are excited to transform the space. He also thanked the faculty and staff for preparing the schools and enthusiastically welcoming back students.

Public Comment

None

Board Member Comment

Board member Fry welcomed Sophia to the Board and congratulated all the retirees. In recognition of Hispanic Heritage month, he recognized community members of Hispanic heritage.

Reports to the Board

- Superintendent's Report
  - The Superintendent thanked the retirees recognized tonight and wished them well.
  - SHS teacher, Justin Kaput, is one of 30 environmental educators to be selected by The North American Association for Environmental Education as part of its Change Fellowship cohort. The organization's focus is on environmental and social issues to build an equitable and

- sustainable future. Mr. Kaput will have access to professional development as well as mini grants to support projects.
- The Superintendent thanked Donna and Brian from Suffield by the River, who donated several backpacks filled with school supplies for Suffield students. These backpacks were distributed to the schools today.
- Suffield on the Green is this weekend and the Superintendent will be present on Saturday, along with Tecton representatives to discuss long-range facilities plan. Tecton is seeking Board members' feedback on the long-range facilities study.
- The CABA/CAPSS convention is on November 12, 2021. Any Board member who wishes to attend can contact his office to be registered for the event.
- Board Chair's Report
  - Board Chair Mercik Davis thanked the administration and teachers for their work over the summer preparing for the new school year.
  - She attended Convocation and she thanked Ms. Osleger and her staff for providing the technology needed to live stream the ceremony to all the schools.
  - She stated the start of the school year was a big success.
  - She said the CABA/CAPSS convention is an opportunity to meet other Board members and receive valuable information.
  - The yearly subcommittee meeting schedules were sent to Board members today.
- Business Manager's Report
  - Mr. Hoff said food service is off to a good start and Tim Malley, the new food service director, has transitioned nicely.
  - Transportation, while challenging, is also off to a good start, and many more students are riding the bus than last year. We are fully staffed for bus drivers, but we do not have substitutes at this point. A few people are in training but will not onboard until October. There is a driver shortage across the state.
- Board of Selectmen's Report
  - No report
- Board of Finance Liaison's Report
  - No report

#### Approval of Minutes

**MOTION #22-10:** Fry moved, Finnigan seconded to approve the Board of Education meeting minutes of August 23, 2021. All members voted in favor. The motion passed **7-0-0**.

#### Consent Agenda

None

#### Discussion/Action Items

##### ● COVID-19 Update

The Superintendent said the Governor's Executive Order 13D requires all school employees to be fully vaccinated, start the vaccination process, or have a religious or medical exemption documented by September 27, 2021. Those who have an exemption or will not be vaccinated by this date are required to submit to weekly COVID-19 testing. He noted that this mandate has been received well by some staff but is also a concern for others. This mandate has led to very time consuming human resource processes.

The Superintendent stated he has received concerns with this year's communication plan for positive cases. The district-wide communications were discontinued this year due to negative

feedback of these last school year. The plan this year is to communicate only with those who are affected by a positive case. Close contacts will be notified as well as a notification letter to the parents whose children are in the classroom, on the school bus, or other cohorts. As always, if health data or health official guidance changes, the district will revisit our protocols and communication plans. The Superintendent said another concern received is for more COVID-19 data and information to be posted on our website.

Lastly, the Superintendent stated the labor shortage is being felt everywhere and has resulted in the district still trying to fill some teaching and non-certified positions. As Mr. Hoff stated, the shortage of bus drivers has been a challenge to the start of the year. The district is developing a communication to families to inform them about job opportunities in the district in hopes to fill some of these vacancies.

In response to a Board member's question relative to adding general COVID-19 positive case numbers to the website, the Superintendent said that information could be added. In response to a Board member's question relative to there being any indication of bus drivers coming back or a training program provided by M&J to increase the number of drivers, Mr. Hoff said M&J is currently training new drivers but they will not be onboard until October. The challenge with athletics is the time buses are needed to transport our athletes is the same time that buses are transporting middle and high school students home from school. The district is looking at sharing buses with other districts and other creative ways to mitigate the shortage of drivers. Mr. Zenczak added that it is not only shortages in bus drivers that are impacting athletics but there are also shortages in game officials. The Board discussed sending a communication to families to inform them of these shortages and the impacts to the schools' operations. The Board and Superintendent discussed quarantining protocols for students and when students are allowed to remotely access the classroom and when they are considered absent. The Superintendent clarified that remote access may be available in limited, special circumstances beyond in-school exposures. In response to Board member's questions, the Superintendent clarified the quarantining rules and said the district could readdress the bussing contract if the district incurs expenses due to bus driver shortages. In response to a Board member's question relative to the correlation between the vaccine mandate on staff and staffing shortages, the Superintendent stated it is too early to know, but it is possible there is a correlation.

- Discussion and Possible Action as to whether the Suffield Board of Education should engage legal counsel to initiate legal action challenging state directives that infringe on the local Boards of Educations' authority to use their judgement to implement the educational interests of our schools and community

Board member Lingenfelter said he is concerned over the state vaccine, mask wearing, and other mandates eighteen months into the onset of this emergency. It is no longer an emergency but an ongoing issue. State statutes state that local Boards of Education are charged with providing the educational needs of their communities, providing an appropriate learning environment for students, and providing a safe school setting. It is not the state's responsibility; however, now the state is requiring staff to be vaccinated and everyone to wear masks. We are being forced to adhere to these mandates that should be decided by the Board of Education. He believes this Board and other Boards of Education should challenge these state mandates. Board Chair noted the mandate is set to expire on September 30. She asked for a motion.

**MOTION #22-11:** Lingenfelter moved, Sattan seconded to engage legal counsel to initiate legal action challenging state directives that infringe on the local Boards of Educations' authority to use their judgement to implement the educational interests of our schools and community. In response

to a Board member's question asking for clarification on what the challenge would entail, Board member Lingenfelter said an injunction should be filed against these mandates to give the Board the authority to make these decisions. Board members discussed the impact of these unfunded mandates on the district but also how to best protect the health and safety of the school community. The Board also discussed the option of sending a letter to the Department of Education and state legislators to take up this issue. It was discussed that letters could be written but challenging the Governor's orders would be more effective. Board Chair Mercik Davis called for a vote. Board member Lingenfelter voted in favor. Board members Sattan, Dudack, Finnigan, Drzyzga, Fry and Mercik Davis voted against. The motion failed **1-6-0**.

**MOTION #22-12:** Sattan moved, Lingenfelter seconded to authorize the Board Chair to draft a letter in support of local control of district decisions. Board members Sattan, Lingenfelter and Finnigan voted in favor. Dudack, Drzyzga, Fry and Mercik Davis voted against. The motion failed **3-4-0**.

#### Subcommittee Reports

None

#### Board Liaison Reports

- CREC – Nothing to report
- Agriscience – The Agriscience department is holding a welcome back event this Thursday evening. To increase communication, the department has developed a guide for new families. Agriscience students will be at the Big E next Wednesday building a landscape project. Students are also building a float for the Town's 350<sup>th</sup> celebration parade.
- CABA – The CABA/CAPSS convention is Friday, November 12<sup>th</sup>.

#### Future Business

None

#### Public Comment

None

#### Board Member Comment

Board member Sattan said she would like for the district's general COVID-19 data to be posted on the website weekly. She supports local control of Boards of Education and hopes the Board will reconsider the motion put forth this evening.

Board member Dudack expressed her appreciation for a great start to the school year and congratulated the retirees recognized this evening.

Board member Finnigan thanked Assistant Superintendent Zawawi and Curriculum Coach, Stephannie Holland for their work in promoting student involvement in the Town's 350<sup>th</sup> celebration parade. She extended an invitation to all Board members to walk in the parade on October 9<sup>th</sup>.

Board member Lingenfelter reiterated his concerns over the state mandates and forced vaccinations on our staff, and that this could lead to mandated vaccines for our students. The Board is sitting back and letting the state tell us how to run our schools. He is concerned that these mandates are also contributing to the staffing shortages.

Board member Drzyzga said she wants nothing more than to get rid of masks but she hopes we continue to follow recommendations of the CDC and the local health department.

Board member Fry thanked everyone for a successful start to the school year. He said in his opinion vaccines are the best way to get through the pandemic, and he encouraged all to get vaccinated.

Board Chair Mercik Davis supports adding COVID-19 data to the website and leaves the frequency of posting to the administration. She is in support of local control while still seeking guidance from the experts. Her issue with the motion relative to challenging the state mandates was that we are in a global pandemic and the Board is responsible for students' safety. If we ease the mitigation strategies in place, we may forfeit the opportunity for in-person learning and that is why she voted against the motion.

#### Adjournment

Dudack moved, Sattan seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:05 p.m. All members voted in favor.

Click here to view the meeting:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VaFyFOudbnzKY5Zo78rXtqH\\_SmexaLld/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VaFyFOudbnzKY5Zo78rXtqH_SmexaLld/view?usp=sharing)

*Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of October 4, 2021.*

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Sattan  
Secretary