

School Board Meeting Summary

I attended our school board meeting on September 11, 2018 at the Spring Lake Park Schools District Services Center. The meeting was called to order at 7:00pm and wrapped at 8:41pm, lasting one hour and forty-one minutes total.

The meeting was attended by all school board members, of which there are 7. In terms of district level employees, the meeting was also attended by Superintendent of Schools Jeff Ronneberg, Director of Learning and Innovation Hope Rahn, and Director of Business Services Amy Schultz. In the audience was one teacher (who I believe may have been a representative of the teachers union), a representative from our local newspaper, and myself.

There were several topics on this meetings agenda, many of which focused on “start of school year” logistics. The meeting began with a call to order, and a few items that needed board approval including a correction to a clerical error from a previous meeting’s minutes and, consent to minutes from previous meetings, and consent to bills paid in May and June, all of which were approved unanimously. Next, the board was presented with personnel items including new hires, resignations/terminations, and leaves of absence. These were all passed unanimously as well.

The meeting then moved into more in depth agenda items, which first kicked off with an overview by Dr. Jeff Ronneberg and Dr. Hope Rahn of the 18-19 District Operational Plan. They reviewed each of the projects on the plan briefly, but went into more depth on the “School Based Mental Health” project. There were a total of 18 projects briefly overviewed that fell into 3 different categories - Effective Operations, Communications and Connections, and Engaged, Enthusiastic Learners. The next two agenda items were overviewed by Amy Schultz, who gave a

monthly financial report and then went into an in depth update on facilities work that has been done across the district alongside Superintendent Ronneberg. She updated on early childhood construction, STEM makerspaces, the building of a new elementary school, and renovations at the high school. She also briefly reviewed that each facilities project was a collaborative planning effort between district staff, teachers from each site, and architects. Lastly, Dr. Ronneberg gave a quick report on accomplishments including praising Human Resources Director Ryan Stromberg on great accomplishments from the summer, praising the “Summer of STEM” summer school program that ran this year, as well as athletics and activities opportunities that were offered.

Lastly, the board moved into “Action Items” and board specific reports. They approved both regular education and special education transportation contracts and accepted a motion to amend a board policy on the accepting of gifts. They also approved the superintendent contract. The board specific reports included updates on MSBA learning opportunities and a review of an AMSD meeting.

Shortly before the end of the meeting, a motion was made to hold a closed session to discuss employee negotiations. This was interesting, and I was not aware that such sessions were held. The closed session took place from 8:01-8:38pm, at which case the board meeting become public again, just in time for adjournment at 8:41pm.

As I reflect on the social, cultural, political, and community dimensions of education, I do believe it is important to hold public meetings to discuss aspects of an educational organization. For a publicly funded entity, the public has a right to understand the decision making process, hear about a district’s priorities, and hold their elected school board accountable for their

decisions. That said, the poor attendance of the meeting itself and the formality with which the agenda items presented lead me to believe that school board meetings are likely one of the least effective “hows” for providing this type of information to community members.

While I would not advocate for closing or eliminating school board meetings, I do believe that board meetings themselves are exclusive for a number of reasons: They fall on evenings at 7:00pm which is likely not a conducive time for many people to attend, they use language and imagery that are likely most comprehensible to community members who are already familiar with school systems, and there are many superfluous agenda and action items that would likely hold little meaning or value to the majority of community members or families (e.g. the board confirming motions to accept minutes or approve personnel decisions), and the meetings are conducted entirely in English. This likely accounts for the very limited attendance at the meeting itself beyond district level employees who were presenting at the meeting and the handful of staff and community members who have an active stake in dissecting the proceedings (e.g. media and union reps).

Given this reality, rather than trying to adjust the institutional workings of the school board which are likely mired in some levels of bureaucracy, I would rather advocate for offering alternative opportunities to the community. While board meetings might always be open to those who wish to attend, a school system should additionally provide structured opportunities for information sharing and information gathering that are specifically tailored to the customers of the district. For example, holding open meetings where only very pertinent information is shared in a highly comprehensible way for the general public to listen in or sending digital and print communications in a variety of mediums and languages would help to facilitate information

sharing. At those same meetings, holding open forums for questioning and giving input is also valuable. Additionally, having ad hoc and ongoing opportunities for input should be readily available for any community member or family (e.g. opportunities to hold meetings with district employees, drop boxes to ask questions/offer suggestions, cultivation opportunities where the district sends out surveys or holds focus groups, etc.). Again, while I do not believe that board meetings are the correct avenue for these type of school/community partnerships, I do believe it is the obligation of the school to create the avenues that best meet the preferred methods of their customers.