TOWN OF SIMSBURY
BOARD OF EDUCATION

Record of Proceedings | Regular Meeting | February 26, 2019

Ms. Tara Willerup called the regular meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in the auditorium at Simsbury High School.

Roll Call:
Members present: Mmes. Tara Willerup, Susan Salina and Jen Batchelar. Messrs. Todd Burrick, Tom Frank, Jeff Tindall and Brian Watson.

Members absent: Mrs. Lydia Tedone

Also present: Superintendent Matt Curtis, Assistant Superintendent Sue Homrok-Lemke, Business Manager Burke LaClair, Director of Personnel Neil Sullivan, BOE Student Representative Katie Galt and Recording Secretary Katie Wilde.

Public Audience

PUBLIC AUDIENCE
Mr. Curtis opened the meeting with remarks relative to the feedback he has received as a result of the situation that occurred with two Simsbury High School students. He briefly reviewed areas where the concerns of the student body, staff and community have been, and will continue to be, addressed. Mr. Curtis noted that public audience this evening will provide an opportunity for the public to provide input to the administration and BOE as we seek to move forward productively.

Patti Gonzalez, 951 Hopmeadow Street, stated that the incident does not reflect on the town. She stated that the educational system is not flawed and parents need to get involved. Ms. Gonzalez noted that discrimination is a two way street and multi-faceted.

Jennifer Wilson, 23 Wooster Road, stated that she has 2 children of color and there are acts of racism and micro-aggression everywhere in town. She pointed out the misconceptions about her son that have occurred in school. Ms. Wilson stated that equity/race teaching is failing and changes need to be made to the curriculum.

Cacina Reynolds, 7 Hallview Drive, stated that she is flabbergasted that people feel this is an uncomfortable conversation when it should be a comfortable conversation.

Vicky Carrasco, 3 Old Barge Road, stated that she has two high school students and this incident provides a teachable moment. She suggested that students have sensitivity training and history lessons. Ms. Carasco suggested that the middle school revisit their core values and student handbook. She suggested that there be a reassessment of school staff from a diversity perspective. She noted that even if you haven't experienced something it does not mean it doesn't exist.

Lloyd Huie, 17 Butternut Lane, stated that he was disappointed not to see more white families at the meeting. He noted that racism is a system built on other systems. Every student should have the same opportunities regardless of race/sex. Mr. Huie stated that how we treat kids will impact them in the future and impact other students as well. He also noted the lack of teachers of color.

Maxien Robinson-Lewin, Greater Hartford NAACP President, P.O. Box 1012, Hartford, stated that she wrote to the superintendent regarding the issue with 2 students. She said Simsbury needs to take a look at policy and how we address these issues of zero tolerance. Ms. Robinson-Lewis said she has heard from Choice students about how they are treated in schools. She stated that we need to require students to participate in the forums and the NAACP would like to be a part of the conversation.

Tim Boswell, 11 Great Pond Road, noted that the incident that brought everyone here this evening was an unfortunate internet posting that went viral. He stated that it was hurtful and inappropriate, but he does not believe there was racial hostility in these children's hearts. It was a poor decision by a teenage brain. Mr. Boswell stated that there is work to be done He expressed concern that after the incident the NAACP distributed a press release stating that racism is running rampant. Mr. Boswell noted that school leaders met with the NAACP to discuss our programs around diversity and inclusion. It is disappointing that the NAACP didn't do a subsequent press release after that meeting. He suggested that there should be outrage over what has happened to these two families and children. Mr. Boswell urged community members to get involved with the issues in this town and to support our school leaders.

Justina Gibbert, Wildcrest Drive, East Hartford, stated that these girls need to be educated not punished. She noted that other kids need to be educated as well and this is not just a Simsbury community issue. She urged people to look into the Don't be Afraid organization.

Akia Eskano, President of the CT State Conference, Youth College Division of the Greater Hartford NAACP, said an apology is not enough. She demanded that black history month be improved in the school district and that more diverse teachers be hired.

Isabel Ceballos stated that racism has been part of the school district for years. She noted that in 2nd grade the schools hold a pow wow. She stated that a minimal reaction to blackface sends the wrong message to students.

Manu Looney, 10 Cedar Glen, stated that she is a member of the class of 1994 and these problems did not exist. She stated that the initiatives we put in place need to be consistent and routine, and part of the school culture. She suggested that implicit bias with teachers needs to be addressed as well.

Aanya Mehta, 42 Banks Road, stated she is SHS student and spoke about the atmosphere at SHS. She stated that students seem to have a sense of superiority and she hears the "N" work spoken every day. Teachers will close their door when they hear it instead of taking the opportunity to educate the student. She suggested that world history teachers teach respect for culture, race and person.

George Harris, 20 Fairview Street, First Church Minister, stated that the district does great dealing with students with special needs but does not do well dealing with racism. He stated that racism is observed and experienced with a lack of follow-up by the SHS administration. Mr. Harris noted that special education is integrated into the life of the school where these students are accepted and thrive. He suggested that the same commitment should be made to students of color.

Kiyana Riddick, 2 Hitchcock Circle, expressed concern that nothing has been done about this incident and diversity training has not been done. She stated her daughter will not go to SHS and next year her son doesn't want to go to HJMS. Ms. Riddick suggested that black history should be taught all year and should not just be about MLK and Rosa Parks. She stated that even some teachers pick on students. Parents need to speak up and protect our kids.

Patrick Lyle, 740 Old Meadow Plain Road, stated that he is well aware of incidents over time. He questioned why in a school district with so many resources students not have education on these matters. He stated that when an atmosphere exists that kids can get away with something they will do it. Mr. Lyle stated that this incident consumed everything for his daughter. He stated that the school district needs to follow through on what they say they will do and show tangible results.

Tina Williams, 29 Banks Road, stated that when she moved here she thought good schools meant good people. She has 3 boys and she shared a story about her oldest son who graduated from SHS. Shortly after he began school here he was sent an image of a public lynching. It deeply affected her son. Ms. Williams said there is indifference toward racism and the kids need to receive a culturally centered education.

Ainsley Thompson, 40 Musket Trail, stated that students and teachers pride themselves in being colorblind and that is not a good thing. She stated that this is not an isolated incident and she hears racist things being said every day. She suggested that education needs to start in the younger grades.

Alicia Riddick, 2 Hitchcock Circle, stated that she is a student at SHS and after Trump became President it was the first time she felt a difference. She stated that she would see Ms. Thompson because she was a black social worker. Ms. Riddick stated that when a group of students wore shirts for police brutality they were told to change, but when a student wears a MAGA shirt or hat they are not told to change their clothes. She stated that the only black person they are taught about is MLK. She said that walking through town she has had racial slurs yelled at her from a car.

Juliette Masakura, 37 West Mountain Road, stated that she has taught her daughters about black history and the only education they get at school is about MLK and Harriet Tubman. She stated there is no talk of the accomplishments of black individuals or matters of racism. Ms. Masakura stated that the day after Mr. O'Brien's statement students wore MAGA hats to school and some students cried after reading the statement. She stated that empathy and understanding needs to be addressed for all minority groups.

Recina Reynolds, East Hartford, said she knows Caucasian women who are too scared to speak up. She stated that parents are responsible for educating their children. Students need to speak up when they are hurting. She stated that it should be mandatory for students to attend the forums around racism.

Olivia Romanowsky, 5 Clifdon Drive, said that she is a student and this is not an isolated incident. Racism happens in classrooms, hallways and the lunch room. Students were told it would be addressed at HJMS and it was not. She suggested that there should be a requirement for 2 World Civ classes, one of which teaches

about slavery and other cultures. Ms. Masowski stated that there is an issue with white privilege at the high school. She noted that during Black History Month announcements are made but students talk during announcements. She also pointed out the lack of diversity among the staff.

Terri Wolfisch-Cole, 20 Banbury Drive, noted that there was a previous incident at SHS with a swastika that was discussed at great length. She said that some parents said "not my kid" but it can't always be someone else's kid. She said don't wait for minorities, LBGT or non-Christian incidents to educate yourself.

Olivia Nunez, 3 Old Barge Road, stated that she is a student who never realized she was different until someone told her she was. She stated that at SHS there is a lack of sensitivity, perception and the acceptance/celebration of other cultures. She stated that she has to point out to other kids when they are saying inappropriate things. Ms. Nunez said she met with Mr. O'Brien and gave suggestions. She noted that white privilege is about how the world perceives you.

Scot Esdaile, State President of the NAACP, stated that they refuse to listen to lies, be naive or be ignorant. He gave examples of racist acts at the Coast Guard, University of Hartford and within the Bridgeport police department. He stated that hate crimes run rampant in Connecticut. Mr. Esdaile stated that the superintendent was wrong letting the principal give a one day suspension. He pointed out that black people have gone through racism for 400 years.

Curtis Looney, 10 Cedar Glen Road, stated that when he was the only black kid growing up in town he never experienced racism. He stated that he hopes we can send a strong message and do the right thing going forward. He said the response by the school didn't make him feel good. Mr. Looney stated that it's all about coming together and working things out.

Gillian Forsberg stated that this issue is brushed under the rug and the only thing being done is open discussion groups. She shared a story about when a teacher assumed a black student was from Hartford. She stated she is embarrassed to be a part of this school at this time. Ms. Forsberg said she hopes this incident brings a brighter future to the school.

Sean Robatham, Bloomfield and the parent of a SHS senior, said the answer needs to come from the kids. He noted that everything said tonight is going on at the school. He said students, staff, community members, as well as parents of students of color and white students need to be at the table for this discussion. He stated let's take the lid off and make SHS a beacon in the U.S. to handle race relations. Mr. Robatham said make sure teachers are getting the training with the community at the table, and outcomes must be reported.

Gregory Callahan stated that he is a student and hatred is prevalent at SHS. He said this hatred occurs in the hallway within earshot of teachers and peers and he is not surprised something like this could occur. He stated that he hopes this incident will show that SHS struggles with inclusion and racism.

Debra St. Germaine, Hartford, stated that she is a former teacher in Hartford and the best guide to change is your students. She suggested an Advisory Council may need to be formed. She stated that you need to remind children that they are

humans and need to learn about humanity to function in society when they become adults.

Tim Gibson, Hartford, stated that he is a high school student in Hartford. He said that he learned black history from his mother and she learned from hers. He noted that typically what you learn at school from teachers you are tested on, such as math. But students are never tested on black history. He suggested that this incident provides an opportunity for adults and students to learn.

Ronald Holmes, President of the Greater Hartford Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance and Pastor at Gethsemane Missionary Baptist Church in Bloomfield, stated that he is appalled by this incident. He noted that no one on the BOE looks like him. He suggested that teachers are speaking irrationally about race. He stated the district needs to become proactive, not reactive. Sensitivity training must be mandatory for students and staff. The district needs diverse teachers. White privilege should not be allowed to take place, there should be zero tolerance.

Matthew Antonetti, 3 Smokey Ridge Road, stated that tonight should not be an uncomfortable conversation it should be an enlightening conversation. He said K-12 staff should receive sensitivity training. The board should send a message that we won't tolerate this in the community. Mr. Antonetti suggested that coaches should also receive sensitivity training as they can impact a student's self-esteem. He stated that there are gaps in the curriculum and it needs to cover a broader range of subjects.

Reverend Daylan Greer, Bethel David Church, Bloomfield, Greater Hartford Alliance, stated that education is a right not a privilege and a quality education must be given to all students. He noted that Simsbury's population is 93% white and of the 1,423 students at SHS, 165 come from Hartford. He asked if we are only looking from the vantage point of 93%. Reverend Greer urged diversity training and assemblies for all cultures. He also noted the lack of diversity in the administration and SHS staff.

Debra Bell, Hartford, stated in 1969 she was bused from Hartford to Simsbury and attended school in Simsbury 1st grade through 12th grade. She noted that this was during the civil rights movement and she was never disrespected in Simsbury. She pointed out that there was a bus aide, for students from Hartford, who also helped at the school. There was also a resource person for the Hartford students. Ms. Bell asked the board to please fix this and implement resources to help those enduring these problems.

Nkosi Lee, 235 Branford Street, Hartford, stated that he has 4 sons in the school system and before the first one attended he had to speak with him about attending school in Simsbury as a person of color has different expectations. He stated that we need to stop saying "that is just the way it is" and end the injustice. Mr. Lee stated that the incident caused trauma and school is a place where students should feel safe. These incidents manifest through life and your help is desperately needed.

Jeremy Wallman, 30 Meadowlark Road, stated that he had no idea the situation was as bad as he is hearing. We have gone backwards over the past 50 years. We need the resources to address this situation and we need to educate the community.

Devin Hoffman, 14 Fox Den, stated that she is a student and what is most concerning are those students who felt, after the incident, that they are white so why should they care. She stated that there is a lack of empathy throughout SHS. She suggested that classes operate like colleges where there is a large seminar and then smaller conversation groups, incorporating black history into the curriculum. Ms. Hoffman pointed out that MLK is used as a figure of peach and love, and his radical side is ignored.

Fletcher, Hartford, stated that she has 4 children and she needs to check in with her son every day. Two of her daughters are in college. She pointed out that the only difference between her youth and now is social media. She stated that in New Haven there is an anti-bias/anti-racist curriculum that teacher are required to agree to. She also noted the importance of parent education for their children and to empower them.

Aminah Carrington, 370 West Mountain Road, stated that she moved here from California this year. She stated her surprise at how often the N word is used by white and black students at SHS. She stated that black boys will give their white friends an N word card which means they are allowed to use the N word.

Kevin Weikel, 7 Musket Trail, stated that he is a Youth Minister and he described an incident of a lynching picture that was sent to a student who contacted him to be picked up at SHS. He stated that students of color need to know that teachers and administrators have their backs. There needs to be more factual discussion in class.

Brian Rothchild, Windsor, stated that he teaches in Hartford and he questioned why the police are at this meeting. He stated that if this is not resolved people of color are going to get aggressive.

Heather O'Connor, 13 Carver Circle, stated that she has 2 daughters and is a teacher. She stated that we need to educate administrators, teachers, parents and children. We need to change the culture in the school system, the town and the world. There needs to be shared humanity in the steps moving forward.

Zach Vargas, SHS student, said he moved from the more diverse West Hartford to Simsbury. He said as a white person he has never been targeted. He suggested that it was a bad idea for teachers to discuss the incident the next day as it gets toxic and people are afraid to speak. He said open forums are the best thing. Mr. Vargas said assemblies are not the answer, as students will do the opposite of what is being taught. There needs to be an open curriculum and the way to get this done the fastest is to listen to students.

Kwan Johnson, 12 Hitchcock Circle, stated that she is the parent of 3 children. She stated that Sue Lemke and Scott Baker have been important figures in her children's lives. They took care of things and made her children feel comfortable. She stated that we have to make a change; children are our future and should not be disrespected. Discussion needs to occur at school and at home. We need to change behavior and this will trickle down from the BOE.

Tiffany, Hartford, stated that in 2012 her partner attended an away game in Newington and was the target of racial slurs. She expressed her disappointment that

this has not changed and suggested that there is a root problem that is not being handled properly. She stated that maybe more community outreach is needed.

Recess

Ms. Willerup thanked everyone for contributing to this important conversation.

Communications

The board recessed at 9:24 p.m. and reconvened at 9:36 p.m.

BOARD AND ADMINISTRATIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Ms. Lee reported on activities at the elementary schools and events at the secondary schools that have occurred over the past 2 months. She noted the Friends for Music fundraiser will be held on March 8th.

Board members thanked those who spoke during public audience and noted that it gives them a lot to think about and act upon. Mr. Curtis commented on the quality and quantity of the information provided this evening. He stated that next steps are about the actions and planning moving forward.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Approval of Minutes of January 22, 2019 Meeting

A. Approval of Minutes of January 22, 2019 Meeting

Mr. Frank: MOVE to approve the minutes of the January 22, 2019 meeting.

Ms. Batchelar:Seconded. So moved.

Approval of Minutes of February 5, 2019 Budget Workshop

B. Approval of Minutes of February 6, 2019 Budget Workshop

Mr. Burrick: MOVE to approve the minutes of the February 6, 2019 budget workshop.

Ms. Batchelar:Seconded. So moved.

Approval of Minutes of February 14, 2019 Special Meeting

C. Approval of Minutes of February 14, 2019 Special Meeting

Mr. Burrick: MOVE to approve the minutes of the February 14, 2019 special meeting.

Mr. Tindall: Seconded. So moved.

Personnel

D. Personnel

Mr. Burrick: MOVE that the Board of Education approve the request for non-salaried, guaranteed leave of absence for Sarah Grasso effective February 25, 2019 – June 30, 2019.

Mr. Frank: Seconded. So moved.

Mr. Burrick: MOVE that the Board of Education accept the retirement of Mark Hartunian effective February 28, 2019 and Jean Darlington and William McCooey effective June 30, 2019.

Ms. Batchelar:Seconded. So moved.

2019-20 Budget

INFORMATION AND REPORTS

A. 2019-20 Budget

Mr. Curtis presented his proposed budget for 2019-20. He noted that the BOF gave the BOE a guideline of 2% as the increase in the operating budget. He pointed out that there is a new Governor and how that will affect our budget is unknown at this time. Mr. Curtis stated that over the past several years there has been mill rate pressure to mitigate the tax rate in Simsbury compared to other towns.

Mr. Curtis stated that his budget does not cut any programs and it keeps class size within guidelines. He noted that the projected decline in enrollment is only 17 students next year. Enrollment is anticipated to remain flat for the next 5 years and then increase. Staffing has decreased by 11.89 FTE over the past 2 years, with continued improvement in programming. Mr. Curtis presented ranking information compared to other communities and the state. He reviewed some of the specialized programming opportunities offered at SHS.

Mr. Curtis reviewed the budget drivers, noting that personnel is the largest driver of the budget. The increase in fixed personnel costs is 2.11%. This will be offset by 10 certified staff retirements. Mr. Curtis discussed the personnel budget requests for 2019-20 which include the addition of an elementary World Language teacher, a K-6 classroom teacher, additional Math tutor hours, a social worker at SHS, a computer technician, a Director of School Safety, and additional funding for elementary after school activities.

Mr. Curtis reviewed projected insurance and pension costs. The projected increase for these line items is .72% of the budget. He summarized the additions and reductions to next year's budget. The additions total 3.78%, the reductions total 1.28%, with an overall budget increase of 2.5%. Mr. Curtis suggested that a conversation take place with the BOF for use of non-lapsing account funds to offset the budget increase and bring it to 2.0%.

Mr. Frank asked how much money would be left in the non-lapsing account. Mr. LaClair responded $40,000. Mr. Frank suggested that the BOE tell the BOF that they need a 2.5% increase. Ms. Salina pointed out that the Governor's budget includes town funding of the state TRB fund and the BOE should let the BOF come to us with how we can resolve this together. Mr. Burrick noted that after tonight's public audience more funding may be needed to address these issues. Mr. Frank agreed that it makes sense to have a reserve contingency. He suggested the BOF be told that the BOE has 3 possible important needs for the non-lapsing funds. Mr. Frank noted that the results of the Master Facility Study will likely increase our costs.

Mr. Curtis reviewed the non-public school budget noting that included are the costs for nursing at private schools, Parks & Recreation maintenance of our fields, and transportation to private schools

BOE Committee Assignments

B. Review of BOE Committee Assignments

Ms. Willerup noted that board members have received the updated assignments which were discussed with each member individually.

Adoption of 2019-20 Public School Budget

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

A. Adoption of 2019-20 Public School Budget

Mr. Frank: MOVE that the Board of Education adopt the 2019-20 Public School budget in the amount of $70,877,377 which represents an increase of $1,727,825 or 2.5%.

Mr. Burrick: Seconded. So moved.

Adoption of 2019-20 Non-Public School Budget

B. Adoption of 2019-20 Non-Public Budget

Mr. Burrick: MOVE that the Board of Education adopt the 2019-20 Non-Public School budget in the amount of $546,432 which represents an increase of $2,942 or 0.54%.

Adjournment

Mr. Tindall: Seconded. So moved.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Burrick: MOVE to adjourn the meeting at 10:22 p.m.

Mr. Tindall: Seconded. So moved.

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Todd Burrick
Secretary

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Katie Wilde
Recording Secretary