

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in regular session on Wednesday, February 23, 2022 at 7:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback (arrived late) and Mr. Stone

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mrs. Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education, Mrs. DiMaggio, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment and Mr. Brough, Human Resources Specialist

Mrs. Petrella called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Ms. Adams made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Dahlheimer, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Public Comment

Carl Stoup, from Durham, noticed that the meeting is once again on YouTube with no public comment from the community. He stated that it can happen if they want it to happen as other organizations are able to do it. He takes it as a slap in the face to the community because they can watch and listen, but be quiet. He urged the board to look into that further.

Next Board Meeting - March 9, 2022 at 7:00 PM in the CRHS Library at 7:00 PM

Committee Reports

A. Policy Committee Meeting - February 16, 2022

Mr. Moore reported that Policy committee met last week and talked about how policy is generated and maintained. They also asked the IT department to investigate options for providing live public access and public comment for meetings and they are working on that. Mr. Pietrasko had had some meetings already and had one proposal, but was gathering more information. The third issue they discussed whether public comment items received via email would be included in the minutes and recommended that that not be part of the minutes as they receive so many and some of them aren't related to Board of Education business. They felt that that sentence should be eliminated from the agenda and to indicate that people can specifically ask for their comments to be included in the minutes.

Mr. Moore explained that that had been initiated due to COVID and, in actuality, he only included those that specifically asked to be included in the minutes. Mrs. Petrella reminded everyone that they can always email before or after a meeting and are answered somehow as well as being referenced at the next meeting. Ms. Adams added that streaming is different than having active comment and receiving

comments can require an exponential amount of time during the meeting. She felt that it was important for everyone to realize that emails are circulated and Mrs. Petrella does respond.

Communications

Mrs. Petrella reiterated that most of the emails she receives are forwarded to the rest of the board members when she responds.

Mrs. Petrella received an email, forwarded by Mrs. Dahlheimer, from EMTJJ regarding the budget, field house, robotics and declining high school enrollment as well as the possibility of an eighth-grade survey about high school attendance. She also received an email from Linda Lauderdale regarding support for keeping masking in schools. Mrs. Petrella responded and Ms. Lauderdale has since sent another email that she has not responded to yet. There was also an email from Debbie Lauschneider, dated 2/10/22, regarding the district purchasing high-visibility reflective vests for athletes. An email was forwarded by Ms. Betty from Shannon McDuff dated 2/15/22 regarding mask policy and changes to mask choice. Mrs. Petrella received an email from Ken Murgolfo, from WTNH-WCTX, dated 2/16/22 questioning the district's plans for masks and the superintendent responded. There was also an email from Nicole Zappone, from the Record Journal dated 2/21/22, regarding upcoming meeting location and COVID policy updates.

Mrs. Petrella received several emails from Michelle DiMauro expressing support for the budget and field house, including a detailed history of the project. There was an email from Nicole Ercolani dated 2/10/22 regarding public comment at the previous board meeting and Mrs. Petrella responded. Samantha Winkler, MTA Program Coordinator, sent an email sharing happenings at MTA. Mrs. Petrella also received an email from Michael Doyle who shared concerns about public comment issues and any program book objections. Mrs. Petrella noted that she has also received emails today that she has not responded to yet.

Mr. Roraback spoke with Michael Janis, from Middlefield, who happens to be an HVAC professional and he questioned the estimates for John Lyman renovations. Mr. Roraback tried to explain as best he could.

Fiscal Year 2022-23 Budget Discussion

Dr. Schuch noted that a number of board members have reached out to them for information and there is a Google doc as well. Mrs. Neubig will go through those questions and then they would like to talk about health insurance and capital issues, including the stadium project (field house) and the 2 percent reserve. Dr. Schuch would also like to know if there are other topics that the board would want them to address tonight or come back with more information at the next meeting.

Mrs. Neubig began by going through the Google doc where she received three questions. Mr. Moore and Mrs. Petrella asked if the district should consider bonding of the Pickett Lane pavement project and use capital reserve for some short-term repairs. Mrs. Petrella also wanted to note that she would consider bonding for Pickett Lane, but if that failed could they transfer money to those improvements. Mrs. Neubig felt that it would certainly be an option to bond, however she cautioned that the referendum may fail. If the referendum fails, that would push the work back two years in the paving cycle if they would need to save for it under capital reserve. Money reserved for a bond payment can be transferred, but it would only be \$100,000 to \$150,000 and Mrs. Neubig is looking for \$582,500. She added that another

\$700,000 would be required next year to finish the project. Mrs. Neubig explained that the district spends about \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year fixing potholes on Pickett Lane, but are now seeing a deterioration in the road which is almost down to dirt. Each section needs to be cut out now, at about \$10,000 each, and more sections are deteriorating. Mrs. Neubig added that she did not feel it was wise to bond for \$1 or \$2 million because that would only address one need and additional bonding would be required for other end-of-life systems. If they took the \$582,000 for paving out of the budget, it would reduce the budget by about 1.25 to 1.5 percent.

Mr. Moore explained that he asked the question because it would take three-and-a-half years to put aside \$1.7 million for the paving. Mrs. Neubig explained that there is money in the \$6.9 million bonding for paving as well as some contingency. There are also funds that were saved on the Pickett Lane culvert due to the grant which she believes to be a total of about \$400,000. That brings it down to two years of saving for the work. Mr. Moore added that if the work as bonded, the payment wouldn't hit until the 2023-2024 fiscal year. Mrs. Neubig explained that 1 percent of the budget is \$380,000, so removing the \$582,000 would be approximately 1.25 percent. She noted that the total could be saved in two years, however that would mean not saving for anything else next year.

Mr. Moore questioned whether it would be a risk to go to referendum on this. He explained that it would have a positive impact on the budget, but the issue would be if there is a risk to go to referendum on the budget as well as bonding. Ms. Adams felt it would be worth looking at the two options side by side.

Mrs. Neubig explained that if they were to bond, they would remove the \$582,000 or even more which would reduce the current operating budget proposal by up to 2 percent. However, the budget would not be reduced if they were to reallocate those funds to other projects. Ms. Adams explained that she would just like to look at the time lines and wasn't advocating for it. Mrs. Neubig summarized that if they save the \$582,000 this year and the full 2 percent next year plus use the money in contingency and what was saved on the culvert, Pickett Lane can be paved in the summer of 2023. Should it not be included in this budget and go to referendum instead, there are district meetings, 30 days' notice and if it fails, they would have missed the opportunity to put it in the budget cycle.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked what costs would be associated with bonding and Mrs. Neubig estimated about \$13,000 for a referendum, but financing fees, attorney fees and financial advisors can be about \$45,000. Typically, you would bond for a larger amount and not \$1 or \$2 million because you would still pay those fees. Mrs. Dahlheimer summarized that while it may reduce the budget, they would actually be adding \$58,000 to the taxpayers.

Mrs. Petrella added that she has also thought of several other ways to reduce the budget, including completely taking Pickett Lane out of the budget. Mrs. Neubig stated that repairs can be made, but it can be up in the hundreds of thousands of dollars if they wait another year as the road is disintegrating. Mrs. Petrella noted that if the budget doesn't pass, it won't happen anyway. Mrs. Neubig felt that it's time and an opportunity to be put in the budget and accomplished in two years.

Mrs. Booth would still want the district to save the entire 2 percent, even if they decided to bond the Pickett Lane project because things are put off every year and that isn't fiscally responsible. She added that it couldn't be paved this year, even if they had the money, because the culvert is being done this summer. Mrs. Neubig added that they had to take the pump house out of the budget this year to save for

the paving. ADA improvements at Coginchaug also need to be made that have been put off for years. Mrs. Neubig also stated that there are no grants available for that.

Mrs. Petrella had also asked if updated figures were received from the Building committee for the field house. Mr. Moore thought that Mr. Overton had some new numbers, but Mrs. Neubig has not received anything. The last she heard was that the company who had originally quoted the project no longer does business in Connecticut, but there is a company in Rockfall. She also felt that the \$180,000 that was included in the budget may not be enough.

Moving on to health insurance, Mrs. Neubig reported that nothing has changed since the last meeting. She spoke to the broker today and ConnectiCare will not back off the 22 percent rate because they are still at 131 percent loss ratio. The broker also reached out to several other carriers who all said they would not quote. There are two options, including the State Partnership Plan or a consortium of other school districts. Rates will probably not be available until around April, but Mrs. Neubig is hopeful that it will produce around a \$700,000 savings. She did remind everyone that that savings is already incorporated into the budget and if that doesn't work out and they have to stay with ConnectiCare, the budget would increase an additional \$700,000 or close to 2 percent. They will work with the unions on this issue as well.

Capital reserve includes \$740,000, or 2 percent. The items earmarked are to continue funding the turf replacement (\$27,500) which will complete that line item, unanticipated repairs and maintenance (\$50,000), brick replacement and repair at Strong (\$80,000), and Pickett Lane paving (\$1.7 million). Mrs. Neubig added that they have shifted priorities, but they have funded at least 50 percent of the ADA improvements.

Mrs. Neubig added that the field house increased the budget by about .46 percent (\$180,000) which was based on the figure from last year. The cost of the existing slab was \$170,000 which would be about \$250,000 today. The plumbing would make the total closer to \$300,000.

Mrs. Booth asked if the brick at Strong School needs to be fixed immediately and Mrs. Neubig felt that it should as it is leaking. Mr. Croteau had noted that as a priority. There is water in the school now, but Mrs. Neubig did not know if there was mold. The section was built in 1959 and it appears that the brick work is original and appears to have been repointed during the 2003 renovation. The brick wall is leaking into the cafeteria after heavy, wind-driven rain. The current proposal is \$85,000 and they will obtain two other bids.

Going back to the health insurance, Dr. Schuch explained that they felt comfortable budgeting at the lower number because they believe they can, at a minimum, join the state plan. Both plans will require a three-year commitment. Mr. Moore reviewed that they had looked into the state plan during the last union negotiations and he recalls that the benefits were pretty similar. Mrs. Neubig noted that the union stipulation is that the benefits are equal or better. Dr. Schuch has only heard favorable things from his colleagues about the state plan. He added that to get the best rates, subscribers have to actively get annual physicals and other things with the emphasis on preventive. Mrs. Dahlheimer also felt that moving to a PPO would be a benefit to employees. Dr. Schuch added that the board also currently puts money into health savings accounts for employees and that would go away if they switch to a PPO plan. Ms. Adams added that unions statewide have been pushing to move to the State Partnership Plan.

Mrs. Neubig explained that one of the reasons districts shied away from the state plan a few years ago was that they felt everyone's rates would go up if they allowed high-ratio districts in. That is exactly what is happening with our district now. The state plan does accept everyone, but the consortium does not and would adjust the rates for the first year. Mrs. Neubig felt that they may know if they have been accepted into the consortium tomorrow, but would not know what the rates are. Dr. Schuch added that the state plan is currently running Anthem and a lot of the district's employees prefer that, however that can always change.

Mrs. Petrella thanked Mrs. Neubig and Dr. Schuch for a great job on the budget, however felt that the board really needs to take a look at the budget and the fact that there is a 4.96 percent increase. She felt that they need to think about what the public will think and what ways the budget can be cut that will make the most sense. Mrs. Petrella suggested no improvements to Pickett Lane, but it doesn't seem like that will go over well. However, \$1.7 million to completely replace the road is an awful lot of money for the district to support. She asked if they have considered just paving, without completely starting all over. It was noted that there is no base left and it was down to dirt.

Mrs. Petrella would also like to look at staffing and/or hiring freezes. Another suggestion would be to have the two elementary schools share an administrator, administrative staff and/or a nurse. Mrs. Petrella felt that the budget with a 4.96 percent increase will get voted down by the voters and they will have to find ways to cut the budget anyway. She encouraged everyone to start thinking outside the box to find ways to reduce the budget. She realizes that they have presented very reasonable budgets for the past five years and people have still complained. Mrs. Petrella is not saying no increase because that wouldn't make sense, but the increase needs to be much more reasonable. She hopes to be able to meet with the Boards of Finance from both towns.

Mr. Moore added that the board has basically had a flat budget for the last six years, not accounting for any inflation that occurred. He felt that this increase was still way under what inflation would have done over those years, but agreed that this is a big change. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that it was a big change, but the district hasn't been saving. Mrs. Caramanello agreed that Pickett Lane is imperative, but also agreed with Mrs. Petrella that this may not be the year to do it. She believes that Lyman is still up in the air and hopes there may be a little bit of savings coming. Mrs. Caramanello would be more in favor of saving, but not doing that project right now, as opposed to cutting staff. Coming out of COVID, she would not want to cut staff after what they just went through.

Superintendent's Report (if applicable)

A. Update on John Lyman Elementary School Options

Dr. Schuch reviewed that the district has tried multiple times through referendum to get permission to close John Lyman and most recently failed a referendum to bond for repairs. Based on input since the last meeting, they have reached out to some of the local legislators who represent Middlefield and Durham and learned that there is a process by which the State General Assembly could give the board permission to close John Lyman in spite of the votes. It was described as a "validating act" which would empower the board to take a specific action as there aren't a lot of options available. This would move quickly as the General Assembly is currently in regular session and it has been initiated, however the board is not bound to it.

If the board wants to move forward with this, a resolution would be drafted for the board to consider at the next meeting on March 9, 2022. Dr. Schuch understands that this is a different board under different circumstances and they would need to vote on something that they weren't even sure they could do. He did feel that many in the community would support this action, and many would not. If the board does not want to move this forward, they would ask the legislature to withdraw the request.

Dr. Schuch also explained that if the board does pass a resolution on March 9th that would not be a guarantee that it will get through the General Assembly and result in having that option. He would draft the resolution in line with the action that the previous board took last fall which would be that the school would close at the end of the 2022-2023 school year, especially since the bonding for repairs failed and more things will come up.

Dr. Schuch explained that no vote was necessary, but asked if the board felt this was the course of action they would like him to pursue with the legislators. The General Assembly only meets once a year, so if not now, it would be pushed off another year.

Mr. Moore reiterated that it certainly doesn't mean that it will pass the legislature and the public will have an opportunity to respond in public hearing and sessions. He felt that if they were going to try this, they needed to try it. It would give the board the authority to do it, but wouldn't mean that the board would do it. Dr. Schuch agreed and explained that getting the authority to close the school doesn't bind the board to doing it. However, if that is not the intent of the board, it would be a lot of work to go through it to then not close it. He felt that the resolution would state the board's intent to close the school at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. If the General Assembly gives that permission, absent any other action subsequent to that by the board, that is what would happen. He explained that the board could always change their mind, but the legislators are asking for a good faith commitment from the board in order for them to go down that road.

Ms. Adams felt that the board has always tried to stay out of court and that action could, in fact, be grounds for someone to say they didn't have the ability to do that. Dr. Schuch explained that the way he is addressing that is to acknowledge exactly that, that the board acknowledges that they do not have the authority to close the school. A vote to do this on March 9th would not say they will be closing the school.

Mrs. Caramanello felt it was important for everyone to state where they stand on this issue tonight. She explained that six months ago, the majority of the board would have already closed the school. Part of the majority voted to keep the school open, but the majority of the community voted to not pay for any repairs. Mrs. Caramanello felt that she knew how the prior board members felt, but wanted to know how the new members felt because it may be a waste of time if they are divided on the subject.

Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that she has been in support of this, but is concerned that would be compelled to close the school and not be able to build additions due to costs or materials. Mr. Mennone added that he has always been in favor of making four state-of-the-art schools. Mr. Stone felt the same and added that the majority of votes were to close the school, but both towns had to agree.

Mrs. Booth added that the current estimates to add on to Brewster will probably go up and Dr. Schuch had given options to move children to different buildings without adding on at all. One of those options involves moving eighth grade to Cuginchaug and she felt that nobody wants to talk about that. There are

plenty of high schools who are 7-12. Mrs. Booth felt that if people don't want to spend money to educate the kids, they need to do something different. She was nervous that the numbers are going to be higher than they thought to add on to Brewster and that referendum may fail.

Mr. Roraback reminded everyone that there will be savings with not having that school which may be able to partially defray the costs of additions at Brewster. Mrs. Booth added that that savings would not be immediate. Mr. Mennone stated that it may not happen right away, but they can't keep kicking it down the road. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that they can't do the study on Brewster until they have a resolution to close Lyman.

Mrs. Neubig stated that the numbers for Brewster from 2018 would result in a \$2.8 million bonding after state reimbursement. Mrs. Dahlheimer had a hard time believing they could put 189 kids into six classrooms at Brewster and the portables are tiny. Mrs. Booth also stated that she would not vote yes to renovations at Brewster without another cafeteria or a separate gym. Mrs. Neubig stated that the gym floor replacement was removed last year and again this year. Mrs. Booth summarized that she is hesitant to be 100 percent okay with it.

Mr. Roraback asked who would represent the district at a committee meeting in Hartford and Ms. Adams felt that a lot has happened behind the scenes and they are now looking for an indication from the board about how to proceed. Mr. Roraback wondered if the district's attorney will have an impassioned argument about why this needs to be done. Mr. Moore added that the superintendent will be asked to testify as well. Ms. Adams added that others can testify as well.

Ms. Adams agreed with four excellent schools and that this would be the way to go. She does not agree with how this all turned out, but noted that the district agreement was for exactly this reason. On the other hand, this resolution would not change the agreement and be very specific to this instance. Dr. Schuch explained that the resolution would include the whole history of the issue.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed that even if this resolution is allowed, it would not change anything else in the regional agreement. Ms. Adams felt it was important to focus on the fact that they are not allowed to close the school yet not allowed to make the necessary improvements. Mrs. Petrella summarized that the outcome of the two votes has made it impossible for the district to do anything.

Dr. Schuch added that there are some in the community that are shocked with the proposed budget and they may be able to demonstrate fiscal responsibility through this resolution. He hopes that they would know the outcome on the resolution prior to the budget referendum. Dr. Schuch felt that they would be able to explain that while this budget has a significant increase, the next one should show a significant decrease. In year two, they will not need as many staff members if the school closes.

Ms. Adams reiterated that the board can always do something different and Dr. Schuch stated that numbers are different now than three years ago. They have not even recommended grade level configuration at this point as they felt it would be inappropriate absent some semblance of understanding about Lyman.

Mrs. Booth confirmed that this is the legislative relief and asked what the judicial relief would be. Dr. Schuch felt that that wasn't as viable an option for this current situation.

Dr. Schuch summarized that he did not hear anyone say not to move forward, so they will draft a resolution for the next meeting.

B. COVID Update

Dr. Schuch reviewed that the governor had made an announcement about optional masking effective February 28 and that it was agreed that that would be the district's position. The district is significantly pivoting to a mask optional position as are 95 percent of all districts. A few exceptions were made, including everyone being masked on all bus trips. Another exception is also in the nurse's offices where everyone must wear masks. People returning off quarantine from COVID should also wear masks. He did caution everyone that the Commissioner of the Department of Health can reinstate a school mask mandate if he or she sees fit.

Dr. Schuch reminded everyone that masking only started in the district because it was a state mandate. There could be a local situation whereas a mask mandate would have to be temporarily reinstated, but he did not see that as a likely scenario. Dr. Schuch added that the Commissioner of the Department of Health understands the social, emotional and relational toil that masking has had on everyone.

Dr. Schuch reported that he has heard some concerns about children and adults who continue to mask by choice potentially being bullied, ridiculed or teased. As a result, principals will be instituting lessons at all ages this week in preparation for next Monday. They also want to make sure that everyone knows that the district has a lot of in-home test kits and encouraged everyone to call the school to get them.

The State has recently put out updated guidance and everything seems to be a local decision. "Risk tolerance" is a new term that is used to determine how important it is to have children and adults mask. Dr. Schuch wondered what will happen to other mitigation strategies, including large gatherings, social distancing and cohorting. His team would like to leave all of that alone for now and feel like removing masks is a big deal in itself. He gave the example of the once-postponed social that was scheduled for next Friday and they have decided to postpone that once again for a few weeks.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if there was an update for athletics on masking and Dr. Schuch felt that they wanted to end masking a while ago. He noted that masks will not be required for the home playoff game next week. Mrs. Booth added that students will have to follow the requirements of different school districts if they travel to play there. Dr. Schuch asked for support from parents about masking students on the bus. There is also a supply of masks at each school if someone needs one.

Mrs. Petrella noted that the district is in a real transition period. She explained that she participated in a Zoom meeting with board chairs, the Department of Health and Department of Education and there is no consistent data to provide specific guidelines. She noted that Dr. Schuch is making decisions, but always shares them with the board. Mrs. Petrella acknowledged that taking the safety of a mask away is scary. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that DPH has given strict guidelines every single week and then it all went away a couple of weeks ago. Everyone needs to be patient. Ms. Adams felt that this was a great way to move through the transition.

Director of Finance's Report

Mrs. Neubig had nothing further to report.

New Business**A. Vote to approve the CRHS DECA field trip request**

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the CRHS DECA field trip request.

Mrs. Booth had a concern about the number of chaperones and felt that there should be two chaperones if they are traveling on a plane. Mr. Mennone asked there was a ratio used in the past, but Dr. Schuch did not know that answer. Mr. Moore agreed that it wouldn't hurt to have two chaperones. Dr. Schuch will convey that the board would like to have two chaperones unless it is a very small number of students. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that there had been an issue with students being allowed to go on a field trip based on their vaccination status and that it falls to the travel agent. Dr. Schuch felt that they would follow the rules of the venue they are attending and rules are changing every day.

In favor of approving the CRHS DECA field trip request: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried with Mrs. Booth abstaining.

B. Vote to approve CRHS Senior Class field trip request

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Caramanello, to approve CRHS Senior Class field trip request.

Mrs. Petrella thought that this trip was generally held in the spring and wondered why they were proposing the trip for November. Mrs. Booth explained that they usually go in November.

In favor of approving the CRHS Senior Class field trip request: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Public Comment

Michelle Gohagon and Darrell Gohagon, from Rockfall, explained that their daughter attends Regional School District 13. They wanted to communicate their grave concerns about what their daughter has been experiencing regarding racist comments, actions and threats and the district's ability to understand these attacks and to keep their child, and other children of color, safe, both physically and emotionally. Mrs. Gohagon had convinced her husband to move to the community, but he worried that such a small community with little diversity would welcome their family. She assured him that the community would protect their child and she would receive the education she deserved. Unfortunately, his worries were justified. Their child's experience has been filled with racially-insensitive statements, racist comments, such as the prevalent use of the "N" word, and most recently escalating behavior that included outright racist threats. They are not safe and protected. Mrs. Gohagon felt there was something uniquely devastating about your child being targeted because of the color of her skin and cannot be properly put into words. It may be difficult to accept that such prevalent racism exists within the schools, but she asked the board to please believe that it does. This is not a problem unique to Durham and Middlefield, but how they choose to respond can be. Last year, the district passed an equity policy where they

committed to adopting procedures to ensure an equitable school community inclusive of diversity, race, ethnicity, language, gender, cultural values and family belief systems as well as improving cultural competencies. They asked that the board make them aware of how they are ensuring the commitments made in the policy are being carried out within the district today and in the future. Determining how to combat acts of hate can be difficult, but they are asking that it be planned for with a sense of urgency by empowering the superintendent, administrators, educators, staff and students with the tools needed to stop these acts of hate within the schools. Mrs. Gohagon felt that they could empower the many or embolden the few by staying silent. Their hope is that no other young child will have to experience what theirs has endured.

Maureen Funke, who has three daughters in three schools, explained that they moved here from West Haven in the fall of 2020. Her children have seen and heard more racial slurs and bullying in their short time here than they did in a much longer time in West Haven. She felt that Mrs. Gohagon's composure was amazing and thanked her for that. She also thanked the board for all they do. She felt that if the board would put as much thought into their forthcoming plan to avoid masking bullying as they would into racial and gender and other forms of bullying, their time would be well-served. She also echoed the statement that staff needs more training. She knows of at least two incidences that her daughters heard in two schools where a teacher was in ear shot of a racial slur and did nothing. She felt that it's not just the students and the adults in the community have work to do. Mrs. Funke felt that what the Gohagon family has gone through in the last week is disgusting. They should feel that it is safe for their daughter to go to school and something needs to be done about it.

Oahn Stephan, from Durham, stated that according to policy 5114, the heinous and racist acts that she has heard about in the past few weeks have checked almost more than 10 of the examples of acts that should leverage no less than expulsion. She asked how much they were willing to tolerate before they risk being identified as board members, community members and school members who tolerate racism and are perhaps a wee bit racist themselves. Dr. Stephen is a member of the Well-Being Committee and asked that this be specifically discussed at the next committee meeting because they need to put their money where their mouth is.

David Zemelsky, from Durham, noted that he has lived in the district for 40 years and all three of his children graduated from Coginchaug with two of his grandchildren presently enrolled in the district. As he understands the details of the racial incident, he felt it was a thoughtless and unconscionable act that bears an unflinching, honest look. He felt that there is a tendency in primarily white towns to sweep racial incidents under the rug and allow one to think there is no problem. Nothing could be further from the truth. Finding an unprejudiced and genuinely antiracist way of seeing the world is an arduous and profoundly difficult struggle. Ideas of how white people interact with people of color starts at an early age. Well-meaning people will inadvertently stumble in efforts to make sure the world is a safe and equitable place for all. Mr. Zemelsky wanted to be clear about using the term "antiracist," a phrase often misunderstood which simply means that the actions, thoughts and words of someone are designed to help eliminate racism. To be neutral is to allow more racism. He believes that the Board of Education is in an excellent position to forge policy that would only educate children on the heinous and poisonous power of prejudice and help them be aware of their attempts to learn ways to help all people to understand and love one another. The perpetrators of this act are also in a good position to learn how hurtful and thoughtless their actions were and the Board of Ed can help make a positive difference for them and all other students. Mr. Zemelsky felt that the situation did not come out of nowhere and there is an undercurrent circulating for a long time. He asked that this not be called CRT which is not taught in the district's school nor is it

about making white children feel bad about the history of slavery and racism in our country. He felt that this incident is an opportunity for the towns to learn empathy, tolerance and ways to look at the unfair and illegal constellation of racially motivated acts that is sadly so prevalent in society. He hoped they come out the other side as a town loudly and proudly saying that they can work to eliminate racism here.

Eileen Buckheit, from Durham, stated that everyone should believe Mrs. Gohagon. Her daughter is a student at Strong School and the “N” word is used so often that it’s no longer shocking to her daughter. She did not learn that at home and she is devastated that that is the case and we should all be ashamed. She also knows of at least one incident where a teacher heard it and felt that something has to be done.

Julia Talbert-Slagle, a student at Coginchaug stated that she was so embarrassed for the way that her peers have behaved in the past and was very sorry that this has happened. She also has heard a lot of incidents, at both Strong and Coginchaug, with someone very loudly referring to a black student as a monkey. She heard it and knew that her teacher heard it as well, but she did not say a word. There have been many other incidents where people have heard things and not said anything. She felt that the more they don’t speak, the more these people just feel encouraged to continue to say these offensive things. If you stand by, you become a part of it. She does not want to be in a school or a community where everyone is a part of this kind of treatment. She would appreciate if change were to be made and more punishment be inflicted when people say these heinous things.

Patrick Holden, from Durham, wanted to share the words and thoughts of someone who is as close to a brother as he could have. As someone who is black, he unfortunately shares many experiences similar to these incidents that have happened at Strong and throughout the district recently. He read some of the things he has heard: “The only reason I have to be nice to you is because it’s Black History month. I wouldn’t have to deal with you if it wasn’t for MLK. Go back to the cotton fields. Oh look, it’s a Jamaican beef patty. The time a teacher pulled me out of class because he wanted to tell me that Michael Brown was not killed because of racism. Getting beaten up on the school yard, called the ‘N’ word and teachers ignoring it and a teacher crying in class after making me read the ‘N’ word out of a book. These are just a handful of incidents that rattle around in my head from my school years. I felt helpless and isolated. I was bullied constantly and the faculty did nothing or worse, the faculty would punish me. I found myself sitting in the office far more than my bullies. I would lash out and yell at my bullies and the faculty would punish me but never offer me any emotional or mental support. So, I stayed silent which led me to be mentally and occasionally physically bullied at school. When I moved to RSD 13, I did not know about race. The world quickly and brutally taught me that lesson, but I wish the school taught me and taught everyone because glossing over slavery for a few weeks isn’t enough. Race should be discussed at school often, candidly and respectfully. Diversity should be celebrated and children should be listened to. The faculty should also reevaluate how it handles punishments; offering support and understanding is far more effective than punishing victims into silence. A few teachers excelled at this, but only a few.” Mr. Holden noted that they graduated in 2016 and he is aware that there have been some changes made, however the fact that his brother’s experiences and the racial incidents this year are nearly a decade apart speak for itself. There is a systematic and dangerous crisis of hate and intolerance in the towns and in the school system and not nearly has been done enough to heal it. For a district that prides itself on core ethical values, they sure seem to forget all about them. He finds it hypocritical and absolutely despicable. His brother also told of being bullied and feeling like he was going to have a panic attack. The teacher wasn’t there, so he left without permission. The teacher later yelled at him and sent him to the office. He was treated like a delinquent until another teacher came by and offered to take me the rest of the way to the office, but instead took him to an empty classroom and listened to him. He

acknowledged that the understanding teachers and friends that he had were valuable and if other teachers were understanding, his world would have been much brighter. When he looks back, he sees darkness and cruelty which can only be combatted by understanding and allowing teachers more flexibility.

Katie Forline, from Durham, felt that it was not up to people of color to fight this battle. The privileged white people have the power and need to do something about this as it is escalating. If you follow Facebook in town, it is escalating. She would like this to put on the board's agenda so that they can know if there is active training happening for the teachers, students and everyone starting tomorrow on how to be able to step up when these incidents happen and be empowered to act on behalf of the people being abused.

Nicole Ercolani wanted to discuss how she was treated by the board at the last meeting. She felt that it was connected to the educational program of the district as bullying has been a topic of discussion and directly affects the children in the community. She wanted to clarify that being direct, assertive and honest in a discussion is not bullying. Pointing out hypocrisy is not bullying. Asking a clarifying question is not bullying. Criticism is not bullying. Having a difference of opinion is not bullying. Mrs. Ercolani didn't necessarily think that what happened to her at the last meeting was bullying, but it was extremely inappropriate. Whether or not anyone agrees with what she was saying does not allow them the ability to scream and yell over her. She also felt that incorrectly using the term "bully" delegitimizes the word and makes it more difficult for people who are actually being bullied. Mrs. Ercolani understood that public comment is addressed to the entire board, however the board is not a single mind and when there is an individual who expresses their viewpoint during the meeting or references their personal experience during a meeting, she would be entirely within her right to ask clarifying questions. Clarifying questions allow someone to gain insight on where the individual is coming from. Had she been allowed to finish her comment at the last meeting, she would have said that offering educational information to the board and to parents might help to ease some of the anxiety involved with masking. Education and access to accurate information empowers people to make informed decisions and helps people to be comfortable in allowing others to make their own decisions. Ms. Ercolani asked that the board use better discretion when silencing parents and hoped that the board can work with parents to have an open and honest conversation, even with differing viewpoints.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, commended Mrs. Petrella for her comments about taking another look at the budget. He reiterated that the field house/stadium project is a luxury item and is a want, not a need. He acknowledged that there have been items put off around the district and this project is another building that will add more maintenance, upkeep and staff. He also had a letter from Chuck Stengel that he was asked to read into the record. "With the declining enrollment, maintaining staff and programs at current levels is not acceptable. Declining enrollment is primarily what's causing increased per-student expenses. Please reduce staff expenses commensurate to enrollment declines. You would surely increase staff if the student population grew, now it's time to cut it. It's sad, but a reality, if you want the budget to pass. With declining enrollment, a 5 percent net budget increase is not acceptable. The field storage building is not required. Adequate storage space exists in the high school or at Korn School with Durham's approval. Budgeting salaries at 97.5 percent does not recognize the nexus between a new COVID mask policy and likely senior teachers' retirements. Try 96.5 percent instead. Increase in capital reserve from 1 to 2 percent should be done gradually over four years to avoid budget impact shocks."

Adjournment

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Booth, to adjourn the regular meeting of the Board of Education.

In favor of adjourning the special meeting of the Board of Education: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Meeting was adjourned at 9:08 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First