

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Well-Being Committee met in a special session on Tuesday, November 10, 2020 at 4:00 PM remotely.

Committee members present: Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich and Mr. Moore

Committee members absent: Mr. Hicks, Mr. Roraback and Mrs. Olszewski

Student Advisors absent: Nora O'Connell and Gage Rovelli

Teacher Advisor present: Mrs. Schmidt and Mrs. Schaefer

Administration present: Dr. Serino, Superintendent of Schools

Guests present: Pastor Rebekah Forni, Mrs. Anne Koba and Mr. Jayme Watson

Mrs. Caramanello called the meeting to order at 4:40 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

None.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Caramanello made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda as amended: Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich and Mr. Moore. Motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Minutes - October 6, 2020

Mrs. Caramanello made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to approve the minutes of October 6, 2020, as presented.

In favor of approving the minutes of October 6, 2020, as presented: Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich and Mr. Moore. Motion carried unanimously.

Equity and addressing systemic racism - invited guests Pastor Rebekah Forni, Mrs. Anne Koba and Mr. Jayme Watson

Before beginning, Mr. Moore asked that everyone introduce themselves.

Mrs. Koba explained that she began educating herself about this issue around the time of George Floyd's murder. She set up a rally at the Middlefield Town Hall and has also set up a Facebook page. They have read books and held gatherings to discuss a petition that was sent.

Pastor Forni explained that she is pastor at the Middlefield Federated Church and inherited some of the racial justice work that had been started at the church. That group has held book groups and film screenings as well as racial justice training through the UCC. They had a resurgence in energy after George Floyd's murder and have begun to think about how issues of white supremacy can be addressed locally. They have had conversations with the Durham Fair Association about Confederate flags at the

fair and are working to limit that from happening. There is a book group through the Durham Library this week on the book titled "So You Want To Talk About Race."

Mr. Watson explained that he moved to Middlefield about five or six years ago and has had a couple of incidents that have concerned him. He felt this would be a good opportunity to learn what the board is doing and possibly give some information about what he has seen in his lifetime.

Dr. Serino explained that the district has started using the words "systemic racism" instead of referring to race and equity. They have also realized that they need professional help with this work. They have been working with SERC (the State Education Resource Center) and Ingrid Canady. They were set to do some grant work with them around Courageous Conversations this year and the high school faculty was scheduled to continue that work, however Dr. Serino feels that they just cannot ask their staff to do even one more thing. Because of that, she suggests that they hit the pause button and hoped that this team can start talking about possible actions.

Dr. Serino also explained that the board has begun to look at a policy against racism and it was also recommended that there are clearly designated actions that will be taken to address racism in school. She reviewed that they will still try to have a focus group with students at Strong School. Dr. Serino hopes that the board will continue to work on a policy and asked one of the board members on the committee would talk to the full board about whether they are willing to engage in some of the work around systemic racism.

Dr. Serino began to review the district's goals and felt that the vision needs to be a little more profound. The equity team began to meet two years ago and met a couple of times last year as well. They did have a book group with students from Middletown and Cuginchaug. They also implemented a stipend for staff to help with the work with the high school students. The high school will have African American, Puerto Rican and Latino studies as part of the curriculum in the 2021-2022 school year. They will work to engage parents and want to make sure that hiring practices are amended to include questions about race and racism to be sure they are aligned with the district's goals. They would also like to partner with the community and convene a Black History Month committee.

Gage reported that Mr. Falcone informed the students today that there is going to be a class on African American history and he feels that will be a great opportunity. He mentioned that he went to a minority white school until second grade when he moved to Durham which was so much different. He thought possibly a partner school could help to integrate kids into the mix.

Nora agreed that it is very important to be educated on equity and to incorporate that into learning. She loved the ideas that Dr. Serino reviewed and added that it would be great to incorporate equity into clubs that already exist.

Mrs. Koba has done extensive research on polling people of color about ideas and felt that an anti-racist type statement should be created. Staff training is also important. She also felt that funds should be appropriated to show that it is of value. Mrs. Koba added that there should be a plan for racially-charged issues when they come up and how they will be addressed. It was also strongly suggested that everyone remember that if people of color say it's about race, it really is about race. It has also been suggested that black history should be all throughout the year, not just one month. Mrs. Koba also volunteered to help with clubs, including something like an advocacy club. She also suggested having an African American history professor come to give a talk.

Mr. Watson added reaching out to community organizations in surrounding communities, such as the Meriden-Wallingford NAACP. He hoped that kids could see that kids are kids, regardless of their community. He suggested reaching out to other school districts to see what they are doing.

Pastor Forni understood that people are at their limit, but she felt that there is an extreme value in a district-wide staff anti-racism training. Dr. Serino explained that that was what the district had planned to do and still intends to, but just not this year. Dr. Serino also mentioned that she is looking for the community to support the district being in school and participating in things that will keep people healthy. She felt that a topic that people in the community could support would be a good thing.

Pastor Forni also recommended "So You Want To Talk About Race" as a book that could be used as a start and went on to describe the contents of the book. She also mentioned that she's heard that District 13 does a really good job with its history program and asked if there was a space for students to process events as they are happening. Gage stated that if they have any personal issues, they usually go to Guidance first. Pastor Forni asked more about global issues, such as the George Floyd murder.

Mrs. Schaefer stated that the teachers are currently afraid to have those kinds of conversations and having the support of the board and leadership and receiving training will be the first step. She would like to be able to talk about issues in the moment to help students process things. Mrs. Koba noted that she had also been scared to talk about race, but is no longer feeling that way. She read a couple of books to help her overcome those fears.

Mrs. Schmidt agreed that teachers want to have those conversations, but there is a level of fear and discomfort. She, too, felt that they all need active training and that a board policy or even a position statement would be a step in that direction.

Dr. Serino explained that there could be something like a speaker series where teachers could drop in. She added that she needed to leave the meeting soon, but asked if everyone could participate with shared docs to continue this conversation. Dr. Serino felt it was very powerful to have the three guests helping in this area.

Mr. Moore noted that two places he worked in had very different racial issues. The MDC in Hartford was a culture of racism and everyone was required to receive training from NCCJ. Everyone was glad to have had the training in the end. They also had lunch every month with a different speaker each time. Mr. Moore also suggested inviting students to some of Pastor Forni's discussions.

Mr. Moore also stated that he created an environmental justice program at CT DEEP and he plotted where all of the waste sites were and they were next to minority communities throughout the state. He felt that sometimes it takes data to show people that there is an issue. Mr. Moore felt that having regularly-scheduled guest speakers at the schools would be good and that it would be great to join with the church to have those conversations.

Mrs. Caramanello agreed that all of the staff would benefit from speakers and also felt that the board needs to have a stance. Mr. Moore thanked the guests for being part of the Well-Being committee and hoped that they could create a shared doc to continue this work.

Pastor Forni also reported that she has spoken to the Middlefield Board of Selectmen about using the book as a community read. Right now, they are running two sessions with two people on a wait list. She

does not feel that she can commit to running many book groups, but would be willing to help to facilitate book groups that other people could lead.

Nora totally agreed about the book clubs and she is on one at Coginchaug. The advisor is also one of the teachers starting the Black History class. Gage also felt that books are effective, but also felt that kids need the connection with actual people. He agreed that it would be very helpful to connect the district's kids with kids from other districts that are not predominantly white.

Mr. Moore stated that equity will continue to be on the agenda for this committee and the guests will be invited every month.

Student Update

Nora reported that Spirit Week did not go as planned since there was a positive case at Coginchaug on the second day, resulting in about 120 being quarantined. They hope to have another Spirit Week in the future. She also reported that they hope to decorate doors in the schools for the holidays. Mr. Moore stated that he heard that the elementary schools really enjoyed Spirit Week.

Mr. Moore added that the teachers are looking for something fun and he asked if the students did as well. He wondered what else the board can do.

Gage felt that the in-person students are having less trouble than the online students. He has heard from cohort C students that they are having trouble communicating with the teachers.

Nora added that she felt there was a lot of stress and everyone is really tired of every day feeling the same. She felt they need more things like Spirit Week. Gage suggested a photography program.

Mrs. Caramanello asked how the students felt about the workload and Gage stated that they have been getting a lot of work in school and imagined it was even harder being out of school. Nora added that they are juniors and it is their hardest year and is even harder with COVID. She added that there is flexibility, but the teachers feel like it is wrong to give an extension. Gage added that he feels like he is taking advantage of the teachers when he asks for an extension because of his workload.

Dr. Friedrich asked if the assignments were a profitable use of their time and Gage felt that most of their assignments are graded work that he feels is necessary.

Staff Well-Being Update

Mrs. Schaefer felt that everyone understood "compassion over content" at the beginning of the year, but now the teachers are falling back into the content area. She felt that they need to remind themselves that compassion needs to come first. Mrs. Schaefer has spoken to teachers and the biggest struggle she hears about are Wednesdays. Teachers feel that Wednesdays are unsafe. She explained that they have half-hour classes with two minutes to get to each class. Mrs. Schaefer stated that everyone was very thankful for having the microwaves and refrigerators back and also for being able to go home on Wednesday at 11:30. She also felt that people are really nervous about coming back after Thanksgiving and would like to know what the plan is for moving forward. Mrs. Schaefer also felt that Dr. Serino's drop-ins really helped people and stated that a few things Mrs. Schmidt has been doing have really helped morale.

Mrs. Schmidt agreed with Mrs. Schaefer on all of her points and explained that they have started a recognition for both staff and students. The students receive a positive office referral from a teacher. Mrs. Schmidt would be happy to share her ideas with Nora and Gage. As far as staff, they use a website that publishes sticky notes to other teachers. Mrs. Schaefer added that she checks that site to get updates. Mrs. Schmidt also explained that students are making slides thanking their teachers and they hope to get those out to teachers on Thursday, the day before World Kindness Day.

Mr. Moore asked how Wednesdays were at the high school and Nora felt they only had one eight-period Wednesday and that was when they were online. Nora did like being able to continue with work on classes that they already had on Wednesdays.

Mrs. Caramanello reiterated that overall well-being is important and asked what options would be possible for Wednesdays. She also asked Nora and Gage about homework and if it adds to their stress level. She wondered if there was even a need for homework this year.

Nora felt that there is a lot more homework than usual and though today is an easy night, she will probably not get to bed before midnight. Mrs. Caramanello felt that the district is tending to put more pressure on students to pick up the slack for academics. Nora also felt that the students are lacking motivation and stamina. Gage felt that the positive reinforcement that is happening at Strong would be great at the high school as well. He felt that if they let the kids know they are doing a good job, it would help them to keep going. Mrs. Schmidt mentioned that students could also recognize staff using that same referral system. She will send her two files to Nora and Gage.

Mr. Moore felt that there may be options for Wednesdays, but wasn't sure what they would be. Mrs. Schaefer stated that she made the switch to concentrating on well-being on Wednesdays because it was just too hard to get art supplies out and sanitized. She added that they need to admit that it just isn't working on Wednesdays and it needs to change.

Mr. Moore added that the COVID Planning and Response team meets on Fridays and one of the things they talked about last week was problems that staff are having. One of those issues was how to address curriculum needs with making sure everything gets done and how things can be modified. They also talked about how to have fun and break up the stress. They talked about having the music department have a sing-along, having a scavenger hunt, taking a hike, having an ice cream truck, etc. Mr. Moore added that the board would be in support of making everyone's life better.

Mr. Moore stated that they will talk with Dr. Serino about a policy on equity and racism, how to deal with Wednesdays and what can be done to break the stress. Dr. Friedrich suggested a project on graffiti art and felt that the students and teachers would really have fun with it. Gage suggested doing that with chalk. Mrs. Schaefer thought it would be great to drive in and find a message in her parking space. Mrs. Schmidt added that Second Step has volunteer opportunities and she thought that Wednesdays could be used for that.

Mrs. Caramanello liked the idea of a Well-Being Wednesday to help remove the stress from both the kids and the teachers. Mrs. Schaefer added that she always feels better after these committee meetings.

Public Comment

None.

Adjournment

Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to adjourn the meeting.

In favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich and Mr. Moore. Motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:24 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
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