

Revised

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Well-Being Committee met in regular session on Tuesday, February 1, 2022 at 4:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Committee members present: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer, Mrs. Schmidt and Dr. Stephan (arrived late)

Committee members absent: Ms. Adams

Board of Education members present: Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone and Mrs. Petrella

Student Advisors present: Ben Carroll, Nora O’Connell and Gage Rovelli

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Warner, Principal of Coginchaug, Mr. Fitzgerald, Coordinator of Student Affairs at Strong School, Mrs. Gonzalez, Principal of Strong School and Mrs. Trainer, Assistant Principal of Coginchaug

Mr. Moore called the meeting to order at 4:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

Nora O’Connell introduced two juniors to serve on the committee and they will be appointed to the committee at the next Board of Education meeting.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer and Mrs. Schmidt. Motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Minutes - October 5, 2021

Mr. Roraback made a motion, seconded by Nora O’Connell, to approve the minutes of October 5, 2021, as presented.

In favor of approving the minutes of October 5, 2021, as presented: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer and Mrs. Schmidt. Motion carried unanimously.

Impacts of COVID on teacher and student wellness, grades, homework, attendance, participation, music and athletics

Mr. Moore noted that he had sent out a video from St. Andrew’s School about the Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning which he believes lines up well with Reimagining Education. A focus of that video was on the well-being of both students and teachers.

Nora O’Connell stated that it was definitely better than last year. There is definitely more normalcy now that they are back in person, but it’s just not the same as it was pre-COVID. Ben Carroll felt that COVID

was such a huge event that there is still a lot of healing and processing to go through. Students are not only struggling with new routines, but are still struggling from such a huge event in their lives. The video mentioned that they need to recognize that students are dealing with other things besides school, which Ben believes is really important and that students, teachers, staff and anybody else are still struggling with COVID. Gage Rovelli also felt it has definitely improved. They are totally on schedule for Shorelines and States in track, unlike last year. The music program is having a play, scheduled for some time in April, and there will also be a Jazz Combo gig in about two weeks from now.

Mrs. Schaefer stated that she was nervous about the list of questions that were on the agenda and wondered exactly what the board wanted to know. She asked if they wanted to know what teachers need, how it's actually going and how they are feeling or how students are doing. Board members responded that it would be both and Mrs. Schaefer stated that they are overwhelmed and exhausted. She stated that she has been teaching for about 20 years and this is the first time she is feeling inadequate as are other teachers. Mrs. Schaefer went on to say that teachers are feeling neglected, abandoned and a little rejected.

Mrs. Schmidt added that they feel like COVID isn't recognized anymore and they are expected to adapt to a new normal. They feel like they're expected to keep going, no matter what, and there is a heaviness over every room.

Mrs. Schaefer added that how everyone is feeling is variable from minute to minute, hour to hour. She also felt that they have never had to bring so much home and that goes for the kids as well. The hardest thing is to know that both the students and staff are hurting and need to heal since it is different for everyone. Mrs. Schaefer added that it is heavy for educators because they love what they do and they love their students.

Mrs. Schmidt explained that she came back from maternity leave at the beginning of January and is noticing that students are wearing the heaviness in their academic load as well. The students have an intense amount of stress about their grades, their mid-terms, where they will be placed next year and the fact that they are falling behind and the teachers are frustrated. Mrs. Schmidt acknowledged that students may be behind, but it is not the single student's responsibility to fix that. She wondered about the goals of this committee and whether it is to help kids address that and to help them find balance. Mrs. Schmidt felt that while the kids are only three feet away from her, they seem to be almost unreachable.

Mrs. Keane stated that teachers are also taking over the duties of other staff due to a lack of substitutes. She felt that staff is going above and beyond.

Mrs. Schaefer added that teachers are still fearful of getting sick and bringing it to their families. Mrs. Gonzalez stated that she knows teachers are worried about taking a day off and putting a burden on their colleagues. She added that she feels very fortunate that staff never say no and take on the additional burden. Mrs. Schaefer felt that the staff at Strong School may be feeling this more than staff at other buildings because they are so close and have been doing things together for years. Mrs. Schmidt added that not having COVID leave is also a huge impact for teachers with young kids.

Mrs. Schaefer explained that everyone needs something different, but everyone needs to be accepted and listened to. They need to acknowledge that this is still happening and the emotions are real. They would also like to be appreciated and affirmed to feel that they are doing a good job. She added that they also miss affection. The one tangible thing she would ask for is time to plan, time to be with other teachers and time to be with the board members. Mrs. Schaefer suggested that a teacher from every school be on

the committee and Mrs. Schmidt added that she'd like to see some younger students as well.

Mr. Moore acknowledged that time is probably something that they have to give, but how to do that is the question. He wondered if breaks between classes would help. One the students wasn't sure that a break could happen between every class, though it is a great idea. He would like to see a scheduled 10-minute break a day for everyone to just breathe. He added that they would have to be distributed equally and noted that mask breaks were not. Nora O'Connell noted that they used to have X block which was nice. The students also felt that schedules could be looked at and reshaped.

Mrs. Schaefer suggested suspending all professional development for the rest of the year to give everyone time. She explained that there is no time during the day. Mr. Roraback stated that he has been teaching in public schools for only four years, but already sees the time issue. In his school, they pushed to use professional development time for parent contact. He added that Hartford had proposed a plan to have UCONN students come in as substitutes and wondered if that type of thing would be possible here. Mrs. Keane was not aware of the UCONN plan, but noted that the district has had college students come back and substitute.

Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that, as a board member and as a parent, she wants to appreciate and see all of the teachers. She felt that her kids are doing very well and couldn't thank their teachers enough. It was also suggested that they tap in to parents to come into the schools. Mr. Moore felt that they could check into COVID guidelines to allow that to happen and Dr. Schuch reminded everyone that there are things within their purview to change. Dr. Schuch reviewed that there was a time when everyone wanted to limit the number of people in the district's buildings.

Dr. Schuch felt that this just seems to be going on and on and the uncertainty of when it will end layers onto the heaviness. He finds himself being less concerned about everyone's personal safety from the pandemic and more concerned about everyone's social-emotional well-being from the pandemic restrictions. He acknowledged that some people are fearful of not wearing masks and people getting sick. Dr. Schuch felt that unless you advocate for this going on forever, there will be a transition back to more like normal.

Mr. Roraback asked the students if the board is part of the problem for expecting the district's students to be the best. He added that colleges need students now and they may not be quite as picky as everyone thinks. Ben Carroll stated that well-being equals motivation equals performance. He believes that people's happiness is at the lowest level and the stress and pressure to succeed damages people's well-being. Students feel a disconnect between work and school and motivation because they are so overwhelmed in daily life. Gage Rovelli felt that they need to find a balance. In AP classes, well-being can't be totally put ahead of grades and testing. Nora O'Connell added that this year has been the hardest academically for her and there is a ton of pressure. She felt that some teachers really want things to be normal again and are putting a lot of pressure on students. For the first time in her educational career, Nora feels that her well-being is being affected. She is so exhausted that she is having to miss classes. Nora mentioned the difficulty in finding COVID tests and how that adds to the pressure. Gage added that he has gotten to the point where is more afraid of getting COVID because of how much he would miss and how his grades would be affected than his health. Ben added that, as much as they would like things to get back to normal, they don't really know what normal is anymore.

Dr. Stephan asked the students if they felt that the limitations of certain teachers they have always had difficulties with have been more exacerbated by COVID and its restrictions and if the teachers who have

always been supportive continue to be. All three students confirmed that that was the case. Dr. Stephan felt that the majority of the teachers in the district are amazing, but there are outliers and the administration needs to be more aware of those teachers. Gage Rovelli felt that some teachers are far better at helping their students than others. He is now tutoring eight students that come from two teachers. Nora O'Connell stated that she is really struggling with a subject and the teacher only works part-time and is not available after school. She has gone to other teachers and students to get help and feels that it's sad that she doesn't get the support from her teacher.

Mr. Roraback then asked the teachers if the pressure of student achievement falls on them. Mrs. Schaefer stated that it wasn't for her as she is an art teacher, but she does feel like it is for other teachers. She cited a study about how emotions drive effective teaching and learning and affect the climate and culture within the classroom. Mrs. Schmidt stated that her students come in with so much stress and she has to choose to lose them to check in with other teachers. She also allows students to use her class as a tutorial period. Mrs. Schaefer added that she always checks in on teachers and noted that teachers are very stressed about keeping up with the pacing guide.

Mr. Roraback also asked if teacher evaluations are weighing on the teachers and if the evaluations could be tweaked a little to put fire under the feet of some of the teachers. Mrs. Schaefer didn't feel that the evaluation process will do that, but the leadership does a good job of guiding the evaluations. It really does not weed out the weak. Mrs. Schmidt felt that learning walks could help to do that. She added that teachers may be trying, but not achieving their goals and they need to look at what is holding them back. It was generally felt that the evaluation programs used are cumbersome and a waste of time.

Dr. Schuch felt that COVID has put a magnifying glass on the deficiencies that were always there and the biggest difference is that there are individual learners with individual needs and the system was not designed to respond to those individually. He acknowledged the pressure on seniors to get into their college of choice or their career of choice and noted that it comes from everywhere.

Mrs. Keane explained that the next professional development is teacher choice, so that has been addressed. Mr. Moore agreed with Ben Carroll that it is time for a change and each student needs to be addressed separately.

Social media, school threats, bullying and Tik Tok responses at Strong and CRHS

Mr. Fitzgerald reported that the first thing they did was a presentation with Mark Hesseltine, the SRO, to acknowledge that something was going on in the community. He felt that learners were appreciative that it was being discussed. Trooper Hesseltine addressed the legal matters of what was happening and Mr. Fitzgerald addressed the community matters. They then used November and December to target how to address social media needs responsibly. He noted that students had the power and responsibility of having their own devices, but not necessarily the tools to handle it appropriately. Mr. Fitzgerald noted that the number of incidences has diminished tremendously, but that doesn't mean it has gone away. They also had Scott Driscoll in to work with students directly and parents and community members as well.

Mrs. Gonzalez felt that the presentation really hit the sweet spot of legal responsibility but also the students' responsibility to each other. She also noted that the kids really listened to Scott Driscoll. She was disappointed in the parental turnout and felt that they need the parents to be on board. Mrs. Gonzalez also spoke to the eighth-grade class during the last advisory and she will speak to both the sixth and

seventh grades as well. She stressed that the most important thing is to be kind.

Mrs. Keane reported that Scott Driscoll had supplied a link to his website and materials and she can reach out to him for more specific items. He has offered to be an ongoing resource. There was some discussion about the differences in access that students have, with some having full access and others have strict restrictions. Dr. Stephan felt that having access to Mr. Driscoll's information is key, but parents also need to keep an eye on it.

Mr. Roraback also felt that Tik Tok, with all of its problems, can be a good thing for the students to allow them to just be a kid. Mr. Roraback also mentioned an article that Megan Morello had written and suggested that they send something out to parents. The kids and technology always seem to be one step ahead. Mrs. Keane also mentioned that the marketing also changes. Dr. Schuch related this to young people learning to drive and how parents have to trust them. He felt that not being able to use social media effectively can impact employability. Dr. Schuch added that sometimes adults are not the best role models in this space. Dr. Stephan felt that it requires continued checking in and honesty with the kids.

Mrs. Gonzalez mentioned that kids are getting text messages all the time and are kept up to date on what is happening. Gage Rovelli stated that he was doing his homework last night and then checked Classroom and found he had a quiz on Thursday. Students do not have a chance to get away from it. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that she shut Power School off on her kids' phones because it just caused worry and stress. Mr. Fitzgerald wondered if there was a way to highlight the differences with sixth grade coming to Strong School, especially related to devices. Dr. Stephan suggested a subcommittee that will visit each school quarterly to sit down and brainstorm, with parents, teachers and students. Dr. Schuch wasn't sure a board committee would be the appropriate avenue for this as that requires agendas and minutes and added that there will be a well-being component to the action teams. Mrs. Schmidt felt that more kids should be included in whatever committees or teams are formed for this.

Senior high school activities and needs

Mr. Moore reviewed that there will be a senior trip, prom, graduation, Project Graduation as well as a play and concerts. Basketball, baseball and track tournaments will be coming up. Nora O'Connell didn't feel there were any issues, but it was hard with the uncertainty.

Dr. Stephan noted that parents have asked what they could do to help the students and mentioned a winter formal. Nora stated that they tried to do that, but nobody bought tickets. Mrs. Trainer added that it was going to be at the middle school, but the kids wanted to be in their own school. Nora felt that COVID makes everything really hard and a lot of things are last minute and uncertain. Dr. Schuch mentioned that the masking restrictions that the schools have make everything less attractive by comparison to the outside world.

Ben Carroll stated that a good thing is that a lot of trips and field trips are coming back. Model UN is going to Boston this weekend, the music program is going to Disney and there will be a senior trip.

Coginchaug principal transition, challenges and student feedback

Mr. Warner stated that it's been experience and has been fun navigating the uncertainty of COVID as well as learning a new community. He was very frustrated with not being able to have the winter formal happen. He is working on the schedule for next year and hoping to find new opportunities for the kids. They have been working with the Root Center to provide support to students during the school day. He

has also spoken to Jen Penney about the scholarship committee and getting activities back on track.

Mr. Warner also mentioned that keeping the building open has been challenging and he has taught English, history and science this year. He noted that it has been fun and gives the students and staff a lot of credit for their perseverance. He agreed that the ability to gather together will make a big difference. Mr. Cuginchaug is coming up, the robotics team and Ocean Bowl will be competing as will Envirothon. He acknowledges that some people may feel they are going a bit too fast and he has encouraged staff to be creative.

Mrs. Keane explained that the Root Center will provide mental health services to high school students during the day so that they don't have to get a ride after school or try to get evening or weekend appointments. They have had great interactions with the Root Center as well as a great recommendation from another district. Mr. Warner stated that he met with Root Center today and they are working on how families will be notified. It will start with an assessment of the student and they also have the ability to prescribe with parent consent. They can also do group work. He explained that they are located on Saybrook Road in Middletown, so students can go there as well. Root Center also offers family support. There is no charge to the district for these services.

Mr. Warner also noted that they will make the counseling sessions work, no matter what the students have. Sessions will be approximately 20 to 30 minutes and he will tell the teachers that they need to accommodate that for the students. They will start on Mondays, but can go to three days a week.

Mr. Warner thanked Mrs. Gonzalez for allowing the eighth graders to come up to Cuginchaug to highlight the related arts fields. He felt that students need to be able to select their courses in their freshman year to be able to reach the highest realm of whatever area they like. They gave students a list of all the courses in the related arts and allowed the students to talk to the teachers. The choir and band performed, NHS students toured the eighth graders around and they had a showcase in the gymnasium and saw the art and tech wing as well.

Mrs. Schaefer added that it was a real buzz and the students were excited about high school. They were excited about robotics and Pilates. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that her sixth graders talked about it as well.

Mr. Moore thanked everyone for coming and providing their input today. He felt that there were ideas that they could move forward with and they will keep the dialog going.

Mrs. Gonzalez stated that it breaks her heart to hear Mrs. Schaefer say she feels inadequate as she is one of the most student-centered, competent teachers in the district. Mrs. Schaefer thanked her for the acknowledgement and the acceptance.

Public comment

None.

Adjournment

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting.

In favor of adjourning the meeting: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Keane, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Schaefer, Mrs. Schmidt and Dr. Stephan. Motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:44 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz
Alwaz First