

EASTON BOARD OF EDUCATION REGULAR MEETING

Held remotely via Zoom:

<https://zoom.us/j/96902976868?pwd=YWp1MjJYOG9KbWwremhRNEpGT2R2UT09>

Meeting ID: 969 0297 6868 Password: 06612

May 11, 2021 - 7:30 p.m.

Minutes

ATTENDANCE

Board members: Stinson, Goldstein, Chieda, Hicks, Parker, Wible
Administration: Harrison, Pierson Ugol, Zachery, Del Conte
Others: 63 members of the staff and public, and the recording secretary.

CALL TO ORDER

J. Stinson called the Easton Board of Education Regular meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion: move that the Easton Board of Education approve the minutes of the April 20, 2021 Regular meeting as submitted. (Hicks, Parker). Approved. Unanimous.

Motion: move that the Easton Board of Education approve the minutes of the May 5, 2021 Special meeting as submitted. (Hicks, Wible). Approved. 5-0-1 (Hicks abstained).

PUBLIC COMMENT

Shari Williams, Riley Road, said that the Easton and Region 9 BOEs should re-word and simplify the DEI questionnaire because there seems to be adult terms in it. She said that she thinks the school district is trying to teach shades of gender.

Maureen Hanley, Andrews Road, said that much of the language in the survey is not appropriate at the middle school level and some at the high school level. She said that these conversations belong at home, not in school.

Julianne Licamele, Wells Hill Road, said that she respectfully disagrees with the previous comments. She said that it's really important for information from students to be gathered. She said that surveys can help you figure this out and that a glossary of terms for the students taking the survey is a great idea. J. Licamele said that the DEI Task Force has done a great job.

Kevin Oliver, Lilac Lane, said that the wording of several survey questions needs to be changed and/or reworded.

Jack Bebon, Blackrock Turnpike, recounted several stories about being bullied while a student in the ER9 school system. He said the survey would have helped him and the people who bullied him had it been available when he was a student in Easton. J. Bebon said the glossary would have been especially helpful because it would have helped students find out the terms used to describe all different people.

Susan Falzone, Flat Rock Road, said that she supports the survey and that it's very important to collect information. She said we should all want to know and make sure all students are safe and accepted and not just labeled as "other."

Agnes Bebon, Blackrock Turnpike, said that she supports the DEI work and survey. She said to people who say these things "don't happen here," it does, maybe just not to your child. A. Bebon said that punishment doesn't work, but that education does. She encouraged parents to read the glossary with their children.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENT

J. Parker said that he's always viewed Easton schools as warm, giving and united in providing the best educational experience for our children while also being committed to their social and emotional well-being. For that reason, he said, he voted to approve the creation of the Tri-Board DEI Task Force. J. Parker said that after reviewing the survey questions, he was disappointed to find no substantive work within the DEI Task Force description and he cannot support it as represented. He said he hopes some common ground can be found and revisions made.

D. Wible thanked the voters for passing the budget with a 2 to 1 margin; that showed an incredibly strong support for our schools.

J. Chieda said that it was wonderful to see so many people come out to vote. She thanked J. Stinson, Dr. Harrison, C. Zachery and Dr. Pierson Ugol for framing the budget and getting the word out. J. Chieda said that she wanted to sing the praises for S. Kaplan.

REPORTS

Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Rydell Harrison, reported that the ESSER II Grant had been submitted last week and it was in the amount of \$123,338 over two years. He said this is the second federal grant that the District is receiving as part of the COVID relief response. Dr. Harrison said the grant will address the Priority One area of: academic support, learning loss, learning acceleration, and recovery. He said the District will assemble a small diverse acceleration team who will lead this initiative and will partner with the Center for School Change's Network Improvement Community. He said that an ESSER III grant will be applied for and that there will be a community involvement piece to it; more information on this grant will come at a later meeting. Dr. Harrison reported that HKMS students Audrey Gil and Owen Fellows had been awarded the CAFE Leadership Award. S. Kaplan read highly praising descriptions of each student, written by HKMS staff.

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Dr. Pierson Ugol, reported that the use of student teachers and interns will be reinstated next year; this program had been put on hold because of COVID-19 concerns. She said the student teachers become interns and serve as a support to students, teachers and also the budget since they take on the role of substitutes within their building. Dr. Pierson Ugol gave an update on the communication of District curricula by saying that K-8 ILA and math curricula, with standards and content, will be on the website this fall. She said the delay occurred because last summer Central Office staff needed to reprioritize their energy and the transfer of files from Rubicon Atlas to Google did not take place.

Director of Finance & Operations, Clarence Zachery, pointed out the new EFinance format of the transfers report; it now has descriptions of where the funds had come from and to where they had been transferred. He also said that there had been a few minor format adjustments to the Budget Object Summary, that there was \$125K in anticipated expenditures, and that \$71K in Excess SpEd Costs had been received. In terms of health care, C. Zachery said that the District is doing very well with claims and they are where they are expected to be. There was a brief conversation about the reserve balance and the bank reserve balance, with the consensus being that both are also doing well at this time.

Director of Special Education, Jennifer Del Conte, said that due to the length of tonight's meeting, she would not give a formal report and would just take any questions from BOE members. J. Del Conte said that everything is consistent from last month's report. There were no questions.

Samuel Staples Elementary School Principal, Kim Fox Santora, said congratulations to the CABA Award winners and a huge thank you to the PTO and families for a wonderful Staff Appreciation Week. She said that they had sent out 75 kindergarten registration packets, with 48 having been returned already; she said she feels the potential number for kindergarten enrollment for fall 2021 is 87 students. K. Fox Santora said that Cohort C is down to 22 students, and that they are delighted to have the students back in the building. She said that SSES student Annabel Low had won the UCONN Pedestrian/Road Safety Post Contest and that UCONN representatives came to the school to deliver the award. K. Fox Santora also reported that the 10-month office assistant position had been filled with an internal applicant.

Helen Keller Middle School Principal, Susan Kaplan, thanked the PTO for the Staff Appreciation Week and the wonderful HKMS staff for everything that they do. She said that Cohort C was down to 26 students, or 8% of the student body. S. Kaplan thanked the staff of the Easton Community Center and Easton Park & Rec for their assistance in the planning for the 8th grade celebration. She said that even though the school year is winding down, the staff is working hard every day and not letting up a beat.

BOARD COMMITTEE REPORTS

Task Force on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: D. Wible reported that the DEI statement draft was previously circulated to BOE members and is meant as a guiding statement for us as a Tri-Board; she also said that the statement had feedback from staff, students, the community, BOE members and Central Office staff. D. Wible said that all minutes and videos of the DEI meetings are on the ER9 website. Board discussion started with R. Hicks stating that some of the language in the statement such as "unconscious bias" was not comfortable. J. Stinson explained that the term "unconscious bias" means what may be normal for us, may not be for others and people need to be aware of this and it is not intended to make people uncomfortable, but rather, just aware. J. Parker said that he wanted the language to focus on Easton, instead of the state, the county and the world as he feels it takes away from the work. D. Wible said that phrase is included because we are trying to prepare our children for their experiences in the world once they leave Easton. J. Chieda suggested that some of the language may be hair raising and said perhaps language should be chosen that doesn't cause triggers for people and then will take away from the goal. D. Wible responded that they were trying to stay away from jargon words. The discussion turned to age appropriateness and confidentiality of the survey, with D. Wible explaining that they had a national expert review the survey for age appropriateness and that there is no way to track students to a survey. D. Wible further explained that the survey is optional and

individual questions can be skipped. Some Board members wondered if the survey should be sent out at this point in time, and expressed the desire to have more conversation about it and to also have feedback from the DEI consultant about the survey. J. Parker said that it seems the SpEd students will be left out of the survey. The discussion turned to the lengthy topic of the objective and goal of the survey, with some Board members questioning its purpose. Dr. Harrison said that in order to create an environment that addresses students' social and emotional needs, we need to know what to fix and that the survey is the tool to gather this information. J. Stinson said that they would table the conversation now and set a Special Meeting date with the Redding and Region 9 BOEs. D. Wible said that uncomfortable conversations are hard, but they are helpful and that we should be having them. She said that she is grateful for the bias toward action, but that we need to explain our action steps through data, through the survey.

Policy Committee: J. Stinson reported that they are working on a set of recommendations for guidance for the Tri-Board and the Tri-Board meetings. Examples of questions they considered include: Who is the host of the meetings? Who is responsible for the minutes? How are disputes resolved?

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: VOLUNTARY EARLY RETIREMENT INCENTIVE PROGRAM RESULTS REVIEW

J. Stinson gave an update on VERIP, reporting that five educators and one administrator had taken advantage of this program. He said that replacements for these positions will be at a lower salary and the savings will be \$102,637.87 or \$112,304.67.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: BUDGET ADJUSTMENTS POST VERIP

Motion: move that the Easton Board of Education support the restoration of the .5 FTE PE paraprofessional as part of the 2021-2022 budget, in an amount not to exceed \$16,000. (Wible, Chieda). Approved. Unanimous.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: SUMMER PROGRAM

Dr. Pierson Ugol reported that the Summer Academy Advisor positions for each building had been posted, and that once these positions have been filed the District can launch offerings for families for the month of July. Dr. Pierson Ugol said that the program will be four days per week and will be enrichment based, with an academic bent. She said that she had already fielded questions from interested teachers.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: OVERVIEW OF HIRING PROCESS FOR HKMS PRINCIPAL

J. Stinson outlined the hiring process and timeline, saying that it is aggressive and that the District will be using Dr. Joseph Erardi's search firm, JE Consulting. He said that the position has been posted on the ER9 site and other professional administrator sites, and that he had already received some applications. J. Stinson said that there will be a parent survey and focus groups during May 12 - 28 and that they hope to hear from many voices. He said that they would like to have the first round of interviews during the first week of June; the second round of interviews during the second week of June; and hold a Special Meeting of the BOE at the end of June for the purpose of approving a candidate.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: FINAL DAY FOR EASTON TEACHERS

J. Stinson explained that since teacher and staff contracts went to June 18, 2021, BOE approval was needed for this action.

Motion: move that the Easton Board of Education set June 17, 2021 to be the last day for all staff. (Wible, Chieda). Approved. Unanimous.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: EASTON BOARD OF EDUCATION UPCOMING MEMBER VACANCY

J. Stinson said that he was sad to announce that Gretchen Goldstein would be stepping down from the Easton Board of Education. He said that G. Goldstein has done great work on the BOE and is so connected to the community. J. Stinson said that since G. Goldstein's party affiliation is Democratic, they will reach out to the Town of Easton Democratic Committee to recommend a replacement. He said that the BOE will vote on that person at the June 8, 2021 meeting.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Kathy Thompson, Mile Common Road, thanked everyone for all of their efforts, but said that seeing the recent decrease in NWEA results is troubling to her. She said that the HKMS school day includes large chunks of downtime with busy work and/or using on-line services and that we must deliver more significant instructional time.

Gale Bella, Crescent Drive, said that when students who have had to repress a side of them read the DEI survey they will know they are seen, heard and validated. She asked how that could possibly be bad for them. G. Bella said that we are talking about children's rights to feel validated and recognized by their environment, and asked if we are willing to sacrifice this because of a perceived sense of lack of town unity.

Dana Benson, Pond Road, urged the BOE to consider unlimited Public Comment at the beginning of the Board meeting. He said that the survey was no accident as it was created by GLSEN, and GLSEN is a political organization, and that no concessions were made because the Task Force was convinced of the rightness of their cause and ignored conservative parents. D. Benson also thanked everyone for their service.

Jalen Johnson, Forerun Road, said that everyone needs to realize that the survey is not just for students in the minority or the majority, but it is for everyone. He said that not everything is going as well as we think it is, and that the survey is an outlet for students who don't think things are fine.

Krista Zilberg, Lobdell Lane, said that it is very hard as a special needs parent to know how it would go with the survey. She asked if there was something to help explain the survey to SpEd students.

Patti Wunder, Golf View Drive, thanked those who have taken the time to put together the DEI survey. She said that as the mother of a trans daughter, she supports the survey and appreciates how inclusive they are. P. Wunder said that using the options and identities is so that many students will feel like they've been seen; she wondered if the kids are more ready to have these conversations than the adults.

Maureen Hanley, Andrews Road, said that we're not raising strong adults anymore, that we're pandering to whatever social movement is going on.

Kevin Oliver, Lilac Lane, said that he wanted to express appreciation for everyone at HKMS, and that the NWEA testing results show that the emphasis doesn't seem to be on reading, writing and arithmetic.

Julianne Licamele, Wells Hill Road, said that she appreciates all the educators and all the things from my town, but not everyone had the same experience. She said that the survey will recognize cross sectionality and this will help everyone. J. Licamele said that conflict keeps us going and helps us to move forward.

Jack Bebon, Blackrock Highway, said thank you for the kind words said on his behalf and that the experience of which he spoke is not unique to him. He said that the survey will help identify issues affecting students and that it has nothing to do with politics.

Sara Hunsucker, Elm Drive, said that we need to go beyond tolerance to be at a place of respect. She said that recognition of people's identity is a basic human right and that no one should have to hide who they are.

Agnes Bebon, Blackrock Turnpike, said that students cannot be successful in reading and English, or any part of school, if they're being bullied constantly for who they are. Schools also have a responsibility for a Civics education and this is part of it.

Cheryl Graziano, Deacon Abbott Road, Redding, said that she is a member of the DEI Task Force and that they were very deliberate in hearing many voices. She said that GLSEN is not a political organization, but an educational one. C. Graziano said that the survey is the tool through which they can identify what "more" we should do.

Krista Zilberg, Lobdell Lane, said thank you to the young people for everything that you said. She said we all should come together and find a happy medium and stop fighting each other; that we need to come together for our kids.

Tracy Carlucci, Morning Glory Lane, said to the parents who said we are coddling our children by recognizing their unique identities, I disagree. She said she's all for giving our children all the "smarts," but it's also about what kind of world we want them to live in, and she supports the work of the DEI Task Force and the survey.

Dana Benson, Pond Road, read aloud a description of GLSEN from an undisclosed source and said he had a rhetorical question for C. Graziano in "what is school for?" D. Benson said that an individual has a personal responsibility to get themselves help. He thanked everyone for their service.

Jennifer deJesus, Laurel Drive, thanked the BOE for the respect you have amongst each other to talk about this important topic. She said that she's very supportive of making sure all students feel included

and safe at school. J. deJesus said that more than half of this community doesn't understand what those terms mean and they need to since it's basic human rights.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENT

J. Chieda thanked everyone for their comments. She said that she thinks we can do better and that it would be prudent for us to tweak the survey a little and consider what is going on in our community. J. Chieda said that our goal is for this to work out.

D. Wible said thanks for the feedback and at the next DEI meeting, they will articulate more clearly about the purpose of the survey. She said they want to make sure students feel represented in the classroom.

R. Hicks said that we have so many professionals in the buildings and he doesn't understand why Jack didn't feel comfortable talking to these adults. He asked about having a BOE Special Meeting to further discuss the survey.

J. Stinson said that he will check with the other BOE chairs about setting a date for a Special Meeting for this topic.

ADJOURNMENT

**Motion: move that the Easton Board of Education meeting be adjourned. (Hicks, Parker).
Approved. Unanimous.**

The meeting was adjourned at 10:58 p.m.

Submitted by Gretchen Goldstein
Secretary, Easton Board of Education

Recorded by
Sarah Ota