

TOWNSHIP OF UNION BOARD OF EDUCATION
WORKSESSION MINUTES – FEBRUARY 9, 2021

NOTICE OF MEETING:

TO ALL BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERS:

The worksession meeting of the Board of Education of the Township of Union was held on Tuesday, February 9, 2021 at 6:00 p.m. via Zoom, pursuant to the notice sent to each member. Action was taken.

Mr. McDowell called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

PRESENT AT ROLL CALL:

Mrs. Yocasta Brens-Watson, Dr. Guy Francis, Mr. Ronnie McDowell, Mrs. Nancy Minneci, Dr. Kalisha Morgan, Mrs. Nellis Regis-Darby, Mrs. Kim Ruiz

ABSENT AT ROLL CALL:

Mr. John O’Shea (arrived at 6:57 p.m.), Mrs. Mary Lynn Williams

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT:

Mr. Gerald Benaquista, Mrs. Yolanda Koon, Mrs. Kim Conti, Mrs. Ann Hart, Mr. Craig Wojcik, Mr. Barry Loessel (7:00 p.m.), Mrs. Maureen Guilfoyle, Mrs. Sandra Paul

ALSO PRESENT:

Mr. Lester Taylor, Esq. (6:33 p.m.)

Mr. Minneci led the Board in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mrs. Koon read the statement required under the “Open Public Meetings Act”, a copy of which is on file in the office of the Board Secretary.

Mr. McDowell read the District’s mission statement.

Mr. McDowell stated we are doing something new – we started an hour earlier and we are going into executive session and we should be back by 7 p.m. to start the worksession.

MOTION FOR EXECUTIVE SESSION:

Moved by Mrs. Ruiz, seconded by Mrs. Regis-Darby, that the Board go into Executive Session at 6:10 p.m. to discuss the following subject matters without the presence of the public in accordance with the provisions of N.J.S.A. 10:4-12b: personnel matters and any other confidential matter.

Please take notice that minutes will be taken of the discussion conducted during the executive session and the Board will disclose the minutes of the executive session when the disclosure will not result in unwarranted invasion of individual privacy or prejudice to the best

interests of the Board of Education and provided that such disclosure does not violate federal, state or local statutes and does not fall within the attorney/client privilege. Action may be taken when the Board reconvenes in public session.

AYE: Mrs. Brens-Watson, Dr. Francis, Mrs. Minneci, Dr. Morgan,
Mrs. Regis-Darby, Mrs. Ruiz, Mr. McDowell

NAY: None

ABSTAIN: None

MOTION CARRIED

The Board returned to public session at 6:54 p.m.

Mr. O'Shea arrived at meeting (6:57 p.m.)

Comments from Public on Resolutions:

None

Approval of Minutes:

Minutes will be approved at next week's meeting.

Communications

Communications are part of personnel and operations.

Superintendent's Report:

Mr. Benaquista stated the student liaisons will be with us next week and they have been meeting with the high school administration. They are getting more feedback from the students and they created a Google Doc so it is another way to get feedback from students at different grade levels. The student liaisons starting in March will be at the worksession instead of the regular meeting. I will give an attendance update and report on HIB. I will highlight some of the important things around the district as well as sending out a video to highlight all the other things.

Education/Student Discipline Committee Resolutions:

Mrs. Ruiz stated the education committee met and spoke about the AP/Honors. The AP committee chairs presented to us the AP/Honors admission process. There is no longer an application process. (Mrs. Ruiz was having technical difficulties)

Mrs. Brens-Watson stated since Mrs. Darby was present yesterday, would it be easier for her to make this report since you are having difficulties? Mrs. Regis-Darby stated try to log off and log back on or go on to the next committee and have her do it after. Mr. McDowell stated good suggestion – is that o.k. Mrs. Ruiz?

Mrs. Ruiz stated I'm on another device – whenever I join this meeting with this Chromebook, I have this issue.

The Education Committee met yesterday and we discussed the revised AP/Honors course admission process which will no longer have an application process. Students that pass the course successfully with an “A” will automatically be placed into the next level course in that Honors/AP track. I believe Mrs. Moran is going to present an indepth presentation with a slideshow. The students that aren’t automatically placed into the AP/Honors course because they didn’t have the pre-requisite, have an “A” or “B+” average, they will meet with their counselor prior to scheduling so that they can get their courses ready for the next year and they will be asked by their counselor whether or not they want to be placed on the waiting list for that course and if they say yes they will work collaboratively with their teachers and counselor to submit any supporting documentation they may have as to why they should have a chance of taking that course. Similarly, if the student doesn’t want to take the course and they have been put into the course, they can opt out as well when they meet with their counselor. The most significant change, there is no longer an appeal process or an application process and students would actually have live ongoing dialogue with their counselor during the process. Rather than applying for a course and finding out when they get their schedule whether or not they got into the course and then having to scramble to fight to get into the course.

It will be a rolling process; before we had a hard deadline where the students had to appeal. Now the students have through the summer to be able to make a pre-requisite; for example they need a class in order to take an AP class, they can take it over the summer and be wait listed until they complete the class in the summer and then request the course for the fall.

Every student will be able to be wait listed, even if they had a “C” or “D” average, they can still request permission and submit the supporting documentation that they would need to get into the course.

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated we also talked about the language on the rubric that requested the wait listing – that is a form of discussion that we should have – they talked about the language and changing it on how it is worded. Also, I think it was Mr. Taylor or Dr. Morgan that presented a policy and Mr. Taylor said that all the students were allowed to take any classes that were available to them. Touch on that because we had some questions on that too.

Mrs. Ruiz stated yes, thank you. The two issues that came up was in the chart that we were given, it said that if a student did not make that top cutoff – category 1A – they would then request to be on the wait list and I stated in effect that is an appeal process. The student would still be required to appeal but it was explained to us that it is not actually the student requesting whether or not they would be wait listed, it would be the counselor asking the student during that meeting for scheduling – do you want to be on the wait list? Is this a class that you are interested in? If so, here is what we can do to get you into the class.

The other issue was a few months ago when Dr. Morgan presented the equity and access policy for all classes, one of the positions or arguments brought up by Mr. Taylor was that we already have a policy that guarantees access in Policy 5145. But a review of that policy showed us that is more of an equal opportunity policy in that it prohibits discrimination against any student from taking a class but in fact it does not guarantee any student to take any class and have automatic access which is what this committee’s goal was to create an open access for all

students to take these AP/Honors courses so we increase the number of students in the AP/Honor courses.

Mr. Taylor stated if I recall, you accurately characterized my comments about Policy 5145 being the anti-discrimination/equal access very general statement of policy position on behalf of the district saying that all students, regardless of race, creed, color, gender have access to everything. I think my comments should be distinguished a bit; the only caveat I referenced was access to AP courses, other types of courses are subject to any state and/or county academic prerequisites. If there is a requirement to have an 85 average to get into a class by a state regulation or law, the district can't have a policy saying we are not going to look at grades to get into this AP course. All I was saying at that point in time and I will be happy to work with the policy committee to review existing policies or any proposed one to not only enhance access but ensure compliance with law.

Dr. Morgan stated thank you Mr. Taylor for clarifying that because that is not what I got when you made that comment in September but thank you for clearing that up. Can you tell me how this new way of getting into advance classes, and let's keep in mind that this is not just about AP, this goes all the way down to middle school – I don't like the narrative that it is only AP. Mrs. Ruiz stated it is also Honors Dr. Morgan.

Dr. Morgan asked how is this different from what was already in place? I see the wait list, I see this, I see that but it still sounds like gatekeeping to me. Can someone explain what is different?

Mrs. Ruiz stated to be fair to the committee because they worked on it, I don't want to answer for them. I had similar questions which is why I asked about the wait listing language because to me it did sound like an appeals process with a different name. It was a little bit more palatable to me because when it was explained to me that the student would actually be given the opportunity and asked "do you want to be". For example, you didn't get into Honors Geometry, is that a class you really want to take?" The counselor would sit down with the student. If the student says yes, then the counselor would say here are the items that you need to submit in order to prove your case – it does still sound like the appeal process; that is how it was explained. I don't want to speak on behalf of the committee. I think the better people to answer that question would be Dr. Cohen and Mrs. Moran.

Dr. Morgan stated before next week, because I'm going to be asking these questions so let me put it out there now – we need to be sure that we are focusing on middle school. Middle school courses determine your path for high school and then college. With SAT/ACT no longer being a factor, we must be sure that our students are given opportunities to excel so that they can go to the next level. This is the concern I have been bringing forth because it is not just high school, it starts in middle school. Middle school courses impact high school and the future for many children. If students are not taking calculus by the time they are in senior year, and if we are not having algebra for all students in middle school, then we are not giving our students the best opportunity to be successful.

Mr. Benaquista stated I will make sure that the presentation to the Board that you can ask your questions but I do know that several Board members were part of the committee throughout the process. I do think facilitating a conversation with the counselor is a healthy process. I don't see it as a barrier. Consideration is above and beyond what the criteria was. It is allowing the students to have a voice; to hear from the student that they have a desire to be successful by taking certain classes. We as educators also have to build that self-advocacy that the students need to have when they leave us so they can fight for what they want in college or in whatever they do. I do really feel the committee, which was students, parents, Board members, teachers – did a phenomenal job in redeveloping this criteria to allow really anyone who wants it. Even though there is a wait list, that is a conversation with the guidance counselor. In the past, students would find out that they didn't get in when they received their schedule; that will not happen any more. We will sit with student before the schedules or notifications and if a student wants it and say they want to try to attempt this; we spoke how we are going to support the kids taking AP/Honors. I don't think it is just about allowing more people to take these courses, it is about the success rate when they are taking it and providing support no matter what child it is – a child with special needs to a middle of the road child to a child who is taking AP/Honors courses – and children need support. It is about the support the teachers are giving on an ongoing basis. We talked about summer boot camp, afterschool programs, programs during the day to support the students. I am going to support this change. I want it to be done right. I want our students successful when they go into the AP/Honors.

We also talked about moving forward and paying for the AP courses because the more that we can provide for our students, the more access we provide with the support, in a couple of years think about how many years they will be leaving us as sophomores in college because we provided the support, access to the tests because we have a lot of very talented students. But unfortunately over time they can't afford to take more than one test so they pick which one they want to take; now the school is going to help with that through our title funds. We are providing that access, the support moving forward; we are going to create these programs that will help the kid no matter what. I do not want to set up kids for failure. If that child decides they want to try hard because they have that hard work ethic and passion to take an AP course, then we are going to make sure we support that child just like we would support any child that falls behind or needs help.

I disagree that this is the same, looks the same, sounds the same – unless I'm being lied to. The committee over the past six months and met often and came up with something that is breaking down the barriers to the access to the Honors/AP classes.

Mr. McDowell stated Mrs. Minneci and I were also on that committee and Gerry did a great job explaining a lot of the benefits and changes that were made by the committee. What I liked most about it was the students could advocate for themselves and students would have support when taking these types of courses. There were also students that gave some ideas on changes that they thought would be beneficial to the program. Once Mrs. Moran and Dr. Cohen give their presentation to the Board, and you ask these types of questions then, I do think they did a great job making it more accessible to all the students.

Dr. Morgan stated I still want us to focus on our lower grades. If we focus on the lower grades and they would have no problem going into these courses once they get to the high school.

Mrs. Minneci stated there were some students from the middle school and their parents on the committee and they contributed to the conversation as well. I guess it sounds like when you say AP/Honors that it is focused on the high school but I believe there was a lot of input for the middle school as well. The presentation next week – you will have a better understanding of what was done.

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated we also talked about work samples because the rubric calls for the kids to have work samples and when you look at a good rubric and give the kids what the sample should look like and I think the kids should have that kind of exposure when we are asking them to produce a sample, we should show them what a sample should look like. I think that was a request also.

Dr. Morgan stated I'm excited to hear what the committee proposes. Mr. McDowell stated we are all looking forward to it.

Mrs. Ruiz presented the Education Committee Agenda.

DISCUSSION:

None

Fiscal and Planning Committee Resolutions:

Mr. O'Shea stated the committee met yesterday and after going over the reports we had a discussion in regards to the food service account deficit. I had a meeting with Mrs. Koon, Mr. Benaquista and Suplee Clooney with regards to the numbers of the deficit and where it came from.

This deficit goes back as far as 2015 to the end of school year of 2019 and there is a total of \$273,000 that has not been collected from students or parents with regard to school lunches. The current year of 2019-2020 – there was a total of \$81,900; for a total of about \$355,000.

The problem with trying to collect is there is no record after the year 2019-2020. We have changed the food service contract. We know what the numbers are but we don't know who the parents or students are. We do have from our current provider for the 2019-2020 and so forth. Presently this year under the CARES Act, we are debt free. The government is paying for that. We will have no deficit this year.

The auditors explained what we are going to do with this deficit; I made a recommendation to the members and I will give it to the full Board that we have to take somewhat of a bite of a bullet. The 2015-2019 school years of \$273,000 – we are going to have to write off as a loss. We don't have to write this off all at one time. We can do it 4-6 years as long as we are showing something is being written off.

I would like to and Mrs. Koon and I have discussed with Benaquista to do it in four years. That would be approximately \$68,000 per year we would deduct as a loss. It all depends on what we have in surplus for that year. If we only have \$50,000 we will take \$50,000 off. Hopefully in a four-year period of time.

With regards to the 2019-2020 school year - \$81,900, of that \$8,200 we will never be able to collect because these students have graduated. So we are talking \$73,700 that we will make every attempt to collect. Mr. Benaquista knows that from this point on we have to now start collecting our money. Especially when we do go back, we can't have the situation where we are not watching where are moneys are coming or not coming from.

We will take a look at that year of what students or parents owes us money. We are going to try to collect. Maybe there is a situation where they were out of work or unemployed, moved out of the district – these are the things we need to find out and collect as much of that \$73,700 as we can.

From this point on Mrs. Koon and Mr. Benaquista has agreed, as well as our committee, that we need to go to a POS – point of sale program which would mean that we would go to a swipe card system. Every child will have one. No money is to be handed over or exchanged at any of the schools. Parents are to put the money in these accounts. They will get a weekly/monthly bill. Our food service has a POS program and they will be coming in very soon to speak with Mr. Benaquista and Mrs. Koon regarding that.

We also understand, and it has to be done, that once we set up that POS program in force and this is prior to when we go back full time, all parents are going to be notified on a continual basis that this is a POS program. If for some reason they cannot afford it for whatever reason, then they will have to sign up for the free/reduced lunch program.

We are going to be tough but there is some flexibility based on parents and child's needs. We are not going to stop feeding the child. We are not going to restrict a lot of things because we realize certain allergies and things of that order or what the children can and cannot eat, we just can't give them a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or cheese sandwich on white bread; that is not what we are looking to do. As far as the hot meals, we have to take a better look at that.

Mr. Benaquista is putting a program where the schools will now be in charge of collecting these moneys and there will be a report to this Board every month in regards to the schools. We are now starting to implement that plan. Hopefully this will work; I have seen it work in other district. It takes a while to get the kinks out but children will eat.

Mrs. Ruiz stated we currently have the MySchoolBucks and the parents have to fill the accounts with money and that is how he purchases lunch – that wasn't working that well. It is not much different than a POS program so I don't know how that will be different.

Also the principals were supposed to be and I know they were because we would get emails that the account was overdrawn because he bought ice cream for all of his friends and the parents were supposed to pay. A POS program in my opinion will put us right where we were. I

don't have a solution. The kids will swipe a card that they will probably lose versus punching in a code which is what they used to do to purchase lunch. If they didn't have money in their MySchoolBucks account, it created a deficit for that child.

Mr. Benaquista stated in the past, the reason why people weren't using MySchoolBucks was because of the fees that they were paying. If a parent put \$10 on they would lose \$3 or whatever the percentage was. When we talked to the auditors, the auditors said sometimes it is better for the school district to absorb those costs which we can through the money we are making from food service and it can be offset so that the parents deposit would be dollar for dollar. Mrs. Koon stated that is the plan.

Mr. Benaquista stated when we started before COVID, we started to make traction in collecting. We stopped the debt from going up. Unfortunately COVID hit and another year went by, we lost more students that graduated. We have had successful administrators keeping track of this. It is about the weekly and daily contact with the families. You have to find out what is going on. You can't find out if you are not making calls at home to see what is going on with that family. We have to find out and make it personal and that will come from the administrators in the building. We can use our system to make notifications but at some point you have to pick up the phone and have a conversation; that is how things get accomplished.

Mrs. Koon stated I am planning to meet with both the representative from Pomptonian, as well as Meg Berry who is getting a stipend who works for district and we will go over the policy, reestablish the traction and reach out to some of these parents. Because of COVID, it has helped in a way as far as this school year, everyone has been eating free. We do plan to meet and try to knock down that debt but we definitely need the help of the principals, as well as the secretaries. We need to think outside the box in all kinds of communications. As far as the POS system we have can generate letters to parents and I think they also offer texting, we just need to exercise all median ways of reaching these parents to find out what the status is so we are working on that.

Mr. Benaquista stated because all the meals are getting reimbursed, we are making money for the first time. Right now it is free for everyone. We have a system that keeps track of how many meals we are giving away and then we are getting reimbursed for that; that is one area we haven't been impacted. It has been helping our district. Mrs. Koon stated as well as us extending our free meals for weekends. The Department of Agriculture is reimbursing more money this year from this program. We are seeing a profit in our account.

Also speaking what Mrs. Ruiz said about MySchoolBucks and the administrative fee, I did reach out and I'm waiting for a call from the representative to see roughly how much it would be for the district to absorb those administrative costs so the dollars the parent puts on the account fully goes to these students' meals.

Dr. Francis stated Mrs. Koon – I'm assuming this \$270,000 is owed to Aramark, our previous food vendor. Mrs. Koon stated no, it is owed to the Township of Union. We hire a food service company to run our program and this is debt that is accumulating since 2015. The debt is \$273,000 from Aramark. They were told it was going to be written off. Apparently when Pomptonian came, you can't just write it off. Unfortunately, they have to be paid from the

general fund. When Mr. O’Shea mentioned that we would try to do it in four years, that is deducting from our “savings” account – roughly \$68,000 a year that we would be paying off. That was debt that was incurred from the previous food service company.

Dr. Francis stated the Township has made those payments to Aramark already. You said we have contracted the Township to run our food service. Mrs. Koon stated the Township hires a food service company to run our food service program. We do pay them a fee for cost of running the business. The \$273,000 debt that we are speaking of is what was incurred from students not paying their lunch and this was accumulated over several years.

Mr. McDowell stated Aramark has always been paid. Mrs. Koon stated yes, Aramark has been paid. Mr. McDowell stated this is like depreciation – when it is being written off – may that is the wrong word. When you say written off, we are not writing checks to Aramark for the past. Mrs. Koon stated no, you are going into your savings account and paying this debt.

Mr. O’Shea presented the Fiscal Committee agenda.

Upon recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the following resolution was moved by Mr. O’Shea, seconded by Mrs. Minneci for adoption:

F-15. APPROVE UCESC – HOME INSTRUCTION

Approve the Union County Educational Services Commission (UCESC) to provide home instruction to students hospitalized at Trinitas for the 2020-2021 school year (this is on an as needed basis), in accordance with the information appended to the minutes.

DISCUSSION:

Mrs. Ruiz stated since we do have a child that is hospitalized and this hasn’t yet been approved, I just want to make sure that child is receiving whatever educational services they should be receiving in the interim? Mrs. Conti stated we are making provisions. We do have home instructors approved in district who in the meantime can provide that service remotely until we get this approved. This contract is in more general terms so that as students maybe admitted to the hospital, we could have this Board approved for all students. They were providing contracts specific to each student which is not efficient. I had this reviewed so that we could do this in general terms.

AYE: Mrs. Brens-Watson, Dr. Francis, Mrs. Minneci, Dr. Morgan, Mr. O’Shea,
Mrs. Regis-Darby, Mrs. Ruiz, Mr. McDowell

NAY: None

ABSTAIN: None

MOTION CARRIED

Operations Committee Resolutions:

Dr. Francis presented the Operations Committee agenda.

DISCUSSION:

Dr. Francis asked Mrs. Koon to speak about O-2 and O-3.

Mrs. Koon stated O-2 and O-3 – I met with our broker Fairview and Horizon reps on Friday regarding our health benefits. Initially informed us in January of renewal rates, the medical was at 6.5% and the dental was at 11.11% which was very high. Mr. Benaquista and myself asked them to go back to the drawing board and push the envelope. We are happy to say that the increase will be 2% across the board as far as medical, prescription and dental. The medical/prescription is \$24,070,163 and our dental is \$757,451.

Mr. Benaquista stated based on the years that we have been working health benefit renewal, we have an idea where we should be based upon data we received and in our experience. It is your claims that pushes your premium. When they came with those numbers, they needed to go back. It is important to note that with collaboration, and there may be districts out there that don't question it and ask people to go back because they don't know, it is important that we keep pushing forward to get reductions in these renewal rates. Our health benefits are a very big cost to our district. Thank you Ms. Koon for working diligently and appreciate your work.

Mrs. Ruiz stated what did we pay last year, compared to this year. Mr. Benaquista stated a couple of years ago we did get a zero increase, our experience was a little bit lower; we are actually trending over the last 12-months pretty good. We have to correct a couple of months and there are different factors that play into that. It is something that Mrs. Koon and I moving forward will keep an eye on. If we can keep the percentage increase down over time, obviously it is going to be savings to the district and the employees. Mrs. Koon stated the other component of that is the employee contributions. Unfortunately with the Chapter 44 that was implemented in the middle of the school year, the district has to absorb the funding for this last six months and that total was roughly \$661,000.

Dr. Francis stated the last two items are the discussion items below and we have done both in the past:

1. Letter from the Township of Union Veteran's Alliance Parade Committee requesting the use of Hannah Caldwell Elementary School's auditorium on May 8, 2021 for a fundraiser.
2. Letter from the Union Township Chamber of Commerce requesting the use of the Union High School facility site for the Chamber's 10th Annual Mayor's Day 5K Run on September 26, 2021.

Mr. McDowell stated both those letters stated they will take the necessary precautions because of the pandemic. We can vote on those next week.

Mr. Benaquista stated the Veteran's Alliance will do temperature checks, social distancing and sign in sheets to keep track. Mr. McDowell stated hopefully by May 8th the world will be a better place as far as COVID is concerned.

DISCUSSION:

None

Personnel Committee Resolutions:

Dr. Francis presented the Personnel Committee agenda.

DISCUSSION:

None

Policy Committee:

Dr. Morgan stated there are no resolutions right now; however, the policy committee did meet and we discussed at length policies 1648, 1648-2, 1648-3 and Mr. Benaquista will take those policies and update our return to school document to be sure that we are in compliance

Technology Committee:

Mrs. Regis-Darby gave the following summary from the committee meeting:

New Business:

- District Technology Plan - At the beginning of the planning stage
- Upcoming District Technology PD for teachers

- Working on current proposals for district telephone and notification systems.
 - Update: Waiting on funding from the state for the notification system. The district telephone system will be done separately.
- Move from Systems 3000 for payroll and personnel to Genesis during the 2020-2021 school year.
 - Update: Contacted Genesis. Negotiated costs to be done over a 3-year period. The virtual meeting will be held on Monday 2/8/21.
- Classroom teacher laptops
 - High, middle, and elementary teacher classroom laptops have been distributed.
- Security camera systems for middle and elementary schools
 - In the beginning stages of investigating this project. Replacing the security server system.
- The replacement cycle of middle school Chromebooks 21-22 school year.
- Secondary Internet access for load balancing of bandwidth for the district.
 - Update: Project completed
- Replacement of current fiber between wiring closets in middle and elementary schools.
 - Update: Fiber is installed in the ceilings. Moving from old fiber to new fiber connections will be done over the next few weeks.
- Replacement of district old electronic whiteboards
 - Continue to replace old electronic whiteboards (SmartBoards/Promethean boards) with Viewsonic touch-panel devices.

Approval of Bills:

Bills will be approved next week.

Unfinished Business:

None

New Business:

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated I attended the Washington School PTA meeting this week. Congratulations to Mr. Petty, he received the Governor's Education Award, which is a good thing for this district. Also they partnered with the Union Library reading program and let's encourage all of our students to check out the Union Public Library.

At the high school the PTA applications for scholarships will be done electronically and the deadline is March 16th. We had 12 submissions for reflections and four of our students moved to the finals – congratulations to all of those students.

Mrs. Koon sent out the budget calendar. I think we need an update on that and where we are in terms of following that budget calendar.

On the district website it states that we are going to be opening pre-k for three and four year olds, do you know where we are going to house our three year olds because we don't have the space in our buildings. What is the plan? Where are we putting these students?

There was a letter sent home today to all stakeholders from Mr. Benaquista – the reopening plan letter. There was some language in there that was questionable. I wanted to see if you could address it Mr. Benaquista. It says in paragraph two “this will allow our facility and staff to successfully deliver high-level instructions for both virtual and hybrid students”. Just want to clarify that our students are getting high-level instruction because I don't want the community to feel that they are not getting high level instruction. Please clarify that.

Also it says that we are going to have a lot of half days. I think we should revisit that. I think the kids should be in school as much as possible. When you look at what is being planned, seems like these teachers are having the same PDs, nearpod, smart board or whatever board. I think the time could be better spent making sure we are giving kids as much as possible and keeping them in school as much as possible.

I think it is State mandated that all PDs are done monthly by the principals in the building. I think that is another way to recoup that time for the students in the district.

Mr. McDowell asked is there anyone who can address her concerns now. Mr. Benaquista stated I can speak about the letter so that the community is fully aware of what is going on.

Yes, we are delivering a high-level virtual learning right now. As you know as we switch to hybrid, the teachers are responsible to teach students in the classroom, as well as at home. With that, the technology department has set up a lot of new resources utilizing more than one computer within the classroom. There is definitely additional training. We met with several superintendents around the State that have been open for quite some time and we took that time to listen to them about the issues they dealt with early on in the year. This is a process to get back open. My goal is to get open for the 2600 kids that want hybrid. It will take additional planning and PD. I am working with all the associations to make sure that this transition is smooth and that we are meeting the needs of the teachers that need extra support and delivering a much harder instruction to students in two different locations. Teachers do need additional PD.

I can also not violate agreements that are set forth already. It is a restructuring of the day to asynchronous in the afternoon. The teachers in the beginning of the year were in front of the students for almost eight hours straight. We heard that teachers and students were burning out so we adjusted our schedule to include more asynchronous learning. These PD days will be an adjustment of asynchronous learning in the afternoon so that I can stay within the contract and provide PD for our teachers and allow them to get more comfortable with the resources that they will have to use to be successful; to keep that high level instruction for our kids. I will be putting out more information about returning to hybrid this week with a definitive date and as well as other things that will be needed for the success of our teachers then making it successful for our students. I will make sure that another letter goes out to our community. If any community member has any issues or are confused they can reach out to my office.

Mrs. Koon stated an update on the budget calendar – it was emailed to all Board members. The highlighted dates are what changed. The DOE put out a budget guideline for this school year. The Governor’s budget message address will be on February 23rd. This is the time that all Business Administrators are glued to the computer. Two days later is when they distribute the State aid notices for the district and that is when we will know exactly what our State aid revenues are.

In our Finance Committee meeting, we did discuss how the budget is developing from the revenue perspective of our tax levy which is a 2% increase. We talked about the salaries and benefits which are one of your biggest ticket items in the budget as well as health insurance, special ed, charter schools, our facilities. I have been reaching out to certain vendors asking them if during COVID when can remain flat as opposed to an increase in some of their rates. I have been successful with a couple of them. I’m still waiting to hear back – a team is looking at a lot of these line items, especially extra pay. We have a lot of extra pays. We are taking a look at that. We have over 2,000 GL accounts. It is a work in process but it is coming together. We will have more definite numbers as they come. Mrs. Regis-Darby stated thank you Mrs. Koon.

Mr. Benaquista stated the pre-k for three year olds, we will be using outside providers to help us with the needed seats for our pre-k program.

Mrs. Ruiz stated our three year olds – is it all three-year olds or is it just special needs? Are we expanding to all three-year olds. Mrs. Benaquista stated yes. We are speaking to providers. Part of the grant we received, they wanted us to branch out to the community and get providers on board. We are maxed out in district. I think this is another way our pre-k program is branching out to provide more. Mrs. Koon stated we will have her budget, which is a part of ours, by the end of the week. We are reaching out to other providers in the community to see if we can rent out some classrooms. Mrs. Ruiz stated that is great. Thank you.

Mr. McDowell stated to have our varsity and JV games broadcast on You Tube, we need 1,000 subscriptions from parents and teachers so that the games can be broadcast. Mr. Benaquista stated that was sent out to the community.

Mr. McDowell stated about the vaccinations and students were taken offline because their immunizations were not up to date – this is in accordance with State guidelines and regulations. Mr. Benaquista stated Mr. Taylor do you want to speak on this.

Mr. Taylor stated the State is just enforcing the existing rules regarding immunization requirements. Absent a health condition or religious exception, the State is enforcing the existing laws regarding immunization subject to enrollment. There are certain exceptions for students who move from out-of-state – a 30-day grace period and also exceptions for students who show effort meaning they received one shot, but are waiting for the second shot. Absent a parent showing effort to get the immunization or exception, unfortunately the district is not allowed to knowingly enroll a student whether virtual or in person without those State mandated immunizations.

Mr. Benaquista stated thank you, any parent that sends us notification that they have an appointment set up, the student is turned on. Any religious exemptions – they are exempt. I did reach out to the County Superintendent to confirm that there was no relaxation because of the districts that are virtual and unfortunately there wasn't. Mr. McDowell stated we started out with 160 violations and now we are down to 21.

Dr. Francis stated it doesn't make any sense – it is not even common sense for the State to try to enforce certain things for immunizations when we are not even in school in our district. It is the same thing as the State trying to do this testing and requiring us to do testing in this pandemic situation. I'm concerned about the children getting behind in school work. If we are really here about the children, I'm not a big fan of blocking kids from their Chromebooks and lessons. You are not doing anything but hurting children. The children are not responsible for their own shots. If they are not being brought to the doctors for their shot, it is the parent's responsibility. States need commonsense in their decision making. Mr. Benaquista stated as a parent I have one belief, but as a sitting interim superintendent, I have to follow statute. The one thing is I wanted to make sure that I wasn't missing as far as the relaxation or flexibility because they use those words a lot during the pandemic that there was not flexibility on the districts to not impact the students this year since we were virtual. It is unfortunate that it wasn't because I agree that a child doesn't have a choice to go to the doctors and getting vaccinated. It is on the parent to be the guardian and make that decision for the child. We are just following the guidelines of the State.

We did set up a clinic in the district for anyone that needed a flu shot. We sent out information on the clinic to anyone who needed any other kind of shot. Next year, we have already be collaborating to try to get other avenues for our community to possibly get the shot from us. Hopefully there will be other options that we can provide next year before the year starts. Unfortunately, February 1st was the State recording and the district still had a lot that were not in compliance and that is where the statute steps in and says that the child needs to be excluded from school. We made many attempts to the parents and sent a letter to the parents. Hopefully next year we don't have any students on the list.

Comments from the Public:

Susan Lipstein stated on behalf of the Education Foundation, I wanted to go over F-12. Next week you will be accepting a donation of nearly \$12,000 worth of equipment that the Education Foundation purchased for the grants for the teachers of the 2020-2021 school year and we never expected that we would have a COVID situation where the teacher may not be able to utilize them this school year but as soon as the teachers are back in school in person they will be using them. They are for kindergarten through high school and list can be viewed at F-12 of the agenda.

For Union High School is getting an immersion education lab which is going to be used in earth science, math and biology. It is eight virtual reality headsets. First of its kind in Union and possibly one of the first in the entire State. Forbes Magazine had an article which quoted professors from NJIT and they said “augmented reality has a potential to revolutionize learning in primary and secondary schools more than any other technology has done in the recent past.” This is the way to move the district ahead and no cost to the taxpayer; it comes from the support of the community.

We still have funds for the 2021-2022 school year – those grants are due March 15th. Someone asked how many teachers get grants – we have given out 163 grants since we started to 129 teachers. There are 14 teachers who have requested grants more than once. Thank you.

Scott Cornacchia stated I’m a teacher at Burnet Middle School. I currently teach 6th grade accelerated; there is no more accelerated for 6th grade. I used to teach 7th grade accelerated. The reason why the accelerated program were established was to get more kids in middle school to take algebra I in 8th grade. It was a report card for the State. Currently we got rid of the 6th grade accelerated program and next year I believe we are getting rid of the 7th grade accelerated program. I know we are revamping the entire process of the honors criteria but the 7th grade accelerated was the perfect place for that kid that may not be the honors or had a bad 6th grade teacher that didn’t like them or whatever or did mesh well them – it was a perfect avenue to get into the accelerated program which you would still take algebra I in 8th grade or even if you accelerated in that accelerated program, you go back into honors. It is a perfect avenue to get kids into algebra I in 8th grade, they are still on track to take calculus and get AP classes in the high school. I think it should go away. I think 6th grade accelerated should be back because it is a great thing for the kids.

Rich D’Avanzo stated as far as the standardized test – the past couple of weeks there has been a lot of take actions as educators have been coming our way. The NJDOE position I assume was that they thought the federal government was going to give a waiver on this but they opened the waiver for states to apply. There has been pressure coming from educators. Mr. McDowell, as a Board, maybe you can write up a letter and send it to the Acting Commissioner at NJDOE or inundate them with emails. I have had conversations with State Assembly people, one State Senator as well. I haven’t heard an update since last week but there has been numerous discussions. Also coming from the NJEA president to Governor Murphy and I guess it depends who is in his ear but I also heard that Pearson has no platform for giving any type of standardized test in a hybrid setting and you are then inviting every student to come into a building at some point to take the test. Hopefully from your end you can request and push the State in that

direction. If you wait for the federal government I think they have their hands full with enough things and COVID relief as it is. I had a call with Congressman Malinowski and there are a lot of things associated with the stimulus bill and everything else but when they get to it who knows – the deadline is soon approaching for the State so maybe you can draft something up and give them a push as well.

Elsie Mackey stated can we get clarification of the accelerated program going away. When my son was in school there was an issue with the curriculum got changed and he and classmates that were good in math, all of them started to get D's. It definitely helps to have that foundation in middle school before going forward.

In terms of finances, I remember when the district chose Pomptonian and my recollection was they were supposed to take care of all of that outstanding balance. We can do a write off loss and that is a great idea but there is a gray area when we are not getting clarity on what exactly happened in terms of communication with that.

In terms of budgeting with the special education, that is where everyone goes to, I would like to know what you guys are doing as a collective to get people to negotiate on our behalf or whatever they do behind the scenes. Are you engaging your leadership – your political leadership? I know a lot of people have issues with whatever, but what are we really doing to ensure that we get the maximum amount of money to support it because special education tends to be where you go to deflect in terms of budgeting issues.

This might be for Mr. Benaquista or Mr. McDowell, one of the things I asked for before is clarification of what the BOE stands for, what you do, what is your overall responsibility, especially with the committees because we never get to understand who is responsible for what. It is either deflected on the superintendent or it's projected wherever. I called a lot of people they don't know what you do. We get all these promises but if we could get some clarification of what is actual role, especially as it pertains to special education because that is what we always hear and then it comes back we can't touch special education because of such and such and it has to go to the superintendent – so clarification on that.

Also can we get some info on transparency for the superintendent search? We all know about the Patrick Martin fiasco and there are some trust issues. How is that going to be? What does that look like? I see the survey; who is monitoring you to make sure that it is all fair across the board.

In terms of Mr. Benaquista, I'm just making sure he is not set up to fail. What is the status of the two vacant assistant superintendent positions and the manager of personnel – how are we dealing with that? Is it just him? Are there people subbing? What is the Board's plan?

The stigma associated with special education, with people with disabilities, is changing and evolving. What are you guys doing as a Board to bring in policies, curriculum, to ensure that we have our community and our students more engaged. What are we doing in terms of curriculum? What are we doing so when our children grow up, being more encouraging and seeing that disability doesn't define the student, a student can be so much more; but it comes

with education and resources. If we can get someone to get a policy going on that – it would be greatly appreciated. It would be good to hear some policies for the special education.

Jeffrey Monge stated Mrs. Koon, I really appreciate what I heard as far as you reaching out to current contractors about trying to reduce their rates. I don't think I have heard that in the past. I definitely appreciate that effort.

Mr. O'Shea, I definitely appreciate you offering a lot of details as it pertains to food service costs. I think writing it off is not additional money, I think it is an accounting correction – probably a receivable that needs to now be adjusted. That has been out there for quite awhile and I don't understand why that information could be lost from going from one food service contractor to another since it was an accounting item internally. It predates Mrs. Koon.

Mrs. Koon made a really good point on a number of budget items that have been moving greater than probably our tax levy. One I talked about in the past is the charter school costs. Board members should really pay attention to F-2 budget report – first page, there is a column that was the original budgeted amount and charter schools is \$116,000 and now there is almost a \$150,000 difference from what was budgeted. That has increased over the six years that charter school costs have gone up about 150%.

Mr. Benaquista, as far as an update on COVID readiness for not only the district but really for schools; it would be interested to see what is needed per school. What schools are ready? Which schools are not ready? If schools are ready, what is the plan to go hybrid with those that are ready versus those that are not ready?

Lastly, the energy savings funds that were drawn on last month, there was supposed to be a budget offered as it pertains to those funds and there was a great reduction on what was proposed or requested to what actually pulled out – it would be great to get an update on that.

Mr. McDowell stated the timeline for the superintendent search is on the district website.

The district lost another employee this past week. A young mother, Faith Thomas; she worked for Sandra Paul. She passed away last week of an illness. She leaves behind two sons, one 15 and one 6 years old, and her mother. We will have a moment of silence for Faith Thomas.

Thank you and please remember her sons and her mother as you lay on your pillow tonight.

MOTION TO ADJOURN:

There being no further business before the Board in public session it was moved by Mrs. Minneci, seconded by Mrs. Ruiz, that the meeting be adjourned at 8:39 p.m.

AYE: Mrs. Brens-Watson, Dr. Francis, Mrs. Minneci, Dr. Morgan, Mr. O'Shea,
Mrs. Regis-Darby, Mrs. Ruiz, Mr. McDowell

NAY: None

ABSTAIN: None

MOTION CARRIED

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

YOLANDA KOON
BOARD SECRETARY

