

TOWNSHIP OF UNION BOARD OF EDUCATION
SPECIAL MEETING AGENDA
March 4, 2021 – 5:30 p.m.

NOTICE OF MEETING:

TO ALL BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERS:

The special meeting of the Board of Education of the Township of Union was held on Thursday, March 4, 2021 at 5:30 p.m. via Zoom, pursuant to the notice sent to each member.

Mr. McDowell called the meeting to order at 5:39 p.m. He stated we are here to discuss Board and district goals tonight.

PRESENT AT ROLL CALL:

Dr. Guy Francis, Mr. Ronnie McDowell, Mrs. Nancy Minneci, Dr. Kalisha Morgan, Mr. John O’Shea, Mrs. Nellis Regis-Darby, Mrs. Mary Lynn Williams

ABSENT AT ROLL CALL:

Mrs. Yocasta Brens-Watson (arrived at 5:58 p.m.), Mrs. Kim Ruiz

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT:

Mr. Gerald Benaquista, Mrs. Yolanda Koon, Mrs. Kim Conti, Mrs. Ann Hart, Mr. Craig Wojcik, Mrs. Maureen Guilfoyle, Mrs. Sandra Paul

ALSO PRESENT:

Mr. Lester Taylor, Esq., Ms. Kendal Longmore

Mr. McDowell 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.

Mrs. Williams read the District’s mission statement.

Discussion – Goals of the Board/District:

Mr. McDowell stated this meeting is to discuss the Board’s and district’s goals; short-term, long-term goals. I have a few goals and I hope that some of the other Board members would also have some goals that we should be trying to attain. We do need goals to take our schools in a direction that is acceptable to our community and district.

The following are Mr. McDowell’s list of Board/District goals and not in any particular order:

1. Hire and support a superintendent.
2. Work toward being a more cohesive board.
3. Safely reopen schools.

4. Assess and remedy learning loss due to COVID-19.
5. Reconsider district reorganization. Our last superintendent had a thought-out plan to reorganize the district. With our new superintendent, we may want to take a look at that again.
6. Prevent lawsuits due to SPED issues – we have a lot of laws suits and I put special ed only because it is not disrespect to the special ed department but one-third to one-half of our lawsuits are all special ed related; maybe see what we can do to prevent those from continuing to come up.
7. Review and update policy manual where needed.
8. Improve ranking of Union High School – that was brought forth by one of the other Board members.
9. Monitoring student achievement

These are just thoughts that I had and I would hope that some of the other Board members have other things that the district should consider as goals and we can also talk about these.

Dr. Francis stated I have three of yours – reorganization of the district; the plan that Mr. Tatum put forth. The other two were update the policy manual to reflect what is needed and what we stand for. The first one is increase speaking time from 3 minutes to 5 minutes and some other ones as well. The other is to improve our standing as well, along with the superintendent that is hired.

Mrs. Williams stated we had a conversation about preventing the lawsuits and some of the special ed issues. Improving our ranking is something that we need to address and the redistricting/reorganization.

Mr. McDowell stated these are not new ideas and giving credit where credit is due – Mrs. Williams did bring up the lawsuits and special ed. Thank you Mrs. Williams.

To improve the ranking of the high school, that may be a long-term goal. Some of the shorter term goals would be hire and support our superintendent; a cohesive board could be long-term, short-term or intermediate; reopening of our schools – I think that is short-term. We are looking at this month to reopen in hybrid form and maybe by September things will have improved in our Town, County, State and country and open up fully in September.

Assess and remedy any learning loss – Mr. Benaquista and I were talking about it this afternoon. It was a mandate from the State saying that they would like to get some local assessment data, not standardized testing, on how our students are, where they are now as opposed to where they should be. When we have a superintendent on board, I think that is one of the things we need to look at and Mr. Benaquista brought up a very good point, how can you assess the learning loss when subjects may not have been taught. You can't lose what you didn't get. I think part of that would mean looking to see where each particular grade should be and then assess that by using our own means, and not standardized tests. I think Mr. Benaquista has data from iReady and some of the other applications that are being used in our school district. I think we need to look at that. We have all assumed that there is a learning loss. How do we

assess that learning loss and that is what we will have to work on if we keep this as one of the goals.

Dr. Morgan stated we need to add monitoring student achievement – it is not just about COVID because that is only one year but when you are monitoring achievement it is over years. You should go back at least three years and see how we are progressing. I understand COVID may have impacted some of our students or may not have but we don't talk about where our students are. Mr. McDowell stated student achievement to their grade or level they are now. Keep in mind that these are district goals, they will have to be accomplished by our superintendent and his staff. The achieving of these goals will have to be up to our superintendent and staff in the district.

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated in terms of how we are going to define the matrix to meet these goals, can you repeat what you just said about the goals and how they are going to be met. Mr. McDowell stated these are the district goals but it will be up to the superintendent and his staff to carry out the individual steps that may be required to open schools safely or monitor school achievement. We can't tell them how. Mr. Taylor made the point last time, this is the what we would like to accomplish. The how is on the superintendent's table.

Mrs. Williams stated when we were talking about special education, one of the things that I thought would be helpful is if we send out a survey to our special education parents and I think that would get the ball rolling on how we prevent or reduce the number of lawsuits. I think we need to find out what it is that they don't feel we are offering and give them a voice. By starting out with a survey to parents with special needs children, that would get the ball rolling. Mr. McDowell stated that seems like one of the "how's" – how would we get that accomplished. I think that is a very good idea for a survey. These lawsuits are coming from the parents not the students. We can find out from the parents what they feel like they are not getting that we should be giving. I think it would help out a lot.

Anything else, I can't believe we are just going to go with my thoughts.

Mr. O'Shea stated I really didn't have any at this point the type of goals because I don't know what the district needs as being a new member. I really didn't know the entire landscape. Definitely, a superintendent of the entire Board's choice rather than a certain person we are looking for – we need a whole-round superintendent that knows what he or she is doing – that is the main factor.

The second one that was surprising to me was the cohesiveness. I never have been on a cohesive board yet only because we have nine different opinions, views and goals that we would like to see. My feeling is certainly the improvement of the district's high school ranking. I know what it was when I was there some years ago and I know where it was last year and I was a little disappointed.

Mrs. Brens-Watson arrived at meeting (5:58 p.m.)

Curriculum will have to be a major part of that. That means we will have to look at certain things that we may have to do regarding our facilities; our buildings are old – we need to renovate if we want special ed kids to stay in our district and give them what they are looking for. I feel the two major points in this world today is mathematics and science. We have to get on board with that a little more – that is my opinion. I'm hoping whoever our superintendent is going to be that they will have vision on where it has to go.

Our big problem, and I'm not picking on the special ed kids because I have a very soft spot for them, but we have to look for other avenues and I'm not going to say cost cutting but just say a little tighter with the belt. Those are things that we have to look at. We have to start looking out of the box rather than the traditional thinking; how do we raise money and so forth. We have to go other avenues. Our product is education; we don't have a product that we can sell, add and subtract. It is strictly ranking of an education. How good can we give an education to these kids? As far as I'm concerned, our main goal. Mr. McDowell stated absolutely true; educating the children that come to our school district.

Mr. McDowell briefed Mrs. Brens-Watson with the goals for the district presented earlier in the meeting and that they are what we would like to accomplish and the how would be up to our superintendent and staff.

Mr. Taylor asked are the goals going to be all nine of these goals or just the ones highlighted? Mr. McDowell stated this is still be open to discussion because I want to make sure that we have buy-in that everybody is o.k. with these goals. I will forward this to all our Board members and get their further thoughts and at a regular meeting we can approve what goals we want. Mr. Taylor stated that was my next recommendation that the Board approve the goals.

Mr. McDowell stated that would be a reasonable thing to do is to give the Board some time to look at these so that we can vote on these at the next regular meeting on March 16th.

Comments from the Public:

Susan Lipstein stated I want to add in and this probably keys into ranking and monitoring student achievement. We have elementary schools in Town that if you look at the rankings, they can be ranked from 4 out of 10 to 8 out of 10; I think we should be looking at goals for those specific schools that are lower so as to raise them and see why they are not as high and try and get all of our elementary schools to do better. I looked at the rankings currently and how we did over the past eight years and some of the schools are doing better than others but they all have the same curriculum so the needs maybe different for some of the children. This is something we really need to look at and getting a consistency across our elementary schools. Not just ranking of the high school; take a look at the elementary schools as well. The middle schools are also very different and the reorganization plan may be a solution. In the elementary schools, figure out why that is and how can those schools be improved.

David Arminio stated I just want to point out to the Board – the Board's goals and I'm sure you got it in your training, that should only be 2-3 goals that are measurable for you to approve. The list that you have may be paired down to 2-3 that you would all agree on and be able to measure by the end of the school year. Mr. McDowell stated thank you Mr. Arminio.

Jeffrey Monge stated you mentioned that the superintendent be responsible for what was on the list but I think the Board has responsibility as it pertains to policy. I think you should look at matrix; what matrix are you using to be able to say you are meeting your goals and the methods of being able to meet those matrix. In the past I have seen goals but never really understood what improvements – what’s the matrix you are using and then what the method is to be able to meet those matrix. I think that is very important in you approving your goals here.

As it pertains to legal, I don’t think it should only be focused on special education because there are legal suits throughout the district that costs the district money. It should be lawsuits in general.

As it pertains to special education and the cost, I think there are two big things that folks don’t always look at. There is an article that I will share with the Board that speaks to this – the funding calculation for special needs is antiquated. It is a calculation from over a decade ago and when our numbers went up in the district, our costs essentially were exceeding the revenues that were coming into the district. It is something I will share with everybody to educate themselves on it.

Lastly, how we contract third parties for special education services – we have a million contracts and you should consolidate those services, put out an RFP and see if someone like Children Specialized could offer a proposal for the same services, same quality, if not greater at a cheaper cost.

Mr. McDowell stated I will send you a copy of the goals, please feel free to add, delete and one of our speakers said it might be a good idea to focus on just a few of these and not all of these. I think it is a very good idea. I’ll send it out tonight and take a look at them and give us your thoughts and we would like to approve the goals at the regular meeting on March 16th.

MOTION TO ADJOURN:

There being no further business before the Board in public session it was moved by Dr. Francis, seconded by Mrs. Minneci, that the meeting be adjourned at 6:11 p.m.

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

NAY: None

ABSTAIN: None

MOTION CARRIED

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

**YOLANDA KOON
BOARD SECRETARY**