

Amherst School Committee Meeting
Thursday, October 20, 2016
Library, Amherst Regional High School

IN ATTENDANCE

Katherine Appy, Chair
Phoebe Hazzard
Anastasia Ordonez
Eric Nakajima
Vira Douangmany-Cage

Mike Morris, Acting Superintendent
Sean Mangano, Finance Director
Faye Brady, Student Services Director
JoAnn Smith, Student Services Administrator
Public and Press

1. Call to Order and Approve Minutes

5:05 p.m.

Ms. Appy called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m. and welcomed new member Eric Nakajima who was selected to fill an open seat on the committee out of a field of six candidates. Ms. Hazzard then moved to approve the minutes of September 6, 2016. Ms. Douangmany Cage seconded and the motion was approved with four in favor and Mr. Nakajima abstaining.

2. Announcements and Public Comment

5:07 p.m.

Ms. Appy announced that the Amherst School Committee will have a team of four members at the AEF Trivia Bee on Thursday, October 27 at 7:00 p.m. Mr. Morris acknowledged AEF for the award they recently won acknowledging all the work they do on behalf of the schools. Kimberly Stender, community member, read a statement regarding the recent situation involving her friend Karen Dunn and the letter Ms. Dunn sent to the Amherst School Committee (attached).

3. Acting Superintendent's Update

5:12 p.m.

Dr. Morris noted that October is Disability Awareness month and our SEPAC is sponsoring an awareness campaign in the schools. He noted that he will show the slide show developed by SEPAC at next week's Regional meeting. Dr. Morris noted that on Monday and Tuesday of this week, he and Chair Appy attended the School Diversity in Action conference in Washington, DC, which was co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, The Century Foundation and The National Coalition on School Diversity. He reported on the sessions attended, noting that the learning was inspiring. Ms. Appy agreed and said that a theme repeated at the conference was the importance of School Committees working in conjunction with administration to push this important work forward. Ms. Hazzard asked if this conference was something Amherst was invited to. Dr. Morris clarified that it was a closed conference by invitation only. A representative from The Century Foundation called him after seeing the environmental equity implications of the Amherst Elementary School Building Project. Ms. Ordonez asked if Dr. Morris could speak to any concrete ideas he may have heard at the conference regarding recruitment and retention of staff of color. She also noted that she believes the School Equity Task Force would be interested in working with the administration on this work. Dr. Morris reported on the panel discussion session *Diversity within Schools: Teacher Diversity and Development*. He reported that the panelists shared that the pipeline of diverse candidates is small, which impacts districts' ability to hire. Dr. Morris noted that the district is doing a great deal of "build your own" recruiting through the district's para-educator education program. For retention, the Districts have an ALANA group; however, just having a place for an ALANA group to talk is not enough according to the panelists. It is important for the ALANA members to have a voice in policy matters in the district. Dr. Morris noted that he will share a report with the School Committee on this issue from The Shanker Institute. Ms. Douangmany Cage expressed appreciation for Dr. Morris and Ms. Appy attending the conference and for Ms. Ordonez attending the SETF meeting yesterday. She noted that SETF talked about the racial imbalance in both educators and students and would like to get that data. SETF is talking about SMART goals they can propose to the school committee and the Superintendent, noting that this is the type of collaboration they hope for. Dr. Morris noted the importance of also looking at similar data around other

employee groups, as well, for a more holistic look at the district. Dr. Morris reported on the water testing update. Ms. Ordonez noted that a community member has suggested that bottled water should be provided to students, but she believes that is not a good solution since bottled water is not regulated and may contain toxins. She noted that she is comfortable with the measures being taken. Ms. Appy stated that the state paid for the water tests, but they are not paying for the repairs identified through the testing. She stated that the testing was the right thing to do, but said she would like to discuss advocating with the state for them to pay for the repairs as well. Dr. Morris very briefly reported on the Roger Wallace Excellence in Teaching Award, open houses, the Best Wildwood Buddies event, the preschool playground dedication at Crocker Farm and the Aequora Program which is part of the after-school program at Fort River. Ms. Appy noted the upcoming SEPAC events which are scheduled for October 24 and November 14 and encouraged School Committee members to attend.

4. New and Continuing Business

5:42 p.m.

A. Appoint New Amherst School Committee Secretary

Ms. Appy nominated Ms. Ordonez for the role of Secretary and asked for any other nominations. There were none and Ms. Ordonez's appointment was unanimously approved.

B. FY17 First Quarter Budget Update

DOCUMENT: Amherst Public Schools FY2017 First Quarter Budget Update

Mr. Mangano reviewed the highlights of the FY17 First Quarter Budget Update, noting that things are on track at this early point in the year. He reviewed payroll, noting that those figures are pretty stable at this time; however, it is too early to project expense accounts. Ms. Appy asked if the figure for the superintendent search reflects only the Amherst portion. Dr. Morris noted that it does and outlined how the estimate was determined. Ms. Douangmany Cage noted that some parents have brought to her attention the school lunch debt policy that was passed in 2013 and is about to be implemented. She said it would be good to discuss it at some point as a way to problem-solve ways to support families who may have difficulty paying. Ms. Appy suggested bringing the policy back for discussion on a future agenda.

B. Resolution Against Lifting the Cap on Charter Schools (Question 2)

DOCUMENT: Resolution Against Lifting the Cap on Charter Schools

Dr. Morris provided brief background on the resolution, noting that the Pelham School Committee passed it at their meeting last week. Ms. Appy read the resolution aloud for discussion. Mr. Nakajima moved to accept the resolution. Ms. Ordonez seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

C. SuperKids Discussion

DOCUMENT: Letter to Jennifer Harris, Vice-President of Product Development at Rowland Reading Foundation, from Dr. Michael Morris, Acting Superintendent

Dr. Morris reported that he has had two meetings with Jennifer Harris, Vice-President of Product Development, regarding the district's concerns about SuperKids grade two materials. He noted that Ms. Harris was very open to listening to the concerns and is committed to improving the materials. She explained that the illustrator who did the kindergarten and first grade materials passed away before she could do the second grade, which accounts for the change in the illustrations. Mr. Nakajima suggested following up well before the end of this year to get a draft schedule from the company so we can know when to expect to receive drafts of the illustrations. Mr. Morris noted that he will include a sentence in the letter to that effect. Ms. Hazzard asked if the letter should be more specific about what changes we want in the materials. Dr. Morris noted that a great deal of feedback has already been shared with the company so he does not think many more specifics are needed for them to address the concerns. Ms. Douangmany Cage suggested including the district's demographics and mission statement to help the company understand who we are. Dr. Morris agreed, noting that the information can be included as appendices. Ms. Hazzard noted that she would like to see more information shared with the community around the issue, particularly regarding the reasons Wildwood is using a

different curriculum. Discussion followed and members agreed to share ideas with Dr. Morris, who will also think about the best way to communicate around this issue. Ms. Ordonez moved to have the School Committee sign onto the letter. Ms. Douangmany Cage seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

D. Amherst School Building Project Update

DOCUMENT: Crocker Farm 2nd Grade Survey Results, October 20, 2016

Dr. Morris reported that the state has sent official documentation that they agree to fund their portion of the project if local approval is received. He then briefly reviewed the results of the Crocker Farm Second Grade Survey regarding whether parents would want to consider having their children complete their sixth grade year at Crocker Farm rather than moving to the new school. Dr. Morris noted that his recommendation is to keep the door open on this conversation based on the feedback received, which was approximately a 2/3 to 1/3 split. Mr. Nakajima noted that parents may be thinking very differently about this issue as things move forward, but he agrees it is a conversation that should continue. Ms. Hazzard asked who would have the decision-making authority about this issue. Dr. Morris noted that it is in the gray area, so he believes it would be best to have a school committee vote. Ms. Douangmany Cage congratulated Dr. Morris on the League of Women Voters Forum, noting that she appreciates that he was willing to share his thoughts about the building project in such a deep and personal way at a forum.

C. Appoint MASC Delegate

Ms. Appy noted that both the Amherst and Regional committees need to have a representative to attend the MASC conference in the first week of November. Ms. Douangmany Cage and Mr. Nakajima both volunteered to attend so they can represent both districts.

5. School Committee Planning

6:30 p.m.

Ms. Appy noted that all members have heard that the community wants them to go forward in a positive way to do the work of the committee. She noted that, if it is the will of the committee, she thinks it would be good to have a meeting similar to that done with Dorothy Presser at the Regional level. Ms. Ordonez noted that the SETF talked about the possibility of incorporating room on the agendas for formal presentations from the group. Ms. Douangmany Cage said that it might make sense to do the SETF presentations at the Regional level, possibly as a public hearing rather than as a regular meeting. Ms. Ordonez strongly encouraged doing the presentations at both the Amherst and Regional levels. Ms. Appy said it would be helpful if SETF will let her know the topic and amount of time needed for the presentations for agenda-setting purposes. Mr. Nakajima noted that it is important to discuss ways to find opportunities to have policy/programmatic discussions in order to engage the public. Dr. Morris agreed, but noted that the permanent superintendent search and other big topics will take a significant amount of time and will require meetings that are not currently reflected on the calendar. Dr. Morris will summarize a list of topics that have to happen this year to be shared at the Regional meeting next week. Ms. Hazzard noted that she agrees with Ms. Appy's idea of having a mini-retreat for the Amherst Committee. It was decided that Ms. Westmoreland will create a Doodle poll to find a time for such a retreat with potential times starting no earlier than 5:00 p.m.

6. Adjourn

6:47 p.m.

Ms. Douangmany Cage moved to adjourn at 6:47 p.m. Mr. Nakajima seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

I have been following the situation involving my very good friend, Karen Dunn, and felt compelled to speak on her behalf this evening. I am thrilled to know that the *Gazette's* editorial mirrors my sentiments.

My name is Kimberly Stender and I am a former ARPS employee having worked in our schools and the Office of the Superintendent. Several times during my tenure, I was asked to administratively support the three school committees. In addition to taking minutes and sending agenda packets, I was responsible for managing letters sent to schoolcommittee@arps.org.

Over the years I read countless letters from adults and students before sending them to school committee members for review. People expressed their concerns, opinions and suggestions. Some letters were complimentary while others were not. I was always impressed with the level of professionalism and civility our elected officials used to answer questions and clarify information.

However, all this recently changed.

A letter was submitted by a resident which criticized the behavior of two school committee members as reported in local media. It went on to suggest that personal agendas were being promoted through public office. Nowhere in the letter was race mentioned or implied.

I was genuinely shocked and appalled at the incendiary manner in which one school committee member -an elected official - responded to that opinion piece. Rather than address the issue in a collaborative manner this elected official took to social media and launched a highly-orchestrated character assassination.

This elected official labelled the author of the letter a white supremacist and attempted to destroy her livelihood in a combative and very public smear campaign which included Facebook, the *New York Times*, local newspapers and a widely-read blog.

This unprecedented behavior precisely justifies what was stated in the letter – certain school committee members employ egregious behavior, bullying and intimidation to silence opposing voices and promote personal agendas.

This private citizen trusted the system enough to submit an opinion in a letter. The calculated decision by an elected official to publicly retaliate violated the sanctity of the process. I am quite certain citizens will not be so willing to offer opinions for fear of slander and libel from the very people they elect to public office.

Elected officials choose to enter the public arena and open themselves up to criticism. Constituents hold them to high standards. Private citizens do not expect to be publicly vilified by those in power simply because they exercise their right to express an opinion.

Going forward, I hope that all members of the Amherst, Pelham and Regional school committees are much more mindful and respectful of constituents' opinions, concerns and ideas.