

Monday, July 14, 2014

Minutes of the Amherst-Regional School Committee

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**Present:**

Trevor Baptiste  
Rick Hood  
Amilcar Shabazz  
Dan Robb  
Kathleen Traphagen

**Absent:**

Lawrence O'Brien  
Katherine Appy  
Sarah Dolven  
Stephen Sullivan

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Trevor Baptiste called the meeting to order at 4PM, noting he was happy and humbled that people had come to this special meeting. He noted the importance of exercising our right to meet and his desire for openness and transparency in the School Committee's response to the events surrounding the School Equity Task Force (SETF).

Mr. Baptiste asked for a volunteer to take the minutes and Kathleen Traphagen volunteered.

Mr. Baptiste then asked for a motion to consider the memo as proposed and read the entirety of the memo as it was submitted to the School Committee for consideration.

Daniel Robb made the motion and Rick Hood seconded. There was a unanimous vote to consider the memo.

Amilcar Shabazz said, "I profoundly regret how my words were misunderstood. More importantly, however, I would like to apologize to the student and the family that experienced what now has been verified as an unfortunate, violent, traumatic incident. I apologize first of all that this happened in a school district that I serve as one of the duly elected officials charged with "oversight of and responsibility for the school system, [who] sets the direction in which the system must go, and establishes criteria to determine if its goals and policies are being met." What now has been confirmed as having happened in one of my schools on my watch deeply pains me and I apologize for what you have endured. I want a district with zero assaults because our students have learned ways to resolve conflicts peacefully and without resort to violence or the threat of violence. I envision a district where the humanity and dignity of each individual is so respected that it overwhelms the angry impulses, the bilious passions, and the cancerous hatreds that erupt in us all from time to time. Our schools are striving for that vision, but we are short of the mark. I take my share of the blame and will do my best to work harder and smarter to keep our district moving forward, openly and honestly.

Secondly, I apologize for the way I raised what I "heard" in the community. It was incorrect, inaccurate, and inappropriate. If I could go back in time I would phrase things differently. To make it very clear, I called no one a "racist." I did not use innuendo to do so by implication. People who were there, who heard me and who know me better than those who were not there that have sought to reprimand me, know that I did not imply such an odious thing. My comment at the June 18th Equity Task Force (ETF) meeting were to say our district needs help with racism on all sides of the fence, not just with white students. My comment then as

now is that such an incident should not have taken place and should not occur again in the future. Indeed, at the heart of the work of the ETF should be the prevention of such conflicts and the poor school climate and lack of safety it reflects. Nonetheless, when such crises occur that involve our students best practices show that the inquiry we should make as a community is first when and how the event occurred, not why and who. I recognize that my comment invited speculation about motives or the why of the incident; when what I most intended is that we realize we need to dig into the how it occurred. Where were the trusted adults? Did we miss seeing a problem as it festered? Did we fail to have appropriate supervision? What corrective measures are taken in such situations? Are there special needs here we're not addressing? The hope the Equity Task Force and the Amherst-Pelham-Leverett-Shutesbury Regional School Committees will continue to confront these challenges, the fair, open, and honest way in all respects.

I close these brief remarks recalling the words of Abraham Lincoln of more than 150 years ago:

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory...[will swell] when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Rick Hood thanked Mr. Shabazz for his remarks and said he there was nothing that needed to be added.

Kathleen Traphagen noted that this is difficult work and at some point we can expect everyone to make mistakes. She thanked Mr. Shabazz for taking responsibility for his mistake and apologizing. She stated her hope that the SETF set some ground rules for discussion. She also noted that we should all assume best intentions on the part of others, and try to support each other as Committee members when we make mistakes. She noted this is what we want for our children and we should do the same for each other. She noted that we must try not to ignore or deny the problems that our schools have but at the same time not be reluctant to celebrate the many successes.

Dan Robb noted that he believed the Committee was being denied the chance to do its work by the Chair, who has refused to call a meeting despite the fact that a majority of the Committee wanted to meet soon. Mr. Robb noted that he felt as a result the democratic process was not being followed, and that his hope was that the entire Committee would have a chance to meet soon in order to have a full and open discussion about these very important matters.

Mr. Baptiste noted that the work of the Equity Task Force work is paramount. He noted that School Committee members are dependent upon their understanding of the community and it is important to hear from people beyond whom they might bump into at the grocery store or be connected to in some way. He noted that the School Committee created the SETF to increase its knowledge and reach and come to a better understanding about what is going on and how to move forward – the SETF, said Mr. Baptiste, opens up a new avenue for information. He said that work is very important and it is a challenge to do it when the authority to meet is challenged.

Mr. Baptiste noted that the SC needs to model how to appropriately use its power and by so doing, start healing the divisions and schisms in this community. He called on the SC to actively demonstrate this. He noted that the SC needs to 'heal its rifts and then we will be a whole committee again at full strength."

Mr. Baptiste called for any amendments or further discussion before a vote on the memo.

Mr. Robb noted he wanted a stronger statement of wanting to be included in the process.

He offered that the last sentence in the third paragraph be changed to:

This does not meet our School Committee's standards of ethics, therefore we unequivocally disavow the process that led to the creation of the memo, and we call for a meeting of the SC at the earliest possible date.

Mr. Hood noted that he agreed with the first phrase but not the second because he hoped this would be the last meeting to address this issue and he wants to move on.

Mr. Shabazz agreed.

Mr. Hood noted that the most important part of the memo was the last sentence: Therefore, we hereby resolve that the July 3 memo signed by the Co-Chairs of the Regional, Amherst and Pelham School Committees should not be interpreted as representing the opinions of the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee.

Mr. Baptiste called for a vote on the amendment, which passed unanimously.

Mr. Baptiste called for a vote on the amended memo. The memo passed unanimously.

Mr. Baptiste opened the meeting to public comment.

Gaylord Saulsbury spoke about the importance of meeting power face on and knowing that as a 'captain of history' SC members must remove the lid on issues that make people uncomfortable. He noted that the SC has addressed discipline disparities and academic groupings by creating Task Forces and committees and new central office positions but we have not received answers to any of the issues yet.

He called on SC members to be diligent, forceful, outspoken, and look power in the face and meet it with power.

Susan Kennedy Marks then noted she had retired from the schools two years previous and has own grandchild, a white grandchild. She apologized to Dr. Shabazz and noted that it took her several years to believe that 'perception is reality.' She noted that she is treated differently b/c she is white and that "this is a social reality that kids in our district and everywhere face." She noted several years ago Pedro Noguera came to Amherst to teach about context and we need to understand the complicated context of the situation. She said the children that came to the meeting were wonderful and their parents were brave and it was great to have them there.

Vira Douangmany Cage: Thanked all the SC members who came and noted that she believed it 'took a lot' for the SC members to attend. She noted that community members need to keep following the SC closely, educate themselves about FERPA, Open Meeting Law and the SC policies, and work for honesty and transparency. She noted that she wanted her children to graduate with high honors and flourish in the world. She noted that she attends the SETF meetings and supports the SETF. She reminded community members that each person can get involved.

Matthew Jacobsen thanked the SC members for attending the meeting.

Vincent O'Connor also thanked members and noted that the SETF needs to hear from kids of color about their experiences in Amherst Regional Schools. He spoke of his goal that the school system invites all children to raise their sights about what they can do and what their lives can be. Right now he does not think the school system is doing that for all children.

Ajik Marnen (spelling), a teacher at Crocker Farm, noted that it is tough for the children when a teacher is 'bullied out of her job' and there is too much secrecy which makes it easy for people to make mistakes. She asked, 'How can we resolve a problem when it is under the rug?'

Mr. Baptiste noted that was a good point to end and asked for a motion to adjourn.

Ms. Traphagen made a motion to adjourn and Mr. Robb seconded.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:45 PM.

Submitted by Kathleen Traphagen

We, the duly elected representatives of the Amherst Pelham Regional Public School Committee, have created and fully support the School Equity Task Force (SETF). The SETF is tasked with studying and making recommendations for short- and long-range actions to ensure that the Amherst Regional School District provides all students an innovative and academically exceptional education in an environment that embraces racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity and where the educational workforce of our schools proportionately reflects, as closely as reasonably possible, the diversity of the school district as a whole.

The SETF is organizing community conversations, gathering information about perceptions of equity in our district, identifying current challenges, researching effective practices, and developing recommendations for the Regional School Committee. The School Committee's goal is that the SETF provide a venue to heal our community as well as develop a process for all stakeholders to make recommendations that will inform the School Committee's decisions on policies and bylaws. This work is paramount for improving the district's responses to actual as well as perceived inequalities.

This is hard work. The way forward is not simple nor obvious. We know conversations will be difficult and mistakes will be made. We regret that Dr. Shabazz's remarks on June 18<sup>th</sup> caused confusion and distress. We support the notion that clarification to the Task Force was needed. However, if given the opportunity to participate in that process, we would not have approved the July 3 memo released by the Co-Chairs. That memo was released without public deliberation or signoff by a quorum of the school committees. This does not meet our School Committee's standards of ethics, therefore we unequivocally disavow the process that led to the creation of the memo.

Were we given an opportunity to participate in this process, we would have advocated for a more restorative, non-excoriating approach. Our goal at the end of the day is to support the success of the SETF and our school system in addressing the equity disparities that confront us. Going forward, we urge the SETF to agree on ground rules for conversation. We reiterate that we have full confidence in the abilities of Amilcar Shabazz to lead the work of the SETF.

Therefore, we hereby resolve that the July 3 memo signed by the Co-Chairs of the Regional, Amherst and Pelham School Committees should not be interpreted as representing the opinions of the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee.

In honorable service to our communities  
Amherst Regional Public School Committee