

Board of Education Meeting  
June 9, 2014

Call to Order

Board Chair Eccles, called the meeting to order at 8:18 p.m. in the Suffield Middle School Media Center. Present: Board members Lori D'Ostuni, Scott Schneider, George Beiter, Natalie Semyanko, Mary Roy, Mary Lou Sanborn (via telephone); Bob Eccles, Jeanne Gee, Michele Zawawi, and Superintendent, Karen Baldwin

Public Comment

None

Discussion/Action Items

- Board of Education Governance – Roles and Responsibilities

Board Chair Eccles said he had great concerns about having these conversations in a venue other than a public session. He said he has been hearing for several weeks about extreme anxiety and behaviors among Board members that indicate the Board is not working well together or with the administration. Board Chair Eccles said the district is experiencing a lot of change but there is also misinformation that is causing much of the strife and confusion. He said there was a consensus among Board members that they needed a forum to talk about these issues. He said there is no other time between now and August to discuss these issues.

Board Chair Eccles said the district is at a most critical point. The Board has set in motion a series of events, mandates for change. The Board hired Dr. Baldwin to make those changes to improve the district. The Board has a specific mandate to improve the school district. Currently the district is in middle of a tremendous amount of leadership change at the building level. The perception by the community is the system is out of control, but in reality the district is sound and these changes will provide an opportunity for the district to improve. Board Chair Eccles asked for input from Board members.

Board member Zawawi said she is concerned with the many vacancies in the district, including the high school principal position. She was frustrated with the lack of transparency in the hiring process. She stated that most of the applicants for administrative positions in recent years had a connection to the Superintendent. She said she preferred to hire a high school principal who was not known by the Superintendent, and the Board was clear about not having candidates connected to the Superintendent. Board Chair Eccles said he disagreed. He said he expects the organization to recruit for vacancies, and that the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent should be recruiting good candidates. There is a system in place so once they are identified as a candidate, they are treated objectively just as everyone else in the process is treated. The question is whether it is appropriate to disclose that there is a connection to the applicant. Board

member Zawawi said she was questioning the system. Board member Semyanko asked Board member Zawawi to clarify how the hiring process is not transparent. Board member Zawawi replied that she was questioning the transparency of bringing all stakeholders into the process. She felt the high school interview committee was handpicked.

Superintendent Baldwin said she attended the April 24 high school faculty meeting to get the faculty's input on the type of leader they want in the next high school principal, to outline the hiring process, and to seek volunteers to serve on the interview committee. Everyone on committee who volunteered was selected except for one teacher because he represented a redundancy in a department. Serving on an interview committee is how one gets to know a candidate. Board member Zawawi said she was hearing that there were sub-par candidates in the pool and the current front-runner has an educational association with the Superintendent. Board member Gee said she was deeply concerned that Board member Zawawi would have that information when the process is supposed to be confidential. Board Chair Eccles said the high school interview process has been no different than any other position's hiring process. Board member Gee added there were six people who interviewed, and there was unanimous agreement by the committee that one candidate stood out among the others. She also noted there were candidates that have worked in the district in the past so they were known by many on the committee. Board member Eccles asked what difference did it make that the candidate knows Dr. Baldwin. Board member Zawawi said in the current climate the timing is difficult and she was listening to teachers' concerns. Board member Gee said Superintendent Baldwin said, in full disclosure to the committee, that this candidate should be treated as an internal candidate. Board member Zawawi said she would like to see more parents involved in the hiring process. Board member Gee said even though she was not on the committee at the time, she wanted to see all 18 applications so that she was better informed during the Board interview process. The Superintendent provided that opportunity to all Board members. She suggested bringing this topic to the HR & Personnel subcommittee to make that a standard practice. Board member Gee added the hiring process is more transparent than it has ever been in the past. Board member Zawawi said she felt the Board was a rubber stamp committee when they come to the Board for the final interview. Board member Eccles disagreed and added the Board has a history of not being a rubber stamp committee; the Board has not approved applicants in the past. Board member Zawawi would like the Board to have a week's time to decide on candidates. Board member Gee said that process would be burdensome since it is difficult to schedule a time for the full Board to meet outside of regular meetings, but more importantly instituting that procedure is evidence of a fundamental breakdown of trust among Board members. The process should not be changed because of a lack of trust. Board member Beiter said the Board should have the opportunity to meet with the

interview committee to get their feedback on the candidates. The way the Board is ganging up on Michelle is similar to what some interview committee members reported which was perceived as intimidating. The current process allows for an interview and the Board has only about 20 minutes to make a decision. He would also like to have a conversation with the Board representative on the committee. Board member Semyanko said that scenario is different than what Board member Zawawi is saying about the process not being transparent. She said the process was completely transparent. Dr. Baldwin facilitated a collaborative process, and she encouraged everyone's participation and input during and after the interviews.

Board member Beiter left the meeting.

Board member Eccles said that he became informed that a parent spoke at the June 3 Board meeting and made a statement that the Superintendent disparaged building administrators at a parent meeting. Board member Eccles was informed by the Superintendent that the issue needed to be investigated by the Board. He contacted other parents that were present at that parent meeting, and there was consensus that the statement was untrue.

Board Chair Eccles said the hiring process has worked well, with representation by the Board, administration, staff and parents. He asked Board member Zawawi if her objection to the process was that the front-runner is affiliated with Dr. Baldwin. Board member Zawawi did not feel the process was done in a fair manner. She felt the committee was hand-picked and concerned that the process was no longer confidential. Board member Gee said if Board member Zawawi felt that the process has not been transparent, then the Board needs to discuss that. The hiring process for the high school principal position has been the same as all other hiring processes. She said the Board has an enormous responsibility and the Board could mitigate the transparency issue if they are able to see all the applications.

Board member Zawawi asked what the Board should do about the teacher survey that was taken. Superintendent Baldwin said the Board does not have a role in that issue. Board member Sanborn said she received an email on that subject from the Board's attorney and she will forward it to the Chair. Board Chair Eccles said the teacher survey is related to the district survey that was sent out on school climate. He said the Board has a perspective on how to manage the results of the district survey and he did not think the teacher survey was any different. He said this is an opportunity for Mark Janick, president of the SEA, and the building principals to take ownership of the issues in each of the schools. He said there will be two new principals in place to address these issues and work with staff on improving the climate and culture in each of their schools.

Superintendent Baldwin said she is proposing that during the two professional development days on June 16 and June 17, teachers will have an opportunity to meet with Mark Janick, Dr. Collin and her to give them feedback on improving the culture and climate. Board member Gee did not think teachers will give them feedback. Board member Zawawi said that is why we need conversational relationships. Dr. Baldwin said it is clear there is a huge gap and disconnect among teachers and administrators, but we all want the same thing. The information that is being shared is very harmful; it is hurting our staff, impacting learning for students, and causing concern in the community. The district is in a period of transition and it has been very difficult to manage. Board member Zawawi said the difficulty is not happening in every district, and she questioned why there is so much discourse in Suffield. Board member Roy said all districts are experiencing the same thing as board member Sanborn had reported out of the last CREC meeting she had attended. Board member Zawawi said there needs to be clarity on what staff's titles are, their job descriptions, and who they report to. Board Chair Eccles suggested an organizational chart. Superintendent Baldwin stated there is an organizational chart, and she added that teachers when faced with a problem or dealing with a complex issue, should feel comfortable speaking with their principal.

Board member Semyanko said during the budget process, when coaches and interventionists were brought up the role of the supervisors was not really clarified, and in her opinion the supervisors have caused more damage than good. Teachers have reported to her that the supervisors do not help with writing curriculum, they harshly critique teachers' work, do not act in a professional manner, and do not know what the supervisors even do all day. Board member Semyanko is concerned that the district will lose good teachers. She was frustrated that the supervisors are treated with such high regard by the administration, but is hearing differently from teachers. Board Chair Eccles said the Board needs to identify what concerns are valid and address them. Building principal leadership is another concern, he said. He questioned how much of the issues are structural and how much are personnel. Board member Semyanko said it may not be the positions that are the problem but those who are in those positions. Board member Gee said the Board needs to determine if supervisor positions are working. She said the positions are meaningful to the administration and she did not want to disregard that. Collaboration is defined differently by members of the Board and by the administration, which needs to be clarified. Board member Gee said she did not feel the supervisors are adding any benefit to district. Teachers who have been teaching for many years are told to change how they teach and instruct. Board Chair Eccles asked if the consensus is the same K-12, or are there successes in different areas. Board member Gee said all teachers are treated the same no matter how long they have been teaching. Superintendent Baldwin said she understands this is a very real issue and she is looking at the structure of the positions versus personnel issues. The ELA and science supervisor positions were in

place last year, and she did not hear that feedback that some teachers were not quality teachers. The district now has a rubric to identify quality teaching, and evaluators have to be skillful and respectful and exercise judgment in using that rubric. A dispute resolution process is in place in the model and the administration is tracking that. The Superintendent said we need to understand the context, but that does not dismiss the concerns expressed here tonight and in other meetings. We need to improve and have discussions around collaboration, and be clear on that as we extend out to the schools.

Board member Sanborn said evaluations were discussed at the June 3 Policy subcommittee meeting, and one issue was that supervisors are responsible for evaluation of some teachers. According to their job descriptions, it should be a collaborative evaluation between supervisor and building principal, but that is not happening. Again it goes back to the definition of collaboration. Dr. Baldwin noted that collaboration between principals and supervisors needs improvement. Board member Gee said in an ideal world that model works, but in reality we have a staff that does not believe in the work of the supervisors. She cited teacher feedback during the hiring process where they feel they cannot disagree with supervisors. Board Chair Eccles said there is nothing inherently wrong with having a committee-based hiring process, and there is nothing wrong with having supervisors on the committee provided there is a culture which allows people to express their views. Board members Zawawi and Gee said that is not the case, and teachers will not express their thoughts. Superintendent Baldwin asked the Board how that mindset has been perpetuated. She said there is a significant disconnect at all levels in leadership and in those collaborative conversations. Board member Gee said the problems the district is experiencing cannot all be attributed to the phenomena of change. She said there was not one teacher from Spaulding at the last Board meeting because the culture at Spaulding is different. Board member D'Ostuni added it is a district-wide culture problem. Board member Zawawi said Board members are not being heard and respected. The Board has requested certain things from the administration and we have to keep asking for them; it is challenging. Board member D'Ostuni said Spaulding has issues as well. Board member Schneider agreed there were issues with the supervisors at Spaulding. He said many teachers are unsure of the supervisors' role and the curriculum process is still much of a mystery to the teachers. Board member Gee said Spaulding staff went from general sadness to general happiness with the new principal, but that does not mean there are not cultural issues. She said it would be easy to say the problems are all due to the changes brought on by the State. She does not want to dismiss teachers' concerns. It is not all due to misinformation and poor leadership. The discussion around academic support was pushed very hard and it did not feel like collaboration in any way; then it got tied to the budget. She said the curriculum supervisors are not working out as advertised. Board member Gee would like to have an honest discussion about the damage that has been caused. Board members Zawawi and Semyanko agreed.

Board Chair Eccles said he is very concerned whether the Board is going to allow the Superintendent to run the district. He asked how effective the Programs and Services subcommittee has been in evaluating proposals and curriculum change. Board member Gee said it has been a good way for voices to be heard that may not have been otherwise. If academic support had been eliminated there would have been an even bigger issue. Academic support is more than an instructional model, it is a cultural model, she said. We did not feel it was appropriate that within a six week span those positions be eliminated without fulsome data. Board Chair Eccles said productive discussions around these issues can occur in Board meetings.

Board member Semyanko said the Board's and the Superintendent's vision is to improve the district, and it is important that all views are heard, even when we are not always going to agree. The goal is to service the 2500 students in our district. Board member Eccles stated we were a system in despair and that's why we hired Karen. Board member Zawawi said three years ago Suffield was not a district in despair as evident by the honor of being number 26 in the nation. Dr. Baldwin said the district has four ambitious strategic goals, and the district is finishing year two in which significant work has been done. Dr. Baldwin agreed that Suffield is not a district in despair, but there is an opportunity for improvement. Board Chair Eccles said before hiring Superintendent Baldwin, the organization's leadership was unsatisfactory. Administrators would mock Board members to their staff. Board member Zawawi said teachers are discouraged and no longer have autonomy, and the Board and administration are not listening to parents. The district has lost great people in an attempt to be great. Board member Gee said we need to be careful how we characterize the district in public.

Board member D'Ostuni said she has identified four areas of concern: culture issues, leadership style issues, lack of trust, and relationship building. She is not happy with how the Board is operating. We are at a point where other areas cannot move forward until these issues are acknowledged and remedied. She has recently been concerned with the initiatives that are occurring, such as the college and career counselor position that was posted without collaboration and then had to be removed. The leadership style is not collaborative. We need to have a scale to determine what the district culture should look like, and be able to measure what we want to see, and focus on the results. She said for the first time as a Board member she is unable to answer parents' questions due to lack of explanation to the Board, for example, the middle school schedule. In instituting new initiatives, communication by the administration has been lacking. Board member D'Ostuni said the only voice she feels she has is in Board meetings. She said she has made statements in meetings to bring issues up but she has not been listened to. She said change in leadership will not solve the problems. She wants to see a collaborative

environment going forward, and responsibility to be taken and owned where it should be, and to have a clear plan moving forward.

Board member Zawawi stated when she was elected, she did not have any issues with the school system. She now has a bucket full of concerns. Board member Sanborn said there are a lot of issues that have gotten out of control. She asked the Superintendent to assemble a list of priorities on how to remedy the issues brought up this evening. Board Chair Eccles said the last few months have been difficult, but he was more optimistic now than at any other time on the Board. A tremendous amount of work has been done to realize those strategic goals and it is just going to accelerate.

Adjournment

Zawawi moved, Gee seconded to adjourn the meeting at 9:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Lori D'Ostuni  
Secretary

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