

Special Meeting
South Orange-Maplewood
Board of Education
February 28, 2022

A Special Public Meeting of the Board of Education of South Orange-Maplewood was held in the District Meeting Room at the Administration Building, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, New Jersey as well as utilizing the online video conference platform on February 28, 2022.

Board President Thair Joshua called the meeting to order at 7:13 p.m.

Adequate written notice of this meeting of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education was sent to the Township and Village Clerks, The Star Ledger, the News Record, TAPintoSOMA.net, villagegreennj.com and the District website.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

ROLL CALL

Present In-Person: Board member Bergin, Board President Joshua, Board Member Siders, Board Member Vadlamani, Board Member Winkfield, Board Member Wittleder

Present Remote: Board Member Malespina, Board Member Telesford, Board Member Wright

Absent: None

NINE VOTING MEMBERS PRESENT

Motion made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Bergin to allow distance participation in our monthly Regular Board Meeting.

Motion passed unanimously.

BOARD PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT

The School Board meeting is a business meeting in public not a meeting with the public. Oftentimes it may appear to members of our audience that the Board of Education takes action with very little comment and in many cases a unanimous vote. Before a matter is placed on the agenda at a public meeting, the Administration has thoroughly reviewed the matter with the Superintendent of Schools/Chief School Administrator (CSA). If the Superintendent of Schools/Chief School Administrator is satisfied that the matter is ready to be presented to the Board of Education, it is then referred to the appropriate Board Committee. The Members of the Board Committee work with Administration and the Superintendent to assure that the members fully understand the matter. After the committee discusses the matter, it is presented to the full Board for

discussion before any action is taken. Only then, is it placed on the agenda for action at a public meeting.

PUBLIC SPEAKS HEARINGS AND INDIVIDUALS

Anne Wessel Dwyer

Former Columbia High School teacher, spoke about her time in the district and the changes that have occurred in the SOMSD since she left in 2005. Ms. Dwyer also spoke in support of SOMSD teachers.

Patrice Massung, SOMEA Negotiations Team

Finished the statement by Ms. Wessel Dwyer in support of equitable salaries and a deserving work environment for SOMSD teachers.

Ms. Massung informed the Board that SOMEA is ready to finalize a three year contract so that the district and its staff can focus its efforts where they belong, on educating children. Ms. Massung outlined the contract terms offered by the District and what SOMEA is requesting to finalize the contract.

Rocio Lopez, President SOMEA

Spoke about a rebate given to districts enrolled in the State Health Benefits plan for the month of February. Believes that because of this rebate and other sources the district has the funds readily available to cover the contract amount requested by SOMEA and asked the Board to meet with the SOMEA negotiations team tonight to finalize an agreement.

Ryan Scott

Expressed concern that his child's kindergarten class at Tuscan School does not have an assigned teacher for the foreseeable future. The plan to rotate teachers in 50 minute increments to cover the class is not safe nor conducive to learning. Feels there is no urgency to correct the situation and get students back into a classroom where they can be and feel safe and learn.

Sinead Carew

Echoed the sentiments of speaker Ryan Scott and informed the Board that parents who received replies to their emails today regarding class coverage were told they would not be given any idea of the next day's plan because the situation is so fluid. Also spoke of behavioral issues and other difficulties in the classroom. Asked the Board how 50 minute teachers is a plan for such young children and asked when the Board prioritize these students?

Joanna Perlman

Spoke in support of SOMSD teachers stating it is time that we consider the true worth of these educators and the value of their morale, in addition to that of our students.

The following community members voiced similar concerns and comments regarding masking and/or COVID protocols: Kate Walker, SOMA for Safe Return to Schools, Pete Pachal, Gena Preoteasa and Sarah Griffiths.

AUDITOR'S REPORT

Business Administrator Mr. Eric Burnside introduced Auditor Andrew Hodulik of PKF O'Connor Davies. Mr. Hodulik shared an overview of the District Financial audit for the year ending June 30, 2021. In accordance with Government Auditing Standards, their procedures included a review of any prior year recommendations. There were no findings or recommendations.

HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

Rocio Lopez

Requested the Board meet with SOMEA tonight to discuss negotiations.

NEW BUSINESS

Board Member Wittleder requested the Board update policy 1648.11 - The Road Forward COVID-19 - Health and Safety to include specific language that requires SOMSD align the district's COVID-19 Health and Safety Policies to the recommendations of both the CDC and NJDOH as soon as March 7, 2022. As recently as this past Friday, the CDC stated that those living in communities with low to medium COVID-19 levels can stop wearing masks. The CDC has graded Essex County low and as such people may choose to mask at anytime and people with symptoms, a positive test or exposure to someone with COVID should wear a mask. This is the most recent guidance and it is not the only one from the CDC that the district has ignored. The district continues to implement COVID-19 related policies that have long been discarded by the CDC including partitions and outdoor masking. Moreover, the district has not given any indication to the community or our Board as to what data is driving their policies. I do not believe such district policies to be sound if they are incongruent to data and facts presented by the CDC and State.

Policy 1648.11 also states all revision to orders effecting this policy and corresponding dependencies shall be reviewed by the Superintendent with the Board Attorney, School Physician and Board of Education if appropriate. I would like to remove the language if appropriate as it has become clear to me that the Board of Education should have a seat at the table to represent the needs of our families, especially when it comes to policy. I want to conclude by

stating the policy recommendations I am recommending this evening are not a reflection of my feelings on masking. My concerns center around the board response by our community stakeholders to a lack of information and transparency from the district about what data is being used to determine key health and safety policy.

We are hindering ourselves and eroding trust due to a lack of robust two-way dialogue with and within the Board of Education and our district families and the severely outdated COVID-19 mitigation policy as currently written. These are complicated issues and I am not seeking to minimize them. What I am seeking to do is ensure that our key health and safety policies align with and are being driven by science, data and guidance by the top medical and top public health experts. I hope and expect that others on this Board will support the basic objective and my proposed policy changes and if not to clearly explain why. We as a Board have upheld the idea of making more data driven decision in this district, why aren't we holding our COVID-19 policies to the same standard. Science is real.

Board President Joshua asked Ms. Butler, Board Attorney to weigh in on the policy from the legal perspective before taking comments from Board Members. Ms. Butler stated if there is a request for the policy to be reviewed it needs to go back and be reviewed by the policy committee and any changes would have to be made there and recommended or if there is another agreement as to a process, but this is not something that can be done tonight. It needs to go through the two read amendment process.

Board Member Bergin stated the 1600 series of policies is owned by the policy committee and this policy is something that we took straight from the boiler plate from Straus Esmay. We can add this policy to the March Policy Committee agenda but I would like to have more information about where if appropriate the information will come from. Will it come from a statute or an Executive Order or is it something that we have flexibility with and also if appropriate for the role of the Board versus the role of the district.

Board Member Malespina agrees with Board Member Bergin that the Board has to consider the legality of changing the policy and the unintended consequences of making a change.

Board Member Wittleder stated the Board of Education in other districts are involved in the process and we may be able to refer to them and use their language.

Board Member Malespina asked if the Board can receive a list of individuals who speak at the Board Meetings so that Board members can email or otherwise communicate with them.

Board President Joshua and Ms. Butler stated the Board can discuss what parameters would be imposed if necessary for the Board to contact

individuals who provide their information during the Hearing of Individuals and Delegations.

Future Meetings

The Board of Education will meet for a Finance Committee and Budget Workshop on Wednesday, March 16th, 2022, at 6:30 pm using the online video conference platform which will include Hearing of Individuals. Action may be taken.

The Board of Education will meet in Closed Session on Monday, March 21, 2022 at 6:30 pm in the Superintendent's Office, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, NJ, as well as using the online video conference platform to discuss personnel and legal issues, negotiations, and other matters to be announced at a later date. Immediately following the Closed Session, the Board of Education will meet in Public Session at 7:30 pm in the District Meeting Room, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, NJ in person and utilizing an online video conference platform which will include Hearing of Individuals. The community can view the meeting by following the steps which will be listed on the agenda. If there are members of the community who would like to attend the meeting in person, please note that masks and social distancing are required in accordance with the guidance received from the local DOH and the CDC. Action will be taken.

Motion made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Winkfield that the Board of Education will meet in Executive Session prior to the March 21, 2022 Public Meeting to discuss personnel and legal issues, negotiations and other matters, the nature of which will be made public at a future date. Motion unanimously approved.

Motion made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Bergin to adjourn to Executive Session to discuss personnel, legal issues and negotiations. Motion to adjourn to Executive Session the Board will not return to public session. Motion unanimously approved at 8:03 p.m.

Eric Burnside, Business Administrator

