



Winchendon Public Schools

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School Committee Chair

KKM

School Committee Meeting

June 15, 2023 - 6:00 pm

Town Hall, 2nd Floor Auditorium

Attendance:

Ryan Forsythe, Chair; Greg Vine, Vice Chair; Karen Kast-McBride; Alicia Jordan; David LaPointe; Thad King, Superintendent; Amanda Babinski, Director of Finance & Operations

1. Call to order

2. Pledge of Allegiance

R. Forsythe reads audio visual disclosure.

3. Public Comment:

R. Forsythe discusses the guidelines for public comment, which are as follows:

- Each attendee may speak for up to three minutes at a time.
- Each attendee may speak up to two times.
- All comments must be addressed through the Chair.
- Comments must be related to items that are within the jurisdiction of the school committee. The jurisdiction of the school committee is hiring, evaluation and supervision of the superintendent, establishment of the district budget, and establishment of district goals and policies.
- The First Amendment allows broad constitutional protections to speech during this time; however, it has been ruled that free speech does not allow for any threats, fighting words or obscene content.
- All speakers are encouraged by the court to represent their remarks in a respectful manner.
- Written comments are also accepted and especially encouraged for any comments over three minutes. Written comments can be submitted tonight or after tonight and will be shared with all members of the committee.
- Public comment is not a period for discussion.
- Members of the board and representatives of the school are asked to listen and not respond to information during public comment.
- Questions and concerns raised during public comment this evening may be addressed through tonight's meeting or after this meeting in some other form.

A parent approaches and lets the committee know that Murdock currently has four student athletes at the Nike Invitational in Eugene, Oregon. Details are provided on the events the students are participating in. The speaker discusses the Winchendon Public Schools' vision statement. He believes the district is failing as a whole.

A parent approaches and discusses a time when his daughter was bullied and when she was suspended from school. He has concerns about the way administration handled his daughter's situation.

The first parent approaches and returns to his discussion about the district's failures. He makes a statement about teachers being let go due to the reorganization and asks if their contracts will be renewed. He has concerns about students' personally identifiable information being sent to other families. He believes the committee has the final say on the hiring and firing of teachers, superintendents, special education instructors, substitutes and bus drivers.

A parent approaches and discusses the leave of Nicole Heroux, asking what is going to be done to fix the special education department. She suggests bringing someone to meet with parents in a forum to discuss how the issues will be addressed or individual parent meetings to detail a child's specific plan of action. She suggests the district bring in an outside evaluator to coordinate testing over the summer to get IEPs completed before the fall and to get protocols in place to protect information. She offers suggestions on ways the district can prepare with hiring new staff and providing them with SEL training. She discusses the former Director of Pupil Services and her success in running the department. She respectfully requests that G. Vine consider stepping down from his position on the committee as she feels he has lost touch with the students and families.

A parent approaches and discusses the superintendent's remarks about the colleges that Murdock seniors are going to, relating it back to when the district started the Summit program, which she reminds the committee that Mrs. Vezina brought in.

4. Consent Agenda:

a. Minutes:

G. Vine moves to approve the minutes of the May 4 school committee meeting as presented. Seconded by A. Jordan. Roll call vote: A. Jordan - Y; G. Vine - Y; D. LaPointe - Abstained; K. Kast-McBride - Abstained; Chair - Y. Motion passes.

5. Superintendent's Report:

a. Special Education Department Update:

T. King states that the Director of Student Support is on leave. Several people have stepped up to help over the past week where the focus is to ensure that the scheduled meetings and evaluations take place prior to the end of the year. An email address has been set up at specialeducation@winchendonk12.org for any families who have questions or concerns regarding special education. The district has done this in an attempt to ensure the year is finished strong and that the meetings are scheduled and deadlines are met and evaluations take place. R. Forsythe asks for an update on the responsiveness to requests for paperwork. T. King responds that it depends on the paperwork. If it is special education specific, he has reached out to those families and done everything he can to get those into their hands. The exception is the emails involved in the requests for entire student records. He emailed letters of assurance to those families, and the files are being processed on a first-come, first-served basis. The district is contracting with a company for those files to be electronically redacted to protect the names and information of others. The district does not have the manpower to go through 6,000 or more emails to do the redactions. K. Kast-McBride asks who is monitoring the special education email. T. King states it is monitored by the Assistant Special Education Director. K.

Kast-McBride asks if she will be the person held accountable for all the timelines and everything going forward. T. King confirms that she is the person who is in that position and still maintains accountability. K. Kast-McBride states that if someone is on leave, the person monitoring the special education email is not going to be the person who is contacted by DESE directly. T. King replies that the Assistant Special Education Director will be and he will most likely be copied on such an email. K. Kast-McBride asks if she is the one that is running most of the team meetings now. T. King states that all the meetings have stayed constant with who was running them in the first place. Caitlin Smith has continued to run the majority of the meetings, but one meeting that Mrs. Heroux was supposed to run was run by an agreed upon qualified individual. K. Kast-McBride discusses the PRS report that the superintendent sent to her. She does not see how the committee can figure out where the delay is based on the information in the report. T. King states the report is what DESE sent at the district's request for the complaints that have been filed against it. He states he has no control over what they respond with. K. Kast-McBride clarifies that the committee needs to know how the superintendent is addressing those in need while Mrs. Heroux is on leave since the Assistant Director does not have the background to deal with it. T. King explains that the complaints that come in do not always go to the Student Support Director; for example, if something comes in for the high school, it would not be unusual for the Department of Education to actually reach out to that person directly for a first level response. It depends on the level of escalation, but at this point he is in contact with the DESE point of contact to monitor and make sure progress is made with the complaints. K. Kast-McBride expresses concern that there are still open complaints that have not been addressed. T. King discusses the process followed by DESE for complaints and Problem Resolution. While it is an electronic process, he is not sure of their timeline, but it seems to be evaluated on a case by case basis and depends on the complaint and the district's response and a plan of action is created. He acknowledges that not all complaints are closed, but they are in process in one way or another. He assures the committee that he is actively engaged in a number of those complaints. K. Kast-McBride discusses the superintendent's lack of response to emails from people who have filed complaints. She suggests that the superintendent forward complaints to the committee without redaction, as well as a checklist of what has been completed to help the committee understand where the district is in the process; she offers to send the guidance from DESE. She feels that the district is in turmoil and the special education department is imploding. T. King states that relative to special education, he is not involved, but instead, he defers to counsel before taking any action to ensure the district is in compliance. K. Kast-McBride asks who the counsel is for special education. T. King explains that the district has separate counsel for separate things, and our special education/student support counsel is named Felicia, but she is part of the same law firm as our primary counsel, Kevin Bresnahan. K. Kast-McBride asks for a list of all the district's counsel. T. King explains there is student counsel and personnel counsel. D. LaPointe discusses public comments from a May meeting, and out of 20 of those, 6 were related to special education issues. On June 1, there were 16 public comments with 5 related to special education. Tonight, there were 5 public comments with 2 related to the special education department. He states that when his wife served on the committee two years ago, there were zero special education complaints. He also feels the district is in a crisis and asks the superintendent to assure the parents who are concerned about their children's special education and explain how things are not going to be different without a director of pupil services. T. King clarifies that there will be no difference in the delivery of special education meetings and evaluations through the end of the year. He agrees that everyone has areas where they need to improve, and the district needs to endeavor to make sure everyone gets the meetings and evaluations they require. D. LaPointe thanks the work the staff is doing but states that sometimes it is necessary to look at the manager when the team is not functioning to level and you have to fire the managers

sometimes. He trusts the superintendent is taking the steps to fix the problem. He states the committee is here to work with the superintendent to get the issues in the district under control.

b. District Update:

T. King discusses personnel and openings within the district, giving background on the openings the district has had each year going back before COVID. He acknowledges that the openings could change relative to resignations or retirements. In 18-19, there were 17 vacancies; 19-20, there were 13 vacancies; 20-21, which was unusual because of COVID and going remote; there were 3 vacancies, and the district was forced to reduce by 6 faculty due to budgetary issues. He explains reduction in force. In 21-22, there were 30 vacancies, and in 22-23, there were 30 vacancies. For the 23-24 school year, the district currently has 13 to 15 position openings. The district did have several non-renewals, which are decided upon by building principals, and per DESE guidelines, the principals have the authority to execute non-renewals. He acknowledges that his signature is on the non-renewal letters, but it is the principal who submits the list of non-renewed employees. The non-renewals this year were not budgetary and were not related to the reorganization. K. Kast-McBride asks the superintendent to explain what a non-renewal is. T. King defines the non-renewal process, and that the teachers union is governed by Massachusetts General Law. There is a 90 day trial period for teachers, and then at the end of each of the teacher's first three years, the principal is allowed to ask the superintendent for a non-renewal for that individual. Discussion is had about professional status, formerly referred to as tenure, which is 100% about evaluation and proven plans, but in the first 3 years of a person's employment, it is at will. K. Kast-McBride asks how it is handled if a person is employed in another position and then takes a teaching position. T. King explains the process, that it is a different contract, and they are bound by the contract they fall under regardless of their former role. K. Kast-McBride states that at the last meeting, she was not asking about openings like this. She wanted to know where and what positions are listed in each school building now that the reorganization is canceled. T. King states that the structure the district has today is the same structure that it will have next year, no different than what we currently have. K. Kast-McBride asks if there will still be a new vice-principal position. T. King clarifies that there was going to be a change under the reorganization of Dean to Vice-Principal due to the change of structure, but there was no addition of positions or reduction in positions. But without the reorganization, the position will remain as Dean of Students. D. LaPointe comments about there being 30 vacancies this year and asks if it is true that building principals issue non-renewals. T. King explains the methods that building principals use to recommend to the superintendent to hire or non-renew employees. D. LaPointe asks how many non-renewals there were this year. T. King explains that there were issues with emergency licenses this year that were not traditional non-renewals. There were 6 non-renewals this year, 3 of which were related to licensing issues. D. LaPointe asks if T. King sees a large turnover of non-renewals as an issue with the effectiveness of the hiring process. T. King states that the non-renewal process is a very standard process across the state, which is not unique and it is there for a reason. He states that the district has had teachers who were non-renewed in other districts and they have been very successful here. He does not believe it represents a problem.

c. Toy Town Elementary Data Presentation:

Principal Anne Diaz and 5th grade teachers, Carlie Owiredo and Renee Gow approach to provide an overview of school wide reading data. Students as a whole grew 7%. In grade 3, 20% of the students moved up from the red, likely due to the focus on foundational skills as well as daily intervention using systematic phonics instruction. In grade 4, 7% of students

moved out of underperforming. In grade 5, 10% moved out of underperforming to either meeting or exceeding expectations. In math, 13% of overall students moved out of the red and 8 students are now meeting expectations. In grade 3, 12% of students moved out of underperforming. In grade 4, only 1 student moved out of the red, so leadership is going to look into this and see how they can better support moving forward. In grade 5, 7% of students moved from red to yellow. T. King adds that every grade level showed growth in the 50th percentile or above from Renaissance testing data which is used for progress monitoring. He feels this is a huge testament to the teachers of Winchendon.

6. Subcommittee Reports: None

7. New Business:

a. Budget Transfers:

Ms. Babinski states she has been very impressed with the staff in Winchendon as they have had to adapt to a new Director of Finance, a new town accountant and restructuring of the budget to ensure proper alignment of expenses, and all in a school year that is lasting through June 27. The presented numbers are going to be in flux, but the district has fully expended or encumbered 99% of the budget. The transfers presented represent less than 1% of the budget. She believes surplus salary line items can be moved to negative salary line items. G. Vine states he would have preferred to have seen a written record as to what money is moving where. Ms. Babinski explains that the numbers are going to change because there will still be time slips coming in for salaries paid through the last day of school, but she will email the figures to the committee even though they will change. T. King adds that the district has had two or three years now where it has not been forced to give money back to the town, when historically there were years when six figures had to be returned to the town. T. King explains that funds can be moved within personnel or operations but not without a vote from the committee. Discussion is had about the remaining funds. G. Vine moves to approve the proposed transfers as brought forward tonight. Seconded by D. LaPointe. Vote is unanimous.

b. Superintendent's Evaluation:

D. LaPointe moves to table the superintendent's evaluation. Seconded by K. Kast-McBride. Discussion about the date is had. D. LaPointe amends first motion, moving to table the evaluation to July 13. Seconded by A. Jordan. Vote is unanimous.

8. Future Agenda Items:

Future agenda items include:

- a. Superintendent's Evaluation - July 13
- b. A. Jordan asks for a concrete plan of what the school has in place considering the special education issues addressing how the district will proceed if Mrs. Heroux does not come back. T. King agrees.
- c. K. Kast-McBride suggests a discussion of the agenda for the retreat.

9. Closing Comments:

G. Vine apologizes if he appeared intolerant of anyone who has come in, stating that he has listened and heard parent complaints. He states he hears from parents expressing support as well but they feel intimidated coming into a room like this. He believes changes need to be made to the special education department, deferring to K. Kast-McBride, who is an expert on such things. He discusses staffing issues and the manner in which he approaches the superintendent to discuss the decisions made on staffing.

He believes it is not the committee's place to only do what is popular; that they must also make unpopular decisions.

D. LaPointe states that they cannot ignore the good things going on in the district. He feels a lot of successful graduates come from Murdock High School, welcoming a newly appointed attorney to his law office who is also a Murdock graduate. He wants to get it right for all the students.

K. Kast-McBride comments on the importance of bringing back the arts into schools. She tells the community that their voices are heard by the committee as they try to do their best by the people who ask them for help. She feels the district needs to try and rebuild the special education department to ensure it is in compliance as it once was.

R. Forsythe thanks everyone for being here tonight and for those putting on great events. He congratulates the athletes in Oregon. He mentions the school committee will soon have an open seat and will be publicly posted soon, encouraging people to submit letters of interest by June 22. The final committee member selection is tentatively scheduled for July 26. Other meeting dates will be changing as well.

K. Kast-McBride adds that people interested in serving on the committee should include the entire committee in their letters of interest as the two boards will be making selections. G. Vine asks if the person appointed would be filling the rest of A. Jordan's term or if it is only until May of next year. K. Kast-McBride confirms it is until May of next year.

10. Adjournment:

K. Kast-McBride moves to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by G. Vine. Vote is unanimous. Meeting is adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted: Liz Latoria
Liz Latoria, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent

Documents Attached: None