



Winchendon Public Schools

WINCHENDON TOWN CLERK
RCVD JUN 20 2023 PM 2:51

Date Approved/Released: 6/15/23

Date Approved/Hold:

School Committee Chair:

School Committee Meeting

May 4, 2023 - 6:00 pm

Town Hall, 2nd Floor Auditorium

3-0-2
yay nay abstain

Attendance:

Ryan Forsythe, Chair; Greg Vine, Vice Chair; Larry Murphy; Alicia Jordan; 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 reminds the public that public comment is available to any member of the public in attendance; they will be recognized and must come up to the microphone to address the committee. Topics able to be discussed are those on the agenda. A limit of three minutes per speaker is allowed, and each speaker may speak up to two times.

A parent approaches with concerns regarding her child's behavior incidents at the middle school. Prior to Mrs. Vezina's leave, she rarely received calls or emails; after the principal's leave, she receives calls, emails and texts every day stating that the school does not know how to handle her child. Her child has been sent home on admin dismissal multiple times and given in-school suspension. This led to her calling an IEP meeting on March 20. She has yet to receive any documentation to approve the IEP meeting or the consent for her behavior chart or mandatory time breaks.

A parent approaches with concerns regarding the school committee's vote to cap the number of students that can attend virtual school at 1%. He asks the committee to reconsider its vote. He states there are currently 20 Winchendon students who attend virtual school, which is 1.65% of the population of the schools. His child has been accepted to a virtual school but cannot get in because of the cap.

A community member approaches and asks if the public in attendance could be provided with a copy of the agenda when they attend meetings. She asks for more information on the cap on virtual schools. R. Forsythe explains that public comment is not a time for discussion, but all concerns brought forth during public comment will be responded to during or after the meeting.

Andrew Collins, Murdock High School computer science teacher and Vice President of the Teachers' Association, approaches to speak on agenda item 6a, the network update. He praises the teachers for working through the challenges presented with the district's network issues. No learning time was lost, and the teachers were able to teach on resiliency and being prepared for extreme cases and cybersecurity. Many support personnel and nurses were able to access some systems not within the network through tethering, using their laptops and cell phones. He praises the IT department for their handling of the network issues and thanks them for everything they did and their professionalism.

A parent approaches with concerns regarding a male substitute teacher and an investigation which was done. She shares concerns that a proper investigation was not done and the district not being truthful. She states that days, perhaps a week went by before the district notified parents of what happened, until it was posted on Facebook by parents.

A parent approaches with concerns regarding the middle school not having correct supports for students with mental health disorders, and that it was not until this year that her child was helped by a staff member with a mental health background. She believes this person is staffed on the high school side and that the middle school has not had a large presence of mental health training for its staff.

A parent approaches and shares concerns that the proposed reorganization of the schools is costing people their positions within the district and that the pink slips that were handed out were in relation to the reorganization. She states that teachers have been reassigned to different grade levels and subjects. She also shares concerns regarding the renegotiation of the bus company's contract. She recommends the committee ask questions and do research on the bus company because of the nightmare that is going on with the current bus company. She believes there are criminal charges pending against the drivers.

A parent approaches to speak on mental health within the district. She believes there is no support from administration as her child has been denied an IEP three times. She feels he has no support at school.

A community member approaches to provide information on her current role as a community health worker and collaborative liaison for the Handle With Care initiative. She states she has worked with the Superintendent around programming, and she asks for the opportunity to share some resources around the mental health concerns that other parents brought up, including free training for staff and administration.

Andrew Collins returns to finish his previous statement in thanking everyone who helped out with the network issues. All concerns regarding the loss of personnel data and not being paid and being able to effectively teach the children of Winchendon were answered and addressed immediately. He was pleased to see how the staff rallied together.

A parent approaches to share concerns regarding school leadership. He states that the district has a chemistry teacher teaching high school that is not a chemistry teacher. His child at Toy

Town has come home four times with lice. He expresses concern regarding the school's lice policy, indicating lice checks no longer take place.

R. Forsythe reiterates that the topics brought forward in public comment will be addressed tonight or at a future meeting.

4. Consent Agenda:

a. Minutes:

R. Forsythe presents consent agenda. G. Vine moves to approve the minutes of the March 27 and April 6, 2023 school committee meetings as presented. Seconded by L. Murphy. Vote is unanimous.

5. Superintendent's Report:

a. Network Update:

T. King provides update on the ransomware attack the district experienced. A brute force attack took place Sunday at 3:30am, when an outside individual was able to break through an account. Saturday night was the district's monthly routine backup so no data was lost. The attack specifically targeted PCs, so Macs and Chromebooks were unaffected. CrowdStrike, the company used for the district's cybersecurity, detected the ransomware and blocked it, so teachers could not log in to affected computers. CrowdStrike is performing a forensic audit to ensure no data has been compromised. Restoration of the servers is being completed but is a very slow process. As of today, most operations are up and running; however, the phone system has been impacted. 911 calls can be placed if necessary, but other calls are not possible at the moment. Scanning and copying were affected, and MCAS dates had to be pushed back.

G. Vine asks what CrowdStrike actually does, wondering if it is possible to identify who did this. T. King explains that CrowdStrike is a cybersecurity, anti-virus software. They also have an attorney involved that will work on the investigation; there is also an insurance policy protecting the district from this type of thing. A. Jordan asks if there are plans to help teachers have a fallback in order to be proactive when a network issue arises. T. King explains that teachers have traditional lesson plans for times when technology fails. The district also invested in updated textbooks several years ago, and a new math initiative began this year. Paper copies of all those things are available.

R. Forsythe recognizes all those in the district who put in the extra hours of work to bring the network back up. He is glad the district bought insurance which will help cover the cost of CrowdStrike.

b. Budget Update:

A. Babinski reminds all that it is open enrollment time. The district is also working on some multi-year delegations and wrapping up some federal grants. The IVAQ grant is explained. The state's new grants management system, GEMS is discussed. All new grants will go on the GEMS system, and all the old grants will remain on the EdGrants system until they reach their conclusion and final reports are done. The district is in good shape on the budget report, showing data inclusive of all expenses and encumbrances through April 30. There are expense transfers that were requested of the town accountant that have not been posted yet. A few reclasses will also need to be done at the end of the fiscal year. G. Vine asks about the Memorial

custodian substitutes and overtime salary line items. Ms. Babinski explains that a Memorial custodian is retiring, and some additional substitutes have been required.

c. District Update:

T. King provides an update on the reorganization, including the boxes for disposal of materials and shredding of confidential materials. Room assignments for next year were distributed. The plan is for stickers to be provided to teachers for their moving boxes, showing where the boxes need to be sent.

T. King explains that the district does not generally discuss individual personnel matters as they are confidential. He speaks to the process that the district has to follow. We have four bargaining units and then individual contracts. The principals, Superintendent, Business Manager and other administration have individual contracts. The bargaining units consist of paraprofessionals, custodians and secretaries, and each unit has a 90 day probationary period within their contracts. The employer can decide within those 90 days if it is working out with the employee or not. Teachers, or professional staff as they are termed, have a 90 day aspect that is regulated by Massachusetts General Law. If a teacher enters employment with our district, there is a 90 day window to dismiss the teacher in their first year of employment if it is not working out. After the first 90 days, teachers can be dismissed at the end of their first three years of employment, which is called nonrenewed. This process is not the same as pink slips or reductions in force. If a teacher is nonrenewed, it just means that they are not a good fit for the district. Every school district in the state has the right to nonrenew teachers in this manner. He believes that approximately five teachers were not renewed for this school year. He references a parent's question about people losing their jobs due to the reorganization and explains that this was not the reason that some people were non-renewed. This was a normal part of the district's yearly process. There have been no reassignments as previously alleged. He reiterates that individual situations cannot be discussed due to confidentiality, but these would be the reasons that a person might be non-renewed.

In response to questions previously received, an update is provided on special education and enrollment numbers. The district is beginning a tiered focused monitoring, previously called a coordinated program review, which is a sort of audit of special education and civil rights by the Department of Education. The Department of Education determines when districts are assigned to participate in this sort of audit. It includes a self evaluation period, where the district identifies different types of documents and IEPs and submits a self assessment to the Department of Education for them to look at. The deadline for this submission is June 30. The second phase of the process is referred to as the onsite verification phase, which would start some time in the fall. This would include DESE coming out to visit, including viewing classrooms. Questions are asked by the committee, looking for clarification on whether families will be involved and who does the self assessment to ensure it is objective. T. King explains that DESE sends a list of the documents they want to review in addition to our self assessment. L. Murphy describes the process as it was done years ago, and they were all interviewed individually, including parents, students, teachers, administrators, school committee members. After the process, the district receives a list of recommendations that need to be addressed. T. King adds that it is a six-year cycle, where a three-year update is done and they check to see how the district is progressing. He goes on to discuss enrollment numbers, describing the enrollment reports the district must submit to DESE three times a year in October, March and June. In March of 2019, which was before COVID so gives a baseline of numbers, the

enrollment in the district was 1260 students; of that, 197 of the students between the ages of 6 and 21 were on IEPs; 40 were on 504s. In March of 2021, 1165 students were enrolled, and our special education numbers jumped to 242 students on IEPs and 47 on 504s. In March of last year, our enrollment was 1201. The number of students on IEPs was 247, and 49 were on 504s. These are reports all orchestrated by DESE. In March of 2023, 1250 students were enrolled; the number of students on IEPs was 240, and the number of students on 504s was 49. This number can be attributed to students who graduated or students who no longer qualify for special education. T. King discusses the district's plans to continue the Summit program at the middle school for next year, having just signed another yearly contract. He believes the rumor that Summit was being discontinued came from a mistake on the calendar, which indicated the report cards would be sent out for the middle school, when traditionally it would say progress reports. He reiterates that the middle school will continue the Summit program next year. T. King discusses email protocol and chain of command, which he continued from prior building administration roles. If a concern is brought forward about something that happened in a teacher's room, he would check and make sure the family member communicated with that teacher first, allowing the teacher the opportunity to respond. Next it would go to the building principal, giving the principal the opportunity to respond. If an email is sent, and the superintendent is merely copied on it, he would continue that process of communication, allowing those at the building level to respond or correct the situation first..whether it be building leadership or departmental leadership, so that it could be rectified and delegated appropriately, ensuring the building or departmental leadership had satisfied their obligations.

6. Subcommittee Reports: None

G. Vine makes a motion to move item 11 up between 8 and 9. Seconded by L. Murphy. Vote is unanimous.

7. Future Agenda Items

a. Monty Tech Local Graduates Recognition:

T. King explains that an invitation to attend a June 18 school committee meeting will be sent to the Monty Tech graduates who live in Winchendon.

b. Special Education Update

c. Food Service Bid Vote:

Ms. Babinski explains that the district's contract with Chartwells expires on June 30, and the district has gone out to bid for a new food service management company and is receiving bids through Monday, after which we will evaluate and bring forth the recommendation to the committee to vote to enter into a service management company contract effective July 1. R. Forsythe asks if it will be the same for the bus service contract. Ms. Babinski explains that the bus service contract was initiated as a three year contract with the ability to add on one additional year two times, for a total of five years, and the district is still in that cycle. When we go to bid for the bus contract, we will follow the same process.

8. New Business:

a. Conditions for Learning Survey Results:

Dr. Jonathan Landman approaches and presents survey results. The surveys focus on many aspects of school culture and educational culture and well being and generally have between 55 and 65 prompts, received by staff, parents and students. The results are used to learn about what

is going on in our schools and how we can make things better. Highlights of the results include:

- Students who identified as LGBTQIA and students who reported or witnessed bullying were more likely to have a negative perception of school climate;
- Students who self identified as black, indigenous or personal color or declined to identify racial or ethnic background were more likely to have a negative perception of school climate;
- 94% of high school students; 89% of middle school and 88% of elementary school students said they have friends at school;
- 60% of high school and 81% of middle school students always or often feel safe at school;
- 55% of high school students always or often feel supported by their peers;
- 11 out of 13 staff said the high school is a safe place to learn; 58% of elementary students felt safe at school; 100% of elementary staff said the school is a safe place to learn;
- 57% of high school; 70% of middle school and 40% of elementary students always or often feel accepted for who they are;
- 42% of high school and 74% of middle school students sometimes or never feel that students are treated equally; 79% of elementary students report they are always or often treated equally;
- 49% of high school and 64% of middle school students feel the school sometimes or never treats students fairly if they misbehave;
- 6 of 13 staff said the discipline is sometimes or never handled fairly;
- 85% of high school students report that they had not been bullied in the last 12 months; 30% of middle and elementary school students said they had.

Discussion is had about the origins of the survey, consultants worked with the district to clean up and update the survey for this school year. The district is attempting to use this data to improve the schools, incorporate the feedback into the school day and do a better job of managing some of what is brought forward.

9. Old Business: None

10. Closing Comments:

G. Vine thanks Larry Murphy for his years of service and support to the school committee and the district.

A. Jordan echoes same sentiments, thanking Larry for running her through policies and procedures. She thanks parents for coming out tonight.

R. Forsythe thanks everyone who came out tonight, reminding everyone that the best way to communicate with elected officials is in person and in writing. The posts on social media do not get to them and can't be used in a meaningful way. He thanks the IT department for going above and beyond this week and congratulates those who were elected to the school committee. He presents a tribute to Larry Murphy's service to the field of education and to the community of Winchendon, thanking him for his years of dedication to public service.

L. Murphy offers a final plea to the community and the district to work together, stating that everything he has done was with all the people he's worked with on the board and encourages them to keep

working on it, to collaborate and trust each other.

11. Adjournment:

G. Vine moves to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by L. Murphy. Vote is unanimous. Meeting is adjourned.

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

Documents Attached: None