

Board of Education Minutes
October 22, 2020
Special Meeting

DRAFT

A special meeting of the North Stonington Board of Education was held on Thursday, October 22, 2020, at 6:00 p.m. via Zoom meeting platform meeting ID 81133554285. Present were Mrs. Wagner, Mr. Karpinski, Ms. Welborn, Mr. McCord, Mrs. Mastroianni, Dr. Potemri, and Mr. Mendolia. Also present were Mr. Nero, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Costa, Mrs. Wilkison, Mrs. St. Germain, and Mrs. Reyes. Chairperson Wagner called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

2. Pledge of Allegiance – The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

3. Public Comment Regarding Administrator Contract – Mrs. Wagner stated the purpose of the meeting. She read a statement that relayed the negotiation dates, the administrative support needed at the elementary school and how they felt this realignment would be a solution. She asked for a 3-minute time limit on public comment. Veronica Wilkison, principal and president of the NSFSA (North Stonington Federation of School Administrators), read a statement regarding the union's position. Kirsten Montgomery, parent, appreciates the time the Board put into this. She wondered why Sue Costa was not consulted about this. She felt it was misleading that the administrators were in agreement. She worried about the students. She spoke of the special education staffing at other districts and then spoke of what we have in North Stonington. She worried about the long-term effect. She had further comment and questioned how they came to that decision. Ms. Montgomery said Mrs. Costa's job is already at full capacity and doesn't understand how she can take on more responsible. She was confused about how it all came out to be. She had further comment. Kathy White, parent, read a statement. She thanked the Board for their time and commitment. She spoke as a parent of a special education student. She spoke of the services her son received throughout his school career. She had further comment and spoke of the numbers of students currently in special education. She didn't think a person can do both jobs. This position needs to be a position fully focused on special needs students. Mrs. White thanked the Board for their time and for listening. Roberta Curry, teacher, thanked the Board for holding this meeting and for allowing the public and teachers to address their concerns. She said teachers weren't consulted on this. She spoke about the teacher leadership positions that were mentioned which will need negotiations. It will cut into service delivery time. All special education teachers' schedules are packed and she explained. She thanked the Board for their time. Chris Nelson, parent, has a daughter that has an IEP. He has some concerns. His daughter struggled and he explained. He gave some of her history and said with her testing they put together a program and he elaborated. His frustration with this combined position is whether it is Mrs. Costa or nor her knowledge should not be overlooked. He thanked the Board for their time. Joan Johnson, parent, has a daughter who has been in the special education program since Pre-K. Her concern is special education is very busy in order to accommodate all the students and their needs. Mrs. Johnson was concerned about the time that is going to be needed to do both jobs. She gave kudos to everyone involved and is concerned if this position has to split their time. She had further comment. Crystal Dame, parent,

said she is one of the people that signed the petition. Her son has been in the program since he was three years old. Mrs. Costa and her staff have done a wonderful job to get him where he is today. She had further comment. Mrs. Dame said she can't understand how this position will work. She understood the difficult decision they made but it is disconcerting that they weren't at the table when this decision was made. Mrs. Dame said she doesn't know how they will make anyone happy with this and hoped they can revisit this with everyone at the table so they all know what to expect. Amy French, resident, wanted to know what the next step is after this. Is this a done deal? Is this going to be looked at again? Mrs. Wagner said Mr. Urgo will take it to committee as to whether they reject it. Ms. French had further comment. She understands it will cost money but you can't place a price on the children. She had further comment. Dr. Potemri asked if Mr. Nero wanted to comment about not having everyone at the table. She said that is not part of the negotiations process. Mr. Nero said this was management's rights to do this and he explained. He disagreed with Mrs. Wilkison on her statement and elaborated. He said this is something the Board has wanted to do for the last couple of years. He disagreed with Mrs. Wilkison saying our attorney came right out and it was a done deal. He had further comment. Dr. Potemri wanted to address some of the items she has heard. She gave her special education background. She explained her personal background with her own children. She wanted to make sure everyone is clear about the purpose of the restructuring; she didn't know where some of the information is coming from. She explained some of the rationale for this. She had further comment. She said parents should be able to advocate for their kids but the success story shouldn't be based on one person. She said they looked at how we can take the resources we have and build a better capacity for our students. Dr. Potemri said the more access our students have the better the outcomes will be. She said it shouldn't be a separate system; a student shouldn't have to be in special education to get the support they need. She had further comment. She said we need to be working together as a team. Dr. Potemri said it was how can we create a better system for our kids. She commented on sitting down with the teachers. She elaborated. She wanted to make sure they knew it was not a financial decision. She had further comment. Mrs. Mastroianni said it is important to have a conversation about this. The Board followed their protocol for negotiations. She explained how these are confidential. She said she heard from parents about how this position was changing. She said a staff member had called parents to tell them what was happening with this position. She had further comment. Mrs. Mastroianni said she felt this was so unprofessional and she said it has spent a lot in resources. She thinks it is so hurtful that a staff member would do this in the middle of the crisis we are in today. She said we need to work together more now than ever and she had further comment. The idea that someone thought it was okay to cause decisiveness was alarming. She had further comment. Mrs. Mastroianni said change is difficult. She is glad we are talking about it but we could have talked about it in a different way. Mrs. Wagner asked the public to please keep their comments to three minutes. Ms. French, citizen, was concerned about staffing again and asked how many have special education backgrounds. Mrs. Wagner said these would be special education teachers. Ms. French spoke about the associate principal at the high school and asked if she had special education background. Dr. Potemri spoke of the staff in attendance at an IEP meeting and explained. She had further comment. She said the services to kids do not change. She had further comment and explanation. Laura Mello, parent, said she initially became very upset and she explained. She was

most shocked that this was the first time they have been hearing about this. She didn't understand why this wasn't discussed in a Board meeting earlier before this. Mrs. Mello said the system does not have enough specialists and elaborated. If we can find a way to build on our specialists, that would be great. Jeff Bennett, citizen, wondered if the ratio of special education students was taken into consideration and if so, what is the data. Mrs. Wagner spoke of Preston's number. Kirsten Montgomery, parent, said Preston is just elementary school and elaborated. She said she found out after the last Board of Education meeting about this and she elaborated. She looked to social media to see if she could find out and she elaborated. She spoke of the timeline of speaking at the next Board meeting and with the timeline that wasn't going to work. She had further comment. Ms. Montgomery said the staff has been very courageous to speak about this. She elaborated. All teachers have to follow IEPs and 504s and she elaborated. Everybody has some sort of background and had further comment. She spoke of other districts' staffing again and wondered why we are going backwards and how this could be a change for the better. Roberta Curry, teacher, wanted to clear up some points about inclusion. She said North Stonington is probably the most inclusive school district she has seen and explained. She was concerned about being "rudder-less" and she explained. She agreed with Mrs. Mastroianni that it is a good conversation but it should have happened earlier. She said to please take their comments that they are protecting our students. Mrs. Curry invited the Board again to come to their school to see how the special education students are an important part of the school. Dr. Potemri said this does not take effect right away and explained. Dana Mendolia, parent, she is completely in support of this. She said the district itself is wonderful. She said sometimes the captains of the ship change and she elaborated. She said the parents are just the fighters for this. She commended the Board for taking this broad step. Mrs. Wagner again reminded everyone to please limit their comments to three minutes. Joan Johnson, parent, asked what the division of this position would be. Mrs. Wagner said it depends on so many things. They deliberately made it not 50/50 in order to constrain it. Mr. Nero explained how some of the position would work. He explained what duties would be taken away from Mrs. Costa at the high school so time would be freed up. Mr. Nero gave some of his background with special education. He said they are trying to take away some of the duties and responsibilities in order to make this work. It is not a 50/50 thing. Mrs. Wagner said we have heard all the concerns and leave it up to the Selectmen as to what they want to do with the contract.

Mrs. Mastroianni made a motion to adjourn the meeting that was seconded by Ms. Welborn. Mrs. Wagner allowed Shawn Murphy, citizen, to speak since she didn't notice he had his hand up prior to the motion. Mr. Murphy wanted to comment on the process. He said the change didn't necessarily have to be part of the negotiations and he explained. He said once the decision was made in negotiations and discussed in executive session and The Board came right out and voted without explanation. He had comment about the process and that the people have a right to know what is going on. He had further comment about Mrs. Wagner's comments about waiting to comment until after the 30 days is up. Mr. Murphy thought that was wrong and that we should be more open to the affairs we are conducting on behalf of the town residents. He had further comment. He said waiting the 30 days stifles public comment on things. He had further comment. Mrs. Wagner had comment and said there are no tactics. She explained about her comment on waiting until the next meeting. She again said there was not tactic and it wasn't

over a holiday. There was no hidden agenda on this. She had further comment. Mrs. Mastroianni said the other contracts we voted on we didn't give a summary on the contract. She said it may be a good idea to do that. Brett Mastroianni, parent, agreed with Mr. Murphy to a certain extent about coming out of executive session with a summary. He said you are not out of line with other Boards about giving a summary. He commended the Board for the work on the contracts and COVID work. He agrees with this change. Mr. Mastroianni commented about when he sat on the building committee with grade six moving over and how would that work. He commended them for this approach. The Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 7:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Roberta T. McCarthy, Secretary to
The Board of Education