

Richmond School Committee Meeting
Tuesday December 13, 2022 - 6:00 PM - Via Zoom

PRESENT: Peter Dillon, Superintendent; Ina Wilhelm, Chair; Karen Youdelman; Kimmie Leeco; Nathan Steele; Beth Choquette, Principal; Mary Shook, Special Education Director;

Ina called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM. She reminded the group that the position of Secretary had not been filled. Nathan volunteered to take on that responsibility and Ina Nominated him for the position. Karen seconded the nomination and the group voted unanimously to make Nathan the secretary of the School Committee.

Review and Approval of the November, 2022 minutes. Ina moved to approve the minutes with one amendment. Kimmie seconded the motion and the motion was carried by unanimous vote.

Correspondence: None

Public Comment: None

Principal's Report: Beth began with the statement that the first few months of school are going well and she is enjoying being there. She noted particularly the work of Sophia Peckham, Professor of the Youth Leadership Program of Massachusetts. Their goal this year is to support families impacted by poverty. Beth will be recognizing her tomorrow at a school-wide celebration with a certificate of honor.

Tomorrow the grade 6-8 concert band will perform at 1:45 in the gym. Beth is planning to host a Principal's Town Hall for parents and community members tomorrow night. It is designed to provide an opportunity for them to come together to talk about what's been happening in the school. It will be followed by a PTA meeting.

Tiered focus monitoring and educational stability is done every three years when the State conducts a review based on specific criteria. Richmond placed in Tier 1 - self-directed improvements in Civil Rights and Special Education. A press release will be sent out so that the public can know about that review.

Headgear Policy: Beth has rewritten this as recommended from DESE's Tiered Focus Monitoring. The new headgear policy reads: Unless exempt as a form of religious expression students will be asked to remove headwear if it prevents them or others from fully or safely participating in the learning experience.

Some things around the Dress Code are borderline. Beth would like to review/rewrite the dress code policy to ensure we are in compliance with civil rights and that we are being equitable and respectful to all groups of students.

As recommended by the Tiered Focus Monitoring that DESE is doing, the vulnerability statement was missing from our bullying policy as well as information about the Problem Resolution System. Beth added them both into the policy.

Due Processes: Suspensions. Students may not be suspended (outside of the use of drugs, carrying of weapons, etc.) unless the school can document that restorative work has been done. There is also an addition of a Restraint Policy.

Educational Stability: Monitoring review programs for students who are homeless, in foster care or in a military household. The school will need to prove that these have been verified and identified. Beth mentioned Doug Wentworth who is trained in Policies and Procedures around homelessness and foster care.

Enrollment and Admission have any barriers removed.

Kimmie congratulated Beth on the wonderful environment she finds at the school now. Peter noted that Cristina has been managing very well in the face of the new Tridemic, which is creating levels of infection that continually go up and down.

During contract negotiations, it was agreed that evaluation was outdated. A couple of meetings will be held in June via Zoom to evaluate our system by looking at the State's revised system with an eye toward simplifying and streamlining. Now that the committee is comprised of five members, it is possible to create a sub-committee of two to conduct that study.

A discussion followed about the goals of the evaluation process and some practical facts about how it works.

School Psychologist: Richmond and Berkshire Hills have historically shared a Psychiatrist, but she is retiring at the end of this school year. Berkshire Hills needs to hire a new psychologist and wants to give Richmond time to find a Part-time person for that position so that there is no longer a need for sharing. A Memorandum of Agreement to that end was shared with the group on screen. Ina moved to approve the Memo as written. She was seconded by Kimmie and the motion passed by unanimous consent.

Special Education Director's Report: Mary reported that she has been working with Beth on Tiered Focus Monitoring for Special Ed. A copy of the floor plan was required by the State and classrooms had to be labeled. She will send surveys to parents and will share the results of those with the Committee in March. She is doing a child study process to determine the need for Special Ed and will share those results with the State, who will be coming to Richmond next year to evaluate the Special Education program and Civil Rights.

POLICIES:

Beth noted that there are policies schools are told to adopt as is and those that can be improvised on:

Due Process for Suspension: The State now says that you cannot suspend a student unless you can document that every effort has been made to correct the behavior. The school's lawyer has rewritten the existing due process policy, which Beth will change in the Handbook.

Bullying: The JICFB Policy can remain as it is with the addition of a vulnerability statement. Problem Resolution System - identification of the party or parties that parents can reach to submit a complaint. Beth suggested using the draft of the policy as it was given to her. Peter advised removal of the JKAA Restraints as Richmond does not have, nor does it ever intend to have, "Time Out" rooms.

Peter suggested that they go through the "I" and "J" policies to create a first reading and to do second readings and a vote for them at the next meeting.

Ina asked Beth if she had a checklist of procedures for the teachers to follow as they seem so involved and overwhelming. Beth responded that she is constantly reminding teachers to document every step of a disciplinary action so that she will be prepared to respond to a request from the State in case of a complaint.

The new Suspension Law - Richmond will be learning about restorative practices and Beth is training teachers on what that entails. She models for them how the system works. Research shows that punishment does not have an impact on students, but having that conversation and requiring them to make repairs to whomever they have harmed, own their actions and understand how that behavior could injure someone is effective.

Every week, the Nurse, Beth, Doug, Mary, and the school psychologist, meet to discuss any students about whom they have concerns.

Ina asked if a School Committee member could attend one of those sessions. Peter saw no objection.

Kimmie spoke to the positive results of the program at Richmond for the students, even at a very young age. Nathan mentioned his experience as a teacher with bullying and asked about the "toolbox" of responses for students, teachers and the school administration. He suggested the use of an incident report form and Beth noted that she has one that she uses.

The I Policies: Academic Freedom: A normal school year consists of 180 days, 900 hours, which is tied to Massachusetts General Law. The length of the school day has been straightforward and established in collective bargaining.

Organization of Instruction: This policy would be edited to reflect Elementary and Middle School students, not secondary students, as Richmond ends at the eighth grade. Mention of an Assistant Superintendent should be removed and curriculum adoption is straightforward as Richmond does not have a formal cooperation program.

Sex Education: Health, Religious and Cultural exemptions can be requested by parents. Alcohol, Tobacco, Drugs are obvious

Accommodation of students with special needs and disabilities. Parents with special needs children can request an opportunity to observe their children in the context of their classes. Richmond will be receiving Title I funds for the first time as it is tied to families' incomes. The population of Richmond is changing and that new influx of funds will help to purchase more supplies. Currently, Richmond has no students learning English as a second language, but that might happen in the future.

Home Schooling: There is a process in place for parents to receive approval for home schooling, which Richmond will typically approve up front and then check in on the student at the end of the year.

Remote Learning Policy: Remote learning has become easier and more effective since the increasing access to the internet. Summer School - Richmond provides an opportunity for students with need. If the school obtains a grant, we might consider creating a formal summer school.

Instructional materials - Richmond needs to begin to use tools more fully representative of the student population it serves and even beyond. The list of novels recommended for reading needs to be broadened to obtain a better balance. Rhona has done a really good job of choosing books for the library, media and digital resources. Social Media - staff needs to be particularly careful to avoid becoming Facebook "Friends" with students.

Field Trips - just need to use good common sense.

Speakers - This requires a thoughtful, deliberate process when choosing speakers. Background checks are appropriate for anyone coming into the school.

Promotion and Retention of Students - It may occasionally make sense to retain, but remediation makes more sense.

Graduation requirements at the High School level obviously do not apply to Richmond and will be removed.

Policies on: Evaluations, Surveys, Teaching Activities and Presentations, Controversial issues or speakers need careful deliberation, ceremonies require careful consideration of the separation of church and state.

Animals in School - Service and Comfort animals, as well as Guide Dogs are allowed.

At this point, Peter advised that the Committee stop at this first reading and do a second reading of I and a first reading of J at the next session.

Financial Report: Things are moving along. Working on getting and correcting salary lines. Recent electric bills will clearly demonstrate how dramatically prices have risen. Fortunately, the Heating line of the budget is not bad as it has not been particularly cold the last couple of months.

Nathan asked Peter to explain the duties of the Secretary. He said that when the minutes are approved by the Committee, the Secretary will sign off on them and Amy will alert the Secretary that a signature is required.

Beth asked whether solar panels had been included in the budget. Peter explained that the school receives its electric power through a second provider. It is not as good a deal as originally anticipated. He will send Beth a copy of the agreement.

There being no further business before the Committee, Ina moved that the meeting be adjourned. She was seconded by Nathan and the motion passed by unanimous consent.

Submitted by Phyllis LeBeau