

RICHMOND SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Tuesday March 22, 2023 - 6:00 PM
Via Zoom

PRESENT: Peter Dillon, Superintendent; Beth Choquette, Principal; Ina Wilhelm, Chair School Committee; Kimmie Leeco; Nate Steele; Mary Shook, SPED; Sharon Harrison, Finance.

The meeting was called to order at 6:07 PM. Ina moved to close the open meeting and go into Executive Session. She was seconded by Kimmie and the motion carried by unanimous vote.

Review and Approval of the Feb 14, 2023 Minutes: There were several corrections made to the minutes, after which Ina moved to approve the February minutes as amended. She was seconded by Kimmie and the motion passed by unanimous vote.

Principal's Report: Beth reported that she has pulled together a Wellness Committee that reflects the staff, the administration and parents. They will be meeting monthly for the rest of this year and throughout next year.

MCAS starts March 29th. All materials and scheduling are complete and ready to go. We will be back to normal testing into most of May.

Circus Smirkus was in school this week and students are having great fun learning circus acts while they are absorbing social/emotional skills and the value of collaboration - working with peers. The performance will be on Friday at 2:00 PM.

Superintendent's Report: Peter provided a brief context of the budget process for the new members. He noted that the school is a part of the Town and the Principal, the Superintendent and Sharon put together a budget which they take to the Budget Advisory Committee for their recommendation to approve the budget at the Town Meeting. If that recommendation is forthcoming, there is no problem. Historically, the Committee has asked the school to rework their first budget in order to reduce the amount of increase over the last year. There are three or four major concerns (inflation, contracts, utilities and health insurance) that drive the increase in the budget.

Beth, Ina and Peter will be going before the BAC for a second time on Friday. The intent is to balance the needs of Richmond students with the financial needs of the Town, which has experienced greater financial pressure with the building of the new Town Hall.

Ina asked what the line Cultural for \$20,000 was used for. It is an enrichment program that allows the school to contract with organizations to come into the school and provide enriching activities. Beth noted that they had not used much of that money this year since COVID put an end to such programs for a while and, although there are grants

available they tend to be in small amounts. The additional \$20,000 helps to pay for more and bigger programs.

Peter posted his spreadsheet on the screen and explained the columns, including showing the FY22 budget as opposed to the FY22 actual and the dollar and percentage change between FY23 and FY24 along with the costs that created that increase.

For example: Legal expenses increased due to inflation. Superintendent's secretary received a raise to cover the next two years. Special Education Director's Salary, and Tutoring costs. The Principal's salary increased not as a raise, but as a clerical correction. The Nurse's salary was increased and transportation increases are tied to the contract structure with the bus company.

Tuition for Special Education: This is clearly a moral as well as fiscal responsibility but a small district like Richmond can take a very big hit financially around a high-needs student placed in a highly specialized program and the transportation costs for that student can rival the cost of a full-time teacher.

Food Services received a two-year increase and the cost of electricity doubled this past year. Adjustments to the heating system are being made in an effort to correct the huge differences in temperature in various rooms. Insulation in the Pre-K and 1st grade rooms has worked well in that regard. Medical Insurance costs have risen, but contingency and salary lines have gone down. Peter said he and Ina and Beth will meet with the BAC again and he believes it will go well.

SWATTING: [A false report of an active shooter] Peter reported that such an incident happened at Monument Mt. Regional H.S. which did a formal lockdown along with twenty other schools in Massachusetts similarly attacked. The State Police officer responsible for Richmond were there and took part in the debriefing which provided direction on ways to handle the situation more efficiently. Nate asked about communication with parents. Peter explained the methods that work best for families and school staff.

Pre-K Hopes for Going Forward: Pre-K provides a good, meaningful and structured program that prepares young children for learning readiness. Also, this is the time when some students are identified early with special needs. A new program was described wherein special needs children and regular students are placed together. The special needs students are helped and supported by the faster learners who are seen as "partners" who also model behaviors for the class.

A discussion was begun on how to charge for Pre-K classes. Beth said she is a huge supporter of Pre-K, which is often overlooked as an isolated part of the school, but Beth's opinion is that Richmond is a Pre-K to eighth grade building.

Expectations for Kindergarten: It was proposed that Richmond residents will have access to Pre-K at no cost as it was felt to be wrong to have Richmond families drop out of school for financial reasons. Peter was in agreement with having Pre-K free for

Richmond residents but could not recommend it for non-Richmond residents for whom the fee would be at the low end of the market rate for similar programs (\$50/day for one child, \$40/day each for two siblings). That's a lot lower than the usual \$10,000/year tuition which is actually at the low end of the range. The anticipated loss of revenue that would result would not impact the school's budget.

Nate noted that the paradigm of the population living in Richmond is shifting to younger families. Having an excellent Pre-K program at no cost would certainly be an added incentive to choose to live in Richmond.

Ina moved to make the Pre-K program at the Richmond School free for Richmond residents in the 2023-2024 school year. She was seconded by Kimmie and the motion was adopted by unanimous consent.

The Committee will also revisit after-school activities and added-time programs that can be supported by grant funding. Such programs (such as Kristine's free "Girls on the Run") have no impact on the budget but have a positive impact on the students.

Special Education Director: Mary reported that there was a tiered focus review on March 6th. She walked through the school with Elena from the Department of Education and felt it went very well. Elena was very pleased with Richmond School and amazed at the size of classrooms and overall lighting. On March 8th, Peter and Mary spoke to Elena who gave them some good feedback. There was also feedback from parents and surveys that were positive. Mary will be receiving a letter within 30-60 days if there are any findings. Elena will work with the School if there are any.

Two grantees have received more money, which has been applied to their programs. Mary attended Circuit Breaker training last Tuesday and on Monday was able to submit the first part of the application.

Mary has posted an ad for a school Psychologist. One respondent is undecided as to whether she actually wants to take on the job. Mary will get back to her to see what she decides. A woman applied for the Special Education Teacher position and Mary is hoping to see many more applications, particularly at this time of year.

Vote on School Calendar: Peter said that the Union and the Principal work together to create a school calendar which is then submitted to the School Committee for approval. Beth noted that the first three days will be devoted to orientation in Pre-K and Kindergarten. Teachers will arrange for individual appointments with families so that they can get to know each other and do formal screenings. Informal screening will take place in the Spring. The first real day of school will be September 5, 2023.

Last year school let out early before the Christmas break on the 21st. This calendar has school in session up to the 22nd, which is a half day. Half days count as full days. This year there will be a half day before Thanksgiving, which will also count as a full day. The decision was made not to have a half day on Good Friday, but to allow the

staff the opportunity to take the day off if they chose for religious reasons. Beth noted that even if the School has to use all five snow days, they will still be out before Juneteenth, which makes people happy.

Ina moved to approve the School Calendar as presented. She was seconded by Kimmie and the motion passed by unanimous vote.

Policies: Peter said that he was set to do the second reading of Policy J, but realized that there had been no significant feedback on it when it was reviewed last time. There were no questions or comments from the Committee.

Beth discussed some issues from the School Handbook that she felt should be included in Policy J as J-h that deal with attendance, truancy and chronic absences to create a better match between the Policy and the Handbook. This started a discussion of how much of the Handbook should be included in the Policy. Peter suggested that they leave the Policy Jh as it currently is and create a compromise Policy Jh-e (exhibit) and label it as the way our Policy is operationalized in the School Handbook.

Beth noted that the entire Due Process from the lawyer and the Restraint Policy and the Bullying Policy were included in Policy Jh. Ina moved that Policy J be accepted as amended with the inclusion of Jh-e. Kimmie seconded the motion, which was carried by unanimous consent.

Beth reported that Julia Sabourin in her new role in the D.A. office is coming to do a talk on Internet Safety with the middle schoolers (4th and 5th graders) next week. A program has just been developed for 2nd and 3rd grade on Internet Safety and Beth has spoken to the 2nd grade on the issue.

Peter very briefly noted that there is another lawsuit that the school is involved in dealing with insidious social media.

There being no further business before the Committee, Ina moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:37 PM. Kimmie seconded and the motion passed by unanimous vote.