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Board of Education Regular Meeting

Minutes

Friday, May 15 , 1998

Chairman Silber of Brookline called the meeting to order at 9:40 a.m. The following were in attendance:

Members of the Board of Education present:

Dr. John Silber, Chairman, Brookline
Ms. Patricia Crutchfield, Vice-Chairperson, Southwick
Dr. Edwin J. Delattre, Boston
Mr. William Irwin, Wilmington
Mr. James Peyser, Dorchester
Dr. Roberta Schaefer, Worcester
Mr. Micah Silver, New Salem, Chair, Student Advisory Council
Mr. Frank W. Haydu III, Commissioner of Education ad interim

Members of the Board of Education absent:

Dr. Stanley Z. Koplik, Boston
Dr. Abigail Thernstrom, Lexington

Also in attendance:

Dr. David P. Driscoll, Deputy Commissioner of Education
Ms. Nancy Catuogno, Registered Professional Reporter
Ms. Carline Gele, Department of Education

1. Approval Of The Minutes

Dr. Silber asked that page 2 of the April 9, 1998 minutes be corrected to read, "teachers' ability" and not "a teacher's ability." Mr. Peyser asked that the motion on page 5 be amended, adding the words, "for one full academic year" in the second paragraph of the motion.

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was

VOTED: that the Board of Education approve the minutes of the special meeting of April 8, 1998 and regular meeting of April 9, 1998 as amended.

The motion was made by Mr. Irwin and seconded by Ms. Crutchfield. The vote was unanimous.

Comments From The Chairman

Chairman Silber spoke on behalf of the Board of Education when he thanked Jeff Nellhaus, Carole Thomson and Carol Gilbert for their extraordinary work on the MCAS and the Teacher Tests. He said: In particular they have been terribly busy on that latter activity and I think the achievement of having launched that test as effectively as we have is something we can all be very proud of. The Chairman continued: I suspect that this initiative is possibly the most important

element of education reform that has been addressed since the passage of that legislation because if we can ensure that we limit access to the teaching profession to teachers who are fully qualified, we will ensure improvement in the quality of education automatically over the period of the next 10 to 15 years.

In regards to the MCAS test, the Chairman stated that he has received some letters from a few students. The Chairman read a letter from a high school student who he stated had horrible handwriting and little grasp of the rules of English grammar. The student's letter suggested that students could get out of taking the MCAS by going to a Catholic school. The letter also claimed that some students felt that taking the MCAS would ruin their lives. Dr. Silber responded that the student never would have made it to the twelfth grade in a Catholic school. Dr. Silber went on to say that if any student thinks that a test will ruin his life, his teachers and parents have failed that student. Chairman Silber concluded: This kind of letter indicates a real failure on the part of our educational system and on the part of parents.

Comments From The Commissioner

Commissioner Haydu recalled his intention to honor teachers at the start of each meeting of the Board. Today, Commissioner Haydu acknowledged all the sabbatical teachers within the Department of Education and thanked them for providing feedback on the teacher certification test. The Commissioner specifically honored Kathy Brown, a science sabbatical teacher within the Department of Education since 1996. Ms. Brown has worked closely with school districts, schools and teachers to assist them in working on developing curricula. She has been in education for nearly 30 years, mostly with the Cambridge Public Schools.

Commissioner Haydu presented Ms. Brown with a citation from Department of Education to commend her for her outstanding work. Ms. Brown thanked the Cambridge Public Schools and the Department and Commissioner of Education for allowing her to serve as a sabbatical teacher within the Department. Ms. Brown commended the sabbatical teachers program, saying: This program gives us validity when we go out to speak with districts and other teachers. We have been there and done that, and we would like to encourage everybody to keep working hard to improve student achievement.

Commissioner Haydu reviewed priority issues that were identified at a previous Board meeting, including the recruitment of a permanent Commissioner of Education, the introduction of a test for licensing new teachers, and conducting the second year of the grade 3 reading test. The Commissioner reported that the teacher certification tests and the grade 3 reading test have been administered and the results will be reported at the end of June. He also stated that the first round of the MCAS test has been administered and the results will be reported in November. On other matters, Commissioner Haydu reported: We have committees established to review and revise the frameworks in foreign languages, health and the arts, and their time-line is set. For math and science, we are in the process of reviewing nominees for the panels. The House budget contains funds for our new accountability unit, as requested, and we continue to work through the Senate to achieve the funding levels requested for other priority needs.

Commissioner Haydu continued: "In the next six months, as the Board and Commissioner work with the senior staff of the agency, we need to begin discussion and move ahead on other matters that are central to Education Reform. These include the following issues:

1. What performance levels will be required to achieve the competency determination on the MCAS? It is my strong view that the level -- the passing score-- should not be set on this year's test or on next year's test, until we have fully analyzed the test and its alignment with local curriculum. While the cut scores defining each of the four performance levels should not change over time, the overall passing score for the test could be raised over time. Our decisions must be thoughtful and should be driven by the data we accumulate, not by hypothetical scenarios.
2. How will we motivate and reward outstanding achievement by students on the MCAS, outstanding achievement by educators in our classrooms and outstanding performance and improvement by schools?
3. What will be the state's role to support school districts as they work to improve the academic performance of students who do not do well on the MCAS?

4. What is the timetable for implementing the Education Reform Law 1994 amendment which requires passing a test in a foreign language as part of the competency determination?
5. Education Reform outlined a process of state assistance to under-performing districts prior to any possible state receivership. What specific performance standards will we adopt to determine which schools and districts are under-performing?
6. What funding formula for schools should be adopted at the end of the seven-year foundation budget cycle, which ends in the school year 1999-2000?"

The Commissioner noted that the special meeting of the Board scheduled for 7:30 a.m. on June 22 will focus on school and school district accountability.

Statement From The Public

Ms. Elvira DiFabio, a representative of the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association, asked the Board to expedite the revision and approval of the Foreign Languages Curriculum Framework. Dr. Silber asked Ms. DiFabio to ask MAFLA for its recommendation on the economic issue: If school districts cannot afford K-12 foreign language instruction, at which grade levels should their efforts concentrate?

2. Student Assessment-Update On MCAS

Commissioner Haydu reported that although some issues surrounding the MCAS test need to be addressed, the feedback on the May administration of the MCAS has been largely positive. The Commissioner said the issues the Board should discuss at a future meeting include the time allotted to testing, and the use of appropriate grade-level language in the reading passages. He expressed his appreciation to all the teachers, administrators and others who have made the MCAS work. Mr. Silver reported that some grade 7-12 schools are confronted with a space problem because too many students are being tested at once. He also said that students were more positive and receptive to the MCAS test than were parents and the media. Commissioner Haydu said that when the tests are completed and results are analyzed, a full briefing will be given to the Board.

3. State Plan For Professional Development

Deputy Commissioner David Driscoll thanked the subcommittee of the Board on Professional Development composed of Dr. Edwin Delattre and Dr. Roberta Schaefer, and Department staff Meg Mayo-Brown and Melanie Winklosky, for their work on the State Plan for Professional Development. He reported that the revised document is leaner and more focused in its language. Dr. Driscoll stated: You will see the predominance and prominence of content, knowledge of subject matter, a strong connection with standards-based curriculum through the frameworks and assessment, and use of data that we will get from the student assessment program as a tool. Dr. Driscoll noted that, by statute, the Department of Education must consult with the Board of Higher Education on the professional development plan. He said that Chancellor Koplik had recommended some mention of technology. Dr. Driscoll presented the State Professional Development Plan to the Board for its consideration and vote.

Mr. Irwin commended the subcommittee for their work. He suggested that the document should be more specific as to delegating specific areas of responsibility. Mr. Irwin said: If we could designate who would be responsible for each area, the document would be much better. Chairman Silber agreed that the areas of responsibility need to be specified and suggested postponing the vote to approve the State Plan. Commissioner Haydu agreed that the suggestions of the Board will be taken into consideration and he will place the vote on next month's agenda.

4. Lawrence Public Schools - Superintendent Search - Discussion

Lawrence Mayor Patricia Dowling was joined by School Committee members Michael Sweeney

and Ralph Correiro and Dr. Mable Gaskins, a candidate for the Superintendency of the Lawrence Public Schools. Mayor Dowling stated that Dr. Gaskins was the School Committee's first choice to assume the position of Superintendent in Lawrence. She said the screening committee appointed under the agreement had interviewed candidates and recommended four finalists. The School Committee interviewed each of those four finalists. Mayor Dowling said that the unanimous choice of the Lawrence School Committee was Dr. Gaskins.

The Mayor briefed the Board on Dr. Gaskins' background. She commented: Dr. Gaskins' professional life can be summed up in one sentence, "If you have a tough job, an even insurmountable job, give it to Mable Gaskins." Mayor Dowling said she obtained positive reviews of Dr. Gaskins from several individuals. She continued: Dr. Gaskins not only holds herself to a standard of indefatigable work ethic, but she also has a history of recruiting excellent teachers and administrators and demanding continued excellence from the people who work under her. The Mayor also reported that she had asked the police to conduct a full background check on Dr. Gaskins, which came out pristine. Mayor Dowling informed the Board that Mr. Correiro and Mr. Sweeney went on site visits to evaluate Dr. Gaskins.

Mr. Sweeney voiced his support of Dr. Gaskins to become the Lawrence Superintendent. Mr. Sweeney said that high levels of student achievement and rigorous accountability and performance standards for administrators and teachers are the main concerns, and Dr. Gaskins is uniquely qualified to lead the Lawrence schools in those areas. In conclusion, Mr. Sweeney stated that he is confident that with Dr. Gaskins' leadership, the Lawrence Public Schools will get back on track.

Mayor Dowling introduced Dr. Gaskins to the Board. Dr. Gaskins thanked the Board and confirmed that just about a year ago she was recruited to be the Assistant Superintendent for Accountability, Technology and Support Services in the St. Paul, Minnesota Public Schools. Dr. Gaskins said in reading Education Week, she noticed a recruitment ad for the Lawrence Public Schools Superintendent, and she decided she would be a good match for the job, having been aware of the many challenges faced by that school district. To conclude, Dr. Gaskins expressed her desire to become Superintendent of the Lawrence Public Schools and Mayor Dowling urged the Board to vote in favor of Dr. Gaskins.

Dr. Delattre thanked the Mayor and School Committee members for their impressive work. He suggested that the Board as a whole conduct an interview of Dr. Gaskins and also review and study Dr. Gaskins' background before taking a vote. In response to Dr. Schaefer's inquiry about what initial steps she would take in the Lawrence Public Schools, Dr. Gaskins replied that the best strategy would be to review and study the report of the fact-finding team, but foremost to look at the accreditation of the high school and focus on student achievement. Dr. Schaefer said that postponing the vote would be a great disadvantage to the Lawrence Public Schools. She said: They need to move forward. It seems to me that since the screening committee that we put in place jointly with Lawrence approved Dr. Gaskins as a candidate, and the School Committee has voted unanimously to appoint her, it is our responsibility to move ahead and let the Lawrence school system move ahead with its process of getting back the high school's accreditation.

Mr. Peyser agreed that waiting until the next meeting of the Board on June 22 is indeed an inconvenience but said that considering the limited amount of information provided on Dr. Gaskins, it would be wise to review in depth the background of the candidate. Mr. Peyser suggested that the Board schedule a time before the next regular meeting to interview Dr. Gaskins.

In response to a question from Dr. Schaefer, Commissioner Haydu clarified that the search committee led by Matt George recommended four finalists for the superintendency in the Lawrence Public Schools. Dr. Silber inquired about the number of finalists, stating that there were originally five finalists. Two of those five, he stated, were at the top and one of the top finalists withdrew. Dr. Silber reiterated that the agreement between the state and Lawrence clearly specifies that the candidate is to meet the approval of the Board of Education, not merely the Lawrence School Committee. He said that the members of the Board should have the opportunity of meeting together to interview the candidate. Dr. Silber suggested meeting within the next two weeks to interview both Dr. Gaskins and the top finalist who withdrew, if he is willing to be considered, and compare the two candidates.

Commissioner Haydu clarified that Dr. Gaskins was the Mayor's and School Committee's top choice since the beginning of the process. Mr. Irwin asked that more information on Dr. Gaskins' background be provided and Dr. Delattre suggested meeting within a week.

Mayor Dowling addressed the Board, stating that the Lawrence School Committee has used all due diligence and has acted in a most reasonable manner with regard to the selection process. She requested that the Board act as expeditiously as possible.

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was

VOTED: that the Board of Education move as expeditiously as possible to determine the availability of the Board members and Dr. Mable Gaskins to hold special meeting within seven to ten days for the purpose of interviewing Dr. Gaskins and making a decision.

The motion was made by Dr. Schaefer and seconded by Dr. Delattre. The vote was unanimous.

Dr. Delattre concluded by asking the Mayor to convey to her colleagues and the citizens of Lawrence that the Board of Education admires their due diligence and that the Board will try to be duly diligent and move expeditiously as well.

5. School Building Assistance Regulations: Proposed amendments to 603 CMR 38.00 - Discussion and Vote

Mr. Peyser expressed concerns about the proposed amendment to section 38.03(8) of the School Building Assistance regulations which expands the requirements for technology. He called attention to the current section 38.03(8), which states that the plans for all projects shall reflect to the best of the applicant's ability attention to the 21st century technology needs of students, faculty and school staff. Mr. Peyser said: While it sounds like we ought to be building a bridge in this section to the 21st century, I think that is probably enough to give districts guidance as to what the expectations are in terms of technology. He continued: At the same time, it is flexible enough so that districts can make rational choices between competing uses of limited resources. Specifically, it is not at all clear to me that having each instructional room wired for at least five computers is necessarily the most significant priority that the school or the school district faces. Mr. Peyser said that districts ought to be encouraged to make the optimal use of their limited resources, and therefore they need to have the flexibility to decide whether to build additional space for a library or whether to invest in additional wiring in the classrooms. He explained that both may have value but they have different value depending on the individual circumstances. Mr. Peyser moved that the amendment to section 38.03(8) be deleted and the current language be maintained.

Mr. Peyser also expressed his concerns regarding the proposed amendment to section 38.06(1), which deals with the cost standards. His first concern was that the overall inflation rate is currently around two percent and yet the recommendation is for a three and a half percent increase in the cost per square foot. Mr. Peyser said that historically, the figures have grown at a rate that is substantially higher than the rate of inflation, and therefore over the years, there has been real growth in terms of cost per square foot and it exceeds the rate of inflation.

Mr. Peyser continued, saying that he is also concerned that the architectural firms and construction firms are involved with the forecast of future costs when they have an interest in increasing the cost and the size of the projects. Mr. Peyser concluded by stating that the Commonwealth should not be afraid to be aggressive on driving costs per square foot as low as possible. Mr. Peyser suggested either sending the proposal back for further revision or setting the inflation rate closer to the actual number. He then moved that section 38.06(1) be revised to reflect a two percent increase in terms of construction costs per square foot, rather than the three and a half percent increase that is recommended. Dr. Delattre seconded the motion. Commissioner Haydu stated that he prefers that the vote be deferred until the staff do some research and report to the Board on the impact of the motion.

Mr. Irwin asked Jim Anderson, Administrator for School Governance, about the source of the

cost figures. Mr. Anderson responded that the Department reviews the architects' numbers, works with the Association of General Contractors and scans the Engineering News Report.

Mr. Irwin asked Greg Nadeau, Chief Technology Officer for the Department, about the purpose of the proposed technology language. Mr. Nadeau explained that the language was proposed for the rare cases in which districts are unaware of the kind of wiring and other requirements that may be necessary.

After further discussion, it was decided that both motions would be tabled until the next meeting.

In conclusion, Commissioner Haydu stated that he would get more information and the Department's recommendations on both of Mr. Peyser's motions. Dr. Delattre asked the Department also to consider the impact of these regulations on libraries.

6. Approval Of Grants

Commissioner Haydu proposed a total of \$2,000,000 in emergency School Building Assistance grants for the Board's approval. Deputy Commissioner Driscoll explained that these grants are to cover renovations and repairs affecting health and safety in Chelsea, Dracut, Lawrence and for five schools in Saugus. For the record, Commissioner Haydu noted that Chairman Silber and Dr. Delattre recused themselves from the discussion on the approval of grants. Deputy Commissioner Driscoll informed the Board that the Dracut and Saugus Public Schools are faced with asbestos problems, and the Chelsea and Lawrence Public Schools are currently dealing with a serious overcrowding situation due to the increase in student enrollment.

Mr. Peyser inquired about the application process for the grants and whether or not school districts with problems short of natural disasters could apply for the funding. Dr. Driscoll replied that districts have to indicate an emergency situation in order to qualify for this funding. Mr. Peyser also inquired if the funds have been used for non-natural disaster or non-disaster purposes in the past. He stated that if we are establishing a criterion that the funds are available to any school districts that have a health or safety problem with school facilities, but with priority given to those districts that are in an emergency situation, we need to establish an open system so that all districts know that these funds may be available to them. Dr. Driscoll agreed that the Department would so advise school districts in the future.

With Chairman Silber and Dr. Delattre absent, on a motion duly made and seconded, it was **VOTED: that the Board of Education approve the emergency School Building Assistance grants as presented by the Commissioner.**

The motion was made by Dr. Schaefer and seconded by Mr. Irwin. The vote was unanimous.

Other Business

Commissioner Haydu called the Board's attention to the proposal submitted to the Legislature by the former Commissioner to have the Deputy Commissioner's salary set by the Board of Education. Mr. Haydu stated that Chairman Silber agreed that the subject should be brought up at this meeting, even though the Chairman had to leave. The Commissioner proposed a \$120,000 salary for the Deputy Commissioner and asked for the Board's approval.

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was **VOTED: that the Board of Education set the Deputy Commissioner's salary at \$120,000, effective July 1, 1998 and contingent on enactment of necessary legislative authority.**

The motion was made by Mr. Irwin and seconded by Dr. Schaefer. The vote was unanimous.

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was **VOTED: that the Board of Education adjourn the meeting at 11:30 a.m, subject to**

the call of the Vice-Chairperson, the Chairman being absent.

The motion was made by Mr. Irwin and seconded by Dr. Schaefer. The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Frank W. Haydu III
Secretary to the Board

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