

Special Meeting
Board Retreat
South Orange-Maplewood
Board of Education
August 5, 2021

A Special Meeting of the Board of Education of South Orange-Maplewood was held utilizing the online video conference platform on August 5, 2021.

Board President Thair Joshua called the meeting to order at 6:33 p.m.

Adequate written notice of this meeting of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education was sent to the Township and Village Clerks, The Star Ledger, the News Record, TAPintoSOMA.net, villagegreennj.com and the District website.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

ROLL CALL: Present: Board Member Bergin, Board Member Cuttle
Board Member Joshua, Board Member Maini,
Board Member Malespina, Board Member Sabin
Board Member Siders, Board Member Winkfield,
Board Member Wright

Absent: None

NINE VOTING MEMBERS PRESENT

BOARD PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT

The School Board meeting is a business meeting in public not a meeting with the public. Oftentimes it may appear to members of our audience that the Board of Education takes action with very little comment and in many cases a unanimous vote. Before a matter is placed on the agenda at a public meeting, the Administration has thoroughly reviewed the matter with the Superintendent of Schools/Chief School Administrator (CSA). If the Superintendent of Schools/Chief School Administrator is satisfied that the matter is ready to be presented to the Board of Education, it is then referred to the appropriate Board Committee. The Members of the Board Committee work with Administration and the Superintendent to assure that the members fully understand the matter. After the committee discusses the matter, it is presented to the full Board for discussion before any action is taken. Only then, is it placed on the agenda for action at a public meeting.

Motion made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Siders to allow distance participation for this Special Board meeting - Board Retreat.

Motion passed 9 yes, 0 no.

HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

ELIZABETH ROHAN

Having read the emails of Board members that were published in the Village Green, I would like to express my disgust at the conduct of people who were elected to serve the needs of children in our community. Thanks to Board member Johanna Wright for her clearheaded rebuke of this disgusting conduct. You did not need a law degree or a PhD to have foreseen with 100% certainty that the Board President's refusal to allow the one problematic police resolution to be severed from a series of resolutions that included one expressing support for transgender students was going to force some Board members to vote against the transgender student support resolution against their will and that some community members would then seize this opportunity to attack those Board members with false claims that they do not support transgender students. That is not good governance or good leadership.

For some Board members to attack the only Asian-American Board member with claims of racism and a failure of respect for "leadership" because she rightly questioned the President's failure to follow Robert's Rules of Order, this conduct was appalling. For those Board members who said these emails showed your values, your values as Board members should not include this nastiness, vitriol and a lack of respect to your fellow volunteers and community members who were elected to serve SoMa's children and taxpayers. I am sorry this petty political squabbling is how this dysfunctional Board conducts itself and that smart, talented Board members need to resign to escape this toxic HIB behavior. I think it's clear that most BOE members should not be re-elected due to their inability to conduct themselves with integrity in their roles as public servants.

Motion made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Malespina to take a brief recess to move to Google Meet for the Board Retreat. Motion unanimously approved.

***Board recessed at 6:40 p.m.
Board reconvened at 6:43 p.m.
Nine Voting Members Present***

BOARD RETREAT - PART II

DISCUSSION

Board President Joshua began the retreat with a brief summary of his meeting with Ms. Peterson after the last Board Meeting - Retreat. President Joshua and Ms. Peterson reviewed emails and discussed the best way to incorporate some of what was heard at the last retreat (July 22, 2021) and the exercise that was shared with the Board earlier this week regarding things we should keep, stop and start, is something that Ms. Peterson has been doing in other districts. The meeting was turned over to facilitators Ray Pinney and Charlene Peterson of New Jersey School Boards Association.

Ray Pinney Member Engagement Director and Charlene Peterson, Field Representative for NJSBA facilitated part two of the Board Retreat. Part two of the Retreat focused on meeting effectiveness and Governance team effectiveness through the lens of the top three areas of keep, stop and start.

- Top Three Areas to Address:
 - Keep - What we do well as a Board Team and should keep doing?
 - Stop - What is the Board doing now that gets in the way of our work so we should stop doing it?
 - Start - What does our Board need to start doing to enhance our work?
- Effective governance requires that adults, on behalf of the children they serve, find avenues of agreement, so that they can govern the district in an effective manner.

Each Board Member stated something they believe the Board should keep, stop or start in the areas of meeting effectiveness and governance and also what commitment each Board member is willing to make to contribute to toward an effective governance team.

Motion made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Cuttle to take a brief recess to return to Webex. Motion unanimously approved.

Board recessed at 8:26 p.m.

Board reconvened at 8:29 p.m.

Eight Voting Members Present

Board Member Winkfield joined the meeting at 8:33 p.m.

Nine Voting Members Present

HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

SCOTT SINKLER

I appreciate you trying to work out the problems. You could have just done nothing, but I would have to say I am not super inspired. About 90% of what I just heard is platitude to be honest. My brain is in kind of a numb place at this point. There has been a lot of bureaucrat speak and not even very convincingly delivered. A couple of members contributed nothing but platitudes tonight. Every time they were called on their response was they agree with everyone else. That is not what we elected you to do. Please try harder. Please don't just phone it in. A few actually said something that meant something, but I really didn't hear a lot that is real. What is going to change?

I have two proposals both of which will sound radical, but I believe are rational, justified and worth listening to. It is my view that the SOMSD community should recall every member of this Board and require all of you to campaign for your positions in the Fall along with the fall new candidates. What we have seen especially in the emails that

we all got to read the other day thanks to the Village Green is shameful and not acceptable. You all need to justify your value for continued support and tell us how you are going to make this district work. There is a mechanism for this just as there is for the Governor of California. Several Board Members past and present have told me that this makes sense and is possible under the rules. Let's be honest, the Board of education has been a mess for a decade and has been getting worse.

Kamal Zubieta, one of the most serious and level-headed members we've had, threw in the towel this year because her mental health suffered from the bullying she was subjected to by her colleagues on the Board. That's insane. We do not elect you to bully each other. There has been a power struggle for a decade between a faction on the Board that has campaigned and voted and lockstep on virtually every issue versus the so-called independents who have just been trying to do what is best for the district and our kids. Everyone on the Board has the best interest of the district's kids at heart; I believe that. But, the dynamic has become so toxic that the members that we put our faith in are literally running for the exits. We cannot have that. Something has to change.

SOMA residents have now had the chance thanks to the work of the Village Green to read the emails that shed light on the craziness that lead to Kamal's resignation. Board Members know that any communication via district email are subjected to an Open Public Records Act Request (OPRA), which is exactly what the Village Green was able to accomplish, despite stonewalling by the Administration. Of course, these were extremely circumspect but you can read between the lines and from what I have been told for years, Board of Education meetings regularly devolve in to rancorous screaming matches and ad hominem attacks. Tragically, these attacks are often framed in a racial context which I find really upsetting, which I guess is not unique in a society that is going through a particularly intense phase right now in regard to that. Which I would want to believe might be or should be or could be different in a community like SOMA.

Critiques of the new Board President's decisions and actions have been attacked as racially motivated. In this community I find that kind of absurd. This type of cheap attack shuts down discussion because pretty much nobody in this community can tolerate being called a racist because we are all trying our best not to be. As President Obama said again and again, "We are Better than This". If every Board Member is required to compete with every other one this fall with the five new candidates, maybe there is a chance to hold you guys accountable and to get our stuff together.

My second proposal is that the District find a way for the students/victims of the disastrous excuse for a chorus teacher this past year to have their grades expunged. The Administration that hired him owe the kids this. Yes, Dr. Taylor ultimately showed some accountability by not renewing this non-tenured teacher's contract, which was not difficult. But, he and others were also responsible for failing to hire a decent qualified candidate for this high-profile job

and for letting him run rampant over our kids for the entire school year, sending some to therapy or causing some to drop out of the program they very much wanted to be a part of. Many families have been upset that these kids' GPA's were torpedoed by this guys punitive and unjustified grading, which by his own testimony, was often based on kids' enthusiasm for singing publicly on demand in face of his disparagement when they did so. There is an implicit covenant between the teachers and the kids. The kids do their best and accept the consequences but the teachers also have to perform to professional standards and they must be reasonable and fair. The district administration and supervisors who we also pay must be accountable and they have not been.

There is a 9th biology teacher who is actually known to be the best teacher in the department in terms of his knowledge and teaching, but his grading is completely out of whack with any kind of normal logical standard. Kids in this class have been tested on material that was not covered or that was not taught properly. One test was said to have returned an average class grade of F. Something is wrong here. What is ultimately wrong is that our school district does not get the concept of accountability. The STEM Supervisor for CHS is known for failing to supervise and hold his teachers to account. In the case of the legendary nonteaching biology teacher this meant that teaching was not required. In the case of an 11th grade math teacher meant the kids had to deal with expectations for self-instruction on a college level, to which they were completely unprepared.

NJ State law prohibits the district from interfering with teachers' grades. If there isn't a remedy the district can offer, I encourage parents and anyone who is listening to band together to demand relief individually but on mass. My kids did not take chorus and our family really isn't hung up on GPA's but a lot of kids were cheated this past year. Some parents reported that their kids were disqualified from getting into the college or music program they wanted to get into because their GPA. Justice demands that this is addressed.

Our family has one more year in the district and I plan to hold this institution to account. Not so much for my kids who've managed to get by and do well with whatever has been thrown their way, but for the thousands of kids coming up through the system who deserve a decent and consistent education and at the very least a fair shake.

Thank You

NEW BUSINESS

- Board Member Malespina asked how the Board can go about supporting the petition to rename Underhill Field to honor the memory of Moussa Fofana. The petition currently has over 5,000 signatures.
- Board President Joshua suggested researching the history of the Underhill name and any conditions that may be connected to the donation of the land before moving forward with renaming the field.

- Ms. Butler informed the Board that grant from the original naming must be reviewed to see if there are any conditions that would prevent a name change.
- Board President Joshua suggested the Executive Committee speak with Dr. Taylor to decide what the appropriate next step is.

Future Meetings

The Board of Education will meet in Closed Session on Monday, August 16, 2021 at 6:30 pm in the Superintendent's Office, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, NJ, as well as using the online video conference platform to discuss personnel and legal issues, negotiations, and other matters to be announced at a later date. Immediately following the Closed Session, the Board of Education will meet in Public Session at 7:30 pm in the District Meeting Room, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, NJ in person and utilizing an online video conference platform which will include Hearing of Individuals. The community can view the meeting by following the steps which will be listed on the agenda. If there are members of the community who would like to attend the meeting in person, please note that masks and social distancing are required in accordance with the guidance received from the local DOH. Action will be taken.

Motion made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Sabin, that the Board of Education will meet in Executive Session prior to the August 16, 2021 Public Meeting to discuss personnel and legal issues, negotiations and other matters, the nature of which will be made public at a future date. Motion unanimously approved.

MOTION made by Board President Joshua, seconded by Board Member Malespina that the Board of Education adjourns. Motion unanimously approved at 8:46 p.m.

Andrea Del Guercio, Acting Board Secretary