

Reorganizational Meeting  
South Orange-Maplewood  
Board of Education  
May 9, 2024

A Reorganizational Meeting of the Board of Education of South Orange-Maplewood was held in the District Meeting Room at the Administration Building, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, New Jersey as well as utilizing the online video conference platform on May 9, 2024.

Board President Qawi Telesford called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m.

ROLL CALL

ROLL CALL: Present: Board Member Callahan, Board Member Duvall Wilson, Board Member Eckert, Board Member Meyer, Board Member Vadlamani, Board Member Sackett-Gable, Board President Telesford, Board Member Wittleder

Absent: Board Member Gifford

*EIGHT VOTING MEMBERS PRESENT*

Pledge of Allegiance

NOTICE OF THE MEETING

Please take notice that adequate notice of this meeting has been provided in the following manner:

- A. That written notice was sent from the Office of the Secretary of the Board at 2:30 p.m. on January 6, 2023.
- B. That said notice was sent via email to Maplewood and South Orange Township Clerks and the Editors of the News Record, Star Ledger, and the Village Green.

SOUTH ORANGE-MAPLEWOOD BOARD OF EDUCATION RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING EXECUTIVE SESSION

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WHEREAS, while the "Sen. Byron M. Baer Open Public Meetings Act" (N.J.S.A. 10:4-6 et seq.) requires all meetings of the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education to be held in public, N.J.S.A. 10:4-12(b) sets forth nine (9) types of matters that may lawfully be discussed in "Executive Session," without the public being permitted to attend, and

WHEREAS, the Board has determined that one (1) issue is permitted by N.J.S.A 10:4 - 12 (b) to be discussed without the public in attendance and shall be discussed during an Executive Session to be held on Thursday, May 9, 2024 at 6:30 PM, and

Any matter which, by express provision of Federal law, State statute or rule of court shall be rendered confidential or excluded from public discussion." The nature of the matter, described as specifically as possible without undermining the need for confidentiality, is Attorney Client Privilege and Personnel.

WHEREAS, the length of the Executive Session is estimated to be sixty (60) minutes after which the public meeting of the Board shall reconvene and proceed with business where formal action will be taken.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education will go into Executive Session for the above-stated reasons only; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board hereby declares that its discussion of the aforementioned subject(s) will be made public at a time when the public's interest in disclosure is greater than any privacy or governmental interest being protected from disclosure.

Motion made by Board President Telesford, seconded by Board Member Callahan to adjourn to Executive Session. Motion unanimously approved.

***Board Members adjourned to Executive Session at 6:36 p.m.***

***Board Members reconvened at 8:02 p.m.***

***Board Member Gifford Present***

***9 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.

SUPERINTENDENT'S STATEMENT - Dr. Kevin F. Gilbert

*When we had our meeting about the budget I made a comment to you that this has been the toughest time of my career as an Educational Leader and that toughness continues tonight. It pains me to be sitting in this particular seat at this time for our district when we have to cut 28 positions. I'm acknowledging the many emails and all of you here tonight; I hear your concerns. We are putting together the plan on what this looks like going forward. My commitment to you is that I will come before you all to reveal*

*our process and plans going forward to create the kind of School District that you have demanded and that you deserve.*

*It pains me that I had to lead this District in a time when we had to make such tough decisions to reduce our deficit. Please know that I will not leave you in the dark; you will know what the plan is going forward.*

*When I first assumed the role of Acting Superintendent, I wrote a letter to you to acknowledge the events that led to my appointment. In that letter I said that as a community we can be the best that we can be, we can disagree without being disagreeable, we can honor and value one another and listen to one another. I want to acknowledge that tensions and passions are high tonight. I ask that as we listen and talk, we remember we are still one community.*

#### HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

Thank you for coming in-person and dialing-in by phone this evening. The South Orange - Maplewood Board of Education certainly respects that you've taken the time out of your busy day to address the Board at tonight's meeting. We value public involvement in our school district, and we are eager to hear what you have to say. The board does have time limits by policy, and it will be enforcing those to enable as many people to speak as possible this evening. Each individual will be given three minutes to speak, please do your best to stay within the time afforded to you. The first public comment period is usually limited to one hour and the second public comment period may be limited to thirty minutes. All input shared with the Board of Education is taken very seriously, and will inform future deliberations and work by the Board of Education and its committees.

#### HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

The following students and community members spoke during public speaks: Ren Crawford, Alice Cohen, Sonia Zenobi, Samantha Baker, Z. Luciano, Gabriel Tarrow, Yuk Khanna, Kira Eggert, Ella Levy, Felix Reichman-Curnow, Emma Phillips, Emmett Simon, Alexander Wood, Karol Agola, Eve Johnson, Alexa Easington, William Clifford, Beckett Mida, Ayla Novemsky, Izzy Sandoval, Paul Parsons, Jamie Ramsburg, Sam Finlay, Margaret Pickron, Cynthia Longley Richards, Andrea Alexander, Tony Mazzocchi, Aniha Rossen, Amy Merlini Coey, Becky Zlotnick, Anna Herstatt, Ambra Teague, Jeff Bennett, Mary Alice Zavocki, Glen Wright, Beth Cosentino.

#### ITEMS FOR ACTION

Motion made by Ms. Del Guercio, seconded by Board Member Eckert to move resolutions 4608-4610 for discussion and voting. Motion unanimously approved.

Motion made by Board Member Wittleder seconded by Board Member Eckert to sever resolution 4609 line#26 Eric Burnside, Business Administrator/ Board Secretary. Motion unanimously approved.

Motion made by Board Member Eckert, seconded by Board Member Vadlamani to table resolution 4610.

Board Attorney Patrick Carrigg explained the process to sever and table resolutions. The motion to table takes precedence so it requires a second and you need to move that first. The sever happens automatically. The Board operates by a consent agenda. A consent agenda is when you move all items at once any Board Member at any time can ask for any item to be severed from your consent agenda. It does not require a second all it means is we want an actual vote on that and you're automatically entitled to that, that's Robert's Rules. So, you don't need a motion to sever and you don't need a second to sever once the Board Member announces I want an item severed it is automatically severed.

Board Member Eckert explained her motion to table resolution 4610 Reorganizational Appointments for the 2024-25 school year. The reorganizational resolution includes the appointment of staff members to other positions and given the potential outcomes at this moment we are unsure if the staff members will accept these positions. So I am tabling this resolution to push it to the next meeting where we will have a better understanding of our staff list.

ROLL CALL: Motion to Table 4610 PASSED YES: Callahan, DuVall Wilson, Eckert, Gifford, Meyer, Sackett-Gable, Telesford, Vadlamani, Wittleder NO: None

Motion made by Board President Telesford, seconded by Board Member Vadlamani to move resolutions 4608-4609 for discussion and voting (excluding 4609 line #26):

4608A. RESIGNATIONS

NAME	ASSIGNMENT	EFFECTIVE DATE	YEARS IN DISTRICT
Bertani, Brad	Assistant Principal TUS - 1.0 FTE	7/1/24	6.4
Harris, Kristin	T 4 DB - 1.0 FTE	7/1/24	8
Kuczynski, Emily	School Psychologist/OOD CHS - 1.0 FTE	7/1/24	2
Ramsburg, Jamie	T 2 CLIN - 1.0 FTE	7/1/24	3.8
Young, Taria	T PreK/INC MONT - 1.0 FTE	7/1/24	.7

4608B. ABOLISH POSITIONS

Community Parent Liaison  
Director of Guidance, Counseling, Social Work Grades 6-12  
ELL Aide/Parent Liaison  
K-8 ELA Support Teacher  
Title 1 Aide

4609. APPROVE REAPPOINTMENT LISTS FOR THE 2024-25 SCHOOL YEAR

LIST #1 - Reappointment of Non-Tenured Staff  
LIST #2 - Reappointment of All Other Staff

[LISTS ON FILE IN BOARD SECRETARY'S OFFICE]

Board Member Vadlamani expressed disappointment that Principal Frank Sanchez is not on the reappointment list.

Board Member Eckert thanked all of the amazing students who came out this evening to advocate for themselves and peers. She also expressed gratitude to teachers and community members for being here this evening and made the following statement:

*We find ourselves in a really devastating situation. The almost double digit gap that we were only made aware of a few weeks before our Preliminary Budget Meeting has led to the elimination of 28 positions and to say that I'm disappointed in the way the RIF process has played out is an understatement. All we see is teaching and support staff. So, no I do not believe that the pain has been shared evenly across the district or at all levels and yes, I have had those hard internal conversations and no I do not agree with the final outcome. It has been disheartening to only just learn about the potential elimination of courses due to the RIF. We still don't understand the full impact on students and existing staff and we need to know more. A student said it today, we are failing students. You all deserve better. I will commit to doing better, we have to do better. It's unfortunate that we find ourselves in this situation and there are certain areas in which we cannot go back but the future of the district is on the line and we cannot sit here and do nothing. My fellow Board Members once this meeting is over we really need to come together and work with our Administration to figure out how we can potentially get back some of the programs that are being cut. This is a really hard evening but I just wanted to share that.*

ROLL CALL: Motion 4608-4609 (excluding 4609 line #26) PASSED YES: Callahan, DuVall, Wilson, Eckert, Gifford, Meyer, Sackett-Gable, Telesford, Vadlamani, Wittleder NO: None

Motion made by Board President Telesford, seconded by Board Member Vadlamani to move resolutions 4609 line #26 for discussion and voting.

- ❖ Board Member Vadlamani - I know emotions are very high and laying off staff and teachers is terrible and there is no way around that but the Board needs to act practically and not go into vengeance mode. We are not a medieval kingdom where we kill the messenger who comes bearing bad news. Our costs are high because our kids need more support. The Board must act carefully and dispassionately in tough times. It is easy to be a Board Member, an FFT Chair or even a Superintendent when revenues are higher than costs. It's simple, there are no problems. We must act sensibly and responsibly when our costs exceed revenue. I will vote yes to renew Mr. Burnside and I am asking all Board Members to do the same.

- ❖ Board Member DuVall Wilson - I've been on the Board for two years and each year we've had a major budget deficit; it continues to grow exponentially. Since the beginning of 2023 I along with many of my Board colleagues have been asking the district for more data, monthly budget tracking discussions in FFT, multi-year forecasting and more transparency with the budget. I repeat these were asked since the beginning of 2023, so what does that tell everyone? The Board can advocate and ask for change but we cannot force the hands of our leaders. Through the Superintendent Search and research from fellow Board Members like Wittleder and Eckert we've learned a lot about how other districts operate. We've seen the large extent that other districts sized like ours overcommunicate and even receive buy-in from stakeholders. I believe that we cannot look at things with a short-term lens, Board Members must look at the long-term needs of our district. When we fail to look at the long-term needs students suffer, our children's education suffers and teachers suffer. So, I want the community to know that we have policy 1330. That policy states that the Board should annually establish procedures for the evaluation of the Business Administrator (BA) in partnership with the Superintendent. Our current evaluation is not up to par for the BA, more than 10 indicators are not applicable to his role. With that said I recommend that the Board follows this policy and works on this for next year. Following this policy will ensure that the role of the BA is evaluated based on their job description and the current challenges and needs of the district. My vote tonight will reflect these opinions.
- ❖ Board Member Meyer - There's a lot that we can't talk about in these discussions because this is a personnel matter. We're not allowed to discuss our view of the performance of the employee at issue, but what I'm going to say is this, this district has a lot of struggles and a lot of them were discussed tonight and the comments made by students, parents and staff are completely valid. Those are some of the struggles that we have they are not all of them. We have systemic issues in our district as well as on our Board and they do come out in these decisions. They come out in how the budget looks, in what services are being provided and what services are being cut. We have a Board that is extraordinarily green, all of us. You look at a lot of other boards in the state they have people who have served five six terms. The most senior people on our Board have been here a little bit over two years. We have a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) that is full of people who have been in their roles a short time and have held roles like that for a short time, in fact, our BA is I believe the person who has the most senior amount of time, 10 years. We are in a situation where the current budget was developed in the shadow of absolute chaos in this District after the Superintendent was summarily shoved aside on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, not as part of the sort of stable process of transitioning to a new Superintendent at the end of their term but just all of a sudden in a fit of pique. I

believe this led to Central office and the District functioning from a place of chaos and for the budget to be developed in that shadow exacerbated some of the issues that we see tonight. We are a district that seems addicted to churn and the vote no tonight will perpetuate that churn. That is one important thing that we need to be considering. The budget is created by a lot of different people, the BA is one person who is directly responsible for packaging it up and handing it out but there are a lot of people in this District who are responsible for saying yes, we can afford to get rid of this piece, yes you can go ahead and borrow from my line item because we can do with less, we can merge those positions together, we can handle this a different way. We have our Assistant Superintendent who was pushed into the role despite not having a major budgeting background, who's had to negotiate and orchestrate all of this. We're functioning from a position of weakness this year because of our own choices and I recognize that having one scapegoat feels like a great win and we can deliver that up; It sounds like what is happening tonight but just don't think that is the total answer, don't think we just fixed it because that is not what's going on.

- ❖ Board Member Wittleder - Our district is at an inflection point and I'm not exaggerating and I know you all know this when I say that the future success of this district is at stake. Plain and simple we were all elected to ensure that the district is well-run. The resounding message from our community this evening serves as a powerful message that we are falling short of these expectations and that we need to do better. We have seen what the last three years have been. What we have seen is what we will continue to get as we look to start a new chapter in this District. I, and I know my board colleagues as well, believe that the only way to survive in this role as a board member, and probably as a community member, is to continue holding on to hope. It's a relentless hope, but if we persist on this current trajectory, that hope is fading and the promise of a brighter future that we all know we can have for students in this district is fading as well. Too much is at stake here, it's time for a new chapter one where accountability and responsible stewardship guide every decision that we make.
- ❖ Board Member Callahan - As both an Educator and a Board member I don't just understand but have had firsthand direct experience around the profound impacts that a reduction in force and a budget can have on a school community. Please know these decisions are not easy and they truly demand our careful consideration. The implications for staff, for students I appreciate very deeply the advocacy that our community has engaged in to support the programs and the teachers they love. Thank you for your emails and for being here tonight. We recognize that maintaining a supportive and stable learning environment is paramount even amidst these financial challenges and

as Board Member Eckert stated I commit to continuing to seek innovative solutions, engaging in transparent communication with stakeholders and advocating for resources that will prioritize the well-being of our students and our Educators. So, while budget cuts and reduction in force may present formidable obstacles they also underscore the need for creative problem solving and collaboration within our school community. By working together my hope is that we can mitigate the impact of these challenges and ensure that our students continue to receive the high quality education that they deserve. But this moment we would be remised to not remember similar situations in May and November where we were warned about the consequences of rash actions and the ripple effect that ensues when leaders are ousted leading to devastating and destabilizing outcomes as my Board Member colleague Mr. Meyer pointed out. Now, a year later we do find ourselves living in that aftermath of reckless decisions spearheaded by our former Board President and colleagues and we are in fact at this inflection point that you invoked in this aftermath. Taking steps to rectify this situation tonight is important and a positive beginning but it's also essential not to celebrate just cleaning up the mess but to recognize where it was created in the first place.

- ❖ Board President Telesford - As Board Members we are always often told to look at things from a bird's eye point of view because you have to look at it from a 30,000 ft. level. One person is usually not affected by our choices. Our choices always have a cascading effect and one of the things that we have to think about as Board Members is how does this affect the people that are in other departments that you're not thinking about or other areas of the district. So, I think one of the things I will caution us on is with our decisions you're not focusing on one thing, it will always have a cascading effect that ripples out. So, just think about that with all your decisions.

ROLL CALL: Motion 4609 line #26 Eric Burnside FAILED YES: Meyer, Telesford, Vadlamani NO: Callahan, DuVall Wilson, Eckert, Gifford, Sackett-Gable, Wittleder

#### NEW BUSINESS

Board Member Gifford made a motion to move a hand carry resolution to authorize a forensic audit of the South Orange Maplewood School District covering all financial transactions and policies from the past three fiscal years assessing the internal controls, compliance and financial reporting accuracy.

Board Member Meyer raised a point of order point as presenting the resolution is violation of our policy related to New Business.

Mr. Carrigg commented that the Board has limitations on what can be brought up during the New Business proportion of the meeting. *It should be limited*



to matters of such urgency that they cannot be delayed and moved in the regular course. The question would arise if this goes through the regular course, through the committee process and appears on next month's agenda would that be a problem? That's what emergent matters are for in your other business portion.

Board President Telesford commented that this can be discussed at the FFT Committee Meeting.

Board Member Gifford asked to read the resolution into the record.

Board President Telesford directed Board Member Gifford to forward the resolution to the FFT Committee Chair for discussion at the next FFT Committee Meeting.

Mr. Carrigg commented that there is no way that a forensic audit would result in saving cuts by the next meeting because a forensic audit is an undertaking of several months.

Board Member Eckert requested that the FFT committee discuss the possibility of this, the implications, timelines and costs in their next meeting.

Board President Telesford asked the Board to take into account that the District just went through a blistering Federal Audit.

Board Member Eckert commented that it is a very different audit.

#### HEARING OF INDIVIDUALS AND DELEGATIONS

Community Member Jeffrey Bennett commented that courtesy transportation is not the cause of the budget crisis and budget crisis is multiple years in the making it didn't just appear in Winter 2024.

#### Future Meetings

The Board of Education will meet in Public Session on Thursday, May 30, 2024 at 6:30 pm in the District Meeting Room, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, NJ. Immediately following the opening of Public Session, the board will move to go into a Closed Session in the Superintendent's Office, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, NJ, as well as using an online video conference platform to discuss personnel, matters within the attorney-client privilege, legal, negotiations, and other matters that may arise and require discussion, to be announced at a later date. Immediately following the Closed Session, the Board of Education will meet in Public Session (estimated to be 7:30 pm) in the District Meeting Room, 525 Academy Street, Maplewood, NJ in person, 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 optional in accordance with the guidance received from the local DOH and the CDC. Action will be taken.

MOTION made by Board President Telesford seconded by Board Member Eckert that the Board of Education adjourn. Motion approved unanimously on at 10:23 p.m.

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Andrea Del Guercio, Assistant Board Secretary