

**CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF EDUCATION
FINANCE COMMITTEE
SPECIAL MEETING
MAY 14, 2015**

ATTENDANCE: Rosa Murray, Chair; Michael Barbis, Brian Meek

OTHERS: Interim Superintendent Connelly, Deputy Superintendent Tony Daddona, Richard Rudl, BOE Finance Director; Sara Legister, NPS; Chrissy Fensore, NPS Special Education; Dr. Lynn Moore, West Rocks School Principal; Atty. Jeffrey Spahr; BOE Member Shirley Mosby (6:33 p.m.)

CALL TO ORDER.

Ms. Murray called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. A quorum was present.

Update on Special Education Finances.

Interim Superintendent Connelly said that there had been a number of questions about the Special Education funding because there were two recent transfers of funding. He said that the meeting was to review the process for everyone from the PPT to a transfer of a student out of district (OOD). He said that the most important thing was trends because these placements are not static. There are times when a student needs services that are not available in the District. The District is required to place that student and to pay for it. He added that there was a first PPT that may determine a student requires placement and a second PPT at a later date with the staff at the OOD location.

Ms. Fensore then said that when a student is recommended for a PPT, it starts at the school level. A group composed of teachers and various other staff members meet to determine if the services can be provided. There are three different placement locations and the staff tries to match the student's needs to the best facility for them. A Central Office staff member is at the meeting and then becomes the case manager for the student's OOD placement. The file is sent to the school where the staff selected and the school then reviews the student file. If the school feels that the student is a good fit, then they will accept the student and their staff becomes the case manager. The staff is required by law to meet annually on every OOD placement to review the appropriateness of each placement.

When the student is accepted into a OOD facility, the family and a staff member visit the facility. The priority is to have the student located as close to Norwalk as possible.

There is a State law that requires that a child not be on the bus for longer than an hour unless there are extenuating circumstances.

Mr. Meek asked how the decision is made. Ms. Fensore said that the first PPT team determines the eligibility together by consensus and the second PPT is done with a Special Education staff member. Mr. Daddona explained that it has to be a consensus, but it is noted in the minutes if there is a team member who disagrees. The principal, the teacher, and the Special Education staff all have the same rank. If there is a disagreement between the parent and the District on the course of action, the State "stay put" law goes into action, which keeps the student in place until things are resolved. Mr. Daddona reminded everyone that there are numerous reports on the student and if the data indicates that the student is not making progress, they are required by Federal law to do an OOD. Discussion followed about the details.

Ms. Murray asked if there were financial guidelines. Mr. Daddona and Interim Superintendent Connelly both said that there were not. Mr. Daddona added that the District is required to follow due process and if there is arbitration or a hearing any variation will result in a ruling against the District. If there is a hearing, the final decision is made by the hearing officer.

Ms. Fensore then displayed a grid showing six different Districts: Danbury (4%), Greenwich (3%), Meriden (9%), Stratford (11%) and West Hartford (6%) . Norwalk has a 9% placement. Interim Superintendent Connelly said that the pattern he sees is that the wealthier communities have more resources to offer. Ms. Murray asked if the presentation could be sent out to the Board Members. Interim Superintendent Connelly said that this would be sent tomorrow.

The discussion then moved to a graph breaking out the various outplacements issues. The largest number of students are in the "Other Health Issues/ADHD" category with 31%. Ms. Fensore explained that this trend is being experienced across the State. The second largest group is Emotional Disturbances at 20%. DCF recently announced at a meeting that 20% of the students in State have mental health issues. There has been an increase in suicidal ideation across the State. Autism was listed at 17% and is followed by Multiple Disabilities at 13%.

Ms. Mosby joined the meeting at 6:33 p.m.

Mr. Daddona said that next year, there is a budget item for specialized classrooms for the students with emotional issues and it will be staffed by a full time psychologist.

A pie chart was displayed showing the various OOD placement facilities. Interim Superintendent Connelly then reviewed the various details with the Committee. Mr. Daddona said that the District was trying to offer more services in house to meet the

student's needs. It will be important to keep the students in District with their peers. He stressed that the IDEA law wants the students in the least restrictive environment.

Ms. Murray asked about the financial component. Interim Superintendent Connelly said that it was just not a classroom but a therapeutic setting. Just bringing a student back and simply putting them in a classroom is warehousing. Discussion followed about the idea of having a psychologist assigned to each classroom rather than sharing a psychologist between several classrooms.

The latest trend has been with students that have with suicidal ideation or self-cutting often with multiple hospitalizations. A few years ago, there was a surge in autism and originally, those students were placed out of the District. Now the districts are providing services for the autistic students, but have not been equipped to deal with the mental health issues.

Ms. Fensore said that she and her co-worker, Sarah, have been in discussions about getting an audiologist in Fairfield with two Hartford County schools that have programs for deaf students.

Mr. Rudl then reviewed the budget history for OOD Tuition. He said that the District starts the budget process in October to prepare it for the Board in December. However, if a student is determined to need special services in January, it is not reflected in the current budget and often results in having a funding transfer. Tuition costs have risen 32% since 2012-2013. The OOD Transportation costs have also increased by 26% since 2012-13. Both of these factors are driven by an increase in Special Education students and changes in contracts.

Mr. Rudl said that the spending costs had increased from approximately 9 million to close to 11 million. He then reviewed the figures for the State's Excess Cost Reimbursement. The funding comes directly to the District.

Mr. Daddona said that if DCF or the courts places a student in a facility OOD, the District is required to finance it. Interim Superintendent Connelly said that this accounts for about 5 or 6 students, but said that there was flexibility.

Interim Superintendent Connelly said that the biggest challenge is the behavioral problems. Within District, often the first notification that a student is now OOD is when a bill arrives. This will be addressed internally by having the Finance Department notified upon completion of the second PPT.

Interim Superintendent Connelly asked if there was any possibility that the current budget will be enough. Mr. Rudl said that he believe this would be possible. Discussion followed about the finances and the reconciliations.

Ms. Murray then opened the floor up to questions by the public.

A question was asked about the Early Childhood Center. Mr. Meek said that the plan is moving forward with six classrooms at the present time with the gym to be handled at a later date. The resident said that she was pleased to hear this because one of her children had attended the Early Childhood program at Cranbury and also at Tumblebugs.

Mr. Barbis asked about the original plan to hire more ADA specialists. Ms. Fensore said that Dr. Rivera has requested that they start with 14 positions and these have been posted. Interviews will be conducted in the next few weeks. The Human Resources Department has been very helpful. Interim Superintendent Connelly advised the Board to watch that program over the next year to see if they will be able to bring more students in District.

Another resident asked about the overall plan to bring these services back in District. Ms. Fensore said that there were three staff positions that were expected to be filled by July 1st.

The first resident asked if there would be cross training for staff. Ms. Fensore said that there had been some training earlier in the year for a certain level of staff. Mr. Daddona said that is on the agenda for Professional Development planning for next year. The resident spoke at length about having the Special Education teachers trained to work with the Special Education students in terms of behavior. Mr. Daddona said that the SRBI training has been given to all the staff. The District is moving forward to providing SRBI training to all the staff. He said that this is a refresher course because the needs of students have changed and different interventions are being used.

Atty. Spahr asked about the financial comparison and pointed out that there may be a number of Greenwich residents who have chosen to pay for their child's OOD placement out of pocket. He added that Greenwich residents may also be able to hire a lawyer to challenge the schools systems.

ADJOURNMENT.

- ** MR. MEEK MOVED TO ADJOURN.**
- ** MR. BARBIS SECONDED.**
- ** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 7:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services

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