

**CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF EDUCATION
SPECIAL EDUCATION AD-HOC COMMITTEE MEETING
DECEMBER 13, 2016**

ATTENDANCE: Dr. Yvel Crevecoeur, Chair, Artie Kassimis, Jacquelyn Lamb,
Jeffry Spahr, Natalie Alonso;
Non-Committee Board Member Sherelle Harris

STAFF: None

OTHERS: Joanna Cooper, Eric Niederer, Sophie Aponte, Jen Cobbs, Kathy Jaeger,
Robin Keller, Dr. Lynne Moore, Kristin Goldstein, Howie Ziperstein.

Call to Order

Dr. Crevecoeur called the meeting to order at 5:35 p.m. and stated that Committee members were in attendance as listed above.

Dr. Crevecoeur reported that the recent news announcing Dr. Topper's resignation is very disappointing, and the interim replacement would be Joseph Russo and Stacey Heiligenthaler, to lead the department.

He reviewed the order of the agenda would be a discussion on planning of the timeline table for the CREC Report recommendation for special education services.

Review of October 25, 2016 Minutes

Corrections:

Page 1 Change Dr. Tober to Dr. Topper, (throughout the document in 6 places)

Replace Terry with Teri (prefer not to use nickname but use Theresa).

Page 3, Paragraph 3 – change allow to allowed.

Page 4, Paragraph 2 change students to students' and capitalize Chief.

Page 5, Paragraph 3 – 4th sentence, change send to sent. Capitalize This. and Send.

It was noted that approval of the minutes was deferred to later on the agenda.

Discussion / Planning of Timeline Table for CREC Report Recommendations

Dr. Crevecoeur explained that he was trying to set up a new document using cut & paste feature on pages 46-52 for the six recommendations and adding columns to include details and timing.

There was discussion on how to best design a form that is workable for tracking.

Ms. Alonzo suggested using Excel with columns and groups to track the information. Mr. Spahr added that there needs to be a flow to show a sequence and organization of priorities and CREC timelines.

Mr. Kassimis suggested using “Tasks” in Outlook and he explained how this can be created and shared with the group involved.

Dr. Crevecoeur stated that he will continue to work on this and set up a workable form and process. It was agreed to get clerical help from the secretary in the Central Office work on creating the forms and to put this back on the agenda for the next meeting.

Dr. Crevecoeur asked to go back to the first item and noted that the minutes can now be approved.

**** MR. KASSIMIS MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF OCTOBER 25 AS AMENDED WITH CORRECTIONS AS NOTED.**

**** MR. SPAHR SECONDED THE MOTION.**

**** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Remaining Comments on Special Education Standard Operating Procedures Manual

It was noted that this was presented to Board of Education on 12-06-16 by Dr. Topper. There was discussion on how to review the minutes to incorporate all comments and then get the updated manual to the parents and Committee members. It was agreed to have it sent electronically to the members.

Dr. Crevecoeur noted that the next meeting would be January 10. He added that the following meeting would be a budget draft by Tom Hamilton to present 2017-18 budgets.

Public Comments

Dr. Crevecoeur asked to keep within the three minute time limit in order to have enough time for questions/answers and public comments.

1. Howie Zipperstein, Cranbury School gave an overview of his tenure in the Norwalk Public Schools as a Special Education Teacher along with serving as Secretary of the NFT and on several committees. He stated his frustration and confusion as to why job postings take a long time to get approved, posted, interviewed, hired and now after candidates have taught lessons, were told there is no funding for the positions. He spoke on the non-compliance with IEPs because there is a lack of paraprofessionals to provide the required services. He gave examples of issues that he has tried to address that have gone with the answer that the budget is frozen, or there is just no approval to comply.

2. Mr. Eric Niederer said that regarding the notation in the minutes of him as a lawyer, he was not acting in a legal capacity and is here on behalf of his son. He spoke of the concerns with resignation of Dr. Toper who was hired to Special Ed. Department, and the promises that were made. He noted that they have been blasted in a series of reports by the Capital Region Education Council (CREC), and parents skeptically hoped she'd be the end of the revolving door of department leaders.
3. Jen Cobbs said that she feels a major pushback from the staff over communication especially after last year that was horrible. The prior SPED directors and Interim Dr. Crecchetti understood the need for the communication between the staff and the parents and she had hoped Dr. Toper would continue. She noted that with student based budgeting the allocation needs to follow the special education student to the school so that resources are not misdirected.
4. Kathy Jaeger said she was a Resource teacher at Cranbury and she was always hopeful for new testing procedures and protocols, that she was pulled for training and now the reports are not being done and the system is stagnant. She said she agreed with Mr. Zipperstein and spoke on the non-compliance with IEPs because there is a lack of paraprofessionals to provide the required services. She gave examples of issues to be addressed that have gone unanswered and now being told that the budget is frozen. She loves her job and has been there for over twenty years, and it is frustrating that she has to work 24-7 and take work home just to keep up. And there is now no hope in sight.
5. Joanna Cooper said she was optimistic but now there are the same on-going problems and she has done soul searching on why the ambiguous reasons for the recent resignation. She asked how long the process will take and spoke on concerns with the same search firm after the recent experience. Dr. Toper's resignation is both eye opening and disheartening, as we had high and truly felt she cared and wanted to make a change. The biggest question of all is where do we go from here? Our children are already struggling, and all of us parents are already frustrated and burnt out. We may need for a state interim to come and run this SpEd department while the BOE searches for a new one to prevent going back to its downward spiral like last year.
6. Dr. Lynne Moore, West Rocks Principal spoke about the case loads and grade level resource teachers that are approaching 50:1. She noted that with student based budgeting the allocation needs to follow the special education student to the school so that resources are properly applied to the school providing services and not misdirected.
7. Robin Keller said she was an attorney that represents parents of special education students (over 30 in Norwalk) and spoke on the serious problems in this district with non compliance with IEPs. She outlined that the base is the teachers and if the district does not support them by providing resources there will be law suits. She spoke on the goals and objectives and progress reports and violations with public information and services. She added that the expulsion procedures are in violation when it comes to students that are on special education services.

Ms. Keller explained that Special Education students who are expelled must receive all services outside of school and Norwalk doesn't provide the IEPs to the expulsion program, or even share that they are SpEd students, -- She warned the district to be prepared as if they don't provide services that's an ongoing violation that will be getting a lot of negative publicity.

Dr. Crevecoeur asked if Committee members had questions or comments to those members of the public that spoke.

Atty. Spahr spoke about having a form that outlines elements of the IEP and other critical issues. He asked about the timing of the search for a new Director.

Dr. Crevecoeur noted that a search for a new Spec. Ed. department leader will begin immediately, at no cost to the school district, by Hazard, Young, Attea and Associates, the firm that conducted this year's search. Mr. Spahr asked for the timeline for the hiring, and it was noted that there has been a shortage in the state for qualified candidates for this position.

Mr. Kassimis asked what the status was with the \$2.3 million deposit from this year's budget into a Special Education Transitional Fund.

There was discussion on comments made about the budget being frozen that prevented the hiring of paraprofessionals. Dr. Crevecoeur noted that he would get an update on this spending from the Central Office Finance Department.

In addition, there was sentiment that service providers have not been paid for services provided and have continued 'on their own' pro-bono in the best interests of the children.

There was further dialogue and exchange of comments and members of the audience spoke (without giving names...)

Mr. Ziperstein added that we've been told by our administration that things are in the works, that somebody is going to be hired, then we find out supposedly they were not aware of any noncompliance, which is ridiculous because we did tracking. He explained again that there was a paraprofessional that was pulled from Cranbury on the second day of school and sent to a middle school, although there were promises of a new hire, the Para has not been replaced.

Mr. Kassimis left the meeting at 6:25 p.m.

Mr. Niederer added that they were sold on new beginnings, but hearing tonight is that there is not and we may be getting into deeper areas... Where is the accountability? That is one concern that has been historic, year after year. If there is no accountability it's going to be business as usual. I think that is the concern also with Dr. Toper's resignation. We had one person where at least prospectively, we could say she would be accountable. In the interim period, right now, the question is who will be accountable? Even under Dr. Toper's reign it sounds like there are issues... there's a great concern.

Ms. Keller said accountability shouldn't be connected to having a director... This CREC report is just chicken scratch on top. There is no depth to it, that's what their reports are known for. Special Education teachers report to principals but if you ask the principals they don't know how many SpEd students are in their buildings or what services they require. Things are going to get worse – there's a tremendous need for Special Education teachers, and she is getting calls from administrators in neighboring communities who are looking to take some of Norwalk's talent.

Ms. Jaeger added that accountability has happened in the last year or two with some of our new administrators. They pretty much know what is going on but I grant you, it's only a year in the works, but there are good things starting to happen in Norwalk.

Another parent (Olivia Togridis) said that many parents put their faith in Dr. Toper and did not pursue legal action against the school system because they thought she would make sure their child get the services that had been prescribed; now those children have been set back months. She added that they don't understand how Dr. Toper could promise such hope and change at a town hall meeting just two months ago promised to distraught parents whose children have no services and are not learning that she was passionate and determined to fix the system... How can she literally abandon us? Our children have no lifeline without SpEd direction, no service approval, everything just stops.

Dr. Crevecoeur noted that this area needs to be worked out where there is outreach to parents that is taken very seriously.

It was noted this will be the agenda for the next meeting for further discussion and review.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Marilyn Knox,
Telesco Secretarial Services