

LWV Park Ridge Observer Report

Meeting: Park Ridge-Niles School District 64 **Date:** August 27, 2018

Observer: Mary C. Fontaine **Start/End Time:** 6:45-10:30PM (preceded by a tour of the Roosevelt renovations, closed session, and a public hearing on the 2018-19 budget, at which hearing there was no discussion by the Board or comments by the public)

Members Absent: None, although Mark Eggemann arrived around 8:15. School administrators (including Superintendent Laurie Heinz, CSBO Luann Kolstad and Director of Student Services Lea Ann Frost) and the district's attorney (Anthony J. Loizzi, Sr.) were also present.

Summary:

The bulk of the meeting consisted of a report by Dr. Heinz about the actions taken to prepare staff for the new school year, a Special Education Update by Dr. Frost, a report on 2017-18 year-end results and a 2018-19 budget update by Ms. Kolstad.

The Board once again deferred discussion of the issues raised in the August 20 meeting regarding the formation of SPED and SRO committees until a later meeting.

As a result of public comment, there was limited discussion of the timing and scope of the SPED committee.

The Board did not otherwise discuss the SRO committee, other than to note that Board designees to the committee should meet soon.

The Board discussed disclosing FOIA requests and responses on the District's website, together with the related costs incurred by the District in responding. While the motivation was described as "transparency," the Board did not discuss how the purpose of FOIA is to increase transparency. The Board's emphasis seemed to be on making the costs of the requests and the names of the requestors public, rather than making the District's workings more accessible to the public or understanding why the District gets a disproportionately high number of requests.

Other activities of the Board included (i) objecting to the state law requirement that the District comply with state fair wage laws when bidding out contracts, (ii) extended discussion about the Board's right to exclude groups or persons from District property for violating District policies, (iii) approval of policy changes discussed at a prior meeting, and (iv) approval of minutes for prior meetings.

Discussion/Action/Public Comment:

The first 30 minutes or so of the meeting consisted of: (i) welcome by Dr. Kevin Dwyer, principal of Roosevelt Elementary, (ii) a slide presentation of Roosevelt construction projects, (iii) flag ceremony

by cub scouts, (iv) a choral performance by Emerson seventh and eighth graders, (v) recognition of Emmerson's PE Blue Ribbon Award, and (vi) recognition of Lincoln teacher Christie Thielen for becoming AMLE Board Chair. Dr. Borrelli indicated that the Board intends to start every meeting in the future with something to recognize student/teacher achievement.

First Public Comment

Public Comment on the SPED program was deferred until after Dr. Frost made her presentation. There was one parent who wanted to comment on another issue.

This person's comments focused on safety at the schools. He thought the District should spend more time and energy planning for prevention of violence, rather than drilling students on what to do if an incident occurred. He advocated having armed guards and metal detectors in all the schools. He thought designating schools as *no gun* zones was naive, and that doing so might attract mentally unstable people because there would be no opposition there. He closed by saying we should not be afraid of the police. Dr. Borrelli wanted to make sure the Board received the person's name, and the commenter responded that his name was on the sign-in sheet.

Beginning of School Report

Dr. Heinz described various programs related to the opening of the school year:

1. New Teacher Orientation. Topics included student engagement, instructional vigor, a mentoring program and opportunities for professional development.
2. District Institutes Days, where the intent was to build support for the District's *2020 Vision* strategic plan. Topics included social emotional learning, crisis team planning, a new hashtag (#District64smiles) and targeted goal setting.
3. Opening Days. 4,116 students registered for grades 1-8 and 400 registered for kindergarten. Dr. Heinz expressed appreciation for the hard work and dedication of District staff and leadership.

The Board had no discussion of these topics.

Special Education Update, Discussion and Public Comment

Dr. Frost described her first two months on the job as spent analyzing the reports prepared in the spring of 2018, speaking with stakeholders and setting priorities. She indicated that fixing the SPED program would take more than one year but she expected substantial progress in 2018-19. Her areas of focus, identified as 'Key Targets,' include the following:

1. Increase staffing in several areas, noting 3 new positions in the current year.

2. Provide systemic professional development to District staff, including as to goal writing, individualized educational plan (IEP) Development (through training by the District's attorneys), legal requirements, use of teaching assistants and co-teachers and restorative justice.
3. Ensure consistency across District schools, including better communication and goal setting among staff members and with administration. This would apply to, among other things, IEP development and students' transition between schools.
4. Build rapport between staff and parents. Tools include parent education workshops and the Parents and Teachers Talking Together (PT3) committee.

Dr. Frost saw the Department's path forward as gathering information, strengthening relationships and being visible and accessible.

Board discussion and public comment followed the presentation.

Dr. Borrelli asked how PT3 functions—was it asked to comment on administrative actions, or was it more of an open exchange of ideas. Dr. Heinz said the process was collaborative, with an administrator facilitating brainstorming. Dr. Frost suggested its function was strategic planning, and that there would be a subcommittee for each of the key targets above.

Mr. Ryles noted that the District has been perceived as lacking compassion in the past, and he assumed the administration was talking with teachers about this. He then asked what efforts were made to introduce gen ed students to special ed students and issues, with the hope that this would reduce bullying. Dr. Frost indicated that the department was working on plans to do so with respect to both special ed and disabilities.

Dr. Borrelli then asked if Dr. Frost had met with the Board SPED committee. When Dr. Frost responded 'What?', Dr. Heinz jumped in. Dr. Heinz said that she had met with Mr. Ryles and was planning to schedule a meeting with Mr. Ryles and Mr. Sanchez in the next few weeks.

Public comments then began.

Parent # 1 started with thanks to Dr. Frost and a positive report of the parent's first meeting this year with staff. However, she wanted to comment that Dr. Frost's presentation, including its goals and methods for meeting the goals, seemed overly vague. She also expressed concern that deadlines kept getting pushed back. The first PT3 meeting has been delayed to September 20. The process of forming the Board's SPED committee continues to drag on with no specific timeline, and membership still undecided. She fears that another year will pass without meaningful progress.

Dr. Borrelli responded that Dr. Frost's work and the formation of the Board's committee take time, and that he did not want to 'rush in' on the committee.

A back-and-forth between Mr. Sotos, Dr. Heinz and Dr. Borrelli ensued. Mr. Sotos noted the need to move things along and pressed for a specific timeline getting the committee formed and in business. Dr. Heinz resisted offering a timeline and said the next step was the meeting with Mr. Ryles and Mr. Sanchez to address the issues regarding committee formation raised by the Board's attorney at the August 20 meeting/IASB presentation. Dr. Borrelli noted that the Board still needed to decide what the committee's mission would be. Mr. Sotos asked if, at the next Board meeting, the Board could approve the committee's mission, members and mode of functioning. Dr. Borrelli responded that would be the goal. Dr. Heinz mentioned again that the function of the Board committee, relative to PT3, was unclear to her.

Parent # 2 then spoke. He asked why the Superintendent, and not the Board, was controlling the process of forming the *Board's* SPED committee. He noted that the SPED issues had been brought to light nine months ago, and that the last PT3 meeting was in March. Parents had been told to wait for Dr. Frost, but Dr. Frost arrived two months ago, and still the Board had not acted, and PT3 has not met. Mr. Sotos noted that the Board members tasked with planning for the committee needed help and expertise from the administration. Mr. Sotos and Parent #2 continued with a heated exchange. When Mr. Sotos asked the speaker to remember that school had just started, the speaker reminded Mr. Sotos that the Board had met several times over the summer.

Financial Report

Ms. Kolstad reported to the Board on 2017-18 year-end results and the 2018-19 budget.

Based on unaudited numbers, the District ended the 2017-18 year with a positive balance. Revenues exceeding expenditures by approximately \$5,700,000.

Ms. Kolstad described the major drivers of increased revenue were state revenues and federal revenues being better than projected in the budget. Local revenues were less than projected. Ms. Kolstad noted that the timeliness of payments due from the state was improving (only one payment still due) and that additional federal money came from an IDEA grant.

Ms. Kolstad compared the budget for expenditures to actual expenditures. Expenditures in Salaries, Benefits, Purchased Services tracked the budget closely. Repair and maintenance services were high due to problems at Carpenter School over the winter break. While that cost would not reoccur, other costs might be incurred because much of the District's equipment was past its useful life. The District is continuing to focus on energy savings.

In 2017-18, the 2014B Field Bonds (\$800K) were retired.

When commenting on five-year projections, Ms. Kolstad noted that the District's existing union contracts expire in 2019-20 and the District should anticipate requests for raises.

The draft 2018-19 Budget was last reviewed by the Board on June 11. Ms. Kolstad reported on the staff's continuing refinement of the budget in anticipation of its adoption in September. The vote will be on September 24.

Mr. Biagi asked about the Board's policy on using funds donated by PTO groups, and whether they were used for teacher resources rather than capital improvements. Ms. Kolstad explained that PTO groups choose what funds will be used for, and that PTO funds are not used for construction costs. Past PTOs have sometimes chosen to fund equipment the District would not otherwise buy, like playground equipment or specialized furniture for the new learning centers.

Dr. Borrelli asked if legal expenses could be broken down into categories, so the public could see what is being spent on FOIA requests, meetings, employee issues and contract negotiations. Mr. Loizzi indicated that his firm could easily generate this information.

FOIA Requests

Dr. Heinz provided a written report to the Board on FOIA matters. According to the report, the District's FOIA attorney has the impression that *District 64 receives many more FOIA requests than most similarly situated districts.*

Neither Dr. Heinz's report nor the Board's discussion asked *why* this might be the case.

Instead, a number of Board members seem to hope that publicly disclosing the cost of FOIA requests (in legal fees and staff hours) will spur public outrage, shame requestors and shrink the number of future requests. The legal fees for FOIA responses was roughly \$19,000 in 2017, and roughly \$16,300 at the midpoint of 2018. The number of staff hours spent on the requests was not available but are not insignificant.

The Board's discussion included a number of legal questions for Mr. Loizzi (such as whether names need to be redacted and whether anonymous requests are permitted) and logistical questions (such as how the staff responds to requests). Mr. Ryles said he believed in the public's right to make FOIA requests but thought the costs should be disclosed. Dr. Borrelli noted the number of requests, and therefore the costs, were increasing from year to year. Mr. Tiu and Mr. Sotos asked if posting requests and responses would cut down on duplicate requests. Dr. Heinz thought not, because requests tended to be very specific. In general, the entire discussion focused on the cost of responding to requests. Mr. Tiu also mentioned privacy concerns. The Board discussed whether FOIA requests can be anonymous. Mr. Loizzi said that they can be anonymous. However, Mr. Loizzi explained that the District is able to obtain the requester's information by denying the FOIA request. When the requester files a request for review to the Public Access Counselor (PAC), the person's name will be revealed.

Other school districts have web pages on which information about requests is posted. The Board directed the staff to investigate creating a similar page for District 64.

Other Matters

The Board took other actions, including:

1. Approving a resolution regarding prevailing wage. Board members wanted to be clear that they were paying prevailing wage on District contracts—as is required by state law—under protest. Mr. Biagi estimates that complying with the law increases costs by 20-30% and would like the excess costs disclosed to the public on every contract. Mr. Sotos and Mr. Ryles also expressed strong views along these lines.
2. Approving policy changes discussed at a prior meeting. This followed another extended discussion of the Board's power to ban someone who violated District policies from using District property. The discussion was prompted by a specific incident, but the details of the incident were not disclosed.
3. Setting September 26, 2018 at 6:30PM at Roosevelt as the date of the District's public information session for people considering running for the Board in the next election. Two Board members will be present (one older member and one newer member). Several Board members volunteered.
4. Approving a personnel report reviewed at a prior meeting.
5. Discussing the need for education on the dangers of vaping in the middle schools.
6. Approving Board minutes for the June 25, July 9 and August 7, 2018 meetings.

The Board's next meeting is September 10 at Jefferson School.

League Action Needed: Monitor formation of Board committees and FOIA information on website.