

February 24, 2010 – Board of Education Meeting

The Board Discussed the Assignment Policy--The Board of Education's Policy Committee, chaired by Debra Goldman, continued discussions of Policy 6200, the Assignment Policy that newly elected Board members are seeking to change by eliminating "maintaining diverse schools" as a factor and emphasizing neighborhood schools and close proximity as prevailing factors. In the end, Chris Malone moved to approve the original resolution proposed by Ms. Goldman on Dec. 1 but it failed to garner a second after Ms. Goldman and Committee Member Ann McLaurin voiced a need to continue the discussions and research on the policy.

The meeting Wednesday was attended by Committee Chair Goldman and Committee members Malone and McLaurin. They were the only three who allowed to make a motion or vote on a proposal to have it move to the full Board. Committee member Deborah Prickett was not in attendance. Board members Kevin Hill, Carolyn Morrison, Keith Sutton, and John Tedesco also attended and contributed their thoughts to the discussion.

Mr. Sutton proposed a compromise to the Dec. 1 proposal. That is attached as an Adobe file. His version reinserts language regarding diversity and Students with Higher Needs, and he strongly advocated for the language to remain in the policy and for the distribution of students with higher needs to be considered during assignment. By taking out the language in the Dec. 1 resolution, Mr. Sutton said, "If I were a parent of a student with special needs, you are telling me that my child doesn't count."

The emotion and language of the discussion was often charged. Mr. Tedesco accused Mr. Sutton of "profiling" students by including the language on students with higher needs. Ms. Goldman referred to categorizing students by the "race card." Mr. Tedesco also said WCPSS had "53 high poverty schools," referring to the fact that he says 53 schools

have more than 40 percent of their students qualify for Free and Reduced lunch, the district's proxy for measuring poverty rates at schools. Under current policy, WCPSS attempts to assign students so that no school has more than 40 percent FRL, and Dr. Morrison pointed out that the rise in unemployment and other economic problems have caused an increase in participation in the school lunch program across the district. Ms. Goldman expressed concern whether FRL rates understated poverty rates because of the "stigma" of being on the program. Assistant Superintendent Chuck Dulaney pointed out that they have found the FRL rates closely mirror poverty rates for elementary and middle schools, with about a 10 percent dropoff in high school. He also added that students are not identified at the school level as being on FRL; teachers are not allowed to know and identification in the cafeteria for all students--those on FRL and those not in the program--is simply by lunch number.

At one point, Mr. Tedesco also compared WCPSS to Toyota, saying "we sold a lot of cars, and then we lost sight of quality."

Mr. Hill said achieving success for all students should be the priority for assignment. Mr. Hill also underscored that most of reassignment in the past has been driven by growth, not diversity, saying he "agreed with Mr. Tedesco that assignment and reassignment have been centered on growth." Mr. Hill also said the Board should consider the costs of implementing any alternatives.

Dr. McLaurin asked for more research and data, and Ms. Goldman agreed, stating that the issue is charged with emotion.

Also at the end of the meeting, Ms. Goldman asked about investigating further a proposal by Mr. Tedesco to divide the School District into 20 attendance zones. She said a lot of people are unhappy, and at that point, the audience began to murmur loudly, and someone said, "The survey said

94 percent were happy!" Ms. Goldman admonished those attending not to be interrupt the proceedings and to sit there quietly.

With that, there was some discussion on whether to consider Mr. Tedesco's plans and how the Student Assignment Committee, chaired by Mr. Tedesco, would address this issue. Dr. McLaurin said the Board's Policy, such as 6200, should determine the Student Assignment Committee's work.

Mr. Tedesco said he expects 5 to 10 nodes to be adjusted this year. He expects his Committee to take 9 months to one year to develop a plan. The Committee has not yet met or announced members, and Mr. Tedesco's "assignment zone" plan has not been discussed in any detail or with any specifics or maps.

In the end, Ms. Goldman suggested scheduling a work session to examine the data on assignment and also discuss Mr. Tedesco's and Mr. Sutton's ideas. The next Policy Committee meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, March 10, at 9:15 am.

Earlier the Committee also discussed changing the times for its Board meetings, particularly for the third Tuesday of the month, when Mr. Tedesco has a work conflict that has arisen since January. After polling all members anonymously through a form, Ms. Goldman said it appeared that the meetings would need to stay on Tuesdays because of conflicts on other days, and the Board will discuss specific times on Tuesdays at its next Committee of the Whole meeting. Ms. Goldman also said she would request an opinion from attorney Anne Majestic regarding proxy voting by members who are absent from meetings.