

Minutes of School Committee Meeting on Governance 06/16/14

The Barrington School Committee held a Governance Workshop on Monday, June 16, 2014, at the Barrington High School Library. Mrs. Brody called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. Present were Mrs. Brody, Dr. Dominguez, Dr. Shea, Mr. Messore, Mrs. Dillon and Mr. Tarro. Mr. Guida arrived at 8:35 p.m. Absent was Mr. Fuller. Mrs. Dorothy Presser, Massachusetts Association of School Committees consultant, Chair of the Lynnfield, Massachusetts School Committee, and co-author of the Massachusetts District Governance Support Project curriculum, was present as a facilitator of the workshop.

Finalization of School Committee Operating Protocol: Mrs. Presser distributed copies of the revised draft “School Committee/Superintendent Operating Protocol,” which reflected edits based on the School Committee’s feedback. Mrs. Brody described the process used for amending the draft and asked if members thought there should be a policy created to address violations of the operating protocols (yes, was the unanimous response). Mrs. Presser noted that some committees do not have a policy regarding violations, which can be a mistake because they are helpful when members have concerns among themselves. Mr. Tarro pointed to one phrase related to the “violations” clause and noted that caution must be exercised so that conversations involving the Board chair and other members cannot violate the state’s Open Meetings Act. In light of this concern, the phrase was re-worded to read: Members and the Superintendent bring to the attention of the Chair perceived violations of operating protocols. Members also discussed whether the role of the Chair should be made explicit in the operating protocols (yes, was the consensus). Several other edits were discussed and adopted (i.e., delete 8, take out the word “all” from 5).

Discussion of overarching and SMART goals: To kick off a discussion of goals, Mrs. Presser distributed one year’s worth of School Committee agendas and invited School Committee members and office staff to team up and identify “big bones” (the big ideas that the School Committee should prioritize) vs. “little bones” (other issues). She shared Norfolk, Virginia’s presentation format as one model for providing staff with guidance on how to create presentations. Ms. Brody commented that the School Committee needs to anchor its work in data, and that presentations based on data were frequent. Ms. Presser replied that timing can be important and that office staff needs to have enough time to scrutinize the data before presenting it. Ms. Dillon stated that the district’s accountability report contained errors because the district had received inaccurate information.

Committee members and office staff commented on the results of their examination of the agendas. Dr. Dominguez noted that of all the sections of the School Committee’s agenda, the achievement recognition, information and proposals, and School Committee sections are most available to become more efficient. Ms. Dillon reflected that School Committee members can pose their questions in advance of School Committee meetings to direct staff presentations. In response to a question by Mrs. Brody, Mrs. Dillon indicated that she would not feel overwhelmed by receiving questions in advance of meetings.

Mr. Tarro observed that there weren’t that many “big bones” on the agendas he examined, but that the agendas contained small updates of big items (for example, All Day Kindergarten updates). Dr. Shea commented that student achievement and curriculum were clear priorities, but that other topics – scheduling this governance meeting, superintendent evaluation – could have been handled differently. Mr. Messore indicated that until a process is in place items will tend to drag across agendas and meetings. Mrs. Dillon asked to clarify the difference between two similarly worded standing items on agendas (future agendas and discussion to guide future agendas), and Mrs. Brody replied that the general discussion is meant to provide opportunities to generate ideas for presentations that were not originally on

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the calendar.

Members went on to discuss a year-long calendar. Dr. Shea noted that the Chair can be helpful in terms of identifying when topics will emerge, so that issues can be better managed. Mrs. Brody observed that as data become more available (e.g., Standardized Testing and Reporting [STAR] data) it can be better scheduled. Mr. Messore maintained that accountability should be the first item on the calendar every school year, and that the district report is a must do under the state's Basic Education Program (BEP). Mrs. Dillon observed that a lot of NECAP data are repeated, and they do not change much. Mrs. Presser stated that one good way to think about whether an item should be on an agenda is if it has (a) budget implications or (b) policy implications for the whole Committee (not just a single member).

The topic turned to the Committee's meeting structure. Ms. Presser indicated that some School Committees meet twice a month, with one meeting devoted to items to vote on, and the other to a workshop on substantive issues. Mrs. Dillon spoke of the district's strategic plan and how actions have been identified across its four years. How can or should priorities be changed. In response, Mrs. Presser indicated that resources can be rearranged according to emerging priorities. Mrs. Dillon spoke of how guidance counseling at Barrington High School was added to the list of priorities, even though it was not originally meant to be addressed until later on in the strategic plan.

Mrs. Brody noted that the School Committee's agendas do not have metrics and outcomes, which leaves the Committee without a means to measure its effectiveness. She applauded the zero-based budgeting approach, which is a strong way to evaluate what building leaders are doing with their allocations.

Mrs. Presser indicated that two tools would help ground the School Committee's work: a year-long agenda and a format for presentations from the central office staff. Mr. Messore stated that he thought Norfolk, Virginia's presentation guidelines were too vague to be helpful and indicated that his interest is in growth. Mrs. Presser pointed out that there are two basic kinds of presentations: data presentations and goal presentations. Mr. Tarro offered that a helpful conversation might be, what items are for "information only" purposes, and which are for "action." In response, Mrs. Presser replied that some agendas do indicate "information only" vs. "action." Mr. Messore commented that the central office is working on doing a better job identifying which information should go out via a School Committee meeting instead of through some other communication (e.g., principal's messages). Mrs. Dillon observed that the district website has many hits and is a natural place for families to seek information. Mrs. Brody noted that one key challenge is to reach community members without children attending school. Mrs. Presser asked if there is a pamphlet for distribution in the community that is based on the district report (no, but the district may do this next year, according to the superintendent).

Mrs. Presser presented a series of questions for School Committee members to keep in mind for the next Governance Workshop, including: What is a good presentation format? How does this relate to the district's strategic plan? What questions do School Committee members want to pose? How does the School Committee want to handle a year-long agenda?

Committee members concluded by discussing the pros and cons associated with incorporating workshops that allow intense discussion of key issues, perhaps on a quarterly basis.

Mrs. Brody adjourned the meeting at 8:55 p.m.