

SPECIAL MEETING

CRANSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE

MONDAY, APRIL 14, 2008

WILLIAM A. BRIGGS BUILDING (REED CONFERENCE ROOM)

845 PARK AVENUE

EXECUTIVE SESSION: 5:00 P.M.

PUBLIC SESSION: IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING EXECUTIVE SESSION

MINUTES

A special meeting of the Cranston School Committee was held on the evening of the above date at the William A. Briggs Building with the following members present: Mr. Archetto, Mrs. Greifer (arrived at 5:18 p.m.), Ms. Iannazzi, Mr. Lombardi, Mr. Stycos, Mr. Traficante, and Mrs. Tocco-Greenaway. Also present were Mr. Scherza, Mr. Nero, and Mr. Laliberte.

The meeting was called to order at 5:05 p.m. It was moved by Mr. Lombardi, seconded by Mrs. Greifer and unanimously carried that the members adjourn to Executive Session pursuant to RI State Laws PL 42-46-5(a)(1) Personnel (Administrators' Contracts); and PL 42-46-5(a)(2) Contract and Litigation (Possible Litigation – Caruolo Action.) Pursuant to RI General Laws 42-46-5, this meeting is closed to the public to discuss the job performance of a person. This person affected has been notified in writing and advised that he or she may

require that the discussion be held in an open meeting. This person chose a closed session.

Chairman Traficante reconvened public session at 7:10 p.m.

The roll was called.

I. Public Hearing

a. Students (Non-agenda or Agenda Matters)

b. Members of the Public (Agenda Matter Only)

There were no students who wished to speak on agenda or non-agenda matters.

MaryAnn Casale, Principal of Garden City School – She asked to speak on Resolution No. 08-5-1. She gave her support to Mr. Schimmel who is a special education director on the eastern side of the city. She has had the pleasure of working with him when she was the principal of Horton School, and she found him to be extremely supportive, a wonderful advocate for the special education students, and has a great deal of knowledge about special education. Mr. Schimmel worked wonderfully with the parents. He was a great support for the staff and principal as well. He was there anytime they needed him. It would be a huge loss if the district doesn't have him.

Steven DiBiasio, 58 Chickory Lane – Mr. DiBiasio read the following statement: Distinguished Members of the School Committee, Cranston School Administration, Administrators and Guests: For the purposes of earning some brownie notes, I would like to point out that my wife is a life-long Cranston resident. When we were married twenty-nine years ago, I learned the truism, at least how it applies in my life, that Cranston girls don't leave Cranston. That is how I became a Cranston resident. My wife and I have a rather large family. We have three boys aged twenty-one to twenty-seven who have all gone through the Cranston Public School system. In 1989, we became a foster family, and that eventually led to our adopting three children all of whom are former wards of the state's Department of Children, Youth, and Family. All of our adopted children have special needs which have certainly created many challenges for both our family and for our school system. Some members of the School Committee know me because I have, on occasion, in the past stood before this committee when I have encountered situations that needed attention and or intervention. On the positive side, I have not been before this committee since 2004. I hope you share my feelings that that is a good thing. Trust me, if you are having a meeting, and I am not speaking at that meeting, it is a very good thing because it means that there is harmony between the Cranston School Department and the education of my children. I stand before you this afternoon to ask you to reconsider and revisit the issue of the

elimination of one of your directors of special education's position. Mindful that the committee prefers that no names are used, I will simply say that the director of special education who is charged currently with overseeing my children's educational needs is the only male that holds that title in that department. Understand that there have been many directors of special education in our children's academic lives. We, my family, have outlasted them all. Most of our experiences have not been favorable. However, I must add that the relationship my family has with this current director is not in this category. It is a relationship where I feel I am an equal partner; I am treated as a true member. It is a relationship where appropriate academic placement really is a driving motivation. It is a relationship built on the principles of trust. How can I persuade you that my motivation for being here is sincere? Probably the best way to say it is that we have never had to go to hearing nor has there ever been a reason to have to go to mediation. I can assure you that if we had gone to hearing one time, it would have paid for this man's salary in that one time. The man you hired in 2004 to fill the position of director of special education knows he is in the people business. He has never lost sight of this. Once again, distinguished members, I humbly request that you rethink the issue of the elimination of the position of one of your special educators. Please do not let this man go.

Mary Genco, Representing the Special Education Parent Advisory Board – She thanked everyone present for all their time and energy

and thoughts in listening to all the parents relating to this issue.

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Paul McDonald, 21 Jay Court – He stated that he has a special education daughter at Orchard Farms School. From his understanding of the information he has, they are talking about eliminating a position that is 1/10 of 1% of the budget. He guaranteed the committee that he could find that much fat in the budget to keep him employed for the betterment of the students and not eliminate him. Special education deals with all sorts of kids, some more severe than others. For the ones who are borderline, the education is the silver bullet that is going to keep them out of jail, off drugs, and out of trouble. That can't be lost when talking about dollars and cents. Every home in America is going through tough times just as the school budget. Sacrifices need to be made, but they need to be made in an intelligent way that doesn't affect the education of the children. It is just politics. The first thing they talked about is police, fire, and education, the three hot buttons to get the taxpayers upset. They are the most important things to the city. If they don't keep the kids educated, who is going to pay the taxes for the salaries for those people in the years to come. Einstein said we can't fix today's problems with the thinking that got us into them. They need to think out of the box. There is a gentleman who was on 60 Minutes last

night who made headway in finding Cancer with a hot dog and his wife's pie pans in using radio current. The strides he made in his garage are more than what the experts have made in the past forty years because he thought out of the box. He didn't use the same thought pattern that got everyone into this problem not being able to solve the crisis at hand. The committee should look at where there is duplication in other areas rather than cutting a special education teacher for the kids who are at the greatest risk. They can't be just thrown to the wolves. They need guidance and help. He doesn't know the gentleman much at all, but he has heard nothing but good things. He can tell everyone about the dealings with his daughter at the school for the two years he has lived here, and they have been great. He doesn't see a positive to eliminating 1/10 of 1% of the budget.

II. Consent Calendar/Consent Agenda

There was no consent agenda.

III. Action Calendar/Action Agenda

ADMINISTRATION

NO. 08-5-1 – RESOLVED, that the Cranston School Committee, at the recommendation of the Superintendent, rescind amendment to Resolution No. 08-2-13, adoption of the 2008-2009 Operating Budget,

that was unanimously adopted by the committee that read: to eliminate the salary for a special education director at a salary of \$95,498.50 and a benefit package of \$24,150 which was the benefit analysis given to the committee last year. The total savings would be \$119,648.50, and

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Be it further RESOLVED to accept the Superintendent's alternative to the elimination of the Special Education Director position as set forth in the amendment above; that is, through attrition, two speech therapists who are retiring in June 2008 not be replaced. The salary and benefits for the two speech therapists is \$203,497.28.

Moved by Mrs. Greifer and seconded by Mr. Lombardi that this Resolution be adopted.

Mr. Lombardi stated that he stood in favor of this Resolution for a number of reasons. Unfortunately, this committee, given the financial circumstances, has been faced at looking at numbers consistently. Sometimes, they have to look at things beyond the numbers. He was in Florida when he received the call regarding the issue of Mr. Schimmel specifically. He has had a lot of e-mails attesting his abilities as a special education administrator and not a single word to

the contrary. He applauded Mr. Schimmel first of all for the work he has done in a very specialized area. Most importantly, looking at this in a vacuum, the committee has to reconsider the movement of taking away such a critical position for such a critical group as Mr. McDonald said. The students who are most at risk are affected by this. He applauded everyone for coming out, and he stood in complete support of this Resolution. He applauded the administration. The committee has dealt with the administration rolling up their sleeves and telling the administration that it is a dollars and cents game with a lot of things they have to do. One of the things they wanted administration to do is if they want to, at least for now, leave special education alone and unscathed, come to the committee with a plan to save the money somewhere else. The committee is not dealing with 1/10 of 1% of the budget because they implored the Superintendent and his staff to show them where they could get that bottom line, that \$1119,000 figure which is Mr. Schimmel's salary and benefits; and they did that for them. They found \$203,497.28 based on the two speech therapists who are retiring in June 2008. The committee doesn't have to ignore the dollars and cents here; they are actually saving approximately \$100,000 more by the movement of the administration. He applauded the administration for what they have done. He urged all his colleagues to support this Resolution that is on the floor now.

Mr. Stycos stated that he couldn't support this Resolution at this time. He felt that the budget situation is very bad, and what they had

to do is what they did before on the budget which is look at all of the things together and weigh them. He doesn't know what these two speech therapists did in detail. The committee received a memo, but he doesn't know what services will be lost, and that should be weighed against many other things in the budget because they will have to cut more. They have to weigh the different priorities.

Mr. Stycos moved to table this Resolution to discuss it when they talk about the budget again.

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Ms. Iannazzi seconded the motion.

This motion was defeated with Mr. Archetto, Mrs. Greifer, Mr. Lombardi, and Mr. Traficante opposed; Ms. Iannazzi, Mr. Stycos, and Mrs. Tocco-Greenaway were in favor.

Ms. Iannazzi stated that she didn't want to do this, but she had to vote against this. She echoed Mr. Stycos's point that this is extremely premature. The committee is facing a \$7.5 million deficit, and here they are going to spend another \$119,648 when what they should be doing is reducing the budget by the \$203,000 after the committee hears more about what these speech pathologists state what their case loads were. The committee is being very short sighted here in

an effort to save someone's job who she could speak all day long about the positive things he is doing. She has the utmost respect for him, and she does believe he is doing a great job, but it is a dollar and cents thing in her opinion.

Mrs. Greifer stated that having represented this committee at the Special Education Parent Advisory Board for years, the outpouring of support received for this position, and not just for this position, but for the model in place that has saved the district unbelievable amounts of money in keeping them out of hearings. The committee received a report from Mr. Laliberte stating that the district has saved \$1.7 million in the past couple of years. She asked who would believe that they could save money on special education. If this position is eliminated the district will be back in hearings again, and the model will start to fall apart. In 2002 the state's report indicated that the district was so far out of compliance in so many areas, and now the 2007 report states that the district is in minor non-compliance in five areas. This is a financial matter. If the committee eliminates this position, the people won't be in place in order to bring in the students from outside placements that has been able to save so much money. They have also in addition to saving money done better things for the education of these children. It is dollars and cents, but the district will lose money if they lose this position and lose the model that has been saving money and has been successful the past few years. The people who have come to speak are the people who know these people best. There is a family here tonight who postponed their

vacation to be here tonight to show support. It is primarily support for this one individual who does his job so well, but it is support for the model the district has. A lot of these people have had children in the special education program for years and years, and they all have horror stories that they could tell about what it use to be like in Cranston and the fights they went through and how good it is now. No one has problems, and no one is going to hearings. The district has something really good, and the state recognizes that it is working, and something that the budget tells them that it is working, and the committee shouldn't be messing with that now. She stated further that she would support this Resolution.

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Mr. Lombardi commented that when the committee was talking about the budget, one of the things that he kept insisting upon from a public relations standpoint was the fact that this committee to its credit had cut \$8 million from the budget, and they could look their constituency in the eye and say to them that those cuts did not affect the quality of education in Cranston but it did affect education. This is a Resolution that goes right to the heart of the quality of education in Cranston to the most susceptible, the most needy of their constituencies. When he looks at \$119,000 compared to a \$130 million budget, this is "whale crap." It is insignificant when one looks at the whole picture

based upon the benefit that it provides. He reminded the committee that not only has the Superintendent put forward the plan to not only replace that money but also to add to that bottom line by \$100,000. He further commented that early on when the committee was discussing cuts one of the cuts they discussed was middle school sports at \$135,000 or \$130,000. This committee at that time did not want to deal with the issue of middle school sports. The issue is special education which is far more important than middle school sports. He urged the committee again to support this.

Mrs. Tocco-Greenaway stated that the timing is not the wisest right now. She has some very real concerns about what Mr. Stycos and Ms. Iannazzi had brought up about these two speech therapists that the committee was about to eliminate by attrition. The committee hasn't seen anything yet from administration, short of a very brief memo, to tell them how it will impact on probably this population as well as other children in this system. She was not comfortable with doing this piece meal, and it has nothing to do with the fact that this gentleman everyone is speaking up for is highly qualified, very well loved, highly respected, and has given the district tremendous educational value and financial value for the school district; this is not about that. This is about not doing something that may set off a chain of events that may come back and hurt the district even more especially in this particular area. She wished that the committee could have tabled this; it is too soon. The committee should wait to see what the repercussions are going to be from what this move is

going to involve.

Mr. Archetto stated that this is very difficult, and the vote is not easy. His colleagues have spoken about the fiscal crisis the school district is in through no fault of the district. The state is not allocating the school district much money. The Mayor won't come across with money, so it is difficult for the School Committee. This issue is that this committee is here because they want to promote education and also to look at the issue of what is in the best interest of the child. It is the committee's job to make sure that the students are taken care of in the best way possible. Although the district has financial issues, the children are much more important than \$119,000. Also, he received many e-mails about the job that this man does, and they were all positive e-mails. He would hate to lose a very good employee; that would hurt education in the City of Cranston. There are alternatives, and perhaps the committee can look at them. He would be supporting this Resolution.

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Ms. Iannazzi stated that she supports Mr. Schimmel; he does a great job. She had a document that states that the district had twelve hearings, all of which were on the western side of the city so they are not saving money on that side of the city. She asked what the current case loads were for speech pathologists. Mr. Laliberte responded

that it is between sixty and seventy students, and next year their case loads will go down because the law has changed. Children who have reached the age of nine and have only a speech IEP will not qualify for a speech IEP any longer or an IEP any longer. They would not be on the speech therapist's case load. Ms. Iannazzi commented that she knows that legislation is proposed every year capping the number of students that a speech pathologist can service. It hasn't gone anywhere in the past and asked if Mr. Laliberte knew what the proposed cap is. Mr. Laliberte did not know what the proposed cap is. Ms. Iannazzi stated that when the School Committee approved the adopted budget, they counted on the retirement of twenty teachers so these two speech language pathologists already count toward those twenty. This is not a savings of \$200,000 because they are not at their twenty teachers yet. This is not a cost savings at this point, and that is why she felt it was premature to take this vote.

Mr. Stycos remarked that according to Mr. Laliberte's memo, students with speech impairments will no longer receive therapy through the IEP. They currently have 102 students. In this Resolution the committee is voting to not have speech services for 102 students. Mr. Lombardi added that is it according to Rhode Island state law. Mr. Stycos went on to say that the committee has not had any discussion about whether or not those children still need the services. The committee knows that the law changed, but they don't know if after their ninth birthday they still need services. He felt that the committee was going at this too quickly, and the parents are

upset legitimately.

Mr. Laliberte commented that the number does not include any children who would naturally be dropped from speech and language case loads. There are some children who are dropped every year. In addition to that, those children who would continue to need speech and language services would be able to obtain them privately, because it would not be considered a disabling condition any longer. He knows that there is some discussion of children receiving it under a 504, and they would have to prove that this is a life-long disabling condition and that it is affecting the child's education. In most of the cases where there is an articulation problem, it would not be affecting the child's ability to learn.

Mr. Traficante stated that he has not personally had a great deal of interaction with the special education directors in almost his four years on the committee. He has had one particular individual who he has interacted with for several years at the Charter School, and that is Mr. Schimmel. That is his responsibility dealing with the students at the Charter School and the AEP Program which the Charter School will be responsible for regarding special education. He has been there every step of the way dealing with the students. He asked them to keep in mind that 52% of their population is special needs

children so it is a great deal of responsibility and a great deal of work. That is why he is supporting this particular Resolution.

Ms. Iannazzi asked Mr. Laliberte if the change in law had to do with the nine year old, and he said that it did. Ms. Iannazzi asked if the 102 number is a number as of the first day of school for next year already turned nine or was it throughout the course of the year. In response, Mr. Laliberte said they will turn nine. He asked the speech and language supervisor how many children we currently have on our case load for articulation who have already reached the age of nine. Ms. Iannazzi commented that hypothetically it is possible that 100 of these students won't be turning nine until May or June of next year. In response, Mr. Laliberte stated that right now they are nine, and they have an IEP right now. There will be some who are turning nine throughout the year. There will be an additional number in addition to that 102.

This Resolution was adopted with Mr. Archetto, Mrs. Greifer, Mr. Lombardi, and Mr. Traficante in favor; Ms. Iannazzi, Mr. Stycos, and Mrs. Tocco-Greenaway were opposed.

III. Announcement of Future Meetings

Mr. Traficante reminded the public that on April 22, 2008, the School Committee will be appearing before the City Council at 6:30 p.m. in the Cranston East auditorium to defend the budget. The district is

facing a \$7.5 million deficit. The City Council has to appropriate more than what the Mayor has appropriated which is approximately \$1 million.

The committee reconvened to Executive Session at 7:45 p.m.

Chairman Traficante reconvened public session at 8:56 p.m.

IV. Executive Session Minutes Sealed – April 14, 2008

Moved by Mrs. Tocco-Greenaway, seconded by Mrs. Greifer and unanimously carried that the April 14, 2008 Executive Session minutes remain confidential.

V. Adjournment

Moved by Mr. Lombardi, seconded by Mrs. Greifer and unanimously carried that the meeting be adjourned.

There being no further business to come before the meeting, it was adjourned at 8:58 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrea M. Iannazzi

Clerk