

**Connecticut State Board of Education
Hartford**

Legislation and Policy Development Committee

Wednesday, January 11, 2023, 8:00 a.m.

Committee Members

Malia K. Sieve, Chair
Karen DuBois-Walton, Donald F. Harris, Bonnie E. Burr,
Martha Paluch Prou, Elwood Exley, Jr., and Valli Pendyala

Minutes

(Approved February 1, 2023)

Pursuant to notice filed with the Secretary of the State, the Board of Education Legislation and Policy Development Committee met in person on January 11, 2023.

I. Call to Order

Committee Chair Malia K. Sieve called the meeting to order at 8:25, having waited to enable Committee members other than those in attendance and Dr. Jones from Greenwich to arrive. Also present at the meeting were Committee Members Donald F. Harris, Elwood Exley, Jr., and Valli Pendyala. In addition, the following individuals from the CSDE were in attendance: Keith M. Norton, Chief Strategic Planning Officer; Irene Parisi, Chief Academic Officer; Michael P. McKeon, Director of Legal and Governmental Affairs; Laura Anastasio, Attorney, Legal and Governmental Affairs; and Sonya Efiayayi, Administrative Assistant, Communications Office.

Presenters:

Mr. Joseph Kelly, Chair, Greenwich Board of Education
Dr. Toni Jones, Superintendent
Laura Anastasio, Attorney, CSDE Legal and Governmental Affairs

II. Approval of Minutes

Ms. Sieve noted that although there were enough Committee members present to open the meeting, there were not enough voting Committee members present to approve the minutes, so action on them would be tabled until the February 1, 2023, meeting.

III. Review and Discussion: Greenwich Board of Education Racial Imbalance Plan

Mr. Kelly, Chairman of the Greenwich Board of Education, was representing the Board and was joined by Dr. Jones, who apologized for running late, noting that a district-related issue had arisen.

Ms. Sieve asked Attorney Anastasio to provide an overview of the racial balance issue, and Attorney Anastasio provided a background on the Greenwich imbalance numbers, steps

Greenwich had taken, such as magnet schools, and the district's most recent meeting with the Committee.

Dr. Jones and Mr. Kelly distributed a handout regarding the racial balance issue, which they reviewed with the Committee. They noted that a third of Greenwich's student population goes to private schools, which makes it difficult to determine redistricting. In fact, Greenwich has the largest private-school student population in the State.

Dr. Jones stated that the district-wide diversity numbers have increased to 39.9%, and that the racial imbalance numbers at New Lebanon and Hamilton Avenue are trending downwards. She reiterated what Greenwich had stated at prior Committee meetings, specifically the difficulty of transporting students across town. The traffic has worsened – it takes an hour to get students across town during rush hour. Dr. Jones stated that there was not as much of an issue with the middle school. She added there is a new magnet program at Western Middle School that families like enough to allow their children to ride 45 minutes on the bus.

The school is so full, however, that they are not taking magnet students for one year but will resume next year. The Principal and Assistant Principal there have been named, respectively, Principal and Assistant Principal of the Year in Connecticut. Dr. Jones stated that there is increased stability at the school with respect to administrators and that that has increased the positive school atmosphere, which Dr. Jones hopes will attract a more diverse group of students.

Mr. Harris asked whether the Principal is a person of color. Dr. Jones stated that she is not, and Mr. Harris asked her to explain what she meant by citing a change of culture. Ms. Jones explained that the Principal is a lifetime resident of Greenwich, knows the town, loves the school, and has brought a positive energy.

Superintendent Jones noted that it is difficult to change a neighborhood-school model – in which parents can walk students to school – to a model in which a six-year-old is placed on a bus for a lengthy ride. It is hot at the start and the end of the school years, young students fall asleep, so it is not necessarily safe.

Superintendent Jones stated that Greenwich is different from Fairfield. Greenwich has taken a more aggressive approach to create new programming at the schools. It commissioned a study early on. Demographers have noted that Greenwich is a difficult town to transport students across.

They have opened four schools in the east, central, and western parts of town. They have opened magnets and rebranded the theme in one to make it more attractive. They built a new school and are working on tweaking its magnet theme – the idea to make it more attractive to parents.

Ms. Sieve asked Attorney Anastasio to remind the Committee what the percentage is for racial imbalance. That figure is 25%, and the two schools in question are Hamilton Avenue – 29.37% -- and New Lebanon – 33.76%. Pending imbalance is 15%, which is a means of alerting districts that there is approaching imbalance.

Mr. Harris asked for the definition of minority. He expressed his preference for “people of color,” and does not like the term “minority.” Attorney Anastasio noted that that is the legal term that is applied.

There is discussion of magnet themes. Dr. Jones believes that all schools should focus on STEAM, regardless of whether they are or are not magnets.

Mr. Harris asked about enrollment of private school students. He notes that the total number has decreased by over 200 students. Presuming that most of them are white, Mr. Harris questioned what impact that might have on the district numbers. Dr. Jones noted that the K-5 student population has decreased and that there are fluctuations in the schools as far as student enrollment goes. Cos Cob is significantly down, whereas other schools have had spikes in enrollment.

Dr. Jones noted that there had been a stretch when there were no magnet seats available due to student enrollment, but they have been seeing some increased seats. The International School at Dundee is the most popular magnet. Ms. Sieve asked whether there is a waiting list for the magnet seats.

Dr. Jones noted that most of the elementary schools are either racially imbalanced or are in pending imbalance. She believes that this is a good thing as it demonstrates more diversity. Attorney Anastasio responded by noting that having that many schools in pending imbalance is not a good thing as while the community might be getting more diverse, the schools are not.

Mr. Kelly stated, and Dr. Jones reiterated, that New Lebanon is a beautiful new building and parents do not want to hear that their children cannot attend the school but have to be bussed across town. Ms. Sieve asked what the actual tangibles of the strategies that have been tried at Hamilton and New Lebanon. Dr. Jones states that the housing patterns and the new housing developments are having an effect, and they will continue to do so. She added that a developer had called her the prior day and asked what the capacity is for Parkway School as they are looking to build two hundred homes.

Mr. Norton expressed concern that the district is waiting for an organic change. He noted that there are only 5.2% Choice seats in Greenwich. To make more meaningful movement, Mr. Norton suggested a more aggressive approach. He mentioned tweaking the magnet-school lottery. Dr. Jones stated that they cannot give preference based upon skin color, but Attorney Anastasio and Mr. Norton both noted that they can weigh the lottery by zip code or street. Mr. Norton suggested transitioning students coming into the system to other, relatively close schools.

Mr. Kelly asked whether Mr. Norton was suggesting not redistricting but permitting voluntary attendance in out-of-zone schools. He discussed taking it neighborhood by neighborhood and increasing choice seats over time from 5% to perhaps even 10%. Mr. Kelly opined that Mr. Norton’s suggestions were “exciting” as they would give the Board more flexibility than the

Board realized was available. Ms. Sieve notes that there are people at the CSDE that can work with Greenwich on some of these potential solutions.

Ms. Sieve asked about the culture and climate of other schools and what steps are being taken to make the schools more welcoming to diverse students. Mr. Kelly says they welcome diversity. Ms. Sieve stated the Committee would like to see Greenwich provide the aggressive strategies that it is seeking. She mentioned that the Committee usually brings districts back in six months. Mr. Kelly stated that the Greenwich Board will make this a high priority. Attorney Anastasio suggested that the district return in September, with which everyone agreed, Mr. Kelly noting that they would be looking forward to it.

Ms. Sieve adjourned the meeting at 9:24 a.m.