

NORTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
Norton, Massachusetts

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2023 MAY 11 AM 8:53

NORTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE  
MINUTES OF MEETING

***Date of Meeting:*** Thursday, April 13, 2023

***Location:*** Norton Middle School Library

***Present:*** Committee Members: Chairperson Mr. Dan Sheedy, Vice Chairperson Mrs. Sheri Cohen, Mrs. Carolyn Gallagher, Deniz Savas, and Mr. Nick Schleicher. ***Also present:*** Superintendent of Schools Joseph F. Baeta, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning Jennifer O'Neill, School Business Administrator Kristine Hadfield, and Student Representatives Malia Savas and Antonio Romano.

***Call to Order:*** Chairperson Sheedy called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

***Pledge of Allegiance***

Chairperson Sheedy announced that the meeting was being recorded and asked that if anyone was recording to let the Committee know.

***H. A. Yelle Elementary School Playground Presentation:***

Board Members of the HAY PTO, Kate Byrne, J Moreau, and Jen Longabard, as well as Principal Geoghegan, updated the Committee on the HAY playground project. The current equipment is in disrepair and new age-appropriate pieces will be added. The existing swing sets will remain and will be cleaned and repaired, and ADA compliant swings and grass mats will be installed. A new main structure as well as the "Door Jam" piece will be added.

The total cost of the project is \$67,487.54 of which \$28,004.63 has been paid. The next payment due is not until March 1, 2024. The remaining balance is currently \$39,462.91. Money for the project has been raised through several fundraisers including the annual Trunk or Treat event, Anything But a Backpack Day, HAY Trivia Night, Scholastic Book Fairs, Twisted Thursday, and the Boosterthon Glow Run. Area businesses including GOAT City, Chateau, and Honey Dew have hosted fundraising nights. Fundraising efforts will continue through the remainder of this school year as well as the 2023-2024 school year.

Regarding the timeframe for construction, it is estimated that it will take about a week to be installed. The PTO is hopeful that it will be completed prior to the end of the school year.

The Committee thanked the PTO for their efforts on this project.

***Approval of Minutes:***

MOTION: by Mr. Savas to approve Minutes of March 23, 2023 and April 4, 2023 Open Session Meetings

SECOND: by Mrs. Cohen

5 - 0 Motion Carries

MOTION: by Mr. Savas to approve Minutes of March 23, 2023 Executive Session Meeting

SECOND: by Mrs. Cohen

5 - 0 Motion Carries

MOTION: by Mr. Savas to approve Minutes of April 4, 2023 Executive Session Meeting

SECOND: by Mrs. Cohen

5 - 0 Motion Carries

***Warrants:***

Mrs. Cohen reported that the following School Expense Warrants and School Payroll Warrants were reviewed and approved and are to be entered into public record:

**School Expense Warrants:**

- March 23, 2023 \$ 521,357.32
- April 4, 2023 \$ 621,995.59

**School Payroll Warrants:**

- March 23, 2023 \$1,114,836.15

***Student Representatives Update:***

Malia Savas and Antonio Romano updated the Committee on school activities, as follows:

JCS – The colorful rock garden in front of the school was cleaned up and is in the shape of a sea turtle. Third grade students will start a new tradition and will place personally painted stones in the new turtle bed. Second graders will be building a sunflower garden named “Aubriella’s Garden” in honor of the special little girl who brought sunshine to JCS. Four outdoor adventure days will take place at the YMCA Camp Finberg for Grades K – 3

HAY – Students are finishing up ELA MCAS. The new playground is about to break ground. Students love being able to use the turn fields for recess and PE classes. Everyone is looking forward to April break.

NMS – Over 350 students participated in final school-wide social, April Awesomeness. First round of MCAS completed with Math and Science testing after April break. Spring sports are underway with some students participating in JV baseball and softball, along with NMS baseball and softball. Both boys and girls are also playing lacrosse. March 31<sup>st</sup> was Trans-Visibility Day

and the school community was encouraged to wear blue, pink, and white. A school-wide annual Day of Silence to support all students in the LGBTQ community will be held on April 28<sup>th</sup>.

NHS – Opportunities Fair held with more than 35 local businesses, organizations, and military recruiters present that had immediate job openings for the summer and information about future opportunities. After the break, upcoming events include the Art Show, National Honor Society Bike-A-Thon, Senior Appreciation Breakfast, outdoor craft fair, drama club production of Band Geeks, and band and chorus concert in May. Spirit week held the week before April break consists of the following: Monday – PJ Day; Tuesday – Surfers vs. Bikers; Wednesday – Jersey Day; Thursday – Soccer Mom vs. BBQ Dad; and Friday – Frat Boy Friday.

Mr. Savas took a moment to thank Landmarc for their help with the stone turtle at JCS, noting their good partnership with NPS.

***Second Reading and Vote on Therapy/Emotional Support Canines in School Policy:***

Dr. Baeta recommended that this new policy should be separate and not combined with the current Animals in Schools Policy due to the very specific nature of the new policy. Mr. Savas stated that the issue is not that the policies should be combined, but that the current policy is poorly written and needs to be cleaned up.

MOTION: by Mr. Savas to approve the Therapy/Emotional Support Canines in School Policy

SECOND: by Mrs. Cohen

5 – 0 Motion Caries

***Review and Vote on Secondary Students Freedom of Expression Policy:***

Updates to the policy were made as discussed at the prior meeting.

MOTION: by Mr. Savas to approve the Secondary Students Freedom of Expression Policy:

SECOND: by Mrs. Gallagher

5 – 0 Motion Caries

***First Reading of Expense Reimbursements Policy Revision:***

Dr. Baeta recommends that the current policy be updated to include allowable expenses such as tips. The new language is clear and specific. No action was required at this time.

***Discussion and Vote on School Choice for the 2023-2024 School Year:***

Dr. Baeta recommended School Choice for the 2023-2024 school year for Grades K – 10 with open enrollment. School Choice enrollment data since the program started in 2015 was shared, showing how the program grew from 11 students in 2015 to 213 students currently. Over 40 phone calls and email have been received from families interested in the program for the next school year and it is estimated that enrollment will increase from 213 to 235.

Dr. Baeta stated that about \$1M of School Choice funds has been used in the general budget. He also noted that School Choice funds could be used for administrative salaries eliminating the cost from taxpayers. Several area districts now offer School Choice as it is a favorable option for parents.

Dr. Baeta said that perceptions regarding School Choice students were untrue, that they are causing destruction in the schools, etc. He noted that the town demographics is changing and three ELL students from Haiti recently registered as Norton is a safe community and our schools are safe.

Options for the Committee to consider are: 1) keep open enrollment with an August 15<sup>th</sup> application date; 2) leave September 1<sup>st</sup> application date; or 3) look at enrollment numbers and accept fewer students in lower grades and more in upper grades.

When accepting students into the program, legally allowable questions are asked regarding the student having a record, etc. Attendance is looked at as well.

Discussion took place regarding the School Choice reimbursement figures which have remained stagnant.

MOTION: by Mr. Savas to continue School Choice for the 2023-2024 school year with open enrollment and with a closing date of August 15th for K-10

SECOND: by Mrs. Cohen

5 - 0 Motion Carries

***Discussion and Vote on Special Education Stabilization Account Article:***

Discussion ensued regarding reconsideration of submission of the Special Education Stabilization Account Article for Town Meeting. Dr. Baeta said that this consists of placing money into an account only for Special Education purposes. The process to do this is through Town Meeting. The argument against such is that we have a stabilization account. There is no requirement that it be funded.

Mr. Savas suggested that the amount be reduced to \$10K from \$100K.

***Superintendent Search Update and Vote:***

Mr. Sheedy stated that Dr. Baeta was leaving the district on June 30<sup>th</sup> and that there were currently 40 superintendent openings in Massachusetts with not a great pool of candidates. He noted that the district was at a crossroad and how Dr. Baeta has been a great leader.

Committee members Savas, Cohen, and Gallagher shared their opinions on Dr. Jennifer O'Neill's qualifications and their support of moving her forward to assume the position of Superintendent effective July 1, 2023. Dr. O'Neill's 20 years of experience with NPS was noted as well as the district's ability to maintain stability and consistency while continuing the initiatives that have been started.

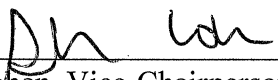
Respectfully Submitted,

Joseph F. Baeta, Ed.D.  
Secretary Pro Tem

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Dan Sheedy, Chairperson

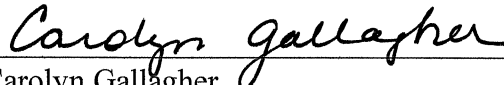
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Sheri Cohen, Vice-Chairperson

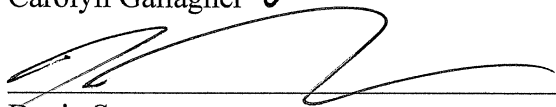
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Carolyn Gallagher

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Deniz Savas

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Nick Schleicher

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Attachments (2)

Mr. Schleicher read a statement and asked that it be entered into the meeting minutes. See attached statement.

Mr. Ralph Stefanelli, 12 James St., Norton addressed the Committee. See attached statement.

MOTION: by Mr. Savas: Pending contract negotiations, to appoint Dr. Jennifer O'Neill as Superintendent of Schools effective July 1, 2023

SECOND: Mrs. Cohen

4 – 1 Motion Carries

***Other:***

- Dr. Baeta read a letter from DESE regarding being granted designation for the Innovation Career Pathway in Manufacturing program. He thanked Jen O'Neill, Karen Winsper, Ethan Dolleman, Heather Albritton, and Kerri Murphy for their efforts.

***Adjourn:***

MOTION: by Mr. Savas to Adjourn and to enter into Executive Session for the purpose of discussions on school safety, not to return to Open Session.

SECOND: by Mrs. Gallagher

Roll Call Vote: Nick Schleicher – Yes; Deniz Savas – Yes; Carolyn Gallagher – Yes; Sheri Cohen – Yes; Dan Sheedy – Yes

5 Yes – Motion Carries

The meeting adjourned at 7:22 p.m.

Next Meeting Date: Thursday, April 27, 2023 at 6:00 p.m. at the NMS Library

***Documents and Other Exhibits Used at Meeting:***

- HAY School playground literature
- Therapy/Emotional Support Canines in Schools Policy IMGB
- Secondary Students Freedom of Expression Policy KHBB
- Expense Reimbursements Policy DKC
- School Choice enrollment data sheet
- Special Education Stabilization Fund Town Meeting Article
- Statement on Superintendent from Nick Schleicher
- Email resume from Ralph Stefanelli regarding Superintendent search/selection committee.

## Statement on Superintendent:

I prepared a statement, simply because I want it on public record, and I truly believe everyone should understand why I voted against this process for superintendent. First, I want to be clear that I personally and professionally respect Dr. Jen O'Neil. My voting stance has absolutely nothing to do with her personally, her qualities, or her potential to be a great superintendent for Norton. At this point right now, no one will be a bigger supporter in getting behind her and doing everything in my power to watch her success. Her success means our student's success, and our student's success means our town's success. I simply wanted options.

My concern lies within this superintendent position itself and how important of a job it is, how much responsibility comes along with it, and its position within our town moving forward. In my opinion, we should post a position of this magnitude, form a search committee, made up of teachers, parents, administrators, students, etc. This search committee would be filled with people strongly tied to the superintendent position and the day-to-day operations in our five schools. That committee, in conjunction with the school committee, conducts a thorough search, interviews, reference checks, and everything else that goes along with hiring the process. We simply search for the best candidate and the correct fit for Norton Schools and our town. That person very well could be Jen; it also could have been another candidate. We will never know, and that's what doesn't sit well with me; we cut our options out.

Being the newest elected member on this committee, the chairman and the committee suggested and said it was okay for me to have conversations with NPS staff members to potentially help my perspectives and understandings. So, over the past week, I have met with a handful of school and town officials, Dr. O'Neill included, to discuss the position and what they would like to see from me as a school committee member. I feel that I have done my due diligence; I have asked tough questions; I had very open and honest conversations, and, quite frankly, those conversations assured me that where I stand is supported and not abnormal.

Where I stand is, this position should have been opened externally. I promised the taxpayers and parents of this town during my campaign that I will challenge the status quo, I will be their voice regardless of the pressure of the situation, I will open the lines of communication, and I will be my own person and not a rubber stamp. There is no greater responsibility of your school committee than to hire a superintendent. The five of us sitting up here each have 20% stake in who is our next superintendent.

I'm a firm believer in democracy and majority rule, however I also refuse to sit back and stay quiet when so much is on the line. In my opinion, not posting this job has potentially failed the students, the parents, the taxpayers, the teachers, and the town of Norton tonight. I hope we did not, but we now won't ever know of what we potentially missed out on.

However, I will also say, from this point forward, it's water under the bridge. I don't hold personal or professional grudges, and I will continue to work and move Norton forward. I'm excited to see what Jen O'Neil can do for this district and I can't wait to see our growth moving forward. I have high expectations, and I'm sure others do as well.

I will email a copy of this statement to each member of school committee and to Mrs. Rand so it is submitted directly into the meeting minutes.