

**Lexington Public Schools
School Committee Meeting – May 17, 2005
Clarke Middle School**

Members present were Tom Griffiths, Scott Burson, Tom Diaz, Helen Cohen, Olga Guttag and Interim Superintendent William Hurley.

Helen Cohen called the meeting to order at 7:10 p.m.

Superintendent's Report

Mr. Hurley introduced Mike Jones, principal of Lexington High School, to report on the day of silence.

Report on the Lexington High School Day of Silence

Mr. Jones discussed two separate events that took place at the high school; Diversity Day and the Day of Silence. The observance of Diversity Day took place on March 10th. This stemmed from the No Place for Hate program, which is to promote a safe atmosphere for all people. It was a time to refocus on the values of respect for individuality, diversity and to promote a safe environment for all students. Students went through a series of programs throughout the day and celebrated diversity within the school. Student evaluations regarding this program were overwhelmingly positive. Because of the great amount of preparation, the observance of Diversity Day is an event that takes place approximately every three years.

The Day of Silence was held on April 13th with reflections planned for the 14th. Mr. Jones explained that Diversity Day and the Days of Silence were two separate events and were not linked together. The purposes were different. The Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) sponsored the Days of Silence. This has been an event that has taken place for the past seven or eight years without incident. The purpose of the Day of Silence was to acknowledge that some people in our society cannot talk about themselves. It is a way of acknowledging their plight. The GSA came to the faculty before the event took place and received faculty support for voluntary participation. Following the Day of Silence on the 13th was the Day of Dialogue but this year, based on events that took place during the Day of Silence, it was cancelled. The day would have involved guest speakers coming in to speak about what it is like to be gay or lesbian. No one was mandated to attend or participate in this program. We feel it is important for students to understand current events and what is going on in society. That was the sole purpose of these programs. The GSA is not special to Lexington High School. There are chapters throughout the state, and such activities are endorsed by the Department of Education. Nothing done at Lexington High School went beyond the guidelines of the State Department of Education.

Public Comment

A parent of two generations of children and grandchildren who have attended Lexington schools spoke about the importance of family and parents. She stated parents deserve to have a role in teaching values and morals to their children. She feels the academic needs of the whole student body were jeopardized by the Day of Silence.

John Rosenberg, a parent of a student who helped organize the Day of Silence, said the day was not disruptive. It was well organized and was to promote fair treatment in a civil society.

Jessie Segovia, parent, spoke regarding the kindergarten curriculum and issues brought by David Parker. He does not feel children should be forced to participate in all programs without an opt-out for the parents. He would like to see parents involved in these curriculum decisions.

Meg Soens, parent of children at Estabrook, said there are many gay and lesbian families in all schools. It is not fair to single out gay and lesbian families and say children cannot be around this or learn about them.

Robert Bennett, a parent, said that a certain book being distributed to second grade students was very specific about intimate aspects of sexuality. He does not want his children subjected to such books and objects to parents not being able to opt-out.

Members' Reports/Members' Concerns

Tom Diaz congratulated the LHS Jazz combo on a wonderful concert on May 14, at which the Combo was able to raise funds for their upcoming travel to the Montreux Jazz Festival.

Tom Griffiths read the letter submitted to the School Committee by Betsey Weiss and Nancy Atkind, asking us to help "Reverse the Curse" and lobby the state Senate to restore a high level of state aid to education. He asked if the other members were ready to support this. A motion was made that the Lexington School Committee endorses the letter and that the authors of the letter may indicate our names and School Committee affiliation as supporters of the letter. (Burson – Diaz; 5-0)

Scott Burson said the foreign language awards night is being held this evening. One hundred children are being recognized for their exemplary performance. It is important that we recognize our children. Cary Memorial Library has a trustees meeting tomorrow morning at 8:00 a.m. He urged all members of the School Committee to attend.

Tom Griffiths attended the Selectmen's meeting last night. The main topic was health care benefits and the increasing costs of such each year. With the escalating costs of

health care benefits, over time it could absorb the headroom we have under 2.5. The saving that might involve the least pain and offer the best results is the use of one of the mail-order prescription plans. Having the unions take a bigger percentage of the health care costs was another option. The use of Canadian drugs was another topic of discussion. This may only be a short-term solution as drug prices are already rising in Canada. Last night he also attended a meeting at Depot Square, A No Place for Hate sponsored function that emphasized the kind of town Lexington is and the respect for diversity that Lexington has.

Discussion Items

LEA Contract

There was no report on this at tonight's meeting.

Calendar Committee

Olga Guttag said a calendar committee has been assembled. Susan Elberger will chair the committee. The committee will meet next Monday and put together a calendar option. They understand this is an urgent matter and hopes to have a report back to the School Committee before the end of the school year. Mr. Hurley spoke with Andre Ravenelle and the expectation is that they will have a proposed one-year calendar by the end of the school year.

Liaison Assignments

Helen Cohen went over the liaison assignment list. She will be the liaison to the Board of Selectmen. Tom Griffiths said he is interested in the Council on Aging. He is interested in their capital program as well as in getting a center built. Ms. Cohen will withdraw from liaison on the Diversity Task Force and Tom Griffiths will serve as backup to Tom Diaz. Olga Guttag will be Helen's backup on the Health Advisory Committee. Scott Burson will be the liaison with LEF and Tom Diaz will be his backup. Tom Diaz will take over on No Place for Hate and Olga Guttag and Tom Griffiths will be his backup. Ms. Guttag will be the liaison to the PTO/PTA President's Council and Helen Cohen will be her backup. Tom Diaz will handle the Suburban Coalition and Ms. Guttag will be his backup. Tom Griffiths will support the TMMA and Scott Burson will be his backup. Tom Griffiths will be the primary liaison to the Capital Expenditures Committee and Olga Guttag will be the backup. All other liaison assignments will remain the same as originally designated except for these noted changes.

2020 Presentation

Ann Redmon of the 2020 Committee distributed a handout to the School Committee summarizing the 2020 process. The 2020 Committee is in the process of putting together

two groups; a budget collaboration group and a community discourse group. They are now trying to decide who should be involved in these meetings. The budget collaboration group meeting hopefully will take place in May or June; and the community discourse meeting will kick off in the fall.

Helen Cohen opened the meeting up for further public comments.

Additional Member and Public Comment

Tom Diaz asked about the book referenced previously by Mr. Bennett, saying that he found it difficult to believe that such a book would be used in any way in our schools. Mr. Hurley agreed and noted a book containing the content as described by the parent should not be in circulation. He stated it is hard to imagine that a book that explicit would be in a second grade since our curriculum for sexual education does not begin until fifth grade. This is not part of the curriculum and if this particular parent is correct, the book will be pulled.

Bessie Matthew, a new parent at the high school, said she made several phone calls to the Superintendent's office and high school and no one would speak to her about this matter. She feels parents need to be more informed of what is happening.

Deborah Strod said public education should be open to everyone and she does not believe this information is harmful.

Madeline Pease, a parent, asked the School Committee why the GSA was given a whole day to recognize their group.

A parent asked when the School Committee would speak about the issue of where a Day of Silence fits into the schools. She feels this is a civil liberty issue and thinks the community deserves a response from the School Committee.

Scott Burson responded that the role as School Committee members is to support the administrators to make sure they are following the law. He said our obligation is to provide a safe and civil environment for every student in our schools. Tom Griffiths noted the School Committee has been clear in its support for diversity. That occurs at a policy level and it is the job of the superintendent and administrators to implement School Committee policy. Tom Diaz suggested that some policies might need new consideration. The Day of Silence is an example of student expression within the school that was actually meant to create harmony but instead has caused some conflict.

Olga Guttag said if we do not provide a safe environment in our schools, children will not learn. The goal is to make all children, K through 12, feel welcome.

In response to a comment made by a parent, Mr. Hurley noted our goal of prevention of bullying, teasing and name calling rather than waiting for intervention after there is a problem. There is a real attempt in this school system to make children feel like they can approach anyone with grown up issues. Regardless of parents' personal preference, all youngsters are welcome. Our focus is on the children and to make them feel welcome and safe.

Action Items

Approval of the minutes from the March 15, 2005 School Committee meeting has been deferred.

A motion was made to accept the minutes of the March 28, 2005 School Committee meeting as amended. (Diaz – Burson; 4-0; Tom Diaz abstained as he was not present)

A motion was made to accept the minutes of the April 4, 2005 School Committee meeting as amended. (Diaz – Gutttag; 5-0)

A motion was made to accept the minutes of the April 11, 2005 School Committee meeting as amended. (Diaz – Burson; 5-0)

A motion was made to accept the minutes of the April 12, 2005 School Committee meeting as amended. (Diaz – Burson; 4-0; Olga Gutttag abstained as she was not present)

A motion was made to accept the minutes of the April 13, 2005 School Committee meeting. (Diaz – Griffiths; 5-0)

A motion was made to adjourn at 9:00 p.m. and move into Executive Session for the purpose of discussing contract negotiations and not return to public session. (Burson – Gutttag; roll call vote 5-0)

Submitted by,

Lisa McGuire

cc: William Hurley
Helen Cohen
Tom Griffiths
Scott Burson
Olga Gutttag
Tom Diaz