

**Please Note: These minutes are pending Board approval.
Board of Education
Newtown, Connecticut**

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting held on February 22, 2024 at 7:00 p.m. in the Reed Intermediate School Library, 3 Trades Lane.

A. Plante, Chair (absent)	C. Melillo
J. Vouros, Vice Chair	A. Uberti
D. Ramsey, Secretary	T. Vadas
S. Tomai	4 Staff
C. Gilson	1 Public
D. Linnetz (absent)	
G. Peteronjes (absent)	
A. Jerfy	

Mr. Vouros called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Item 1 – Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. Vouros requested to add an additional item at the end of the meeting.

MOTION: Mr. Vouros moved that the Board of Education add for discussion and possible action the appointment of a Board member for the Policy Subcommittee to the agenda at the end of New Business. Mr. Ramsey seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

Item 2 – Consent Agenda

MOTION Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the consent agenda which includes the donation to Newtown High School and the correspondence report. Mrs. Tomai seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

Item 3 – Public Participation

Item 4 – Reports

Chair Report: Mr. Vouros, on behalf of himself and the Board, thanked Mr. Higgins for his service to us in his nine months on the Board of Education and wished him well.

Mr. Ramsey was sorry to lose him. He is a very sharp, extremely intelligent, and insightful person and we wish him well.

Mrs. Tomai was sorry at the loss of her dear colleague and read his February 20 letter into the record.

Dear Board of Education Colleagues:

As some of you already know, I am in the process of relocating to Florida later this Spring to pursue certain business and teaching opportunities, and will no longer be domiciled in Connecticut, which means I will no longer be eligible to hold office in Newtown. Given the many important matters facing the Board, I have decided to step down now, so that a successor can quickly be appointed and can thereafter begin contributing to the critical decision-making ahead. For your reference, attached is my letter of resignation, effective as of February 20, 2024, filed with the Clerk.

From my perspective, Newtown faces serious challenges with its school system, many of which I have publicly discussed at length over the past year, including lackluster academic progress, declining post-secondary readiness, unaddressed performance gaps, inefficient allocation of existing budget resources, inadequate long-term facility planning, minimal investment in research and innovation, non-compliance with Board of Education policies, and alarming indicators of systemic leadership failures across multiple core functions, including district goal setting, school

security and safety, pupil services, data utilization, and performance accountability. These challenges are real, they are non-partisan, and as I have often sought to highlight during my time on the Board, they are capable of objective, evidence-based assessment, if only we choose to look.

The good news is that, while many of these challenges are hard and often frustrating, they are also solvable with honesty, collaboration, and the courage to act. Unfortunately, that appears to be the greatest challenge of all. As I see it, there is an entrenched culture of fear and resistance to change permeating the system, and a corresponding lack of courage to address that resistance head-on. While change is never easy, especially in large institutions, entrenched resistance poses an extraordinary barrier to real progress here. There is no better illustration of this than the administrative turmoil enveloping the district right now, the foreseeable results of which are likely to be disastrous for students, as well as for Newtown's committed educators and for the cause of progress. My strongly held view continues to be that Board leadership must have the courage to immediately and comprehensively address legitimate, well-known concerns, while also holding to account all contributors to administrative dysfunction. I believe a failure to do so now risks lasting harm to public education in Newtown.

I would like to take this final opportunity to wish the entire Board the very best going forward. It has been a pleasure to serve alongside all of you, and with our Superintendent, Chris Melillo. I am grateful for the collegiality, friendship, and patience, and I remain hopeful that together you will find the strength and the courage to do what is right for Newtown's future, no matter how hard it may be. I will be cheering for your success.

A final personal note of appreciation for my dear friend and talented colleague, Shannon Tomai. We began our unlikely journey of service on the Board of Education together, and I have been blessed with the good fortune to learn from her and to sit by her side at Board meetings. I will miss that seat greatly.

***Best Wishes,
Todd***

Mrs. Tomai added that she hopes we certainly do.

Mr. Gilson liked working with Mr. Higgins. He has a good heart and has meant well. From working with CABE, a lot of the challenges spoke about are being dealt with in other districts also and he looks forward to meeting those challenges.

Superintendent's Report: Last week we presented our budget to the Board of Finance. He thanked Mrs. Vadas and Mrs. Plante for their valuable contributions to the presentation.

There were no committee reports.

Mr. Ramsey visited the middle school on two occasions. One was for the Harlem Renaissance exhibit which gave him a great history lesson and included students in Grade 7-Red. He is big on social emotional experiences and referred to the pep rally where students and staff joined together in the A-wing gym with a student and faculty band and basketball contest.

Financial Report and Transfers:

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the financial report and transfers for the month ending January 31, 2024. Mr. Gilson seconded.

Mrs. Tomai said there was no CFF meeting due to the snow and noted that the transfer requests totaled \$25,180, with \$22,000 was from salaries to professional services and \$3,180 from equipment repairs to instructional supplies.

Mr. Gilson asked for an update on the middle school boiler situation.

Mr. Melillo said the emergency boiler is up and running. The boiler that failed is under warranty but we will have to pay for the emergency boiler and hookup.

Mrs. Tomai noted that they were interviewing for the facilities studies next Thursday.

Item 6 – Old Business

Action on Grades 5 and 6 Band Curriculum:

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the Grade 5 Band Curriculum. Mrs. Tomai seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the Grade 6 Band Curriculum. Mrs. Tomai seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

Item 5 – Presentations

DEI Update – Nixon & Co. Consulting:

Kellen Nixon and Jana Briggs of Nixon & Co. spoke about their work the past year and a half. Mr. Nixon said their work reflects the priorities of the district. Superintendent Melillo laid out a DEI statement and tenets that we are behind and integrated in the work we are doing in the district and seeing that as the way we are providing consulting services to the district. The SEL curriculum is guiding us as we think about individual relationships the students and teachers are being asked to build. He continued talking about the three-year work plan.

Mrs. Tomai asked for information regarding the Increasing Educator Diversity hiring plan.

Mr. Melillo said the State of Connecticut requires all districts to create an educator diversity plan. Our teaching force does not have deep diverse candidate pools. We are looking at a recent teacher shortage and at ways to look at a broader group of people during that process. It needs to be approved by the Board and submitted to the Department of Education.

Mrs. Tomai asked if they noticed any common concerns from the equity leaders.

Ms. Briggs said most is a concern about being comfortable navigating conversations. We encourage people to remember all of this is part of interacting socially and understanding the humanness of people.

Mr. Nixon said it seems that the culture of the school is reflected in the students they are serving. In the next months we will give them ways to navigate discussions.

Mr. Ramsey was glad there's been a shift since they arrived from a compliance approach to an invitational approach. We need to celebrate our unity and our differences. He asked how this translates into increased academic performance in the subject areas.

Ms. Briggs said it deals with psychological safety. When we create welcoming environments it elevates some of that when people feel safe. That's when the academic achievement increases.

Mr. Gilson appreciates the process and hopes the community sees what we are trying to do. He asked if teachers have access to them when they aren't here and if they get additional resources.

Mr. Nixon said that next session would be more robust. We are here monthly in the schools doing observations and we can also schedule office hours for those who want to meet with them.

Mr. Melillo said we are looking at the DEI work by bringing materials on creating welcoming environments. We found cultural differences between all of us and discussed how we feel welcomed and supported and how we can provide that for our students. We want to create an environment of learning and to ensure all students feel comfortable.

Mrs. Uberti said we worked on creating a community of practice with everyone believing in the work we are doing with a common understanding of how to handle things and be there for each other. We have this core group that supports each other.

Item 7 – New Business

Action on Increasing Educator Diversity Plan:

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the Increasing Educator Diversity Plan. Mr. Gilson seconded.

Mr. Melillo said we were tasked to create this from the State of Connecticut. We want to encourage a diverse group to apply and start our hiring season earlier in the year to reach candidates. Our goals are understanding the hiring process, provide bias training, look at ways to screen candidates, look at questions in the interview process, and look at creating a mentorship program so teachers feel supported. We also want to assure that our professional development helps our teachers to be confident.

Mr. Vouros asked if we have made a concerted effort to touch base with teacher colleges. Mr. Melillo said we have placed many of their interns in our schools. Few men go into the profession and 85% are white female. The state population for the diverse teaching force is 11%. In Newtown its 4%.

Mrs. Tomai verified that this was a template and Mrs. D'Eramo created the goals. Motion passes unanimously.

Action on 2024-2025 School Calendar:

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the 2024-2025 school calendar. Mr. Gilson seconded.

Mr. Melillo gave an overview of the calendar which has not changed much from the current calendar. The middle school requested more conference time so they have four days next year.

Mrs. Tomai said as a working Mom with young children its challenging to have multiple early release days in a row.

Mrs. Uberti said the elementary teachers don't need as much time for conferences. Mr. Ross utilized two days from the K-6 conference days and two from the high school days so there is no additional impact on the elementary schedule. Motion passes unanimously.

Action on Minutes:

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the minutes of January 30, 2024. Mr. Gilson seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the minutes of February 6, 2024. Mr. Gilson seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the minutes of February 15, 2024. Mr. Gilson seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

Action on Policy Committee Appointment:

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved that the Board of Education approve the appointment of Don Ramsey to the Policy Subcommittee effective immediately. Mrs. Tomai seconded. Mr. Vouros believed this was a temporary appointment until we get a new Board member. Motion passes unanimously.

Item 8 – Public Participation

Melissa Gomez, 6 Old Gate Lane, spoke about her concerns regarding a book that was read aloud to a third grade class at Middle Gate School.

MOTION: Mr. Ramsey moved to adjourn. Mr. Gilson seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

Item 9 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Donald Ramsey
Secretary