

*SHALER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT
Committee of the Whole Meeting
October 13, 2021 – Hybrid
Minutes*

The Board of School Directors of the Shaler Area School District held a Committee of the Whole Meeting on Wednesday, October 13, 2021, in a hybrid format, in person at the Shaler Area Middle School auditorium, Glenshaw, PA, and on Zoom, a virtual meeting platform, with Dr. April Kwiatkowski, School Board President, presiding. This meeting began at 7:19 p.m.

Board Members Present:

- Mrs. Suzanna Donahue
- Mr. James Fisher
- Mr. Tim Gapsky
- Dr. April Kwiatkowski
- Mr. Jason Machajewski
- Mrs. Jeanne Petrovich
- Mrs. Eileen Phillips
- Mr. Steve Romac
- Mr. James Tunstall

Others Present:

- Dr. Sean Aiken, Superintendent
- Dr. Bryan O'Black, Assistant Superintendent
- Ms. Sherri Ludwig, Director of Business Affairs
- Mr. Matt Hoffman, Solicitor
- Catherine Clark, Student Representative
- Avery Gallant, Student Representative

Notice of this meeting was posted as required.

- Dr. Kwiatkowski called the meeting to order at 7:19 p.m.
- Dr. Aiken provided an overview of the order of the meeting.
- Dr. Graczyk presented on the student services department and provided an overview of the services provided in the district. She spoke about the school counselors, college and career readiness program and counselor, behavior specialists, Student Assistance Program, trauma-informed care, dedicated Google site with family resources, and school nurses who have been instrumental in COVID management and contact tracing. She said Shaler Area has more supports in place than any other school district. Dr. Aiken pointed out that the work the student services department did before the pandemic set up the district to create awareness and understanding around trauma informed care. He added that the district is adding a social worker at the high school and a part time school counselor at Reserve. Dr. Graczyk said the district had a mental health task force set up before the pandemic. She encouraged any concerns to start at the counselor or social worker level and any program concerns can be directed to her.

Ms. Ludwig then announced the following Finance Items:

| <u>ITEM</u> | | <u>SUP</u> | <u>ACTION</u> | |
|-------------|---|------------|---------------|----------|
| # | <u>FINANCE & OPERATION ITEMS RECOMMENDED FOR APPROVAL</u> | # | <u>TAKEN</u> | |
| C.1 | APPROVE FUND PROFILES: | | | |
| | A. General Fund – Schedule of Bills and Addendum | C.1A | _____ | |
| | B. Cafeteria Fund – Schedule of Bills | C.1B | _____ | |
| | C. 2019 Bond Fund – Schedule of Bills | C.1C | _____ | |
| | D. Year-to-Date Financial Reports | C.1D | _____ | |
| | E. Fund Profiles and Investments | C.1E | _____ | |
| C.2 | Approve additional ABC Transit, Inc. Bus Drivers for the 2021-22 school year. | C.2 | _____ | |
| C.3 | Approve additional Exception Request for the 2021-22 school year. | C.3 | _____ | |
| C.4 | Approve the Resolution authorizing the incurring of non-electoral debt by the Shaler Area School District, for the purposes of refunding prior debt of the District, possibly financing various capital projects of the District and paying the costs of issuing the bonds; authorizing the incurring of non-electoral debt by the issuance of Shaler Area School District, General Obligation Bonds, (Federally Taxable) Series A of 2021 and (Federally Taxable) Series B of 2021, and all necessary parameters as attached in the full resolution. | C.4 | _____ | |
| C.5 | Approve a three-year contract with Maher Duessel, CPA in the amounts as follows: | C.5 | | |
| | | | | |
| | | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| | Audit Services | \$23,250 | \$24,150 | \$25,050 |
| | Consulting (year-end closeout) Hourly | \$ 105 | \$ 105 | \$ 105 |
| C.6 | Approve an additional bus stop. | C.6 | _____ | |

Dr. O’Black then announced the following Education Items:

| <u>ITEM</u> | | <u>SUP</u> | <u>ACTION</u> |
|-------------|--|------------|---------------|
| # | <u>EDUCATION ITEMS RECOMMENDED FOR APPROVAL</u> | # | <u>TAKEN</u> |
| A.1 | Approve the Waterfront Learning Contract for the 2021-22 school year. | A.1 | _____ |
| A.2 | Approve the AmeriCorps Host Site Agreement for the 2021-22 school year at a cost of \$ _____, to be funded thru _____. | A.2 | _____ |

- Dr. O’Black said they are finalizing the agreement identified in Item A.2 and it will be funded through ESSER funds. The district will host sites at Reserve, Marzolf and the Elementary School.
- Dr. Kwiatkowski asked if the contract in Item A.1 has changed significantly. Dr. O’Black said the contract is approved every year. There is a slight increase due to licensing, but nothing significant.

Dr. O’Black then announced the following Information Items:

Information Items:

1. Student Representatives – Catherine Clark & Avery Gallant spoke later in the meeting.
2. Shaler Area Education Foundation – Mrs. Phillips deferred to Dr. Aiken who said that the Foundation will meet the following week because of the holiday. The Foundation continues to strengthen its strategic plan and has a proposal to mobilize alumni support. The Foundation plans to come to a future school board meeting to discuss options. There also are grant opportunities available to teaching staff.
3. Superintendent’s Report – Dr. Aiken shared that homecoming was a great success. Primary and elementary principals are finalizing Halloween events. The 50th anniversary committee has a meeting the following day. Upcoming events include a storytelling event in March and a scavenger hunt in April. Four seniors were recognized by the National Merit Scholarship program. Last Wednesday, Shaler Area hosted a marching band festival with nine local bands performing on the field. The fourth grade iPad covers were delivered and the Technology Department quickly mobilized to distribute the iPads so the district is fully 1:1. Earlier in the week, the LIGHT Initiative held a professional development opportunity on diversity, equity, and inclusion for 15 people. The district is working on a partnership with the Pens Foundation and Argo AI to work with Shaler Area students on an autonomous vehicle project. Dr. O’Black also shared that the U.S. News and World Report, for the first time, ranked elementary schools and all four Shaler Area primary schools ranked in the top 30 percent. Dr. Aiken said the district is looking forward to building on that success.

Dr. Aiken then announced the following Discussion Item:

Discussion Item:

1. Graduation Gowns
 - Student representative Caty Clark thanked the district for hosting a successful homecoming event for the high school student. She also said she was glad to hear the district is still promoting school counselors and social workers. She said if the district decides to stay with two color gowns, it already has committed to removing any association to gender. Her concern is the violence and harassment that students in the LGBTQIA+ community will face. She said if the district makes the switch, she already has heard threats and she doesn’t feel the district can make this change safely. It also is not the number one issue that they want to see addressed. They want to see more inclusion in the bathrooms, health curriculum, etc. The gown color is performative. She said she doesn’t feel the district is in a place to make the change yet. She feels if gender is removed from the equation then that would be inclusive.
 - Avery Gallant said she feels that it is an important issue and she wishes it wasn’t brought up just because of the color of the gowns.
 - Julia Ehrenberger, senior class president, said she was speaking on behalf of the Class of 2022 and that they believe there is a bigger underlying issue that needs to be addressed. Students do not want this change and the LGBTQIA+ students would face repercussions. She feels education is important now so that this change can be made safely in the future.

- Flannery Loudon, a senior and student council member-at-large, said that she understands the weight of the issue but it should be low on the list of priorities. Graduation is one day and changing the color so we look inclusive is performative. The concern is that if the change is made it would target the very people the district is trying to help.
- Isabel Dean, a senior and student council member-at-large, said everyone is entitled to their own opinion, however there have been many personal attacks made against students and staff and school board members. The issue affects the student population and they believe students in the LGBTQIA+ community should be included. It seems the only issue the district is trying to address are the visual ones.
- Rebecca Beckas, vice president of the senior class, said students should be given the choice and they feel that is a better option because it gives students the ability to express their individuality or identity. She feels the argument for the graduation gown is performative and makes people look and feel good. She said if the district wants to make progress, a programmatic change would be more effective. She also responded to a letter written by Mrs. Donahue in response to the senior class' letter to the school board. She said she didn't feel like their letter was disrespectful, but she felt insulted and belittled by her response.
- Maeve Snyder, a senior and leader of the high school's Gay Straight Alliance, said there are currently two opposing petitions in the community. She said that students, parents, and citizens see this as a LGBTQIA+ issue and placed universal blame on her community. She asked the school board and administration to do better.
- Dr. Aiken said one of the discussions moving forward is to have the high school social workers speak to students who identify as nonbinary and trans. The district doesn't want to put a target on their back but it does want to understand their experience at SASD better.
- Taylor Pierce, a senior, said they all strive for inclusivity and feels like there was a change made when students were given the choice of the gown color.
- Elizabeth Hanulak, of Vilsack Street in Etna, said the district should address gender neutral bathrooms. She has two transgender graduates, and she asked about the graduation gown colors previously. She said there is a problem districtwide and conflicting messages within the district.
- Heather Chirdon, of E. Undercliff Street, said there was an open letter signed by 900 community members and alumni to encourage the district to create an inclusive environment. She laid out a timeline of the graduation gown discussion and said it has been a year that the district has been discussing this. She shared statistics from the Trevor Project and said that in the year of discussing this topic, half a million children have attempted suicide because of gender identity.
- Bryan Whitaker, of Dorf Drive, commended the students who spoke and said he was glad that they recognized that there are more important goals than graduation gowns. He said one option that hasn't been discussed is a third gown option that incorporates both colors.
- Julie Loesch, of Colony Oaks Drive, said with the many issues in the district, families are considering other schools or school districts. She asked what value Shaler Area brings. Dr. Aiken said over the past year-and-a-half, there has been consternation around schools and divisiveness. He said if families would reach out to him, he can show them the phenomenal things going on in Shaler Area classrooms, staff who are recognized at the state and national level. He said Shaler Area has its faults, but it does not operate within a political framework. It considers the needs of students, health and safety of students, expanded options for students. He said he realizes that right now it is easy to dismiss with cancel culture but he invites anyone to see the great things in the district. He said that he would put what Shaler Area does for its students up against any other school district in the state. He emphasized that he stands behind the Shaler Area teachers, principals, and programs.
- Dr. Kwiatkowski also added that the District Parent Council is a great resource and open to anyone. It's a great opportunity to hear what's going on in any building.
- Chris Chirdon, of E. Undercliff Street, said at the university level, the colors at graduation reflect academics, but at the end of the day, blue and white is a separation even if the district removes gender from the equation. He added that there are students who are not in the position to make a choice. He suggested the district go with black gowns and choose tassels with color.
- Tracey Bragg, of Louann Street, said a committee is a great idea but cautioned who would be on the committee. She said she has helped the Class of 2022 raise money, and she doesn't want a decision that would impact that. She feels the students are right that they haven't had a voice.
- Crystal Corfield, of Seavy Road, said her child hasn't been in school for two weeks because he's been sick and asked why there isn't remote learning. Dr. Aiken said the district is working with families individually. During inclement weather, the district does plan to engage in Flexible Instruction Days. He said recently the district's quarantine student numbers have gone down significantly, however, they don't want anyone to fall behind. Ms. Corfield said Shaler Area

is the only school district in the area without its own cyber academy. She said that there are teachers who will work with students but it is not the same as remote learning. Ms. Corfield also asked if there was a code of conduct for school board members. Mr. Hoffman said there is a school board policy. She said there is a school board member who is insulting others online. She said they should be held responsible and feels this needs to be looked into.

- Kim Piekarski said she has worked with queer youth and training and felt compelled to stress that Shaler Area doesn't weaponized gender identity. She said everyone should move away from claims of the decision being performative. She said she feels the district is behind in this issue. She acknowledged that there are other issues, but feels many comments are only fueling the fire. She said this decision affects all future classes, and it's important to consider future students as well.
- Taylor Pierce, a senior, said a lot of the issues brought up concern her and are not battles that will end after the meeting. She asked the district to take into consideration that students are still getting sick and being quarantined and feels like there needs to be another option for instruction. She said if the district is concerned about the entire student body, then it needs to be consistent in all of its decisions and asked the school board to keep that in mind.
- Avery Gallant clarified that some teachers do post on Google Classroom but it is not consistent among all teachers. She also pointed out that a lot of her classes are discussion based. She feels remote learning needs to be reintroduced, and while she recognizes many teachers oppose teaching remote students, they are educators and all students deserve a right to their education.
- Elizabeth Dunn, of Aurelia Drive, said these conversations are ones that are going to continue. She said the district has the opportunity to do something that would benefit future generations. She also said that her student was in quarantine twice this school year and is still playing catch up. She recognizes that there are concerns with remote instruction and access but asked if there could be approved criteria that would allow for this to occur so that it isn't a burden to the teachers.
- Crystal Corfield pointed out that there are high school classes that are run as Socratic seminars and students with IEPs who cannot use Google Classroom. Teachers are updating grades as zeros and students are failing and taking longer to make up that work. There are students who are saying that it isn't enough.
- Dr. Aiken thanked everyone for their comments and said it is something that the district is looking into and will work to find a solution as soon as possible.
- Dr. Kwiatkowski thanked all for attending.

After no further items were presented, final adjournment occurred at 9:21 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Bethany Baker
Assistant Board Secretary