

**SHREWSBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
100 MAPLE AVENUE
SHREWSBURY, MASSACHUSETTS**

MINUTES OF SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Present: Mr. Jon Wensky, Chairperson; Ms. Sandy Fryc, Vice Chairperson; Ms. Lynsey Heffernan, Secretary; Dr. B. Dale Magee; Mr. Jason Palitsch; Mr. Patrick Collins, Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations; Ms. Amy B. Clouter, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction; Ms. Meg Belsito, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services; Dr. Jane Lizotte, Assistant Superintendent for Community Partnerships & Well-Being; Ms. Barb Malone, Executive Director of Human Resources; and Dr. Joseph Sawyer, Superintendent of Schools.

A complete audio/visual recording of this meeting is available on the Shrewsbury Public Schools website.

The meeting was convened by Mr. Wensky at 7:01 pm.

I. Public Participation

For clarification and in response to questions about Public Participation received by the School Committee after their March 2, 2022 meeting, Mr. Wensky highlighted key points of *Policy 123: Public Participation at School Committee Meetings*, and especially Section 10 as it relates to the Committee's role to listen during Public Participation.

Mr. Wensky then introduced the following speakers, who shared a variety of perspectives on the controversy surrounding an original student poem recited at the recent Black History Committee assembly held at Shrewsbury High School:

Mr. Jeffrey Sossa-Paquette, Shrewsbury Public Schools (SPS) parent, who expressed concerns about the poem, about Mr. Palitsch's comments in response to his public comments at the previous meeting, and about Ms. Heffernan having referenced her candidacy for re-election at the previous meeting.

Dr. Patience Hemenway, SPS parent, who expressed concerns regarding her child's fears relative to speaking out or participating in events like Black History Month as a result of the current environment.

Dr. Adnan Rehman, SPS parent, who expressed concerns about the safety of the students from the Black History Committee as a result of public comments at the previous meeting and subsequent posting of the poem on social media, and that the school administration had not adequately supported these students.

Ms. Bridgette Hylton, former SPS student, who expressed concerns about the effect of the politicization of the poem on students, and concerns about the qualifications and training of who would facilitate after-school meetings for students at the high school that were planned in response to the controversy.

Mr. Brendan Mahan, SPS parent, who shared his perspective that the poem was about parental fears regarding interactions between young Black men and police.

At the close of remarks and in response to allegations that the Committee is silencing parents' voices, Mr. Wensky advised that School Committee meetings are open to the public, that Public Participation is an agenda item for all meetings, and that anyone who wishes to speak during Public Participation should reach out to the Committee in advance of the meeting, per the Committee's policy.

II. Chairperson's Report & Members' Reports

Per their request, Mr. Wensky read a letter from Shrewsbury High School Black History Committee members to the School Committee and school community that detailed their thoughts and concerns about inaccurate information being presented at the prior School Committee meeting (during Public Participation) and shared online about the Black History Committee assembly held in February.

After reading the letter Mr. Wensky requested a motion for a 10-minute recess. On a motion by Dr. Magee, seconded by Ms. Heffernan, the Committee voted unanimously to take a ten-minute recess at 7:24pm. Mr. Wensky called the meeting to order at 7:31pm.

III. Superintendent's Report

Dr. Sawyer thanked Calvin Coolidge School for the opportunity to read to students in Teacher Peter Fairbrother's Grade 3 classroom as part of National Read Across America Day 2022, and congratulated SHS and Oak Middle School athletics teams on completing a successful Winter season.

IV. Time Scheduled Appointments:

A. Student Spotlight: Grade 4 Student Leader Crews

Dr. Jane Lizotte, Assistant Superintendent for Community Partnerships & Well-Being, acknowledged the following Shrewsbury Public Schools staff who were in attendance at the meeting:

Stephanie Fox, Media Aide, Walter J. Paton School; Shelley Hoey, Assistant Principal at Major Howard W. Beal School; Gina Kelly, Assistant Principal at Floral Street School; and elementary School Principals: Chris Girardi, Maj. Howard W. Beal School; Bryan Mabie, Spring Street School; Lisa McCubrey, Floral Street School; and Donna Olson (Interim Principal), Calvin Coolidge School. Dr. Lizotte introduced the following students, who shared general information about serving on Grade 4 Student Leader Crews in the district and provided examples of leadership opportunities at their individual schools:

Desmond Conlin, Maj. Howard W. Beal School; Lenny Fan, Spring Street School; Brynlee Killeen, Walter J. Paton School; Pallavi Padala, Calvin Coolidge School; and Zuhaib Syed, Floral Street School. After their presentation, the students were invited up to be recognized by the Committee and Dr. Sawyer and presented with certificates.

B. District Response to the Pandemic: Report

Dr. Sawyer presented current state, local, and district-specific COVID case data, and detailed vaccination data by age for the town of Shrewsbury and across local communities. Dr. Sawyer provided an update on testing programs in the district (symptomatic, *Routine COVID Safety Testing*, at-home antigen testing) and student/staff absences. He also presented student/staff case data for periods before and after school vacations in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, noting a reduction so far (as of March 2, 2022) in case numbers recorded after the recent February vacation.

V. Curriculum

None.

VI. Policy

A. COVID-19 Mitigation & Mask Mandate: Discussion & Vote

Dr. Sawyer provided a brief history of the different mask mandates implemented in the district over time, and summarized guidance on masking from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that had been updated since the last School Committee meeting. Noting current low case rates in the district and citing a variety of improved COVID-related metrics, Dr. Sawyer recommended that the Committee vote to rescind its mask mandate while noting masks would still be required in some situations, and require that the Superintendent adhere to proposed guidelines around monitoring conditions and potentially implementing a future mask requirement. He added that individual choices to wear or not wear masks would be respected and supported in the district.

Committee members shared their perspectives in turn and expressed support for the recommendations. In response to a question from Ms. Heffernan, Dr. Sawyer advised that there would be no impact to testing programs or case reporting in the district as a result of the recommendations.

On a motion by Mr. Palitsch, seconded by Dr. Magee, the Committee voted unanimously to rescind its mask mandate so that wearing masks is optional within any Shrewsbury Public Schools facility or indoor setting, except where mandated by another authority, effective immediately.

On a motion by Mr. Palitsch, seconded by Dr. Magee, the Committee voted unanimously to require the Superintendent of Schools to adhere to the guidelines regarding the monitoring of conditions that could affect the health and safety of the school community, in order to consider any potential future implementation of a mask requirement, as detailed in the enclosed memo.

B. Policy 551 – Right to Study Controversial Issues: Discussion

Dr. Sawyer began the discussion by introducing *School Committee Policy 551- Right to Study Controversial Issues*, and by providing background information on a recent controversy surrounding the Black History Committee assembly in honor of Black History Month and a charge by a local parent and congressional candidate that students in the district are being indoctrinated at school. Dr. Sawyer presented, in order, the four rights that compose the policy. After each, Shrewsbury High School (SHS) Principal Mr. Todd Bazydlo provided detailed information on ways – historically and in the context of the current controversy – that SHS supports students and their right to study controversial issues.

Dr. Sawyer noted that while several components are fostering the current difficult environment, fallout from the recording and posting of a minor student's self-expression by an adult political candidate for campaign purposes was a significant contributing factor, was wrong, and reflected a documented national-level political strategy to create/fuel a narrative that schools are indoctrinating children on issues of race/diversity/equity. Dr. Sawyer advised that the district supports the Black History Committee students and students of color at SPS; supports the police, and especially the Shrewsbury Police Department; and supports all district students.

Committee members shared their individual perspectives on students rights relative to studying controversial issues in detail, in turn. During his comments Dr. Magee expressed interest in voting to reaffirm Policy 551. At the end of the discussion, Mr. Wensky requested a motion to reaffirm *School Committee Policy 551- Right to Study Controversial Issues*, Adopted February 20, 1980. On a motion by Dr. Magee, seconded by Mr. Palitsch, the Committee voted unanimously to reaffirm the policy.

VII. Finance & Operations

None.

VIII. Old Business

None.

IX. New Business

None.

X. Approval of Minutes

Without objections from the Committee, the minutes from the School Committee Meeting held on February 16, 2022 were accepted as distributed.

XI. Executive Session

Mr. Wensky requested a motion to adjourn to Executive Session:

A. For the purpose of addressing G.L. c. 30A, § 21(a)(7) “[t]o comply with, or act under the authority of, any general or special law or federal grant-in-aid requirements” (“Purpose 7”), Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §§ 22(f), (g) – for the purpose of reviewing, approving, and/or releasing executive session minutes;

B. For the purpose of addressing G.L. c. 30A, § 21(a)(3) “to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining or litigation if an open meeting may have a detrimental effect of the bargaining or litigating position of the public body and the chair so declares” (“Purpose 3”) - the Shrewsbury Education Association Units A and/or B, the Shrewsbury Paraprofessional Association, and/or the Cafeteria Workers Association; and

C. For the purpose of addressing G.L. c. 30A, § 21(a)(2) “to conduct strategy sessions in preparation for negotiations with nonunion personnel or to conduct collective bargaining sessions or contract negotiations with nonunion personnel” (“Purpose 2”), where deliberation in an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining position of the public body; and return to Open Session only for the purpose of adjourning for the evening. On a motion by Mr. Palitsch, seconded by Dr.

Magee, on a roll call vote: Mr. Palitsch, yes; Dr. Magee, yes; Ms. Fryc, yes; Ms. Heffernan, yes; and Mr. Wensky, yes, the School Committee voted to adjourn to executive session at 9:32 pm.

XII. Adjournment

On a motion by Mr. Palitsch, seconded by Dr. Magee, the committee unanimously agreed to adjourn the meeting at 10:03 pm. Roll call votes were as follows: Mr. Palitsch, yes; Dr. Magee, yes; Ms. Heffernan, yes; Ms. Fryc, yes; and Mr. Wensky, yes.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth McCollum, Clerk

Documents referenced:

1. Letter from SHS Black History Committee Members
2. Pandemic Response Slide Presentation
3. Memo: Superintendent's Recommendation to Rescind Mask Mandate
4. School Committee Policy #551- Right to Study Controversial Issues
5. School Committee Policy #551 Slide Presentation
6. Set(s) of minutes as referenced above