

MONTGOMERY TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION REMOTE MEETING

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES Wednesday, June 17, 2020

Call to Order – By Board President Tonkin at 7:04 p.m.

Statement of Open Meeting and Public Participation - In accordance with the State's Sunshine Law, adequate notice of this meeting was provided by mailing notice of meeting on June 10, 2020. Notice was provided to Board of Education Members, Montgomery Township Clerk, Rocky Hill Borough Clerk, Public Library, Township Posting, School Posting, PTSA Officers, Courier News, Montgomery News, Princeton Packet, Trenton Times, and The Star Ledger.

The Board reserves the right to enter into Executive Session during all meetings of the Board of Education.

This meeting is being tape-recorded for the purpose of Board review and future reference and to assist in the preparation of minutes.

It is the School Board's intention to conclude this meeting no later than 10:00 p.m.

ROLL CALL-Via Teleconference

Phyllis Bursh – Present
Christina Harris - Present
Amy Miller – Present
Michael Morack, Jr.- Present
Jinesh Patel - Present

Ranjana Rao – Present
Dr. Biren Saraiya - Present
Shreesh Tiwari - Present
Joanne Tonkin - Present

Also Present: Mary McLoughlin, Acting Superintendent of Schools
Damian Pappa, Acting Assistant Superintendent of Schools
Kelly Mattis, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources
David Palumbo, Associate School Business Administrator/Assistant Board Secretary

SALUTE THE FLAG

COMMUNITY FORUM – STANDING UP AGAINST RACISM TOGETHER

Ms. Tonkin welcomed input from community members related to school matters. There is much work to be done against injustice. We can create positive and lasting change. The roll the young people are taking. Some of us are facing extreme hurt and the opening of old wounds. We are feeling frustrated and confused and must stand together. We must have open minds and open hearts.

Listening is not enough. When we look back at 2020, it is up to all of us that it is a year we took united action against bias. There will be a commitment for the long road.

Ms. Tonkin read the four letters submitted by email through this morning from: Ms. MJ Narula, Ms. Karen Dentler, Ms. Nia Pretto and Mr. William M. Rogers, III.

Ms. Sandra Donnay thanked the board for holding this forum. She was on the school board for four years until 2016, and wanted to address the racial bullying in the school. There was a racial achievement gap. However, given this forum, how she was treated, how the district revisited her efforts for anti-bullying efforts and administrators witnessing it, she finds this forum to be hypocritical. People in charge of this district were in rooms when she tried to address these issues. The leader of the district was present and witnessed the bullying and racism. An ethics charge was issued against her. There are people on this call who witnessed this. In 2020, we are having the same issues.

Mr. Patrick Todd asked what the roadblocks are to implementing curriculum that adequately covers black history beyond Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, and what has taken so long to get to that part.

Mr. Matthew Heinle, a senior at Montgomery High School, thanked the board for finally acknowledging what has been happening. Hoping action will be taken after this with their experiences. Has taken many AP and honors classes. With all that being said, he will be graduating with an incomplete education. He moved to Montgomery right before 4th grade. Four of the seven history courses were U.S. history. The rest were World History. He described the history of the U.S. and the racism that still existed, even after the civil war ended. Over 90% of his teachers were white. Has never had elective in racial history or African American history because they weren't offered. For the benefit of future students, this needs to change.

Ms. Chilly Wallace stated that since recent events, she has been reflecting on her time in Montgomery, which has not been the best reflection. Her first experience with racism was in the third grade and not handled properly. Students speak on social media without thinking. She has not had any black teachers. Lastly, if going to change English curriculum, she was told that the Black Panther party was a terrorist organization. Montgomery needs to acknowledge black history month.

Mr. Liam Lynch, 2017 graduate, stated that he didn't know how much racism there was until he arrived at college. Non black students would criticize black students on getting into colleges because of affirmative action. A vast majority of Montgomery needs to understand racism. Montgomery need improvements to the English and history curriculum.

Ms. Marion Biondi, a senior at Montgomery High School, read a letter constructed by her and two other students. During their time, topics of systemic racism, police brutality of recent modern day racism. We need up-to-date anti-racisms curriculum. She made the following suggestions: Discuss current race events. Required teacher participation in discussions of race. Tell students how to participate in elections. Create curriculum to discuss white privilege. Diversify reading lists of English language. Revise current U.S. history courses to include black history. Place an emphasis on an anti-racist curriculum in the elementary schools.

Ms. Nia Pretto, 2018 graduate, reiterated everything she said in her letter. Acknowledged everyone who has endorsed racism. No one has acknowledged that they are trying to be anti-racist. Something needs to come of this. This is happening in Montgomery. She had a few statements. A student said that while in 8th grade someone called their name and said “shouldn’t you be in the cotton fields?” Another a black student had an extra bone in their heels, multiple students said the N word to other students. She was called a house slave multiple times. Teachers never stood up for the black students. Black students and Latino students were sitting separately during lunch. Why does it take videos of black men dying for the black voices to be heard?

Mr. Andrew Jiang, 2015 graduate, wants to focus on how Montgomery failed on addressing black history.

Mr. Alexander Liu, 2018 graduate, recognition should be given to sports less than instructional recognition. American economy and media stuffing sports down our throats. NBA gets \$3 billion, and Sloan Kettering gets less funding. Anti-racism curriculum needs to start at lower grade levels.

Mr. Riley Bursh, 2018 graduate, stated that he doesn’t understand the point of standing up. A student asked if the teacher can use the N word in the dialogue. The teacher said the word in the class what it is and how it used. He was called it within a week. He had issues with his Math class and only got in because his mom was an angry black woman. Going into high school, handed out class roster, was branded as black. At lunch in high school, he was called the N word almost every day. Nobody was defending the person who was having racist acts against them, so he didn’t want to put that hardship against him. In the last couple of years of high school, he participated in a lot of the plays. Someone said to him “Glad to know they think affirmative action is more important than talent.”

Ms. Norelis Martinez, a teacher within the district, thanked the alumni for speaking up today. She will speak up because of everyone else. She has been in Montgomery for 3 ½ years, and it’s been the most traumatizing experiences in her life and career. She did not feel supported or welcome by staff and administration. Extensive change needs to happen, especially with diversity and policy.

Ms. Zelda wrote a comment in the chat regarding the courage and authenticity of the current and former students in speaking what they believe their truth. She is an educator, an administrator in an urban district in Union County, NJ. She was processing what took place with the murder of George Floyd. She implores older individuals to think of the 1960s. She discussed the history of JFK, MLK Jr. and RFK and the riots that took place. We need each other as humanity. Three individuals that at least listened to the Wallace family and attempted to buck the system -- Mr. Corey Delgado, Upper Middle School Principal, Mr. Paul Popadiuk, Montgomery High School Principal, and Ms. Susan Lacy, Village Elementary School Principal.

Ms. Sandra Donnay told everyone that it’s not enough to present a list, we have to hold people accountable. Pick a few items from your list to see changes that you would like to be made by June 17, 2021 by administration and hold them accountable. Vote for board members who will give you changes and get rid of administration who are dragging their feet. This is an administration that covers up information.

Ms. Nandita Vasantha, 2019 graduate, stated that she is the person who she is because of the teachers, some who are here today. Students didn't deserve the hostile learning environment. Why did it take George Floyd's death to deal with these issues? Questioned the system we grew up in.

Ms. Jacqueline Wu was thankful for everyone for speaking up. They should not have to come on public record to describe their pain. Administration needs to listen and needs to change. Wants all parents to sit and listen. Why are there so little people of color within the district? She is a staff member at a charter school in Newark. We need to change and do better.

Ms. Susan Liu, 2015 graduate, echoed what Jackie just said and thanked everyone for their bravery. Recognize what everyone has gone through, although she has not gone through the acts of racism. Montgomery has a long way to go.

Mr. Charles Biondi, 2018 graduate, resonated with the comment made by Miss Wallace regarding the Civil War. He hopes the Board members understand the responsibility that comes with their positions. Five black people were lynched in this country. This is the nation we live in. Montgomery is not exempt from this hate.

Ms. Lindsay Fox, Orchard Hill Elementary teacher, stated we can't teach inaccurate history during black history month. She is willing to do the work to get the correct education out. Has three black students in her class and it is vital to teach them about what's going on, especially other colleagues.

Mr. Patrick Todd hopes the Board members listened to the students tonight. There's a racism problem in this district. Come up with concrete plans to address these issues. These issues need to be addressed at home.

Ms. Zelda Wallace followed up with Mr. Biondi's statement that a student posted on social media regarding recent murders of black men. Would like to know what is the Board's position, especially with the student? Another 9th grade student posted a similar egregious post.

Mr. Bill M. Rodgers would like to do several things. He worked for Bill Clinton. Reviewed a speech he gave. We are at another fork in the road and will face major challenges if changes aren't made. Secondly, has not taught a white majority class in over decade. Kids need to be culturally competent. Lastly, what the kids and parents shared, have to do a 360 degree fearless inventory beginning from kindergarten.

Mayor Robert Uhrik, Rocky Hill Mayor, stated that dialogue is needed. When does this all start in our children? It must start early. They are not born with these ideas. The Board needs to try to work on this before it gets to this point.

Ms. Chilly Wallace discussed the fact that current students made racist posts on Instagram. Because of the lack of the discipline, we also have past students making these comments. There is a former Montgomery student who brought a weapon to a peaceful protest. We need to deal with these students before it gets out of hand.

Ms. Mary McLoughlin stated that we can't discuss student discipline in a public board meeting. The records are confidential.

Mr. Jeff Knoll, Blawenburg Reformed Church Pastor, stated that he is new to the community. The formation of our students is just not that of the school's. Part of the work we need to do is to help families.

Ms. Sadaf Jaffer, Montgomery Township Mayor, stated that it is clear that we are a community in pain. She is absolutely committed to doing what she could do and has to do more. There are some things being done. Social Justice Group. African American history needs to be taught. This will be discussed on Friday. This has to be addressed and should have been done earlier, but it needs to be done now.

Ms. Tonkin stated that any type of racist comment is handled extremely seriously. Changes need to be made. Her heart is aching. Is a firm believer in reflection and needs to reflect on herself.

Ms. Mary McLoughlin stated that we can't share student information. Incidents are handled according to Board policy. Thanked everyone for speaking. We can only address the concerns discussed this evening. Today, we must focus on the fact that black lives matter. Black lives have been disrespected far too many times. She would like to grow toward a community that we all can call home.

Ms. Bursh thanked everyone for baring their souls. We as a district have to do better. She called on everyone to come to board meetings and write letters. This will fade in a week or two, and the board and administration will go back to do what they're doing. Demand change from the school district.

Ms. Rao stated that as a Board we should talk about what should be the outlook for our next steps. As a Board, we need some time to come up with an action plan.

Ms. Tonkin stated that we need to discuss at the next board meeting.

Mr. Tiwari thanked everyone for coming out tonight and sharing their opinions.

Ms. Shobha Iyer asked how will this be shared with the community?

Ms. Sadaf Jaffer would like to have a future meeting that can be shared with the township so it can be shared with the community.

ACTION AGENDA

1.0 ADMINISTRATIVE

The Superintendent recommends that the Board of Education approve the administrative item as follows: Ms. Miller read the resolution.

Ms. Miller motioned item 1.1 seconded by Mr. Morack, Jr. and approved by a unanimous roll call vote.

1.1 Approve the Following Resolution Regarding Standing Up to Racism Together

The Montgomery Township Board of Education is appalled by the horrific death of George Floyd and the extensive list of similar tragedies that have been the direct result of historic and systemic racist actions; and

We acknowledge that public education has a critical role and responsibility in combating racism and bias through the education of its students and the professional development of its staff; and

We are committed to working with the broader community to ensure equity and equal educational opportunities for all of our students, and equity and equal employment opportunities for all of our staff, current and prospective; and

We accept our professional, moral and ethical responsibility to assess our hiring practices, policies, curricular decisions, and resource allocations, and to take action regarding inequities identified.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Montgomery Township Board of Education:

--condemns all acts of racism and bias;

--reaffirms our commitment to equity in our hiring practices, policies, curricular decisions, and resource allocations;

--pledges to take necessary action to identify and correct inequities in policy and practice, and

--is confident that together we can, must and will determine what is necessary to create a positive and enduring change where there can truly be justice and equity for all.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Tiwari motioned to adjourn at 9:42 p.m. seconded by Mr. Morack, Jr. Upon call of the question, the motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:42 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

David Palumbo
Secretary Pro Tem