

LWV OBSERVER REPORT FORM

*Board or Commission: West Hartford Board of Education*

*Date of Meeting: October 6, 2009*

*Members present: All*

*Nature of meeting Routine   X*

*Special \_\_\_\_\_*

*Called to order (time): 7:05 pm*

*Adjourned (time): 9:15 pm*

*Action taken:*

The main items on the agenda were approval of a revised board policy on search and seizure, a motion that the board hire outside counsel for advice on the state racial balance law, and reports on high school test results and the 2009 summer school program.

The board unanimously accepted the revisions to Board Policy #5720 Search and Seizure, which deals with the conditions under which district has the right to search student desks, lockers, and personal automobiles parked on school property, as well as the right to search the students themselves. The revisions were technical in nature, designed to bring the policy in line with current law. Please see <http://www.whps.org/board/agenda-documents/20091006/second%20reading%20Search%20and%20Seizure.pdf> for the full text.

Board members Lib Spinella and Diane Mudge offered a motion that the board retain outside legal counsel with expertise in the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment in order to challenge the constitutionality of the state of Connecticut's racial imbalance statute. The statute requires all schools within a given district to have minority composition no more than 25 percentage points different from the composition of the district as a whole. Currently, Smith and Charter Oak schools are out of compliance, but are exempted because of their "unique school" status as schools of choice with programs different from other West Hartford schools. The state department of education, however, has expressed concern that the imbalance at these schools has not improved and has asked the district to provide plans for addressing the situation.

Ms. Spinella and Ms. Mudge both expressed the belief that, in light of recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the state's racial imbalance law is unconstitutional and further that it requires outrageous, discriminatory treatment of students based on their race or ethnicity without any consideration of educational quality. They also said the state's enforcement of the law would endanger West Hartford's neighborhood school system. Three members of the public also spoke in support of the motion during the public comment section of the meeting; one spoke in opposition.

Board member Harry Captain offered an amendment to the motion expressing the board's commitment to both non-discrimination and high quality neighborhood schools, and seeking advice instead from the town's corporation counsel. He asserted that the original motion was both premature and reckless, in that the state is currently forcing no action on the district, and therefore taking legal action against the state would be unnecessarily provocative. Clare Kindall agreed with Captain and asserted as a lawyer that any suit would be summarily thrown out because the town has received no mandate from the state. Jack Darcey expressed support of the

amendment for similar reasons, and Bruce Putterman asserted that the original motion was partisan in intent, designed to play upon people's fear of forced redistricting.

The amendment was adopted 5-1, with Ms. Spinella abstaining. She offered no rationale for her abstention. As of this writing, the text of the amended resolution is not available online.

Assistant Superintendent Eileen Howley and Director of Finance and Planning Chip Ward presented a report on high school test results for 2009. On the SAT, the combined math and reading mean score increased 35 points from 2008 to 1099. Math was up 15 points to 548; reading was up 20 points to 551. The mean writing score increased 18 points to 553. West Hartford's scores compare favorably to statewide averages of 513 in Math, 509 Reading, and 512 Writing. The district's combined score of 1099 is just 1 point shy of its 18-year high 1100 in 2006. Participation was down a bit from 87% to 85%, however, most likely due to the affect of the economy on students' post-high school plans and an increasing number of colleges not requiring standardized test scores. More students are taking the ACT, but most of them also took the SAT. As in years past, Hall's scores were higher than Conard's across the board.

AP participation also increased in 2009. A total of 853 students took 1638 tests, up by 77 students and 124 exams. Conard had substantially higher participation than Hall, but a lower average score. 482 Conard students took 961 exams, with an average score of 3.21 and 71% of students scoring 3 or higher. 52.7% of the Conard class of 2009 earned a 3 or higher on at least one AP exam—the highest percentage ever. 371 Hall students took 677 exams, with an average score of 3.88 and 87% of students scoring 3 or higher. 50.4% of the Hall class of 2009 earned a 3 or higher on at least one AP exam. Conard's overall participation was 70.8%; Hall's was 48.6%. Both schools exceeded the board goal that 60% of graduates who enter as 9<sup>th</sup> graders will successfully complete (grade C or better) at least one AP course during high school, with 71% at each school. In response to a question from Jack Darcey about Hall's lower overall participation rate, Dr. Howley said she is working with staff at Hall to diagnose and address the situation. The complete report on high school test scores can be found at <http://www.whps.org/board/agenda-documents/20091006/high%20school%20test%20score%20results%20SAT%20and%20AP.pdf>.

Director of Continuing Education David Downes reported on the 2009 summer school program. At the high school level, students from 31 towns took 896 courses during the first session and 720 during the second, down 2% from 2008. Students took courses both for remediation and to get ahead in their studies. The program received a state grant of \$108,000 that helped 140 students attend. The PreK-8 program provided both remedial and enrichment courses to 337 students from 12 towns, with enrollment down 19% from 2008. Please see <http://www.whps.org/board/agenda-documents/20091006/2009%20summer%20school%20report.pdf> for the full report.

The next board meeting will take place October 20 at 7:00 pm in room 314 at Town Hall.

*Observer name: Kathy Wilson*