

LWV OBSERVER REPORT FORM

*Board or Commission: West Hartford Board of Education*

*Date of Meeting: November 17, 2009*

*Members present: All*

*Nature of meeting Routine   X*

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

*Called to order (time): 6:31 pm*

*Adjourned (time): 9:09 pm*

*Action taken:*

The main items on the agenda were recognition of outgoing board members, induction of new members, election of board officers, a motion regarding the racial imbalance statute, a report on the student activity fee, multi-year enrollment projections, a budget adjustment, and the financial report for October.

Outgoing board members Harry Captain and Jack Darcey were recognized by board colleagues and members of the public for their 8 years of service on the board. Mr. Darcey served as chairman for part of that time, and Mr. Captain spent several years as a financial examiner. Re-elected incumbents Clare Kindall and Lib Spinella were sworn in by Town Clerk Essie Labrot, as were newly elected members Ellen Katz and Naogan Ma.

Clare Kindall was chosen as board chair by a 5-2 vote. Lib Spinella and Diane Mudge opposed Ms. Kindall on the grounds that her son now attends private school and that her position as an Assistant Attorney General might necessitate her recusing herself on matters concerning the state. Ms. Spinella cited an instance years ago when Democrats criticized a Republican candidate for the board on the grounds that his children attended parochial school. Ms. Kindall stated that the decision to move her son to a private school was based on his particular situation and in no way reflected on the overall quality of the West Hartford public schools. She also asserted that she would not need to recuse herself because the Department of Education is not one of her clients. The ensuing discussion became quite partisan, resurrecting conflicts from the election campaign, and the final vote reflected party lines.

Other officers were elected unanimously. They were: Terry Schmitt – Vice Chair; Bruce Putterman – Secretary; Ellen Katz and Diane Mudge – Financial Examiners.

Partisan divisions continued in the debate of a motion made by Ms. Mudge and Ms. Spinella to set a timetable to discuss the board's response to the racial imbalance statute and schedule a report and presentation by Corporation Counsel Joseph O'Brien. The Democrats opposed the motion on the grounds that it was premature, unnecessary, and perhaps improper. Terry Schmitt, in his former role as chairman, had already sent a letter to Mr. O'Brien requesting his advice. He asserted that scheduling a report and/or presentation would follow naturally depending on the nature of Mr. O'Brien's response. Ellen Katz stated her belief that advice from Corporation Counsel should properly be handled in executive session, rather than in a public report or presentation. Bruce Putterman observed that the board has two years to formulate a plan to improve racial balance in the schools and that it faces many more urgent matters now. Naogan Ma expressed uncertainty about what concrete good the makers of the motion expected it to

achieve. Ms. Spinella and Ms. Mudge said they were primarily seeking transparency for the board's actions by means of a date certain for public discussion of this important matter. The motion was defeated 5-2 along party lines.

Assistant Superintendent Tim Dunn and Director of Finance and Planning Chip Ward presented a report on the newly enacted student activity fee at the middle and high schools. The \$25 fee is paid once a year by students and allows for participation in extracurricular and intramural activities. Its purpose is to reduce general fund expenditures for stipends paid to teachers to advise those activities, and a total of \$50,000 was removed from the 2009-10 general fund in anticipation of revenue from the fee. Not all clubs and activities require payment of the fee, such as co-curricular ones where taking a course requires participation in the activity, or those for which students are selected/elected. Also, at the high school level there are many extracurricular clubs and activities where no stipend is involved, and no fee is charged for these. Scholarships are provided to students eligible for free/reduced lunch. To date \$35,000 has been collected, \$33,000 from the middle schools and \$2,000 from the high schools. Based on enrollments in stipended clubs at the high school level, a total of approximately \$39,000 is expected for the year. Board members who were involved in the formulation of the budget expressed surprise that the activity fee was being applied so unevenly as a result of the above criteria – to only 13 of the 76 total high school clubs – and hope that it could be eliminated next year. Diane Mudge suggested that Hall students, whose complaints about the fee triggered this report, meet with their principal to see if budget trade-offs at the school might enable its immediate elimination there this year. The full report is available at <http://www.whps.org/board/agenda-documents/20091117/Extracurricular%20Report%20-%20Nov%2017,%202009.pdf>.

Mr. Ward also presented the multi-year enrollment projections for the district, which predict a long-term, gradual decline from this year's 9,996 K-12 student population to about 9,400 in ten years time, still some 400 more than were enrolled in 2000. Next year, elementary school enrollment is expected to be flat, followed by a steady decline over the ensuing nine years. The middle schools should see a modest increase during the next three years, flat enrollment for the middle four years, and then a decline in the final three. The high school population is projected to bounce around a bit, ending in ten years just below where it is now. Classroom space should be adequate, except at Bugbee and Duffy. While Duffy's problem is short-term, it looks as if Bugbee will need additional permanent space. It is two classrooms short this year – a small garden room and the vocal music classroom have been pressed into use as regular classrooms – and it is expected to be four short by 2013-14. An addition was in the planning stages last year, but was scrapped due to budget constraints. To see the complete report, go to <http://www.whps.org/board/agenda-documents/20091117/Enrollment%20Projections%20-%20Nov%2017,%202009.pdf>.

The board voted unanimously to reduce this year's general fund budget by \$2,293,500 to reflect federal stimulus monies received via state fiscal stabilization funds. The state was able to level-fund the ECS grant this year and next, thanks to these fiscal stabilization funds, but the federal stimulus bill requires that they be disbursed directly to school districts, rather than to towns like ECS. Therefore, the state portion of the ECS grant goes to the town as usual and is reflected in the general fund budget, but the federal portion goes to the district and is handled as a specially funded account outside of the general fund. In two years' time when these and the federal IDEA

stimulus monies go away, along with one-time savings generated last year in the utilities account, we will have a \$4 million budget gap. Even if the state is able to resume flat-funding of the ECS grant from its own revenues, this will still leave a shortfall of \$1.7 million that will have to be made up somehow.

The financial statement for the period ending October 31 projects a year-end balance of about \$4,000 – \$2,000 less than the balance projected a month earlier – as the result of increases in unemployment compensation and pupil transportation expenses. The statement reflects the tight budget under which the district is operating. The full report may be viewed at <http://www.whps.org/board/agenda-documents/20091117/Financial%20Report%20as%20of%20Oct%2031,%202009.pdf>.

The next board meeting will take place December 1 at 7:00 pm in room 314 at Town Hall.

*Observer name: Kathy Wilson*