

LWV OBSERVER REPORT FORM

Board or Commission: West Hartford Board of Education

Date of Meeting: December 7, 2010

Members present: All except Diane Mudge

Nature of meeting Routine X

Special _____

Called to order (time): 7:04 p.m.

Adjourned (time): 9:44 p.m.

Action taken:

The main items on the agenda were 3 Board Policies, a preliminary budget preview, and an update on the District Development and Performance Plan for Continuous Improvement. Documents from this meeting may be viewed in full at <http://www.whps.org/whps/primary-offices/boe-page/documents>.

The board approved unanimously as a first reading revised Board Policy 6210 – Non-Discrimination: Instructional Program. This policy, adopted in 1988, was revised to reflect current statutory non-discrimination requirements as they affect programs for both students and staff. Elin Katz suggested one minor change in wording. New Board Policy 6211 – Cultural Diversity, which is a more philosophical statement of the district’s commitment to respect for individual and cultural differences, received somewhat lengthier discussion before it was also adopted unanimously as a first reading. Naogan Ma suggested that the policy should include the idea of celebrating diversity, and Elin Katz supplied wording that met with everyone’s approval. Both policies will receive a second and final reading at a future meeting.

The board adopted unanimously revised Board Policy 6220 – School Organization, which outlines the structure of the school system by level, i.e. elementary, middle, and high schools. This was the first and final vote on this policy.

Director of Finance and Planning Chip Ward presented a preliminary preview of the school budget for 2011-12, which will be formally proposed to the board by the superintendent in early March. Discussion of the budget is beginning early because 2011-12 promises to be a particularly difficult fiscal year, and the purpose of the presentation was to provide the board with an understanding of the factors driving district costs.

By way of background, Mr. Ward noted that West Hartford’s per pupil spending has dropped relative to other towns over the past 30 years, that we now rank 113th out of 169 towns, and that we spend well below the average for both DRG B and the 10 largest CT districts. Since 2007-08 we have eliminated 44.7 full-time and 31 part-time positions, despite rising enrollment, for a savings of about \$4 million. Over that same period, our average CMT score rose steadily to a historical high this year, demonstrating that we have so far been able to increase efficiency without sacrificing student achievement.

A “normal” budget for 2011-12, one where we maintain current programs and practices, would require an increase of 7.6%, from \$126.7 million to \$136.2 million, due primarily to the loss of federal stimulus funds (ARRA). The actual increase in expenditures is about 4.8%, but filling

the “hole” left by ARRA will require the additional 2.8%. Salary expense accounts for \$5.2 million (55%) of the \$9.5 million total increase, a much larger increase than normal because the bulk of ARRA funds were used in that category. Medical expenses, by far the fastest rising category of expenditure, are projected to rise by \$2.7 million, or 15.2%. Pension, utilities, transportation, and tuition expenses taken together go up \$1.4 million, or 8.6%. All other expenses increase \$300,000, or 4%. It should be noted that this last category, which includes such things as supplies, equipment, and contracted services, has actually declined as a dollar amount over the past several years.

As for areas of possible savings, Mr. Ward stated that the district has limited control over the rises in many areas, but that salaries will be a focal point because we are currently in negotiations with all major unions. The goal is for all bargaining units to take a “hard freeze” for at least one year, meaning no cost of living or step increases. Administrators, maintenance, security, and non-organized workers have already taken such a freeze this year, and if all units accept one for 2011-12, savings from \$1.1 to \$1.5 million could be generated. The district also received a \$930,000 grant from the federal Education Jobs bill passed this summer, of which \$600,000 is slated for 2011-12 spending. Taken together, these savings would reduce the budget increase from 7.6% to about 6%.

Assistant Superintendent Eileen Howley and Administrator for District Improvement Donna Nestler-Rusack presented the District Development and Performance Plan for Continuous Improvement. The plan is based on both the new District Mission and the board’s goals for 2007-2011 and comprises three broad goals: to strengthen standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment; to utilize data as a means to inform decision-making; and to create an environment and community that fosters intellectually, physically, and emotionally healthy learning. Each goal is supported by specific action plans and indicators of progress, as well as professional development priorities, all of which are founded upon a model of continuous improvement that uses student performance data to design instruction and upon the Scientific Research Based Intervention (SRBI) model to aid students who are struggling.

In her Superintendent’s Report, Karen List announced that the district has been awarded an \$11,500 grant for its Chinese Language program by the Han Van Society, which will be used for professional development for program faculty. She also announced that Conard has received approval for its green technology construction project from the town Planning and Zoning Board. The project includes a geo-thermal installation and a wind spire. November’s Conservation Challenge, won by Morley School, saved the district a total of \$6,188 in energy costs.

The Financial Statement for the period ending October 31 projects an end-of-year surplus of \$224,000, or .2% of our \$126.7 million budget. The savings are spread fairly evenly across the major categories of salaries, purchased services, materials, and capital expenditures.

The next board meeting will take place December 21 at 7:00 p.m. in room 314 at Town Hall.

Observer name: Kathy Wilson