

LWV OBSERVER REPORT FORM

Board or Commission: West Hartford Board of Education

Date of Meeting: December 21, 2010

Members Present: All

Nature of meeting Routine X

Special

Called to order (time): 7:01 p.m.

Adjourned (time): 10:13.p.m.

Action taken:

The main items on the agenda were approval of three Board Policies, ratification of three collective bargaining agreements, and updates on the World Language and Quest programs. Documents from this meeting may be found at <http://www.whps.org/whps/primary-offices/boe-page/documents>.

The board approved unanimously as a second and final reading revised Board Policy 6210 – Non-Discrimination: Instructional Program and new Board Policy 6211 – Cultural Diversity. Policy 6210 focuses on compliance with state and federal non-discrimination statutes, while Policy 6211 summarizes the district’s philosophy of respect for and celebration of cultural diversity.

The board unanimously approved as a first reading revised Board Policy 6230 – Curriculum Design and Development. The proposed revisions seek to lay out broad goals for district curriculum and limit the role of the Board with respect to its development and implementation. The old policy required that the board approve any “major change” in subjects or courses, but the proposed one requires only that the superintendent or his/her designee keep the board informed on curricular matters. Bruce Putterman explained that the policy sub-committee sought to reflect the board’s actual current role of providing the guiding philosophy, policy, and broad programmatic goals for the schools, as opposed to making specific curricular decisions, which the old policy seemed to require. Such operational decisions, the sub-committee felt, have been and should be the purview of the administration. Members of the board generally agreed, but did not seem comfortable that the revised policy as worded sufficiently embodied that notion. Further revision will be undertaken before the policy comes up for a second reading.

The board ratified unanimously collective bargaining agreements with unions representing teachers, administrators, and head custodians.

- The teachers’ contract runs from 2011 through 2013 and provides neither general wage nor step increases in its first year. In 2012-13 it provides step increases only, with 2% for teachers at the top step. (“Step” is a percentage increase based on years of service and is distinct from a general wage increase, which applies to an entire salary scale.) A new, high deductible medical plan with a health savings account will be offered as an additional health care option and is expected to help the district control costs.
- The administrators’ contract runs through 2014 and provides 1% plus step in its first year, 1.6% plus step in the second, and 1.75% plus step in the third. Administrators voluntarily took a “hard freeze,” i.e. no wage or step increase, last year. The new agreement would add an estimated \$130,000 in total administrators’ salaries to the 2011-

12 budget. The administrators' health insurance plan will be reopened in January, presumably to negotiate the addition of a high deductible option similar to the teachers'.

- The head custodians' contract applies to the current year and runs through 2014. It entails a 1.5% wage increase this year, no increase next year, a 1.7% increase in 2012-13, a 1.75% increase in 2013-14, and no step increases for the length of the contract. Health plan changes increasing employee contributions and co-pays are expected to save 8% to 10%. Pension benefits are subject to re-opener negotiations upon completion of negotiations with rank and file custodians. New hires will no longer be able to redeem unused sick leave upon retirement, producing significant savings in the future.

Assistant Superintendent Eileen Howley and Department Supervisors Lucy Cartland and Bert Neumaier presented an update on the World Language program that summarized program history at the elementary, middle and high school levels, the sequence of languages presently offered, current enrollment figures, and possibilities for changes/enhancements to the program. World Language offerings have fluctuated over the years more than any other subject area due to changing student interest, geo-political realities, and local funding considerations. Five languages are currently taught: Spanish in grades 3-12, plus PK-2 at Charter Oak; French in grades 6-12, plus 3-5 at Norfeldt; Latin, Chinese, and Ancient Greek in grades 9-12. 73% of high school students currently study World Language, 82% of middle school students, and 54% of elementary school students. Funding considerations will constrain program enhancements for the foreseeable future, but the board urged staff to pursue creative ways to expand offerings without added cost, perhaps through grants or partnerships with institutions of higher learning.

Dr. Howley, along with Program Coordinator Nancy Eastlake and Administrator for District Improvement Planning Donna Nestler-Rusack, presented an update on the Quest program for gifted and talented students. They provided a program summary, current enrollment figures, an update on efforts to improve the program based on an external evaluation done two years ago, and a list of potential program enhancements. Quest is currently offered in grades 4 through 8 and enrolls a total of 479 students. It provides enrichment, as opposed to acceleration, designed to give participants greater depth, complexity, and independence in learning. Math Quest is an accelerated program offered in grades 4 and 5 with the goal of placing students in 7th grade honors math when they enter 6th grade. It currently serves 83 students. Art Quest is offered after school for 20 weeks to a group of 5th graders who are selected based on a submitted portfolio of their work. 36 students are currently enrolled. An external evaluation done by Teachers College, Columbia University, in 2008 has served as the basis for ongoing internal review and evaluation of all facets of the Quest program. Actions taken include alignment of Quest goals with the District Plan for Continuous Improvement, changes in the supervision of Quest teachers, better space for the program, improved consistency of content across elementary buildings, and revising Math Quest content to better align with Grade 7 Honors Math. Funding constraints will limit Quest expansion in the near term, but there are possibilities, such as annual in-house vertical program evaluation, that could be implemented without cost.

The next board meeting will take place January 4, 2011, at 7:00 p.m. in room 314 at Town Hall.

Observer name: Kathy Wilson