

RSU 56 Board of Directors Minutes

Special Board Meeting Agenda- August 9, 2022- 6:30pm

(The special board meeting will also be available via zoom and livestream on the RSU 56 Facebook page.)

School Board Members Present: Barbara Chow, Donald Whittemore, Marianne Young, Deanna Dolloff, Bruce Ross, Larry Whittington, Elizabeth Kelly, Carl Leuders, Angela Cushman

School Board Members Absent: Natalie Sneller, Konstantin Aslanidi, Tim Kelly

Staff Attending: Pam Doyen, Mary Dailey, Brian Keene, Jason Long, Judy Horne, Alan Tacheny, Jay Nicholson, Charity Webster, Nick Karavas, Jared Hodgkins

Also Attending: Carrie Tacheny, Mark Remeika, Dick Pickett, Miranda Shurtleff, Calvin Burgess, Tammy Burgess-Schmersal, Brad Dyer, William Clunie, Nancy Carpenter, Andy Bean, Janice Merrill, David Smith, Lynda Hebert, Tammy Lyons, Scott Belskis, Theresa Bishop, Leslie Jamison, Charlotte Collins, Vicki Swan, Royal Swan, Peter Holman, Sharon Moore, Jason Dolloff, Rachel Hendersen, John Pulk, Michelle Pulk, Tina Courtway, Sarah Cole, Erin Beedy, Mark Belanger, Lucille Belanger, Evan Belanger, Sheila Weld, Bruce Weld, Heather MacDonald, Matthew Martin, Bonnie McKenna, Joe Brissette, Marianne Hutchinson, Shelley Bronish, Lisa Kiem, Sylvia Lutick, Sheriff Chris Wainwright, Jason Gurney, Don Carrier, Vicki Carrier, Paul Remeika, Sarah Remeika, Kathleen Sastick, Justin Ashby, as well as a few others that names were not captured.

CALL TO ORDER AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Barbara Chow, Board Chair, opened the meeting at 6:30pm with the Pledge of Allegiance. Audience introductions were made. Everyone on zoom and Facebook live were welcomed.

ADJUSTMENTS TO THE AGENDA

Motion to adjust the agenda to include:

- 1. III Hiring of New Staff: #2 Kate O'Connor, DHS Science; #3 Theresa Bishop TWKDMS Alt Ed**

Motion: A. Cushman

Seconded: M. Young

Motion Carried

HIRING OF NEW STAFF

1. Motion to hire Erin Beedy, Math Teacher, DHS

Nick Karavas introduced Erin to the board

Motion: A. Cushman

Seconded: B. Ross

Opposed: E. Kelly

Motion Carried

2. Motion to hire Kate O'Connor, Science Teacher, DHS

Nick Karavas introduced Kate to the board

Motion: A. Cushman

Seconded: M. Young

C. Lueders asked if she has conditional certification. Pam replied that she does. Pam also mentioned that Kate is deployed at this time and Melanie Johnson will long term sub until she returns.

Motion Carried

3. Motion to hire Theresa Bishop for the 2-year ESSER Middle School Alternative Education position

Motion: A. Cushman

Seconded: B. Ross

Jason Long introduced Theresa Bishop for the Alt Ed position. L. Whittington asked about certification for spec ed. Jason explained it is not special ed, it is Alt ed and she is fully certified to teach K-8

Motion Carried

EXECUTIVE SESSION

1. Enter into executive session pursuant to 1 M.R.S.A. subsection 405(E) for consultation with legal counsel concerning policies and duties of the board.

Motion: M. Young

Seconded: A. Cushman

Motion Carried

Entered into executive session at 6:46pm

Exited executive session at 7:30pm

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Tina Courtway- 4 students in RSU 56 district. She and husband work with a lot of youth programs. Does not feel the book should be in the library. This book has nothing to do with LBGT, it is pornographic. It's perversely vulgar, it communicates false facts. It depicts things that are harmful to a child's body. We support gay rights, we do not support this book and the graphic images it portraits for anyone under the age of 18.

Mark Remeika- There are movies out there that children cannot watch. Children are influenced by what they see and hear. Schools have the responsibility to teach academics and mold children into productive adults. He went on to explain the ratings on movies,,what children could and could not watch. He spoke on the possibility of the book being behind the librarian counter should not be allowed either even with parental permission. The graphics in this book are obscene and prohibited by federal law. If the author were to pass this book out in public it would be illegal, but it's ok to put in the school? I ask you for our children's sake, keep them innocent.

Lisa Kiem- The first she heard of the book "Gender Queer" was from parents in the district. She went on to say that she has since learned that it is the center of a national controversy. She spoke on parent's rights and what their child's education should look like. Education of our children is and should remain an issue of local control. No one is more expert on a child than a child's parent. No one has greater right or responsibility of a child than their parent. What is happening across America does not have to be Dirigo. As a community member and one whose children have been part of the Dirigo system I want to see our school have a wholesome and welcoming environment that makes everyone feel accepted. Peer groups

have a strong influence on sexual behaviors particularly among young adults. Our children are a gift from God. We have a moral obligation to protect them, to help and not harm them. The book "Gender Queer" inflicts harm. It is vile and pornographic in its content. It encourages confusion and normalizes a dangerous lifestyle with no mention of the real health risks associated with these behaviors. She went on to talk about a study regarding gender dysphoria. She went on to explain some of gender dysphoria. She feels it has to do with some mental health issues. When she read portions of the book she felt the young woman needed serious help. She feels the message of the book and other material like this is dangerous to the long term well being of an adolescent. In the school that my tax money supports I want to see wholesome material that supports a parent's unalienable right to the rearing of their children as their conscience dictates. The school has no rightful authority to use public funds to purchase or make available offensive materials that corrupts our children's moral foundation and the truthful view on human sexuality. I know very well the position you are in as a school board, faced with two sides as there are on any issue. Dirigo HS should be a reflection of our community and offer material that our community supports. I have no hate for anyone in opposition of this book, I only have a deep concern for the well being of our children and an obligation to stand for truth. They are worth the fight. She passed out the citations of the studies that she spoke about to be passed out to the board.

Kathleen Zostek- She is appalled that this book wasn't pulled immediately. She fails to see any redeeming quality that would cancel out the pornography. I know there are some people who would say that this woman's transition would be helpful to other people going through that, but I don't think that weighs against the obscene pornography. I have intense compassion for everybody who is not at home in their body, but I expect schools to be halls of truth. In an age where we're saying follow the science, it is not accurate to say that you can change your steps. She stands for parents rights.

Kelly Skillins- She has a son in the district, has family that work in the district and also has been in the district. She said it is incredibly disheartening to hear members of the community disparage a group in regards to this book, as if this book produces such people. If a book had such power there wouldn't be horror stories. There wouldn't be fiction, there wouldn't be science fiction. Since when can a book not be for pleasure or enjoyment? The school library has more than educational novels in it. A school library is a world of cultures that a student not at home may not have access to, diverse cultures. Our society, our community is very small. It's a very limited community. There's nothing wrong with that. It's a beautiful, wonderful community but it's limited. That's where the library comes in. Everyone should have the opportunity and the pleasure of reading books that push the line. It's a disservice to our students to say that a book is going to make such a profound change on their lives if one student reads it and passes it along to another. It's not a plague. If we're going to start pulling a book because it's not educational we're going to have a long list of them.

Joe Brissette- It's not a fun day to be a school board member. I'm not going to talk about the inappropriateness of the book, it's been stated over & over. That's pretty obvious. What he wanted to point out is a couple of different things. He has the idea the book is supposed to help somebody with gender dysphoria, a term he hadn't heard of until Lisa spoke. He spoke that, if he was someone that had that issue and I was of that age in school, where kids can be pretty mean. That book looks like a weapon to them, because they're going to get tied to the content that's in that book. The kids know that books out there now and they're going to look for it. Guarantee it's going to be used as a weapon against that same child that probably doesn't need to be picked on. The other point he wanted to make: these people that are here, this is their school, this is our town, those are our kids. This is our place for them. I've heard that there's a loss of faith in the schools. He's very disappointed that we allowed this book to stay in the

library the second we knew it was there, or that anyone could make an argument that it should stay. It's even worse when these people are here begging to get it out of here and we don't get rid of it. This is our school, it doesn't belong to the DOE or any federal government. I hope you hear their voices and I hope you hear mine and I hope you get rid of this book.

Scott Belskis- He asked if this was the only book in the library that deals with this subject? Barbara replied that she had no idea but they were discussing this issue. He has researched and there are dozens of books that deal with this issue and that are nowhere near over the top like this is. He has read it twice and asked the board if they saw anything that bothered them? He doesn't understand what the thinking is. All board members are elected officials. Allowing the book to stay has brought people out, more than likely it'll bring out more the next time if it's not gone.

Paula Kaseranian- Rumford resident so could not speak

Jason Dolloff- I'm a taxpayer, I want to know where my tax money is going. Who allowed this book to come in? I want people to be answering questions why our children are possibly being demoralized, whether they want this book to help them out or if they want to use it against the public. There shouldn't be a book in the library that can be used against anybody to make them feel less worth. I'm a poster boy for individuality. I'm the youngest of 11, I wanted to stick out. I'm not trying to take away from a person's individuality. I'm trying to make the point of our children's safety and the safety of others. Moving forward this opens up a flood gate of other books that come in here.

Bonnie McKenna- She said she ended the last time she spoke that she reminded everyone that is in charge of schools, that has a place in schools, that at the end of the day, at the end of the year, that the impact of whatever was spoken, whatever was presented, materials that were taught, does not stop when the bell rings. Any person that approves, talks, teaches, that chooses to bring it into a facility, a school, should be held responsible. You should have to answer to us, and you will continue to answer to us as long as these materials are in here that we don't agree with. Our community has been hit with so much stuff lately and we are here every month in front of you saying please get rid of this. Leave this stuff out of the schools, it doesn't belong there.

Spencer Jacques- Originally he wasn't going to talk about the book. He graduated 2 years ago, and is in college now. Seeing some of the words that are being brought up about this book, it's really damaging. As a queer student who went through Dirigo, it's hard to see the communities rally so hard against this book. I'm seeing words like obscene, being promiscuous, child pornography and discussing appalling, all synonymous with the word queer and what it means to be queer. The point being is you're bringing more attention to this book. It's good for these children to be reading this book, because when they leave for college, when they leave this town, they're going to encounter more people that are gender, queer or gay or lesbian and so on. He feels that it's important to teach them that now. He wished he had read books in high school that would talk to him more about his sexuality but he didn't have the exposure to those books and that can be damaging. Think about the students that are currently in the school who are listening to this group of people who are saying that this book is damaging, when in reality this is the book some of these children who are questioning their sexuality or gender need to see and hear. He spoke about age rating and the book. Banning this book is less about the images and it's more about the lack of acceptance for students. You have to take it all in context. All the pictures in the book are to teach, not to try to arouse children. All of the pictures in the book, especially those more explicit scenes, and yes they are explicit, they are between consenting people of adult age. They are not depicting minors doing these things. We have books like Romeo and Juliet in the school, which are between two minors, but that book

has never been questioned. It's hard for him to sit there and hear that it's about the images when it feels more about the type of people depicted in the book.

DISCUSSION CONCERNING BOOK, GENDER QUEER

Barbara explained they have gone through the process. There were two complaints. Pam specifically said who was on the committee. The committee gave a report to the two complainants. It then went to the board for appeal. They heard testimony from the two complainants. Right now we've heard public comments. The next step is the board has discussion. The board makes a decision and then by the next board meeting which is August 23rd the written decision, by policy, goes to the appeals people. She then opened it up to discussion of the board.

Larry Whittington- He started off with a quote he found online. This is addressed to all the parents here. Hearing a lot of quote, parents should control what is taught in school because they are our kids. Unquote. Watching this line of reasoning be applied to limiting discussion of anything to do with equity and inclusion. Not sure where this is originating but parents do have the option to choose to send their kids to a hand picked private school at their own expense if that's what they desire. The purpose of a public education in a public school is not to teach them only what parents want them to be taught, it is to teach them what society needs them to know. The public school is the best defense of the democratic nation. Now that that defense is being worn down, our children will be a collateral damage. He thanked everyone for their comments and all their concerns. It is his opinion that this movement is a politicized agenda, not the focus group to protect our children. Larry started by speaking about a certain court of the city of Virginia Beach. There is a brief and a motion to dismiss on the book Gender Queer. The goal of this lawsuit is to censor literature. The petition dislikes what he sees on seven pages of the many other pages of the book. If the court rules that the book taken as a whole is not obscene, that it does not have it's dominant theme as an appeal to prudent interests or that literary, artistic or political, or scientific values in the statute does not apply in this case. There is no comic arts exception to the first amendment. The graphic novel is not obscene simply because it uses pictures to portray what courts otherwise protect in books with the same words used alone. He spoke about another complaint against the court of appeals regarding some other books. In light of the special characteristic of the school of environment, the special characteristic of the school library makes that environment especially appropriate for the recognition of such rights. While petitioners might rightfully claim absolute discretion in matters in curriculum by reliance upon their duty to inoculate community values of school, petitioners, relations on that duty is misplaced, where they attempt to extend their claim of absolute discretion beyond the compulsory environment of a classroom. In the school library, in the regime about voluntary inquire that this holds is sway. The petitioners possess significant discretion to determine the content of the school libraries, but that discretion may not be exercised in a narrowly partisan or political manner. Whether petitioners remove rebuilding the books and libraries denied responders their First Amendment rights depend on the motivation behind the petitions or actions. Local school boards may not remove books from libraries simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek to remove what should be orthodox, politics, national, religion, and other matters of opinion. He suggests this has nothing to do with the book. This has everything to do with political, the politicalization of the book itself. I heard this book is used as a weapon. At least 8 states have banned this book as a weapon. Children's safety, he would like to see more people involved in the curriculum than about the banning of a book. He has heard it as being pornographic, nothing has been proven as such. He's a student of history. He spoke about World War II, his uncle died in a prisoner of war camp in World War II. What he is reading here is exactly what he was

writing about in his thesis and all his papers of World War II. Such challenges have been a staple in the school board meetings but it isn't just their frequency that has changed according to educators, librarians, and free speech advocates. It's also the tactics behind them and the venues they play out. He had two more points: He read that educators and parents battle book bans. First one, one of the roles about school libraries is as a refuge. It's a safe place in the building for kids who don't feel seen or comfortable, who are marginalized or are unrepresented groups and that books that have been targeted here in our community and all across the country by book banners everywhere are books about these kids or by adults who were these kids. Lastly, parents already have the right to adopt their children without reading any book, even if it is assigned. Which of these are not. Schools are not trying to "indoctrinate students". No one is making kids read those books and indoctrination does not happen by osmosis. In fact, the first step to indoctrination isn't by providing access to ideas, it's eliminating access.

Angela Cushman- Explained that when she first saw the images on FB she was shocked just like most others were when they saw it. She honestly wished we had this many people concerned about our schools all of the time, not just when there's a controversy occurring. Both ladies who made their presentations during the last meeting did wonderful heartfelt explanations are the reasoning behind the request for the book "Gender Queer" to be banned. Instead of jumping to conclusions, she needed to come into this with an open mind. Thinking of my role as a board member, a parent, a grandparent and a community member. I read parents' comments and also ordered the book so she could read it. She wanted all details of the book and the context and the few images that were posted on FB and what was told they depicted versus what they actually depicted. I also started asking people for their opinion. In the beginning, it was our students, the ones that this will affect. She spoke on some of those, no one she talked to even knew that it was there: This book has been in the library for over a year now; Another: didn't even know it was in the library until it was posted on FB by the parent of students that had already graduated; One said they didn't consider it pornography, at least not to me or any of my friends; Think it's pretty harmless but very informative; One feels a lot of people have not even read the book or know what the content is about; Another feels it's important to have access to books like this, this person can talk to their parents about just about anything but there are some that can't tell their parents they go by a different name in school; There are a lot of people who say they don't care how others live their lives, but in all reality they do or why would they be complaining about this book. This book is in the high school, not the middle school or elementary school. You see more things in real life. This is a cartoon in a book and not something that your child is being forced to look at. We as a school board have received emails, verbal and official complaints concerning this book. You may or may not be surprised but our community is divided on this as they are in most things. She checked all correspondence that had been received about the book, both for and against, and it was in a dead tie... completely even. There are just as many community members that want this book in our library and are just as passionately as there are of those that want it to be banned. Many think we have come in with our minds made up but we have not. We are going to have half of our community upset with us no matter which way we decide to vote. Either way, there are community members on both sides of this that I respect and consider friends. She hopes they will continue to think that way of her no matter how her vote goes this evening. There is a lot of process and procedure that goes into banning a book. One thing she wants the audience to think about is banning a book from school outright denies children the opportunity to see themselves reflected on paper. Think about that. Some facts she looked up: Every 45 seconds a young person between the ages of 10 - 24 attempt suicide. LGBTQ youth are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than others. 75% of LGBTQ youth report that they have experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation. Having at least one accepting adult can

reduce that risk of suicide attempts among LGBTQ by 40%. The majority of the students that are utilizing this book are not looking for pornography, they are looking for a way to understand themselves or someone they care for. Could your child come to you after hearing you say some comments that she has heard some community members say? She mentioned other books that were great stories but have all been banned in our nation's history but are all considered classics. Something the board needs to consider: Has the material been reviewed objectively and in its full content? She feels that for some students in the high school this book helps them to navigate being a teen in today's world. She also feels this book might also be a good book to read that has a friend/family member or might be dealing with these matters. They might be more understanding, empathetic after reading it. She stated she was initially shocked but she looked at the big picture and how this would affect the entire student body and the benefit to have it available in our library even if it is beneficial for only one student. She does not feel that having access to this book in our library in any way would be harmful to a student.

Don Whittemore- He read the book entirely, he was appalled. He didn't want to read it, but he had to in order to make a decision. As far as he's concerned, all the people sitting in the audience are all taxpayers and as school board members we should listen to what they're telling us. He has had people call him, stop him when he's out in town and about 75% of the people want it banned. He just got reelected to the board and if people don't like it they can find other people for the board.

Carl Lueders- It's a great night to be a school board member. He's researched the book, he read the book. He believes the book is readily available and other resources in the school library. As a board member to make a proper decision for RSU 56, he believes they should remove the book from the school library.

Elizabeth Kelly- She's new... She's been looking at this stuff for the last 4-5 months before this even came about. She went to Pam a couple of times about her concerns about things that were in school. She has been very helpful and also the board. The board has been great through this whole process. She doesn't believe it should be in the school either. She was/is a parent who graduated from Dirigo. She graduated from Dirigo, it means a lot to her. She wants it to have a good reputation, which it always has had and wants it to continue. She wants us to be leaders, wants us to dare to make tough decisions, do the right thing. She has done a lot of research. She can find arguments for both sides. She has hundreds of hand written notes, she didn't bring them, it didn't change my mind. If she had a child in this school and if they were coming to school and changing their name, in the 6th grade, 7th grade and she wasn't told she would be furious. Her child is under her guidance and it's up to her to deal with things of sexual nature, religious nature, political nature. She has been an educator of some sort for 24 years... love the kids, see them as kids, not as labels... Once you put labels on kids you're segregating them, you're putting a target on their back and that concerns her. She's more interested where we're going from here. Are there students that have attempted suicide, what are we doing for them. That should be a concern. She's for classical education, a well rounded student, parental rights.

Marianne Young- She has a lot of papers... things she wrote. She can't say anything that hasn't already been said. Distinctly her objection is to the breast binding, the used menstrual pads. Everything to do with health, safety, the wellness of this child with no direction as to where these children or people who feel this way can go to get help. Where were the people, family/friends to help her. She didn't want to read it but she did read it cover to cover. There's so much bad advice and things that are not said that is concerning. It's the harmful behavior that is exhibited with no repercussions, with no idea how to deal with that. It has nothing to do with gender dysphoria. It wasn't the book she expected it to be. She doesn't object to most things that most people object to. Speaking broadly, her concern is the health and safety and what is not said.

Deanna Dolloff- Doesn't have anything that hasn't been talked about. When she first heard about it and seeing the pictures online she thought what is this? She read the whole thing with an open mind. She could definitely see where some people could find value in the written words and the story of it. Feels the images really ruin that. Some say that students are going to see those things in other places and at that point it's up to the parents to redirect that and it's not a place for it in school. She feels there are better resources and books that we could be giving to youth around the LBGTQ community. She doesn't feel this is the book for that.

Barbara Chow- A lot of things have been said. When it all started she looked at the policy/ procedure. She knew it wasn't curriculum so that was a different aspect, it was the school library. School libraries are very different from public libraries. School libraries, under the policy, we delegate the professionals to do what they do but ultimately it comes back to the board. It's the board's decision on things. She, like Marianne, thought at first was about the pictures but then as she read it, it was about health issues. When she makes her decision, it has nothing to do with gender issues. She does know there is much concern around suicide, and when you hear from a student that they were confused and didn't know who to turn to. We do really stress community...we try to get the parents involved with things going on. It's a tough balance when a student confides. We do have professionals. We try to do what we can whether it's a gender issue or a drug issue, the student is very important to us. She has been in this community for 30 years and does things for students. She just felt that it was not appropriate for a high school library, especially freshmen. Feels they can go to a public library.

Bruce Ross- When this first started he stated he stayed completely open minded and had not read the book. He wanted to hear what everyone had to say. After the last meeting he decided he would do his due diligence and read the book. He is in the health profession and when he looked at and read this book, it scared him. He's not talking the pictures. That wasn't what was concerning. It was the messages that were coming out of it. You can find this materials and other materials if you want to dig for it but that's not what we're talking about right now. We're talking about this one book. It may be other books that may eventually come to light but right now this is the issue. Some of the suggestions and some of the things that went on with this book made things as unhealthy as they could possibly be. It scared him to look at this stuff and read it and think Wow. After reading the book and being as open minded as he could be, he thought if they want to have it in a public library that's great but in a public school at this stage it should not be here. He also believes that this school system is for our public. He turned to the audience and said, you guys are all here, and part of our belief and part of my belief in being a board member is looking at representing my constituents and the people that asked me to represent them. Yes, we've had people send in comments that supported the book, but when you get through and delve into it, seeing the suggestions as Marianne suggested as how things were left so unhealthy there is no way that he could support keeping this book in the library.

Motion: M. Young made a motion to move to remove the book Gender Queer from the Dirigo High School library.

Seconded: E. Kelly

Opposed: L. Whittington, A. Cushman

Motion Carried

ADJOURNMENT

1. Motion to adjourn

Motion: B. Ross

Seconded: A. Cushman

Motion Carried

Meeting adjourned at 8:50pm