



CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT OF NEW BRITAIN

New Britain Board of Education Special School Board Meeting

February 24, 2022 – 6:00 PM | New Britain Educational Administration Center

Call to Order

Call to Order

Ms. Gayle Sanders-Connolly, President of the New Britain Board of Education, called the meeting to order at 6:03 PM.

Board Members Present

Mr. Anthony Cane, Ms. Monica Dawkins*, Mr. Merrill Gay, Mr. Anthony Kane, Mr. Joseph Listro, Mr. Matthew Marino, Ms. Annie Parker, Ms. Diana Reyes, Ms. Gayle Sanders-Connolly, Ms. Tina Santana

**Attended remotely*

Public Participation

Cameron Naples

Mr. Naples spoke in support of discontinuing the mask mandate in schools. He commented that many students and staff do not wear their masks properly to begin with and that children are the least vulnerable population when it comes to COVID infection. Mr. Naples concluded his statement by asking Board members to make their decision based on what the teachers and parents in New Britain want and not on their personal agendas.

Andy Zink

Mr. Zink spoke in support of continuing the mask mandate in schools. He stated that as a math teacher at the high school he will not feel as comfortable helping a classroom of students not wearing masks. Mr. Zink also stressed that we are still in the midst of a worldwide pandemic and teachers or students becoming ill or having to be out for 5 days is not going to help them learn.

Margaret Shea

Ms. Shea spoke on behalf of Local 51 – New Britain Federation of School Administrators membership and executive board. She stated that it was the union's position that they stand in solidarity in support of Superintendent Sarra. Ms. Shea commented that their partnership with Superintendent Sarra has been grounded in consistent process, professional integrity, and strong collaboration. She added that the superintendent has taught them that education goes beyond content and that it is the relationships we build with our students, families, and staff that allow us to lead effectively. In conclusion, Ms. Shea stated that Superintendent Sarra is a champion for ingenuity, a role model for dedication, and a leader with courage.

Christine Morell

Ms. Morell spoke in support of Superintendent Sarra both as a teacher in the district and parent of three graduates of the New Britain school system. She stated that Ms. Sarra has been a more effective change agent than her 5 predecessors and has always been supportive of teachers' professional growth. Ms. Morell commented that the superintendent is approachable, empathetic, and courageous enough to stay the course for what is best for our students. Ms. Morell concluded that ending Superintendent Sarra's contract early would not enhance the education of our students at all and would in fact rob them further of what are already limited financial resources.

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Jacqueline Escales

Ms. Escales spoke in support of Superintendent Sarra both as a city resident and Board of Education employee. She stated that she has worked under many different superintendents during her career and none of them could match Ms. Sarra's dedication to the students, families, teachers and staff in the district. Ms. Escales supports Superintendent Sarra remaining in her position until her retirement. She stated that a buyout of the superintendent's contract would not be a solution to what are actually community issues not just school issues. Ms. Escales added that many citizens have lost faith in politics and see this maneuver as a way to slip an already chosen candidate into the position. In conclusion, Ms. Escales asserted that allowing the superintendent to work until her retirement date will provide time for the search process to continue in a transparent way.

Tammy Bacho

Ms. Bacho stated that she has worked with Superintendent Sarra for many years and is embarrassed that the Board is talking about buying out the superintendent's contract in a city where she sometimes buys her own school supplies. She emphasized that, more importantly, the issue of buying out someone's contract comes down to a matter of respect and shows a lack of confidence that the superintendent doesn't deserve. Ms. Bacho further asserted that for her many years of service in the district the superintendent deserves to retire with pride and dignity not shame and disgrace.

Carmelo Rodriguez

Mr. Rodriguez stated that although he was originally opposed to Superintendent Sarra's hire 6 years ago, he concedes that the community, City Hall, leaders in the community, the Board, and Mr. Rodriguez himself have failed her. He asked Nancy not to take the buyout because she deserves to retire with dignity after 25 years of service. Mr. Rodriguez stated that he can testify that Ms. Sarra loves the kids, the community, and the city. He asked Superintendent Sarra to come to the schools with a "mop and broom" and take out the dead weight administrators and teachers. In conclusion, Mr. Rodriguez asserted that certain board members that have been there too long and new members that can't communicate with each other need to resign.

Sal Escobales

Mr. Escobales addressed the Board as a "23 year veteran at NBHS", serving 5 years at various district levels, and former Local 871 President. He stated that although he has clashed over certain labor matters with Nancy he has never disagreed with her ultimate destination. Mr. Escobales believes in Ms. Sarra's comprehensive "whole child" instruction philosophy and dedication and said it would be detrimental for her not to finish her "tour." In conclusion, Mr. Escobales asserted that you do not do something as undignified as asking someone to leave and these matters should be worked out.

Jonathan Johnson

Mr. Johnson read aloud the following statement:

"I'm a New Britain resident and father of two children. We live at 133 Highview Ave. I'm writing to demand an end to school mask mandates.

The increased violence in our schools is a result and indicator of the extreme psychological and behavioral issues the stress and continued insanity is causing in our children.

My children have had the Omicron variant and recovered, and so have my wife and I. This virus has a 99.99+% recovery rate for children under 10, based on CT DPH numbers, which doesn't include asymptomatic and mild cases going unreported, and is estimated to highlight even more recovery.

However, suicide death rates are 5x higher than COVID-associated deaths for children during the pandemic in Connecticut. The rates of self-harm, drug use, drug overdose, seeking of psychological treatments, etc. are all exploding. And the children's educational and developmental setbacks will be felt for years to come.

Enough is enough. That's enough trauma of our children. That's enough ruining of their childhoods.

Teachers can wear N95 masks and boost as much as desired, and so can administrators, and the children can mask or not based on their individual family factors. This is a sensible, prudent course correction, and in-line with dozens of towns - and even the CIAC following suit.

Do the right thing. Allow our children to catch their breath. Allow our children to breathe! They have suffered enough."

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Jose Torres

Mr. Torres expressed his concern and frustration regarding the mask mandate. He stated that he believes that people have the right to wear masks if they choose but that parents should have the right to decide if their children wear masks to school or not.

Ann Speyer

Ms. Speyer addressed the Board as a retired teacher from the district. She stated that she is appalled at the idea of buying out Ms. Sarra's contract at the end of such a successful tenure. Ms. Speyer shared that Nancy came into her role as superintendent with energy, love for kids, knowledge of education, knowledge of process with respect for everyone and has continued to show it. Ms. Speyer concluded by stating that we need a fair, non-partisan, non-game-playing, transparent search for the next Superintendent and that by treating Nancy this way we are alienating some of the best potential candidates out there.

Bill Clark

Mr. Clark spoke in support of Superintendent Sarra finishing her term. He stated that we will not get the best candidates for the superintendency if the rhetoric between City Hall and the Board of Education continues. Mr. Clark concluded that Nancy has done a great job and is sorry to see her go.

Diane Leja

Ms. Leja addressed the Board as a New Britain resident, current employee, and former Board of Education member. She spoke in support of Superintendent Sarra sharing experiences of working with her as a mentor and colleague. Ms. Leja stated that while working with Nancy as a teacher she was witness to her energy and the dedication she showed every day for her kids, the school, her colleagues, and the city. She stated that she left the school district in 2013 when the Board of Education selected Ms. Sarra's predecessor as superintendent. Ms. Leja asserted that she returned to the district when Ms. Sarra was selected as Superintendent with the hopes that she would energize and reverse the damage done by the previous administration. In conclusion, Ms. Leja shared her experiences working with Superintendent Sarra as a member of the Board of Education and spoke to her working non-stop to improve the educational environment for students, welcome and connect with families and partnerships, and support initiatives in the city.

Irene Faraone

Ms. Faraone read aloud the following statement:

"My name is Irene Faraone and I am here not only as a tax paying resident of New Britain, but more importantly as a concerned parent with 3 children enrolled in the CSDNB. I stand before you as an angered, and frustrated parent, and especially as a disappointed parent.

Your policies that are forced on our children every day are just outrageous. As parents, we should be the ones making choices on what is best for OUR children. My husband and I conceived them, I carried and birthed them, and my husband and I are raising and supporting them together. We do not co-parent with the government, and we surely do not co-parent with the B.O.E.!

We have freedoms in this beautiful country, and we have rights. You keep our children muzzled with masks during school, while there is not a mask in sight during large public gatherings. Our children can enter shops, restaurants, and other public facilities freely, yet the school district feels they can keep these beautiful smiles covered during what should be the best times in a young child's development. They cannot see each other's expressions, they cannot see each other's emotions, and for many children in our district who already struggle to learn- whether bc of language barriers, or other challenges- this just makes it even more difficult. They cannot connect with their teachers, and other educators when they cannot see them. What about the severely anxious children? What about the ADHD children, who can barely keep it together all day on a normal basis? THIS is not normal. The fact that masks are still being forced on our children, when we are already aware that masks do not stop, or prevent the spread of this virus. A virus which has a 99% survival rate, and which does not pose a major threat to our children. A virus where the people and governments seem to pick and choose when or where it will strike??! The hypocrisy is just amazing.

My children are MY children. I choose to send them to public school because I feel it's a great experience for them. However, this is NOT the experience I signed my children up for. Parental choice is nonexistent in our district beginning with what crazy programs and learning videos are used to educate our children- which we were never even asked about to begin with- all the

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way to the masking of our children which we are also against. Yet, the district fights back as if the district overrides the parents. You do NOT override us!!! We the parents are fed up. We the parents will always fight for our children because when they all grow up and leave your schools, they will still be OUR CHILDREN.

Those who choose to mask their children have the right to do so, but those who choose to unmask them, equally have the right to do so. WHERE THERE IS RISK, THERE SHOULD BE CHOICE!!

I encourage you to lift this mask policy and start letting these children be free, and their parents be free to choose what they feel is best for THEIR children.

THANK YOU.”

Francisco Santiago

Mr. Santiago spoke in support of Superintendent Sarra continuing her tenure until her retirement. He stated that during the four years he served on the Common Council, Ms. Sarra advocated every year for more money and support for New Britain kids and families. In conclusion, Mr. Santiago asked the Board to let Superintendent Sarra finish the last 4 months of her tenure to honor the work she has done.

Dr. Violet Jiménez Sims

Dr. Sims addressed the Board as a taxpayer, educator, parent, and former Board of Education member. She spoke in support of Superintendent Sarra staying until her retirement date and expressed her disappointment in some Board members asking to buy out her contract citing community concerns over safety. Dr. Sims asserted that there are several reasons that the buyout is a bad idea including that it is a waste of money and a short sighted decision that will thwart the systemic change that has been going on.

Nick Mercier

Mr. Mercier addressed Board members stating that the decision regarding masks is complicated but that whatever policy is decided upon it is important to leave to the ability for the district to adapt to changes that may occur. He further asserted that the potential buyout of Superintendent Sarra’s contract is a waste of time and not truly about school safety but rather about just getting rid of Ms. Sarra. In conclusion, Mr. Mercier asked specific Board members to do their jobs and focus on education.

Kristen Beckford

Ms. Beckford addressed the Board as the mother of a New Britain first grader and educator of sixteen years. She asked the Board to reconsider the current mask policy and allow parents to decide what is right for their children based on what they are comfortable with. In conclusion, Ms. Beckford asserted that masks reinforce developmental delays and negatively impact education.

Geoff Ponticelli

Mr. Ponticelli addressed Board members as a Special Education Teacher at Gaffney Elementary School. He stated that he is concerned that the buyout of the Superintendent’s contract is not what the city or taxpayers deserve especially to the tune of \$100,000.00. Mr. Ponticelli further added that rushing the process of Ms. Sarra’s departure and looking for a new superintendent solves nothing and will do more to actually divide the city. In conclusion, Mr. Ponticelli shared 3 of the sixteen messages he received from teachers in support of Superintendent Sarra.

Desiree Costa

Alderwoman Costa stated that she believes that decisions regarding the mask mandate should have been made at higher levels instead of being left to the Board of Education. She added that she is in support of parental choice and for their right to make the best decisions for their children and families regarding masks. Ms. Costa commented that she has heard no good reasons to buy out the superintendent’s contract prior to her retirement date. In conclusion, Ms. Costa asserted that the community has had enough disruptions and challenges to handle in the last 2 years and that Superintendent Sarra should be allowed to complete her tenure.

Jennese Birritteri (Phone Call)

Ms. Birritteri expressed her disappointment and disbelief in the effort to consider buying out Superintendent Sarra’s contract. She stated that she has always received great support from Ms. Sarra and that this focus on the buyout is simply a distraction from the more important issues of finding replacements for the superintendent and assistant superintendent positions. In

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conclusion, Ms. Birritteri asserted that she is in favor of parental choice when it comes to masking because masks are not being worn correctly to begin with and are negatively impacting education.

Steve Gray (Phone Call)

President Local 871 Mr. Gray read aloud the following statement from the Executive Board of 871. Executive Members: Basia Maselek, Susan Humanick, William Sanford, Laura Skinner, Daniel Blanchard, Dave DeVost & Cliff Parker

“Local 871 organized a walk-in on February 17th. Our goal was to voice our concerns and request a seat at the table to discuss solutions about safety. These concerns have been long-standing issues; many pre-date Superintendent Sarra’s administration. While Ms. Sarra has acknowledged and addressed some areas of concern, there remain conditions in need of urgent attention.

Local 871’s primary concern is to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff. As a labor organization, we are willing to work with any parties who have the same goal of ensuring positive change. We call for a full and transparent superintendent search involving all stakeholders so that we can together move forward to provide the students of New Britain safe and successful schools.”

Connie Zamgochian (Phone Call)

Ms. Zamgochian addressed Board members as the parent of a New Britain student and a middle school educator. She stated that she is disappointed that some Board members want to buy out Superintendent Sarra’s contract. Ms. Zamgochian shared that she believes Ms. Sarra has been outstanding in her communication with parents and dedication to the community. In conclusion, Ms. Zamgochian asserted that we are experiencing a nationwide youth mental health crisis made worse by the pandemic and the answer is to get more community involvement and hire more mental healthcare professionals in the schools and not use Superintendent Sarra as a scapegoat.

Rita Zapor

Ms. Zapor addressed Board members as the parent of a sophomore at NBHS, alumnus of NBHS, the former school governance council at NBHS, and NBHS PTA member. She stated that school safety is a multi-dimensional issue and asked Board members to think about what they have put forth in terms of actionable policies and recommendations before voting on a buyout of Superintendent Sarra’s contract. In conclusion, Ms. Zapor recommended that the Board let Superintendent Sarra finish out the rest of the school year and retire under her own terms.

Nicola Faraone

Mr. Faraone spoke in support of parental choice with regard to the mask mandate in schools. He asserted that the issue of masks and vaccinations comes down to a matter of “my body, my choice” and urged other parents to show up and speak every day not just when there is a hot topic on the agenda.

Nicola Faraone

Nicola shared with Board members that wearing masks in school for six and a half hours makes him very hot and that he does not wear a mask while playing baseball or football because it makes him uncomfortable.

New Business

Review Board Policies:

- 5141.8 – Face Masks/Coverings (Students)
- 4118.237/4218.237 – Face Masks/Coverings (Personnel)

Mr. Cane motioned to review Policy 5141.8 – Face Masks/Coverings (Students) and Policy 4118.237/4218.237 – Face Masks/Coverings (Personnel), seconded by Mr. Listro. Motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Cane motioned to strike and replace current Policy 5141.8 – Face Masks/Coverings (Students) and Policy 4118.237/4218.237 – Face Masks/Coverings (Personnel) with the following language:

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“Effective March 1, 2022, face masks shall be optional for all staff, students, and visitors to New Britain school buildings, unless otherwise ordered by the state of Connecticut Department of Education, under emergency order by the governor, or by an act of the Connecticut General Assembly.

The New Britain Board of Education will continue to work in partnership with the City of New Britain Health Department when determining necessary actions during a public health emergency.”

The motion was seconded by Ms. Reyes. Motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Gay motioned to strike and replace the second paragraph of the revised policy with the following language:

“The Superintendent, in consultation with the New Britain Health Department, may reimpose a mask requirement for up to 2 weeks in response to an outbreak in a school or a rapid rise in community infection rates. These requirements may be renewed if conditions warrant.”

The motion was seconded by Ms. Parker. Motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Kane motioned to strike and replace the last sentence of the second paragraph with the following language:

“This may be extended with Board approval.”

The motion was seconded by Mr. Cane. Motion carried unanimously.

Original motion to approve revised Policy 5141.8 – Face Masks/Coverings (Students) and Policy 4118.237/4218.237 – Face Masks/Coverings (Personnel) as amended carried unanimously.

Executive Session

Ms. Kane motioned to go into executive session at 7:45 PM to discuss item #2B (Enter into Contract Negotiations with Superintendent to Consider Possible Buyout of Contract), seconded by Mr. Gay. Attorney Kevin Roy was invited into executive session to discuss item #2B with the Board. Motion carried unanimously.

Continuation of Meeting

The meeting resumed in open session at 8:25 PM.

Closing and Adjournment

Mr. Cane motioned to adjourn at 8:25 PM, seconded by Mr. Gay. Motion carried unanimously.