

Salem School Committee
Meeting Minutes
Monday, July 31, 2017

A Committee of the Whole meeting of the Salem School Committee was held on Monday, July 31, 2017 at 5:10 p.m. in the School Committee Chambers at Collins Middle School, 29 Highland Avenue, Salem, MA.

Members Present: Mayor Kimberley Driscoll, Mr. James Fleming, Mr. Patrick Schultz, Dr. Brendan R. Walsh, Ms. Mary Manning, Ms. Kristine Wilson, and Ms. Deborah Amaral

Others Present: Margarita Ruiz, Superintendent, Kate Carbone, Assistant Superintendent, Margaret Marotta, Assistant Superintendent, Kristin Shaver, Business Manager, and Jill Conrad, Chief of Systems Strategy.

Call to Order

Mayor Driscoll called the Committee of the Whole (COW) Meeting of the Salem School Committee to order at 5:10 p.m.

Discussion on Review of School Committee Policy #5103 Student Assignment Policy

Superintendent Ruiz began sharing that the purpose of the meeting this evening is to continue the discussion of the Student Assignment policy (SC Policy #5103) that was started at the July 13, 2017 Committee of the Whole Meeting. The end of this year is its 5th year; it is due to sunset at that time. With Kindergarten registration for 2017-18 approaching, a decision regarding the process to follow is needed by November 2017 (this year). Superintendent Ruiz said there were three things they hoped to do this evening in order to seek direction:

1. To continue looking at data regarding the current policy
2. To identify the goals for the future of the student assignment policy
3. To determine a sense of direction for next steps and consider further ideas moving forward

The Superintendent provided a brief recap of the 7/13/17 COW discussion, including the history and intent. Ms. Conrad provided a clarification regarding implementation. The process of prioritizing applications occurs within each batch and they are, in fact, sorted by proximity, within each of the two criteria categories: Low and Non-Low income and processed accordingly.

Ms. Conrad continued reviewing data analyses that had been compiled to review the effectiveness of the current policy. The first slide looked at the percentage of Kindergarten students, by school, for each year that were low income. Dr. Walsh asked about the impact of sibling preference. Mr. Shultz felt that this chart showed that the policy was not working

with respect to two schools, Saltonstall and Witchcraft, in terms of achieving a balance of socioeconomic status. He stated that while the policy appears to be serving the goals of choice, it is not yet serving the goals of equity. Mayor Driscoll stated that choice was an important feature of the policy that keeps people in the district. From what she has heard, many people love having the opportunity to choose a school for their child. Dr. Walsh wondered if one factor driving choice among Spanish speaking families in the same neighborhood was wanting to send their children to school with their neighbors.

Ms. Conrad stated that when a district has a choice-based assignment policy, proactive outreach and communication to all families regarding what the choices are is critical to success. In fact, it's the only way to mitigate the impact of choice benefiting more affluent families over others. Even with the best practices in outreach and communication, however, some families make choices based on a variety of factors such as location and convenience, for example, and not necessarily the demographic makeup of the school.

The second slide pertained to the history of English Language Learners among the Kindergarten classes over time. Members wondered about the dramatic drop in Kindergarten students who were ELLs at Bowditch between 2016 and 2017. Superintendent Ruiz explained that this was the result in a change in how ELL Kindergarten students were assigned in the district – they may be assigned to any school, not just Nathaniel Bowditch as had been the case starting in 2013. Mr. Fleming asked if ELL has ever been analyzed on their tracks with economically disadvantaged. Ms. Conrad said that specific analysis has not been done but that there is a high correlation in general.

The following slide looked at the ethnicity and race of the Kindergarten cohorts over time. Dr. Walsh asked if Race tracked with the economically disadvantaged has been analyzed.

Members looked at the issue of proximity or how distance to a school affects school choice decisions. Members raised the following questions after the discussion:

- What is the difference between the choices of those who are economically disadvantaged versus those who are not?
- What is the impact of transportation policy on choices and the impact of choice on transportation?
- How much are we spending on transportation to support school choice?

The next slide focused on enrolling those new to Salem. After reviewing the data, members raised questions on the following concerns:

- Impact of particular programs (i.e. TSP program at Bates)
- Impact of Carlton spring enrollment
- More clarity on how the policy works when families enroll late in the year – are the criteria of the policy followed or is it more oriented toward the family's choice?

Once all of the data were reviewed, the members engaged in a brainstorming activity to identify their key goals for the future student assignment policy. The members agreed that the primary

focus was clearer policy goals that frame upcoming decisions. The members identified the following policy goals for the future student assignment policy:

- Socio-economic balance
- Keep siblings together
- Allow deviation to be more than 5%; maybe 5% is unrealistic
- System is mainly moving in the right direction; maybe keep a few spots open until October
- Increase diversity; proximity
- Maximize choice for families
- Equitable, diverse student populations in schools
- Transparent/easy to understand process
- Try to reign in transportation (reduce/control/effective)
- Maximize choice
- Overarching - all schools are excellent so this policy becomes irrelevant

Discussion continued on the subject. Mayor Driscoll reiterated her view that parents, in general, like having choice. Mr. Shultz shared his concern that while this may be true, we can't allow choice to have a negative impact. Dr. Walsh said that there is a clash between choice and socio-economic balance. Families would want to choose schools that are closer if the schools have something to offer. Additional comments were made regarding ways to manage the choice process when families register during the school year.

Members were asked to review three potential options as potential directions for the future. Option 1 was to keep the same policy, vote to extend it, but work to improve implementation. Option 2 was to keep some form of controlled choice policy, but revise and improve the policy itself.

Option 3 was to explore other approaches to student assignment such as, potentially, a neighborhood school model.

The members all expressed a desire to eliminate Option 3, as they did not feel that this was the time to conduct a complete overhaul to change the district's approach to student assignment. Members said that they would like for the Superintendent, together with members of the Policy Subcommittee to explore something in between Option 1 and Option 2 whereby the Committee looks at potential improvements and clarifications in the policy language and the district works to continue improving implementation. Members especially hoped to see the district develop a plan to more clearly communicate how the policy works and conduct outreach to families who may not know how to navigate the system or what their choices are.

Adjournment

There being no further business to come before the Committee of the Whole (COW) School Committee this evening. Dr. Walsh entertained the motion to adjourn. Ms. Manning seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by:

Angelica Alayon, Secretary
Salem School Committee

Meeting Materials

COW Notice 7/31/17

Meeting Goals Agenda

Student Assignment Policy #5103

Student Assignment Policy Brief Outline

Student Assignment Policy Presentation