

Salem School Committee
Meeting Minutes
Monday, July 13, 2017

A regular meeting of the Salem School Committee was held on Monday, July 13, 2017 at 5:10 p.m. in the School Committee Chambers at Collins Middle School, 29 Highland Avenue, Salem, MA.

Members Present: Dr. Brendan R. Walsh, Ms. Mary Manning, Ms. Kristine Wilson, and Ms. Deborah Amaral

Members Absent: Mayor Kimberley Driscoll, Mr. James Fleming, and Mr. Patrick Schultz

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

Call to Order

Dr. Brendan Walsh 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 the discussion sharing that the purpose of the meeting this evening is to discuss the Student Assignment policy. The end of this year is its 5th year and 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 look at some data in order to gauge the effectiveness of 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

Ms. Ruiz stated there are options to consider from extending the policy (as is) for another year or making slight changes, as needed, to doing a complete overhaul of the policy. Ms. Conrad walked the members through the evening's agenda and a proposed timeline for review.

Members spent time talking about the current policy, reviewing data presented to them, and sharing feedback on the comments shared regarding this issue during the various engagement opportunities through the recent strategic planning process. Ms. Conrad shared that a factor in the current policy is proximity; distance is applied when students are administratively reassigned. If they do not get any of their three choices, they try to assign them to the closest availability possible in their area of residence. A given example: Applications, such as Batch 1 and Batch 2 Kindergarten enrollments, are

processed in the order received and date-stamped within its prospective Batch. Processing does not begin until deadline is met. March 1st is the deadline for Batch 1 for example. They would process all of the applications that come in by March 1st. Applications are sorted by respective school preference choices. Once sorted, the respective piles are sorted by date received, separated by low-income and non-low income piles, and then sorted by date they received. Ms. Manning asked for clarification on the point of Batch rather than following applications by dates alone. Members engaged in the topic of Batch criteria and concerns of fairness. Ms. Manning asked what the date of the end of Batch 1 was. Ms. Conrad said that it was March 1st, and that it is also important to consider whether they have done an adequate job on informing families of the process. Ms. Conrad commented that there are lots of opportunities for improving the implementation of whatever policy they decide upon, especially with respect to better outreach and communication to families.

Ms. Conrad asked members to share what they like about the current policy as well as what they have concerns about. Ms. Wilson said she would like to know what the data is beforehand. She likes choice and thinks that it keeps many people in Salem. Dr. Walsh also likes choice and the goal of achieving socioeconomic equity. He too would have to see data to find if it, or what, works. Dr. Walsh suggested that one option would be to compare the policy to data of other schools. Some schools have huge socioeconomic status over others. If they are going to compare schools, they ought to make them as much alike or as similar as possible. Dr. Walsh likes that the current policy is an attempt to do that – balance school enrollment in terms of socioeconomic status, for purpose of comparison. Ms. Amaral also likes having school choice. She believes that the quality of the school, not the assignment policy itself, is what works and what changed the school balance. The policy may make a small difference but change may not be as noticeable as would high performance/quality of schools. Members engaged in the topic of the contribution to enrollment balance, decrease, and increase.

Superintendent Ruiz asked members what they heard about the current policy within the community or have been aware of that may need work. Dr. Walsh commented that he heard that the policy is going in the right direction but needs improvement. Ms. Wilson asked Superintendent Ruiz if they leave space in each school for low-income students and if they have any choice or are simply administratively assigned. Ms. Conrad responded that they have not held seats for any particular purpose other than Special Education programs. Ms. Amaral shared that some time ago students were assigned to the two closest schools of their residence. Members agreed that choice for late registrants may need work or improvement. Ms. Amaral shared that she had a gut feeling that low-income families applied later and if they are not holding seats (seats are getting filled) then the same schools end up remaining empty and those registrants are left there. Superintendent Ruiz asked if that would be considered as a need for modification, something they can think about. Ms. Manning shared concern of program cuts. She used an example of the Bowditch School's two-way program that was working very well only to have untimely cuts and decline as a result. Members shared their thoughts and understanding of the cut of the Bowditch School two-way bilingual

program. A quality two-way program such as the one that was at one time at Bowditch School was effective, and families chose that school as a result. Ms. Amaral emphasized that quality drives. Ms. Manning asked Ms. Conrad if they have data comparison on the current policy to previous data 5 years ago. Ms. Conrad said there may be analysis that can be done but that information is not presented this evening. She does not believe there is data available that is reliable prior to the implementation of the current policy.

Ms. Conrad summarized comments from the community heard during on the strategic planning process in relation to Student Assignment policy. This was not a scientific data collection method but all point to the same concerns. This is an issue that seems to lack clear consensus. There were an equal number of comments suggesting that parents liked having a choice as well as comments indicating an interest in neighborhood schools. Ms. Conrad stated that what they do have clear consensus on is in family interest on better parent outreach communication, an issue related to strategic planning. Another clear consensus is the need to improve communication on how the choice policy works as others have commented that it is confusing and not easily understood. Families are not fully aware of their choice options. It may help to improve marketing or publications related to availabilities. These have been discussed at various times throughout the strategic planning process.

Ms. Amaral asked if anyone also received an email regarding lack of consistency in terms of unfair implementation of the policy. Ms. Amaral read a copy of that email out loud for the members that gave examples of what was considered as unfairness. Dr. Walsh commented that they may not be fully aware of the process of the policy. Ms. Amaral said that she thought the process was confusing and stated she wanted to share the information received.

Ms. Conrad then reviewed the data slides that had been prepared for this meeting (see packet). She went over the Socio-Economic Status (SES) by school. There is a complication because the state changed the measure for low income. It used to be determined through collection of free and reduced lunch forms, now the state determines “low income status” through a measure called “Economically Disadvantaged,” which identifies those families who are matched on state database for low-income programs. The goal of the assignment policy was for all schools to be within five percent points of the district average for low income students. Ms. Conrad walked members through the data analysis of the schools that met or fell below this in 2012, at the beginning of the current policy, and now in 2017, at the end of the policy. The data also revealed schools with higher than the district average for low-income students as well as those with lower than the district average. The question was whether it is due to the policy or other alternative issues. Dr. Walsh asked how large were the gaps between each. Ms. Conrad said she would check and add those in for him.

Ms. Manning asked if they have data showing that those that fall below were due to the program or lack thereof. Members continued discussion on the drop amount shown on the data analysis presented. Ms. Conrad clarified that there are two different measures

of analysis (as described above). Ms. Manning asked how different from each other are the measures. Dr. Walsh responded that it would have to compare them to the system as a whole. Ms. Conrad said that based on the state's implementation of the new measure for "Economically Disadvantaged," most districts have seen a drop of about 30% in terms of the percentage of low-income students. Since this is the case, statewide, it is a reliable measure.

Members continued the discussion of the policy and raised the point of application timelines and how parents facilitated their application process by tuning in to the information available to them and actively pursuing seat availabilities within shortest amount of time possible. Discussion also included the age expectation of Kindergarten students and policy term related to it, especially for the Carlton trimester enrollment.

Members compared and discussed results of the first, second, and third choices of families preferences and how well the policy has accommodated choice. Further discussion involved ways to evaluate the equity goal of the policy.

After reviewing and discussing the remaining data presented, Dr. Walsh commented that he feels greater positive reaction after this meeting. Ms. Amaral said she also felt the same way. Dr. Walsh stated that it does seem to be moving in the right direction. Ms. Amaral said it does take time, Dr. Walsh agreed with Ms. Amaral. Superintendent Ruiz invited members to think of the process in terms of changing or making major recommendations for change, goals, or general process and that can be data driven and transparent. The timeline is important. The November 17 deadline would be realistic if the policy looks fine and only need minor changes. If the committee plans on making major changes, additional or extended time for the process would be considerable in that they are not bound to November 17. The level of change determines the timeline. Ms. Manning commented that she thinks they may be able to meet the November 17 deadline if they concentrate on the implementation aspects of the policy unless they have a community engagement process in the planning that may otherwise require extended time. Superintendent Ruiz and Ms. Conrad explained that the community may need to be informed and fully understand the policy information and process, which also helps prevent thoughts or belief of withheld information that can occur from not being fully informed.

This evening's discussion consisted of the Student Assignment policy and its background, student registration in the Salem Public Schools, steps to the registration process and its requirements, student assignment considerations, and application deadlines. Members further discussed Student Assignment issues, concerns, and questions this evening. Members plan to continue discussion at the next Committee of the Whole (COW) meeting on Monday, July 31st, at 5pm.

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 7/17/17

Meeting Goals Agenda

Student Assignment Policy #5103

Student Assignment Policy Brief Outline

Student Assignment Policy Presentation