

Virtual Meeting via Microsoft Teams

Dial in Number: 802-552-8456

Conference ID: 387 431 745#

January 25, 2021

Present: Tim Vincent, Vermont School Boards Insurance Trust (VSBIT); Mara Iverson, Outright Vermont; Jeff Francis, Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA); Melissa Horwitz, Human Rights Commission (HRC); Jay Nichols, Vermont Principals' Association (VPA); Jeff Fannon, Vermont NEA (VT-NEA); Henri Sparks, Burlington School District; Dan French, Agency of Education (AOE)

Others: Rob Evans, Margolis Healy; Sunni Eriksen, Vermont Emergency Management; Bella Firman, Outright Vermont

AOE: Suzanne Sprague

Agenda:

1. Schools and law enforcement: School Resource Officers (SRO), restorative practices, racial justice – Rob Evans, Margolis Healy, Guest Speaker
2. Mascots and Symbols – position statement
3. COVID-19 related work
4. Other?

The meeting convened at 2:32 p.m.

Chair Vincent reviewed the agenda. He said there would be two additions to the agenda: 1) a discussion on the situation in Mill River; and, 2) document from Secretary French for proposed work during the legislative session.

Chair Vincent invited Rob Evans, State School Safety Liaison Officer to the AOE and the Department of Public Safety, to address the council on SROs. Evans introduced himself and provided background on his prior and current work. He introduced Sunni Eriksen, Vermont School Crisis Planning Team and Vermont Emergency Management, who works with him.

Evans said that the School Crisis Planning Team have been in discussions regarding SROs. There was certification to be a qualified SRO and there are between 30 – 40 qualified SROs

across Vermont. The certification was through the National Association of School Resource Officers. Evans added that recent events have highlighted both the positive and negative aspects associated with SROs in educational settings. He added that some people are not comfortable with SROs in schools for various reasons. Evans said that some national data shows that there have been disparate treatment, arrests, and issues around discipline and expulsion in communities of color. He added that there was no sense that this type of behavior was happening in Vermont but acknowledged that it didn't mean there was not room for improvement. Evans said there was no legislation that dictated what type of training or subject matter expertise SROs in Vermont should have when assigned to a school. He added that there was no standard Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between law enforcement agencies and schools that include a framework regarding what assigned SROs are supposed to do. The SRO may be uniformed or not and have weapons showing or not.

Evans said that law enforcement in general has a good reputation in the communities they serve in Vermont. Most SROs are served by the local Sheriff's Department. He added that law enforcement agencies are struggling to fill positions, and many will not be able to recruit individuals with the specific skill set and maintain the level of service required of qualified SROs. Conversations are ongoing with the Vermont Chiefs Association and the Vermont Police Academy on best practice moving forward if Vermont continues to utilize SROs and defining trainings and experiences required so that SROs can be successful.

Discussion followed regarding SROs as a positive resource, SROs not meant to be disciplinarians, MOUs are essential, LGBTQ youth among those who have disproportionately experienced violent and traumatic issues with law enforcement, uncomfortableness around law enforcement is different than trauma triggering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the value of law enforcement as an SRO instead of a school counsellor or social worker, what was safe for some was actively harmful to others, people with unique and qualified skills, dispel the idea that presence of law enforcement is not always bad, and federal funding sources.

Iverson provided background on the current situation in Mill River. She said the students of Mill River requested that a Black Lives Matter flag and a Pride flag be raised at the school. The school board approved this while the community pushed back. The school board then delayed the raising of both flags until a flag policy was written. She said the Liberty Counsel began calling community members in the area and providing them with legal advice. The Southern Poverty Law Center labelled the Liberty Counsel as an extremist hate group that actively advocates against LGBTQ legislation nationwide. Iverson said that there were many people at Mill River working hard to institute equity aims and making shifts in classroom culture, process and curriculum but were receiving community push back as well. In December, Outright Vermont sent out the Needs Assessment data collection that was prepared by the Vermont Department of Health to collect data on how LGBTQ students are doing across the state. They received over 400 responses and they were not good. Students in Mill River belonging to the Gender Sexuality Alliance asked a teacher to send the survey to all students knowing that many students don't feel safe to publicly identify as LGBTQ. The teacher sought permission to release the survey to all students and was denied since it was a third-party survey. It was not removed from the queue to be sent to all students and was eventually released. Intense community backlash was received, and Mill River administration asked Outright Vermont that the survey

be stopped which it could not. There was a public records request initiated by the Liberty Counsel that was ongoing and with its focus on equity related documents. The situation created an environment where LGBTQ students and students of color are seeing adults monitor emails for mentions of equity. Additionally, there was a newspaper article that indicated members of the community are pushing for the school budget vote to fail so that the budget could be reevaluated to see if any funding was targeted for equity aims. An equity educator suspended her contract with Mill River after being warned of the situation and not feeling safe to continue with the work. Iverson said discussions are underway about whether it was safe to perform equity work in the district and that equity education was needed in the district now. She added that she was aware of conversations among families of color and LGBTQ students moving away from the district because they do not feel safe. Iverson wondered what supports were available for the school district and community. Discussion followed regarding hazing, harassment and bullying of a large scale and student and family safety.

Chair Vincent said that Secretary French sent a document which included proposed legislation. He invited Secretary French to explain the proposal and the reason for drafting it. Secretary French said that as a former teacher and superintendent, both in northern and southern Vermont, he understood how challenging the work can be. He said it was difficult to have a uniform approach. Secretary French said that issues of civil rights and issues of local control are necessary in building the positive orientation that was important for schools. The State was responsible for the education of Vermont students and the State delegates a lot of its authority to local decision-making. There are times when the State's fundamental responsibility conflicts with the local delegated authority but that doesn't mean they can violate someone's rights. He said these issues need to be taken on more openly and aggressively. Secretary French said that Vermont's State Equity Coordinator, Xusana Davis, was working on the issues. He added that the proposal was a way to move more forcibly towards action.

Secretary French explained that the State Board of Education promulgates standards and the schools decide on the curriculum to be used to effectively teach to the standards. With the recent events, there was a lot of interest in hate, racial discrimination, and civics education. The proposal was developed by the Secretary and Administration to: 1) create a model curriculum that must include lessons against hate speech, hateful imagery, and discrimination; 2) expand the charge of the Act 1 Working Group to advise Secretary on model curriculum; 3) require school districts to adopt a model policy on racial equity; and, 4) task force on school discipline reform. Many of these goals are a result of the work done by Davis and applied specifically to the education system. The goals must be practical and doable so progress can be made.

Discussion followed regarding being excited about the proposal, handling complaints, being proactive instead of reactive, educator licensing, financial oversight, suspensions, punitive actions, schools using restorative practices, the HHB being advisory to the Secretary, supports for principals and superintendents and a grant from VSBIT for legal advice on issues pertaining to hazing, harassment and bullying as well as employment issues.

Chair Vincent said the position statement on mascots and symbolism associated with them was shared with the council members. Chair Vincent asked the council members to review the document for any changes. He asked Secretary French if the draft was something that the AOE

would support. Secretary French supported the work. Chair Vincent said the topic will be discussed at the March meeting.

The next meeting dates are below.

March 29, 2021

May 24, 2021

July 26, 2021

September 27, 2021

November 29, 2021

The meeting adjourned at 3:38 p.m.

Minutes recorded and prepared by Suzanne Sprague.

DRAFT