

Dover PTO General Meeting Minutes January 20, 2010

A general meeting of the Dover PTO was held in the Chickering Elementary School cafeteria, starting at 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday, January 20th, 2010. Ms. Betsy Ryan, President, presided at the meeting and Ms. Pam LoDato, Secretary, recorded the minutes. There were approximately 30 people in attendance. Ms. Ryan, called the meeting to order and welcomed all the attendees. Ms. Ryan introduced the speakers, Ms. Valerie Spriggs, Superintendent of the Dover/Sherborn Regional Schools and Mr. Bob Springett, Chair of the Chickering School Committee.

Superintendent and Chair of School Committee Report

Ms. Spriggs said she was at the PTO to offer an overview of the principal search process and to get feedback on the characteristics parents thought were most important in a new principal. The search process began with a review of the job description. This had been revamped during the last search and Ms. Spriggs felt the job description still worked well. She will post the detailed job description on the school website for community review.

The job of the Chickering principal requires a diverse set of skills. The principal must be a top notch instructional leader, a creative implementer of student discipline, and an effective partner with parents and the School Committee. The principal must also insure that the school meets all state and federal reporting requirements and mandates.

The principal search has a proposed timeline so a new school leader will be in place for September 2010. Currently the search committee is being pulled together. It will include representatives from the community, parents, staff, School Committee (SC) and regional school administrators. The goal is for the search committee to screen the applicants by the end of Feb or early March and recommend 3 candidates to Ms. Spriggs.

There is flexibility in the timeline to extend the search period depending on the quality of the initial pool of candidates. Ms. Spriggs does not anticipate appointing an interim principal given the current timeframe. The job description has been posted in the Boston Globe, Education Weekly, and with state wide educational groups such as the Mass. Department of Education. Once the final candidates have been selected, there will be a community meeting for the candidates with a question and answer session. Ms. Spriggs will coordinate the interview process and be the final decision maker.

Ms. Spriggs then solicited thoughts from the parents on their key qualities for the new principal. Important criteria recommended by the audience included experience in the principal role, high energy, seasoned finesse with parents and student discipline, and the ability to be comfortable in a one school district without the support found with colleagues in a multi school district.

Ms. Spriggs picked up on the point of the difficulties of the one school district and said she has been forging stronger links between the Pine Hill and Chickering administrations. Chickering is also very fortunate to have a talented senior management team in place to support the principal. She also addressed the question of the high turnover in the Chickering principal job. Nationwide the leadership tenures are becoming shorter as the job becomes more demanding. The principal's job is increasing in complexity with the addition of new state wide testing and filing requirements. A candidate also needs to have a strong body of knowledge of new teaching methods as our school has moved away for the stand and deliver format.

Mr. Springett also spoke to the issue of the principal tenure. He said that his research on trends in the country and state shows principals now only staying on average of 3-5 years. Currently in the state, 25% of the school superintendent jobs are vacant. The leadership jobs are tough with the bar being continually raised and the principals and superintendents being held accountable for student learning. The jobs are very complex, especially in a high demand district like Dover.

Ms. Spriggs thought Chickering would be attractive to candidates due to its financial stability and level of resources. When asked about the issue of overly demanding parents, Ms. Spriggs felt the high interest and support of the parents in the community schools was a strong point. Overall, the parent input has been absolutely fabulous.

There was concern from the audience that the "squeaky wheel" parents were getting the attention and causing some negative group dynamics. The questioner felt that this was not in keeping with the sentiments of the vast majority of community members - who are very supportive of the school. Ms. Spriggs said that there are always those in a community that are more challenging to deal with, but she welcomed all ideas to improve the schools. The key is how issues are brought forward so there can be a civil and constructive discussion. Often when decisions are questioned, community members may not have all the information.

When asked about the characteristics of the pool of likely candidates, Ms. Spriggs said that like last time, there will be many less experienced and many very experienced candidates but few in the middle. There is also informal recruiting being done. The salary range has been raised so there is a highly competitive compensation package.

The superintendent was also asked why Mr. Downing resigned after just 2 1/2 years in the position. Ms. Spriggs said the resignation was a surprise to her and the SC. It was her understanding that there were personal and health reasons for Mr. Downing's decision to leave at the end of the school year.

Mr. Springett addressed the upcoming openings on the School Committee. There is an interim opening due to the resignation of Dr. Darin Correll. In addition, Mr. James Stuart's term expires in May. There appears to be several interested parties, Peter Lert and Dawn Fattore. Others are welcome to come forward. The Selectman will make the decision whether to make an interim appointment. The candidates for the two spots

open in May will be selected in early March at the town caucus. Each potential candidate will present themselves and ask to be put on the May ballot. The caucus will back two candidates for the May election. There is also a procedure to gather signatures to get on the ballot without the caucus backing.

Mr. Springett was asked if anyone on SC has public school teaching experience and if this background would be a useful addition. Currently no member has teaching experience but he felt that the community members' value was their business and community experience. Chickering is an \$8 million business which is part of a highly complex \$32 million regional school system. The administrators and school staff already provide the SC with the educators' knowledge and viewpoint. Mr. Springett saw this as the best of both worlds. The SC operates under the open meeting laws so all discussions are open to the public, except for some administrative items. E-mail is only used to decide meeting times and to distribute information.

The other significant issue for the schools is the budget for the 2010 - 2011 year. The process begins in December and goes through March. Currently there is a line by line review being done of the budget with the Warrant Committee. The Chickering budget has a \$270,000 or 3.5% increase over the prior year to \$8.1 million. Last year the school was asked to cutback its budget by 4% to avoid an override. Schools are 70% of the Dover town budget. 35% of the school budget is for Special Education (SPED) which is federally mandated so cannot be touched. The SPED budget includes out of district tuition for children that cannot be taught at Chickering due to their disabilities. The cuts have to be come from the remaining 65% of the budget.

The town committees have asked the schools to cut their budgets for each of the past 3 years. These cuts were enabled by the retirement of some tenured faculty and some SPED reductions due to reductions of the needs of the students in K-5. The teacher salaries are on a matrix which gives set increases with each year of experience and caps out. Teacher and administrative salaries and SPED represents 97% of the budget. There is just 3% of discretionary spending on travel and supplies.

Ms. Spriggs believes that D/S Regional Schools and Chickering are rapidly approaching the point where we cannot make additional staff cuts without hurting the quality of the school's educational delivery. If parents want the school to continue their positive momentum, it is important for the town to see that citizens want the education budget as the highest priority. If there is another request to cut the school budgets, staff reductions will be required. The schools will find it more difficult to meet its current educational standards. The key to a high quality school is high quality staff.

The next step in the school budget process is a Warrant Committee meeting on Feb 1st. Then in March there will be an open hearing on the school budgets. This is the community's opportunity to be heard and to have an influence on the budget. Once the budget is at the town meeting in May, it is difficult to make changes.

Mr. Springett said that Chickering has a 14 to 1 teacher to student ratio, which is in the top tier of the country. This favorable ratio is allowing Chickering to change the way it teaches so it can reach all students - not just the 80% that was done in the past. The key is small group differentiated instruction which is an educational best practice. Chickering is fortunate to be a resource rich school but it is essential for continued improvement in educational results for the staff resources to be defended by the community. Interested parents should talk to members of the Warrant Committee and the Selectman. Word of mouth is a good way to get people to understand the importance of the issues and to get people out to the important meetings in February and March. Good questions from the community and a show of support for school funding is very helpful in driving the school's agenda forward.

Another unknown in the budget process is the level of state funding going forward. Chickering gets only 8% of its budget revenues from the state and some SPED money. This helps insulate Chickering from the impact of state funding cuts. Town services and the regional schools have the potential to be much harder hit by state and federal cutbacks. Ms. Spriggs and Mr. Springett thanked the parents for their input.

Approval of the Minutes

Ms. Ryan thanked the speakers for addressing the PTO. The first order of PTO business was approval of the minutes from the last general PTO meeting on September 18, 2009. Ms. LoDato had distributed the minutes. Ms. Ryan asked if there were any changes to the minutes. Given that there were no comments, Ms. Ryan asked for a motion for the minutes to be accepted.

Vote: To approve the minutes from the September 18, 2009 general PTO meeting.

The motion was proposed, seconded and passed unanimously.

Treasurer's Report

Ms. Jennifer Friesen passed out the latest figures for the 2009-10 PTO budget. She reported that the PTO is on track for its spending. The largest revenue generator will be the spring auction. Currently the PTO has \$77,000 in the bank which can meet all the remaining PTO program needs for the school year. The goal is to fundraise this year enough for all of next year's programs. Additional capital expenditures for the school, paid by the PTO, will depend on the profits from the auction.

PTO President's Report

Ms. Ryan thanked the attendees for their participation and encouraged all to get involved in the town budget discussion in this critical year. She also reported that the PTO may offer a bulk school supplies purchase for the fall. The meeting concluded at 10:10 am. The next general PTO meeting will be on April 27, 2010 at 7:00 pm in the Chickering Cafeteria.