

SPECIAL TASK FORCE ON SCHOOL SAFETY MEETING MINUTES

CITY OF DANBURY

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3, 2013 AT 7:00 P.M.

CENTRAL OFFICE, 63 BEAVER BROOK ROAD, DANBURY, CT

Present: K. Thompson, Co-Chairperson, K. Molinaro, Co-Chairperson; Members: E. Alberts, A. Fluskey-Lattin, G. Bocaccio, M. Schork, J. Knapp, R. Pietrafesa, C. Garnett, D. Moore, D. Wiedl

Mayor Mark Boughton, Dr. S. Pascarella, J. Martino, R. Jalbert

P. Estefan, Lt. J. Browne, A. Meade

Absent: J. Carmen, R. SanSeverino, E. Daly

CALL TO ORDER

The Co-Chairperson, K. Molinaro, called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. and those assembled recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

K. Molinaro opened the meeting by indicating that she would be asking the Task Force members to try to reach consensus in several areas including facilities, personnel and mental health.

K. Molinaro asked J. Martino to present information on the status of recommending a Safety Consultant to the Board of Education. Mr. Martino stated he spoke with two companies, Safe Haven International and Jennings Smith. Both consultants have experience with reviewing school buildings and school safety plans. To conduct a full review of the District's current safety plans, a building analysis with site visits, and then to prepare a comprehensive report, the Jennings Smith proposal was no greater than \$150,000. To conduct the same type of review and analysis, Safe Haven International's proposal was \$34,000. Mr. Martino said that one area where the two consultants differ is that Jennings Smith has a greater presence in Connecticut, with many local legislative and law enforcement contacts. Safe Haven is a not for profit whose references are also very solid. K. Molinaro asked whether Jennings Smith would be able to provide assistance with preparing construction grant requests or influencing legislation. K. Molinaro asked whether there was consensus to bring both consultant proposals to the BOE. The Task Force members reached consensus to recommend to the BOE that one of these two consultants be hired to conduct an assessment of school safety.

K. Thompson distributed copies of the State of Connecticut's Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety recommendations (attached).

K. Molinaro asked the members whether there was consensus to recommend to the BOE that the District standardize all emergency plans, to include use of a common language, as discussed at an earlier meeting by M. Schork and G. Bocaccio on behalf of the Administrators. The members reached consensus on recommending implementation of standardized emergency plans, tailored to meet individual building needs, to the BOE.

K. Molinaro asked J. Martino and R. Jalbert to update the members on additional safety improvements since the last meeting. R. Jalbert indicated that card access is currently being installed at King Street campus and Mill Ridge Primary, that panic buttons are currently being installed District wide, and that he has been working on pricing for additional cameras/video equipment. Dr. Pascarella indicated that we are in the process of trying to obtain a special permit to permit us to send the camera tapes to the Danbury Police Department. J. Knapp asked who would receive the panic buttons, and J. Martino indicated primarily principals and administrators, with

wireless capacity throughout the buildings to ensure effectiveness. R. Jalbert and J. Martino further described the implementation of the magnetic release locks on the new doors in King Street Primary, which will function to secure the corridors. R. Pietrafasa asked whether the Security Consultant would be just reviewing the existing plans or whether they would also be looking at additional recommendations. P. Estefan responded that an existing plan has been in place since 2006, and that we would want the consultant to tell us what improvements should be made. Recommendations from the consultant would include bigger construction items, such as vestibules or other construction.

K. Molinaro then requested discussion on reaching a consensus with regard to security personnel. K. Thompson outlined the current staffing, which includes SROs at DHS and the two middle schools, and the hiring of Safety Advocates in order to phase out the temporary outside security staff that has been in place since January 2013. K. Thompson read the comments of R. SanSeverino, a task force member who could not attend the meeting: "Since I can't make the meeting, I would like to note my recommendations for the record. I recommend armed police in all elementary schools in Danbury. I have 150 people who support this. If this can't be done initially for all elementary schools, I recommend we start at King Street due to the fact that there are open classrooms. Until the classes are closed off, King Street should have armed police during the school day."

The question was raised as public comment as to whether or not perimeter security, including security on the property perimeters of the schools, would be more effective, because just changing locks is not adequate. P. Estefan responded that the perimeter security was reviewed with the original plan in 2006, and that we continue to look at perimeter issues as an ongoing concern. Mayor Boughton stated that because of where many of our buildings are located and the way in which they are laid out (such as multiple entry/exits), perimeter policing is not always a more effective option. K. Molinaro stated that the consultant can look at this issue again.

A. Flusky-Lattin stated that she understands both those who request armed security guards and those who do not want armed guards in the buildings. She understands the huge cost to the city, and has read research that supports both positions. She stated concern that she cannot determine with any certainty how the taxpayers and parents feel because she has heard so many differing viewpoints. Dr. Pascarella and K. Thompson both emphasized that the Bipartisan Task Force and the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS) could not reach consensus on this issue. J. Knapp stated that the BOE should consider improving in small ways on the current system, using Safety Advocates and the current Police Department plan of assigning officers to City quadrants that would allow them to make random stops at each of the schools, as well as urging the BOE to consider a stronger focus on mental health issues. He noted that the secondary schools already have armed security in the form of SROs. He also stated that one of the ways the BOE could improve on the current elementary security is to hire highly qualified Safety Advocates and be sure they get good training. Mayor Boughton agreed that the research is widely varying on providing armed security in elementary schools, and that all BOEs in the State will have to make their own decision when that research becomes clearer. Lieutenant J. Browne stated that the reason that SROs were placed at the secondary level was not for the provision of security against an outside threat, but instead to provide support and education on drug awareness, gang violence, and to resolve conflicts with students in the middle and high schools. These are not issues that typically occur with elementary aged students. D. Moore confirmed that this is how SROs are used in the middle school where he teaches and that parents and visitors may have the perception that this security is for protection against outside threats when in fact these SROs provide services as Lt. Browne outlined.

Mayor Boughton questioned whether all current Safety Advocates are being used to their greatest effect. He stated that Safety Advocates need to play a larger role than checking in visitors at the door and issuing visitor badges. He said Safety Advocates will need to have centralized training on best practices, and that the Connecticut Conference on Municipalities has been urging a common training platform statewide for Safety Advocates. G. Bocaccio confirmed that the DHS Safety Advocates do far more than just checking in visitors, and are involved in monitoring student conduct during the day. Dr. Pascarella indicated that the District intends to work with Chief Baker and the Danbury Police Department to devise adequate training. J. Martino indicated that many of the current Safety Advocates are either retired law enforcement or corrections officers, so that they already have some training on crisis response.

R. Pietrafesa asked whether the consultant would make a recommendation as to providing armed or unarmed guards. J. Martino stated that one of the consultants had indicated that they provided such guidance to another district by recommending SROs at their secondary schools, which did not previously exist. He said that both consultants acknowledged that there may be circumstances where the provision of armed security is appropriate. R. Pietrafesa stated that as the Citywide PTO Co-chair, many parents have approached him to request armed security in the schools. A. Flusky-Lattin asked whether the City had ever conducted a city-wide survey on an issue like this before. Mayor Boughton stated that, because of the complexity of the issue, a city-wide survey with limited questions was not likely to produce sufficient information to resolve everyone's concerns. C. Garnett stated that everyone is having great difficulty coming to an answer on this question, and agreed that a city-wide survey with limited questions would not provide sufficient information to make this decision. D. Wiedl stated that she also understood the emotional part of the argument, and raised a concern of providing a false sense of security to parents by placing a single armed guard at each building because of all of the concerns already raised. She stated that she does not feel safer in her school building because of the existence of an SRO, but that she feels safer because of the actions of all of the staff in the building. She stated that she had reviewed a lot of the research on this issue and does not think it would be a good recommendation to the BOE to provide armed guards at the elementary schools. Dr. Pascarella stated that he had met with Janet Robinson, the Superintendent in the Newtown Schools, who said that her big concern is the speed of response time from law enforcement. Dr. Pascarella emphasized that the current plan from the Danbury Police Department, to divide the City into quadrants and assign officers so as to shorten response time has been an effective improvement. Lt. J. Browne also stated his belief that the current quadrant approach provides faster response time as well as a deterrent effect. M. Schork agreed that this approach has worked very well in her building, that she has frequent police presence, and that all of those in her building are confident that the police will respond very quickly. Security in her building is a collective, team approach, that includes a Safety Advocate and staff trained to recognize and respond to an emergency. She stated that adding an armed security guard would not make the building any safer; the team response is most effective. Lt. Browne added that the BOE would have to consider the long term sustainability of any plan to place armed personnel at the elementary level.

K. Molinaro inquired as to whether the task force could reach consensus on the personnel issue. There was no consensus for the provision of armed guards at the elementary level. The members reached consensus to recommend to the BOE that the District continue to provide the current model of SROs at the secondary level and Safety Advocates at all levels, including the elementary schools. Further consensus is that these Safety Advocates need to receive consistent comprehensive screening and training. Further consensus is to recommend that the BOE continue to support the collaborative effort with the Danbury Police Department to continue with the current system of assigning police officers to particular quadrants of the city, with opportunities to make random stops at schools within their area of responsibility.

K. Molinaro asked whether the members could reach consensus on the provision of additional mental health services, as further described in a presentation by S. Atanasoff at the last meeting. A. Fluskey-Lattin indicated that the schools are currently understaffed with social workers and psychologists, and requested that the members of the task force recommend the hiring of additional social workers so that there will be one full time in each elementary school building. P. Estefan noted that the Statewide Task Force included a full panel to consider mental health services, and its recommendations reflect that. R. Pietrafesa asked how this process would work, and whether the task force would ask the BOE to include these positions in the budget. K. Molinaro said the task force could make such a recommendation, or could recommend further study of whether the current level of staffing is insufficient. Dr. Pascarella agreed that in recent years, the District has reduced positions in the area of social work and psychology, but that in the current budget proposal, he has recommended the addition of 3.5 employees in this area. D. Moore stated that, as a teacher, he would benefit from additional training in this area and requested that the task force urge the BOE to consider additional training for teachers on recognizing mental health issues that could become security threats. He would like additional opportunities to connect with students, and suggested replicating the DHS Advisory program at the middle school level to provide teachers with additional opportunities to interact with students and recognize potential threats.

K. Molinaro asked M. Bonjour, the Coordinator of School Based Health Centers, to comment on the work that those centers do in our schools with regard to the provision of mental health services. M. Bonjour described the twenty year partnership with the Danbury Public Schools through the SBHCs, which are centers in some of the schools staffed with an LPN, a LSW, medical and office assistants, and dental staff. She stated that mental health services are the most frequently accessed services, assisting students with anxiety disorders or anger management issues as examples, and that all of these clinics are over capacity. At the middle school, the SBHC runs student group sessions, works closely with school based staff and guidance counselors, and conducts special programs such as those for Violence Prevention Week. She requested that the BOE continue to advocate for additional funding for these SBHCs, and support the Governor's efforts to budget for expansion of SBHCs particularly in Alliance Districts. She stated these centers have become integral to the support of the students and their families. K. Molinaro asked how students access these services. M. Bonjour stated that some do so through parental enrollment, others through guidance or social work staff referrals, and others, particularly at DHS, self-refer. G. Bocaccio emphasized how successful the SBHC has been at helping DHS students in particular. K. Thompson asked whether there were any other obstacles to be aware of, such as confidentiality issues, with the use of these services. Dr. Pascarella and M. Bonjour both stated that the inter-agency agreement between the schools and the SBHC has allowed for the sharing of confidential information, so there have been no additional obstacles.

K. Molinary asked whether there was consensus on a recommendation regarding the provision of additional support services in the area of mental health. A. Flusky-Lattin stated that by recommending the provision of at least one social worker in each elementary school, the task force would be sending the message to the BOE that, if budget cuts need to be made, this area should not be considered. C. Garnett recommended that the BOE consider where staffing levels for social workers and psychologists were five or ten years ago, and consider whether, with increasing enrollment, those numbers should be increased. K. Thompson asked whether there was consensus on asking the BOE to study the issue with the Director of Special Services, who could make a recommendation on staffing levels. The members reached consensus on the following: should funding be made available, the BOE should approve the Superintendent's current request for an additional 3.5 pupil services staff; the BOE should urge additional professional development in this area for all staff district wide; the BOE should continue to advocate to the State Department of Education for the provision of additional funding for the expansion of SBHC in our District; and that the BOE should continue to make every effort to support access to additional mental health services available in the community.

K. Thompson requested a Motion to Approve the Minutes from the February 21, 2013 meeting. Moved by D. Wiedl at 8:40 p.m., seconded by P. Estefan. Unanimously approved.

ADJOURNMENT

The Task Force adjourned its April 3, 2013 meeting at 8:45 p.m.

Kimberly Mango Thompson, Co-Chairperson