

**FORT LEE BOARD OF EDUCATION
FORT LEE, NEW JERSEY**

MINUTES

**PUBLIC BUSINESS MEETING AGENDA
Wednesday, March 13, 2024
Lewis F. Cole Intermediate School Cafetorium
and Zoom (virtual) Meeting**

CALL TO ORDER BY THE PRESIDENT

The meeting was called to order at 6:05 p.m. by Board President, Mrs. Richter.

FLAG SALUTE

The Flag Salute was led by Ms. Morell

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT

The Open Public Meeting announcement was read by Board President, Mrs. Richter

ROLL CALL

Present: Mrs. Tanya Byers-Kang, Ms. Paula Colbath (*virtual*), Mrs. Kim Curry, Mr. Kacy Knight, Mrs. Amy Ko-Tang, Mr. Douglas Lopez, Ms. Holly Morell, Mr. Michael Rubino, Mrs. Kristen Richter

Also Present: Dr. Robert L. Kravitz, Mrs. Diane Collazo-Baker, Mrs. Dina Messery, Mrs. Lindita Agastra, Mr. Lester Taylor, Board Attorney

Absent: None.

EXECUTIVE SESSION #1

MOTION by Ms. Morell seconded by Mr. Rubino at 6:07 p.m., to move into Executive Session.

MOTION carried unanimously upon voice vote, 9-0.

Board President, Mrs. Richter asked for a MOTION to adjourn the Executive Session.

MOTION by Mrs. Curry seconded by Ms. Morell at 6:20 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously upon voice vote, 9-0.

PUBLIC WORK SESSION - QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM BOARD MEMBERS ON ITEMS LISTED ON TONIGHT'S AGENDA OR ANY OTHER TOPIC

Ms. Colbath shared that she plans on making a MOTION to table item #1POL pending two readings of Policy 3319 and review by the whole Board.

Policy 3319 recognizes Transgender Day on March 29th. Ms. Colbath then shared that the five Board members that voted to appeal Policy 5756 have been labeled as anti-LGBTQ based on information posted on social media. These accusations and threat made against the five Board members is counterproductive in a situation such as this one. The Fort Lee Board of Education members believe in a safe, inclusive and supportive school environment that focus on the needs of our students. The Board realized there were flaws in the Policy 5756. Therefore, Policy 3319 was crafted keeping the safety of the students in mind. The new policy is similar to Policy 5756 and addresses the public's concerns expressed at the March 4, 2024 Public Board meeting. Ms. Colbath then shared that having a policy that the Fort Lee Board of Education can't live up to potentially a recipe for disaster and lawsuits. The Board will greatly appreciate the parents and community members feedback regarding the new Policy.

Mrs. Ko-Tang thanked all the parents and community members for attending the meeting to voice their concerns. She shared her recollection of the discussion held at the February 26th Policy Committee meeting. She believes the decision to appeal Policy 5756 was made in haste and further discussions regarding Policy 5756 are needed. She addressed certain statements made by parents and/or community members at the March 4, 2024 Board meeting. Mrs. Ko-Tang encouraged all the Board members to support Policy 5756.

Mr. Knight thanked all the parents and community members for attending the meeting. He shared his view regarding the Policy meeting and how the committee decided that the new policy uses language as close as possible to Policy 5756. Mr. Knight shared that he would be happy to receive anyone's feedback. The single issue in this new policy is whether or not elementary school children (K-5) should have completely separate records. Mr. Knight then shared the new policy's first read will be at Monday, March 18th Board meeting.

Mr. Lopez thanked all the parents and community members for attending the meeting. He shared that we can't lose focus regarding other District issues such as teacher retention, open positions, and Infrastructure repairs. Discussion on a new policy may risk intensifying anxiety and stress students are currently dealing with, such as college acceptance letters and financial aid and SATs. Mr. Lopez shared that any discussions the District has on this topic open the District up to potential legal ramification potentially leading to costly lawsuits at the taxpayers' expense.

Mrs. Byers-Kang recognized that abolishing Policy 5756 is not beneficial for High School students. However, the Policy should be revised to allow administrators to contact parents of K-5 students if the student shares with their teacher their gender identity.

President Richter shared clarifying points regarding the Policy Committee meeting explaining that the meeting was called in order for one of the newest Board members that sits on this Committee has an opportunity to ask our legal counsel questions and express any concerns regarding Policy 5756. It was explained that NJ Law of Discrimination is designed to protect all students. The Policy cannot just address protecting students in grades 7 – 12. It must also address how the K-6 students will be protected. President Richter then shared that Fort Lee School District has a large child study team, licensed professional counselors and guidance counselors that are highly trained to handle the transgender issue.

Ms. Colbath addressed comments directed to her that her vote was inappropriate and irresponsible to vote to abolish Policy 5756. Ms. Colbath shared her vote was based on what she believes to be in the best interest of the students. She then explained that she asked many questions at the Committee meeting, and expressed that she has serious issues about certain provisions, and that this topic should be a full Board discussion. She proposed to have a Policy Committee meeting before the March 18th Board meeting.

President Richter agreed to scheduling a Policy Committee meeting but with the entire Board to address not only Policy 5756, but any other policy Board members have questions and/or concerns. A full Board discussion regarding the policy will take place in the Public Session on March 18th.

HEARING OF CITIZENS- QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC ON ITEMS LISTED ON TONIGHT'S AGENDA AND ANY OTHER TOPIC OF CONCERN

MOTION by Ms. Morell, seconded by Mr. Knight to open the floor to the public, 7:00 p.m.

MOTION carried unanimously upon voice vote, 9-0.

The majority of the public comments pertained to whether or not to abolish Policy 5756.

The Board is being viewed as an extremist Board due to all the negative publicity over the past couple of weeks. LGBTQ students should have the option of coming out to a trusted adult if it is not a parent. It was suggested the Board have a discussion with the LGBTQ community to get their feedback. A member of the public shared that he founded Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) so he can continue to fight for the LGBTQ community's rights. Transgender individuals spoke on behalf of the LGBTQ community strongly advocating not to appeal Policy 5756 because Fort Lee Public schools have highly trained licensed professional counselors to work with students that privately reveal their gender identity to a trusted staff member. If the Policy is repealed it's a statement reflecting transgender students do not exist.

The majority of the public are disappointed that five Board members voted to abolish Policy 5756 which could potentially expose children to an unsafe and unhealthy home environment. It is believed that the Board's decision to abolish the Policy was rushed and not thoroughly thought through. The Board should focus more on improving the school's infrastructure and academics rather than exhausting their energy trying to abolish Policy 5756. Policy 5756 has been functioning in the Fort Lee School District for many years without controversy. A former Fort Lee student expressed that the Board does not care about the children and are more concerned pushing their agenda to rescind Policy 5756. It was shared that many people did not attend the meeting to express their support not to rescind the Policy because they do not feel safe publicly voicing their opinions and concerns. This policy is not a mental health issue, but a civil rights issue. The Board should protect all students and vote against abolishing Policy 5657. Fort Lee children deserve to be safe and protected. A Fort Lee teacher commended the students that spoke standing up for themselves and for their friends. Their encouraging words were inspiring.

The Public shared why *NOT* to abolish Policy 5756 to include the following.

1. Detrimental because certain transgender students' parent(s) may not be supportive potentially resulting in an unsafe home environment causing physical and emotional abuse.
2. Fort Lee students expressed deep concerns of being harmed by either other students and/or their parents.
3. Policy 5756 should not be abolished or amended because it provides a safety net for students that may have parents that do not accept their child transitioning.

4. The unpleasant reality if the policy is rescinded it may cause LBGTQ students to be bullied, or worse, attempt suicide.
5. Repealing Policy 5756 is an invasion of privacy.
6. Removing, substituting or amending the Policy is not recommended because it opens up the Fort Lee Board Of Education to lawsuits.
7. A transgender student should have the right to come out when they are ready to share this very personal information.

The Public shared why to abolish Policy 5756 to include the following.

1. It is a violation of parental rights.
2. Policy 5756 is an extremely helpful policy that assists school districts to abide by the NJ Law of Discrimination.
3. Parents should be the ones to advocate for their children, not the schools.
4. As a parent extremely important to keep lines of communication open with your child(ren), and as a parent we have a right to know what is going on in our child(ren) lives.
5. Young children do not understand civil rights and need the guidance and support of their parent(s), not the teachers.
6. Policy 5756 needs to be modified to protect the K-6 students that question their gender identity.

Additional Public members shared their comments and questions to include how well President Richter conducted the March 4, 2024 Board meeting; expressed heartfelt appreciation to the Fort Lee educators for working tirelessly to educate the children; inquired if there was discussion during the private session about Policy 5756, and if so, will that discussion be made public; why did the Board vote against item #3CUR on the March 4th agenda that addressed principles of culturally responsive teaching training and professional development; expressed that the District is dedicated to providing the best public education to all students regardless of race, ethnicity and gender; Fort Lee staff are dedicated to uphold policies, state statutes and laws governing the District that are established to protect students physically, socially, emotionally, and academically; why a special meeting was called to abolish a civil rights policy four days before a scheduled Public meeting when there are shortage of teachers and facilities concerns that also needs the Board's attention; transgender adults shared their experiences transitioning, and the support of a trusted adult is critical especially if they come from a non-supportive home environment; a parent shared how the Fort Lee Schools has failed his children because the school psychologist misdiagnosed his daughter's IEP classification; sidewalks around the Middle School are in need of repair; 7th and 8th graders are sitting in 2nd graders chairs that may be contributing to students spinal issues; very happy that a teacher has been assigned the position for the remainder of the school year at the school his daughter attends; and, what are the procedures regarding transgenders and parent notification.

Dr. Kravitz addressed all questions and concerns.

MOTION by Mr. Lopez seconded by Mr. Knight to close the floor to the public, 9:29 p.m.

MOTION carried unanimously upon voice vote, 9-0.

Ms. Morell voiced how proud she was of her son attending the meeting and voicing his opinion and standing up for the LBGTQ community.

RESOLUTIONS

<u>POLICY</u>	
1POL Postponed	THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED , that the Fort Lee Board of Education approves the second reading for the abolishment of Policy 5756 listed below: <i>Attachment: POLICY 5756</i>

Ms. Colbath made a MOTION to table item 1POL pending two readings of Policy 3319 and review by the whole Board, seconded by Mr. Knight.

MOTION carried upon roll call vote, 5-4, as Mrs. Ko-Tang, Mr. Lopez, Ms. Morell, and Mrs. Richter dissented.

OLD BUSINESS:

None.

NEW BUSINESS

None

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Ms. Morell, seconded by Mr. Rubino, to adjourn, 9:41 p.m.

MOTION carried unanimously upon voice vote, 9-0.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

Dina Messery _____

**Dina Messery
Business Administrator/Board Secretary**

DM/toc / 03-25-2024