

POLICY SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

July 27, 2017

4:00 p.m.

Spencer Borden Elementary School

1400 President Avenue

Fall River, MA 02720

A roll call at 4:01 p.m. showed:

Mr. Andrade: Present

Mrs. Panchley: Present

Dr. Costar: Present

Also present were Ms. Barbara Allard, Mr. Thomas Coogan, Ms. Marcia Picard, and Principal MaryEllen Shaw.

A salute to the flag followed the roll call. Mr. Andrade read the Open Meeting Law.

Transcriber's Note: Principals Aimee Bronhard and Matthew Desmarais entered the meeting at 4:02 p.m.

Discussion and Vote to Refer: Amendments to the Proposed Attendance Policy

MOTION: Mrs. Panchley-Dr. Costar: To refer the amendments for the middle and high school section of the proposed Attendance Policy, removing the “failing a class or being promoted due to” piece, to the full School Committee.

Discussion:

Mr. Andrade announced that they were there to discuss some proposed amendments to the proposed Attendance Policy that was discussed at the last School Committee meeting. Ms. Allard stated that she provided the Committee with the suggested policy changes. The first suggested change is at the elementary and middle level where it states “Chronically absent students may be ineligible to move from one grade to the next. Circumstances surrounding promotion or retention will be considered by the school principal on an individual basis.” She stated that this can be found on Pages 6 and 7. They are suggesting adding an asterisk at the end of the elementary section which would read, “For a student who is performing below grade level due to chronic absenteeism and is not being promoted, parents may appeal the decision to the principal. The principal’s decision will be final.” At the end of the middle school section, the asterisk would read, “In extraordinary cases, a student with demonstrated proficiency who is in jeopardy of failing a class or being promoted due to receiving an F6 from chronic absenteeism may appeal the decision to the principal. The principal’s decision will be final.” In the high school section of the policy, under the Special Notations section, there would be an asterisk that would say “In extraordinary cases, a student with demonstrated proficiency who is in jeopardy of failing a class or being promoted due to receiving an F6 from chronic absenteeism may appeal the decision to the principal or designee. The principal’s decision will be final.”

Dr. Costar stated that these changes seem to reflect some of the concerns that were raised at the last School Committee meeting, particularly as they pertained to chronic absenteeism and its relation to an F6 and not being promoted. This gives the parents a vehicle in which they may appeal that, especially if a student is proficient.

Mrs. Panchley stated that the middle school and high school changes seemed pretty similar but the elementary school changes are different. She asked why that was. Ms. Allard stated that, at the elementary level, the only circumstance in which a child would be retained due to chronic absenteeism is if they were performing below grade level. If the child was proficient and performing at grade level yet had a high number of absences, they would not be referred for retention. For instance, they have some kindergarten students who have been out so many days and not performing well, so they're being recommended for retention in K to repeat because 30 days is a lot of days to miss. Mrs. Panchley thinks that is appropriate. She understands in middle school and high school where students went on a family vacation and missed seven days but they're doing well in school; however, if elementary school students are not going to school and doing well, she doesn't agree with including the amendment. Ms. Allard asked if students are not performing well and are being recommended for retention then they should be retained. Mrs. Panchley said that is how she feels. Dr. Costar agreed and said that was his concern, as well. He thinks that all three grade levels should read the same way. However, his concern is that they may be opening a door for a student who is not proficient for any reason for parents to appeal that. He would prefer to see the same wording in the middle and high school be for the elementary school. Ms. Allard agreed and said that they would never recommend retaining a child who was proficient at the elementary level. She would agree to taking out the asterisk for the elementary section. Dr. Costar said that, if a school wants to retain an elementary student because they're not proficient, they have the right to do that.

Ms. Allard asked if they were okay with the middle and high school section. Principal Desmarais stated that the high school section takes care of itself. If they're referring to a student who is proficient but is getting F6s by the term, that student's grade is a 64. They have the opportunity to take a final exam. If they're proficient, they're going to pass the final exam and they're going to pass the course. Dr. Costar said that the original policy indicated that the student would receive a 64. They get an F6 if they have chronic absenteeism. The amendment states that if they have chronic absenteeism, they may get an F6 but the parent has the right to appeal it if the child is proficient. Principal Desmarais asked if that was by term or final grade. Ms. Allard said that in the original policy it says that every term, even if a child is averaging a 93, if he's absent six or more times, he gets a 64 for the term. It also indicated that on the last semester, no matter what the child's average is, if they've been out six or more times, they get a 64.

Principal Bronhard explained the history of where the issue really stemmed from at the high school. There was a chronic belief system among students that they didn't need to show up to school as long as they completed their makeup assignments. The policy that they had at the time was not effective because it had the buyback and it was difficult to manage. She stated that it was important for the School Committee to know that there are weekly meetings to address the issue of chronic absenteeism. For the kids who are chronically absent, they are trying to figure out what the issues are and putting interventions in place to provide support. The vice principals make decisions to excuse absences past the F6 for an understandable reason and if the family can provide documentation. Her concern is that the F6 was always on a term to term basis. Kids would not get an F6 as a final grade because they were chronically absent. Every student has the option to take a cumulative final exam and show proficiency in the subject matter. Even if they had four F6s and they're chronically absent and everything is legitimately documented, the student still has the opportunity to take the final exam and pass it. She also questioned how they defined "proficiency." After the 10th grade MCAS, they're looking at a class-to-class proficiency measure. There are no concrete ways for a teacher to measure proficiency. The way the policy currently implements itself is that every term is a standalone opportunity for kids to redeem themselves. Ms. Allard asked if, with the F6 policy, a student can't fail a class or not be promoted because

they have the opportunity to take the final exam. Principal Desmarais said that they could fail if they don't take the final exam or if they fail the final.

Dr. Costar stated that, according to the amended policy, the demonstrated proficiency is at the discretion of the principal. He thinks the problem that they had was that a lot of things are being done behind the scenes but the policy that they saw was an automatic black or white. In extraordinary circumstances, a parent needs to know that they can appeal an F6. Demonstrated proficiency doesn't have to be the MCAS, it can be the final exam or whatever the principal deems that proficiency to be. He gave an example of an extraordinary circumstance: a student's grandmother was expected to pass away and she wanted to take her family on a cruise before she passed. It wasn't around the time of school vacation but the student went anyway so the student accumulated absences. This was a student who was proficient in MCAS and in all of his/her grades. The grandmother died and there was a funeral and the grieving process. Then the student got the flu. The student was proficient by every measure but, according to the policy that was presented to the School Committee, it said that this student should get an F6. What they want parents to know is that, with extraordinary circumstances and demonstrated proficiency, they can appeal that to the principals. In the policy, he doesn't believe the School Department can ever have a policy that is black and white, yes or no, without giving the parents the opportunity to appeal that to someone.

Mrs. Panchley stated that, since the policy at the high school is term by term, in Dr. Costar's scenario, the student would only F6 for one term. If a student F6s for all four terms, they've been chronically absent for all four terms. Those students are abusing not going to school. If they're in jeopardy of failing for the year, then they've abused the policy and they are not proficient in that class because they've F6'd at least three times. Dr. Costar argued that, if his scenario occurred during the student's junior year when he or she was applying for college, and they got an F6 that will go on their transcript, even if technically they're a 90 student. If they appeal that and the principal looks at all the data and agrees, it might even be a case where teachers give students extra credit assignments to do during the period of time when they're gone. That F6 could be really detrimental to the child's education so he wants parents to be able to appeal the F6 if there were extraordinary circumstances that caused it. When they write policies, it's not uncommon to have in mind the ones who will abuse it. They want to make sure that they do not allow them to abuse it. They also want to make sure that there is a way to give a way around that policy for someone who is not abusing it and who has an extraordinary circumstance. That's the only reason he feels they need this amendment to the policy.

Principal Shaw asked if they were concerned about a student receiving an F6 for the year or at any point during the term. Dr. Costar answered both but it would have to be an extraordinary circumstance. Principal Bronhard agreed in regards to the high school student applying to college because a 64 would be detrimental to them. What they need to do is encourage families to be open and communicate to the principals and vice principals because that allows them to be strategic in counting out the days that they will hold kids and families accountable. They're also recognizing kids over the course of the time in school and looking at past attendance records to support the child. They need to pay attention to the families of where it's becoming a consistent level of abuse. There are families and kids who follow the policy and then there are those who don't follow it. Ultimately, they want kids to be successful and dedicated to their education. Dr. Costar said that he knows that principals bend over backwards to address the issues of chronic absenteeism. However, that is not currently indicated in the policy.

Ms. Allard clarified that the current language in the high school section just makes mention to the end of the year. If they want to open it up so that every child who is going to be receiving an appeal process, then they

need to change that to read “In extraordinary cases, a student with demonstrated proficiency who is in jeopardy of receiving an F6 from chronic absenteeism may appeal the decision to the principal.” That way, it’s not just the final grade, it’s at any point. Even if it’s the first term, they want them to know there is an appeals process in place. Dr. Costar said that that can be a lot at the high school. Principal Shaw agreed but added that the policy would be very clear about when they’re going to excuse and when they’re not and that will be helpful. Principal Bronhard said that it creates awareness of an appeals process for families who didn’t realize it existed. Mrs. Panchley thinks that the amendment is really backing up what principals and vice principals are already doing behind the scenes.

All were in favor	None were opposed	Motion passed
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EARLY DISMISSALS

MOTION: Dr. Costar-Mrs. Panchley: To refer the early dismissal section of the proposed Attendance Policy to the full School Committee and replacing “may” with “shall.”

Discussion:

Dr. Costar stated that everyone on the School Committee agrees that attendance is important. The issue of early dismissals was raised at the last School Committee meeting because the policy that was presented said that the school had the right to hold on to the students until the end of the school day. School Committee members did not feel that that should happen. It sounds like the school is allowed to keep parents from their children but what they’re really saying is that extraordinary circumstances do exist and they can make accommodations for; however, that’s not what the policy said. The policy said, at all three levels, parents can’t dismiss their child early. Principals are going to have to deal with parents who abuse those situations and that’s the reason for the policy. There are parents who are wanting to dismiss their child early every day in order to beat the traffic. They want to make sure that the policy is not abused. They wanted to have a policy that indicated the parent had the right to dismiss their child early under emergency circumstances; however, if it becomes an abuse or chronic problem, the school has a right to hold a parent-teacher conference that requires additional action. Additional action could be a referral to a trune officer or DCF.

Ms. Allard stated that the policy currently reads “All requests for early dismissals must be submitted in writing and given to the principal or designee at the start of the school day or, if possible, give the school 24 hour notice. Teachers are teaching students up until the final dismissal time, therefore school staff reserves the right to not release students unless extraordinary circumstances arise and to verify and/or deny a request. Five early dismissals (without a doctor’s note) will be considered an unexcused absence.” They suggest changing it to read “All requests for early dismissals must be submitted in writing and given to the principal or designee at the start of the school day or, if possible, give the school 24 hour notice. Teachers are teaching students up to the final dismissal time. While early dismissals are discouraged, it is recognized that emergencies sometimes arise. Frequent or chronic early dismissal may result in a parent-school conference to determine whether additional action is necessary. Five early dismissals (without a doctor’s note) will be considered an unexcused absence.”

Mrs. Panchley suggested that, where it says “frequent or chronic early dismissals may result in a parent-school conference,” they change “may” to “shall.” If this is happening often then there should be a meeting.

Ms. Picard stated that policies don’t usually have rationale within it. She would remove the line “teachers are teaching students up until the final dismissal time.” That seems to be explaining why they’re doing what they’re doing and policies don’t usually include that. Dr. Costar agrees that it is not normal to include that in policy but what they’re trying to do is let parents know why they frown upon early dismissals. Mrs. Panchley

agreed. Principal Bronhard agrees that it provides more information for parents and provides clarity and lets families know that there is an appeal process.

All were in favor	None were opposed	Motion passed
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MOTION: Dr. Costar-Mrs. Panchley: To change “Please refer to Page 4 of this policy” to “Please refer to Page 5 of this policy.”

Discussion:

Dr. Costar said that it was brought to their attention that there was mention somewhere in the Attendance Policy that said to refer to Page 4 of this policy for description but the description was actually on Page 5.

All were in favor	None were opposed	Motion passed
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MOTION: Mrs. Panchley-Dr. Costar: To adjourn.

No discussion

All were in favor	None were opposed	Motion passed (4:32 p.m.)
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Respectfully submitted,



Administrative Assistant

Documents Referred to:

Changes to the Proposed Attendance Policy

ADA Coordinator: Gary P. Howayeck, Esq.- 508.324.2650

Please note: A videotape/DVD of this meeting is on file in the School Committee Office and is available for review by contacting the Administrative Assistant for the School Committee Services