

DOVER SCHOOL COMMITTEE  
MEETING MINUTES  
April 7, 2010

Members Present: Bob Springett, Chairperson  
Jennifer DaSilva (left at 10:10)  
Peter Lert  
Carolyn Ringel (left at 9:50)  
James Stuart

Also Present: Valerie Spriggs, Superintendent  
Kirk Downing, Principal

**1. Call to order – Mr. Springett**

- Mr. Springett called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. in the Chickering Music Room.
- Mr. Springett spoke of Mr. Koocher's presentation at the March 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting. He hoped the community members found Mr. Koocher's presentation helpful, the intent was to have an understanding of the Superintendent and School Committee roles & responsibilities.
- Today is a workshop, Mr. Springett would like to use the Town Meeting protocol where community participants raise their hand to be recognized and state their name.

**2. Community Questions/Comments**

- Ms. Ringel feels the main point for her is that the roles of School Committee and Administration are different; they won't always agree, which is ok. It's important for the School Committee to take the budget seriously and be sure it is well spent, this means looking at data and questioning each other. It's a respectful discussion.
- Ms. Rinaldi stated that we all have the kids' best interests at heart, that's why we are here this morning.
- Mr. Springett spoke about the Committee not setting an easy task. We have been very aggressive at setting high goals for ourselves and the school for academic performance, administrative best practices and innovation. For Chickering and Dover as a community we have great teachers, administration and students. It is a tremendous challenge with the bar set so high, so there can be friction; he doesn't think anyone has walked away from this challenge.
- Ms. White spoke of three observations she sees to delve into: 1. Disagreement on when we get there, not on the goal, but the timing; 2. Balance between business and education—at times there is tension in applying business practices vs. looking at education as a business, is the School Committee a Board of Directors with the Superintendent as CEO? 3. Who deals with parent concerns? Some of the tensions came up this year because it wasn't clear who should resolve the issue, if you don't get an answer from one, do you go to the other? What is the right method of resolution?
- Ms. Spriggs spoke about the conversation she had with Mr. Downing when she arrived about not placing more on the plate, and the School Committee's need for more progress on what was implemented, there is a balancing that needs to take place. The way Foreign Language is taking place with parents and a School Committee member involved in the research is a healthier way to move forward. The faculty has had a difficult year with a lot of transition and there was a resounding request that they need the time to tweak and sharpen skills. We are and will continue to run the race; we don't want to lose the momentum that has been built up or drop back. The School Committee has been right to push, but pacing is critical, some requests were pulled back on because of tension. The balance between business and educational practices is fascinating.
- Ms. Spriggs has had honest and open conversations with the School Committee. Out of those discussions came how we can work collaboratively. When the meetings were held last summer, it didn't go the way we wanted, Mr. Springett asked what he could do differently, that's the beginning of collaborating. It was worth the effort of trying to make this evolve, we aren't there yet and Ms. Spriggs still wants to work on this.
- Ms. Spriggs spoke about determining who handles what issue. The parents usually go to the principal, that's where the initial concern should go. Ms. DaSilva stated when the problem isn't resolved she is also being approached at soccer games or the grocery store. Ms. Spriggs spoke about when an issue comes to her (ex., seatbelts), the response was given and there was a level of frustration. The follow-up meeting did not take place and no research was received from the parents. There comes a time where the decision has to be recognized and then let go.

- Ms. Ringel stated that there isn't a way to totally resolve the tension. We want it done yesterday and as parents we feel it's a day lost when it's not done. How do we manage realistic expectations and how does Administration respond to that in a way that's constructive to us. We need to figure out how to make it constructive for us. There is a lot of the grocery store/soccer communication. There was a lot of e-mail shot around earlier this year, it seems like it's getting resolved because the e-mails are more central vs. just sending the email all over. The Community Comments section of School Committee meeting is when there is a chance to have the floor and get many other people there; it is an underused way for parents to get their concerns out without bounding from one person to another. Mr. Springett spoke of how Ms. Ringel also gets feedback directly at PTO.
- Mr. Stuart spoke about a key part of the collaborative effort being dialogue. When you break things down into a business vs. education perspective it's not the right way to look at it, it's more using the logical way of solving issues and the openness to doing it, having dialog to do it and not micromanaging. That openness is important especially when you have different opinions and views and people want to contribute. The issue can be the lack of a two way dialogue. Even when there are business vs. educational perspectives everyone can discuss the issues, it's solved by the dialogue and discussion being open.
- Mr. Stuart talked about the School Committee vs. Administration and how/what gets resolved when. There is a perspective from the outside that the School Committee was trying to micromanage the Administration, he feels School Committee isn't trying to micromanage, it's just a different perspective on how you dialogue/discuss. There is a demarcation between what School Committee and Administration is responsible for. If the parent isn't satisfied with the answer from Administration, if they didn't explain the decision or the parent is dissatisfied, it's not usually the School Committee's responsibility to get into it. There needs to be an Administration that knows how to resolve an issue and make the parent comfortable with the decision even if they aren't happy about it. It's really about dialogue.
- Ms. Simms asked if there is an opportunity for us to be more explicit in the protocol and expectations about dialogue, as Ms. Ringel said we all want is what is best for our kids done yesterday, or next week, or before your child leaves this school. There is an expectation in Dover that we are entitled to having it done yesterday, we do want what's best for our child, but change can't always be effectively made quickly.
- Ms. Ringel spoke of the need to respect the parent's passion, but they need to explain why. Every parent deserves to be heard as an advocate for their child.
- Mr. Downing talked about when a parent brings an issue to School Committee, then to Administration then back to School Committee. When you go back and forth, the opportunity for the parent to get accurate information gets watered down. Parents have leveraged School Committee to press an issue with him, then that becomes the culture over time. There needs to be a serious retraining on this, otherwise this will continue to perpetuate and not get to a point of resolution. If the parent has a concern that they feel should go to School Committee, it should be brought to him first. He gets robbed of the opportunity of the dialogue to find out how important the message is.
- Ms. Spriggs stated what she saw as important themes: 1. Dialogue/communication; 2. Respect--for parents and among ourselves, and that educators feel valued; 3. Trust--as parents she feels you are doing right by your children as are we when your children come here. We want to give the very best we can give and if we can believe this we can all move forward and build on this.
- Ms. Ryan stated that her big take away from Mr. Koocher's presentation was that there has to be communication and trust.
- Ms. Simms spoke of the minutes from the Park and Rec being cryptic. The current group of five commissioners has made an effort to be transparent, and it gives the opportunity for people to read what we say. Need to be conscientious about what is said in School Committee and what has been put in the minutes. Ms. DaSilva asked how we're not being transparent: we send out agendas and minutes, the meetings are filmed when possible and the meetings are open. Ms. Spriggs stated that it is the responsibility of the Central Office, not School Committee, to send out the agenda and minutes. Ms. Rinaldi spoke of the agenda going out ahead of time. Ms. Fattore stated the agenda did not get out last time. Mr. Stuart spoke of not being sure how much more transparent we could be, though it's a good objective to have. Mr. Stuart spoke of the Foreign Language program and getting things like this out there, but it's not always clear what is appropriate. Ms. Simms feels that we should channel comments that School Committee gets on the soccer field to the Community Comments portion of the meeting, this way the parent concerns are brought to a proper forum and put in the minutes. Mr. Stuart spoke of some parents feeling if they bring up the issue at School Committee that there will be some sort of retribution, which isn't true, we need to deal with that.

- Ms. Menon stated that there has to be multiple ways of communicating, some want to talk about it in front of everyone, some do not.
- Mr. Springett spoke of issues that have come to him from parents after speaking to someone in the school; he redirects them to the Administration. Ms. DaSilva spoke of a call that she received from a parent last week and how she directed them back to Mr. Downing. In many cases when they are not happy with the answer, they come back to School Committee. Mr. Downing spoke of when the bus schedule issue came up that it had not been brought to him. He also spoke of when a parent comes to him with a problem, instead of the teacher for fear of retribution, and how he directs them to work with the teacher to ensure the solution works long term. Some parents will or will not choose to have the conversation with the teacher. When the parent comes to him, it gives him the opportunity to make a bridge with that parent.
- Mr. Springett stated that when we sat down to develop initiatives for this school year, Mr. Downing said there was too much on the teacher's plates, so we didn't do any work that would impact the teachers other than what was relative to RTI/Balanced Literacy, but this didn't mean we couldn't do strategic things. Foreign Language was kept going without impact to teachers by using parents to continue forward. As for business vs. academia, this is a non-profit mission driven organization, we're trying to straighten out how reporting is done, we are looking for ways to augment reporting so we can use the data to assess how we are doing. In business there is well structured reporting, schools don't have this. Most reporting is done around student performance, not school performance except for MCAS. There is a cultural difference and focus between business and education; we want to be sure that for the money we're getting the value out of the investment we're making. Mr. Springett is unaware of School Committee stepping in between or taking position on resolution, there are policies that need to be followed. He feels that trust is built over time by doing what you say, when you say you will. There are different ways and different ideas as to what communication is proper, you have to understand the perspective and deal with that, not necessarily train them. As elected officials we are responsible to the Town and meetings everyone's needs.
- Mr. Springett spoke about how an issue was raised to him at his visit to Town Hall where someone approached him about the flag being tattered. Mr. Springett then contacted Ms. Spriggs and Mr. Downing who were already addressing the issue. Ms Simms spoke of bringing something like this up at a School Committee meeting. Mr. Lert stated that this might be looked at by some as micromanaging, sharing the understanding, perception and communication about what we're supposed to be doing needs to be addressed. He spoke of the Committee's specific role of budget and policy, not running the school. We need to take the concerns and channel them in the proper direction. We're not educators, we're concerned citizens with oversight responsibility for ½ of the Town's budget and we need to do a good job making sure the schools are operating effectively. We're trying to advance the reporting, in Race To The Top, Massachusetts was in need of performance reporting. There are ideas that already exist that we can make better use of that we can investigate. Mr. Lert would encourage better collaboration between School Committee and PTO to bridge the lack of understanding of what School Committee, Administration and PTO are responsible for.
- Ms. Hall spoke of the need to educate the parents on the process to raise issues, maybe they should file it in writing and someone should review it to see if it should go to School Committee. Mr. Lert spoke of there being a way to respond, but if the parent isn't satisfied and it's a policy issue it can go to School Committee with a written statement. The question is what we do with it. Mr. Stuart isn't sure the answer is that simple, the parents can talk about things, but the School Committee can't. If there had been cross-communication there may not be so many problems, whoever assesses would need to be open to the negative impacts. Mr. Stuart spoke of having an ombudsman to deal with issues and escalating where needed, this would be an alternative to the Superintendent responding to the issues. Mr. Downing spoke of issues being brought up daily and being dealt with well, though there are outliers. Having the structures in place to channel issues appropriately is needed. We can find high functioning School Committees and replicate their efforts. A new principal coming in with reporting responsibility not being clear can be difficult.
- Ms. Spriggs spoke about the body of research on effective School Committees that has been purchased and shared with the Committee as a beginning point. When we talk about organizational principles to apply, there has been a tremendous amount of research applied. Peter Singley's work (MIT) is a second body of work that deals with school work, we're not where we want to be and it's a complex issue.
- Ms. Spriggs spoke of the example of a parent who is a strong supporter of Mr. Downing, who had gone to see him last week, and wasn't happy with the outcome after speaking with him. He then went to see Ms. Spriggs. The parent wanted confidential information that couldn't be released and after their discussion, the parent stated that they still loved and supported the principal. There have been some lessons this past year.

- Ms. Rinaldi stated that everything said today is productive. As we move forward and continue the dialogue and understand how we interact more effectively, in the interest of respect and trying to minimize “the blood on the floor”, we’re all here for the same reason, it’s all about the kids.
- Ms. White stated that there is no final denominator on the return on investment.
- Ms. Fattore stated that we were pushing for this meeting because of the incoming transition and wanting to have a collaborative leadership. We want to start fresh with the new Administrator. What are we going to do to get to where we need to be with trust and respect; we don’t think School Committee and Administration have a good working relationship. There seem to be issues from back in December that haven’t been addressed. Ms. Spriggs spoke about the conversations she has had on reporting and the work that Mr. Bliss has done on curriculum professional development, we won’t have a crystal clear transition, and the new principal will have her own things she will want to put in place. Ms. Spriggs spoke of when School Committee was not responding, but was supporting the process during the December meeting when parents came do discuss Mr. Downing. We know we have to be clearer in what is desired, for example when School Committee said they didn’t want reports generated just for them, they wanted to see the application of data in the children’s learning. We have begun to move in a very positive direction.
- Mr. Downing spoke about the valuable learning that has happened over the last few months, as he works with Dr. Nugent he will share the information so that it can be moved forward. With clarity it will give Dr. Nugent further direction, and she will have more of her own to add.
- Ms. Simms asked for a protocol for parents to communicate their concerns for whom to go to when. Mr. Stuart said there should be one, but it needs to be put in the handbook and the web. If the Administration is not solving a problem it needs to be. None of us, School Committee, the community or Administration is infallible. Ms. Spriggs spoke of the Community Comments time on the agenda as being a time to comment on agenda items, not a forum for airing a concern. Mr. Springett stated that of 99.9% of the time this is working fine, for the .1% we shouldn’t be developing a new process.
- Ms. Menon stated that the parents need to own the issue, but some of the issues can get lost, there should be a way to document or record an issue to share with the Committee. It doesn’t have to be part of the agenda. Mr. Springett stated that maybe the new website could be used to have an interactive dialogue.
- Mr. Lert spoke about the thought by some that things are going on in the background for School Committee, there isn’t anything like this taking place, and it’s against the law for discussions not to take place in a public meeting. The only thing we can discuss outside of meetings is what can go on the agenda, not the content.
- Ms. Spriggs spoke of the School Committee having a voice, but only when it’s the five of them. They are a rich resource for information. There are times they strongly disagree, but they are respectful and courteous and resolve things for the better of the school.
- Mr. Stuart stated that it’s nice to get things done yesterday, but some time does need to pass, the time is helpful for thinking. The new principal will have a new perspective and experience, not everyone had full information on what was going on and where people were, it’s very complicated. Though it would be nice to have everything tied together and resolved it will never be that way.
- Ms. Fattore stated her concern about having the new Principal and Superintendent get started on the right foot. Mr. Stuart stated that even when you do your best it doesn’t always work, we’re in a pretty good place, and there is always room for improvement. Mr. Springett spoke of a more experienced Principal coming in, a Superintendent with two years and a Curriculum Coordinator that now has more time in the position. When hiring inexperienced staff the errors we made were because we are highly ambitious. We didn’t have enough mentorship here at Chickering for the Principal to grasp all the elements of the job. With an experienced Superintendent and Principal it will be different. Mr. Springett envisions getting together in late August to see what the new Principal has to say after she spends time with Ms. Spriggs and Mr. Downing. Ms. Spriggs spoke of the interview process and of the teachers being in a different place, they feel well respected and heard and they have shared important information. Ms. Spriggs told Dr. Nugent that the goal for Chickering is to be #1.

**3. Adjournment--** Mr. Springett called the meeting at 10:56 a.m.

Respectfully Submitted,  
 Deb Savastano