

## MINUTES

### Fairfax County School Board

### Burkholder Administrative Center

Special Meeting No. 8

April 6, 2000

#### I. **CLOSED MEETING**

No closed meeting was held.

#### II. **MEETING OPENING**

##### A. **Call to Order**

Chairman Frye convened the meeting at 7:05 p.m. The following Board members were present:

Catherine A. Belter (Springfield)	Kaye Kory (Mason, arr. 7:13)
Christian N. Braunlich (Lee; arr. 7:07)	Jane K. Strauss (Dranesville)
Mychele B. Brickner (At Large)	Rita S. Thompson (At Large)
Robert E. Frye (At Large)	Tessie Wilson (Braddock)
Stuart D. Gibson (Hunter Mill)	

Also present were Division Superintendent Daniel A. Domenech; Deputy Superintendent Alan E. Leis; Executive Assistant/Clerk of the Board Grace H. Winters; Deputy Clerk Norma Bailey; and certain other members of staff.

##### B. **Certification of Closed Meeting Compliance**

There was no certification.

##### C. **Confirmation of Action Taken in Closed Meeting**

There was no confirmation.

##### D. **Announcements**

Mr. Frye announced that Mrs. Castro was out of town on business; that Mr. Reese had another commitment; and that Mrs. Heastie was with her family in Florida due to the recent death of her father.

#### III. **DISCUSSION AND ACTION**

Mr. Frye explained that the purpose of the special meeting was to consider the challenge to a portion of the textbook entitled *Language & Literature*.

Mrs. Strauss moved, and Mr. Gibson seconded, that the School Board deny the challenge and uphold the committee recommendation.

Discussion proceeded as follows: that she had a child who was seriously mentally ill and understood the issues raised by the parent; that she found the language used in the book to be very insensitive, but that she

## FAIRFAX COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD

Special Meeting No. 8

2

April 6, 2000

was pleased that staff had already notified schools using this textbook, cautioning teachers that the exercise should be handled with sensitivity; that this textbook was not one that was read cover to cover, and teachers used sections selectively; that teachers could choose not to use the exercise or could follow the direction provided by the Department of Instructional Services; that she agreed with the recommendation that sensitivity to issues raised by this parent should be forwarded to the Family Life Education Curriculum Advisory Committee (FLECAC), as that was the curriculum area that dealt with mental health; that she hoped this parent would contact the FLECAC and provide any materials they might have for consideration; that following the Board's decision regarding the challenge, she would suggest that a letter be written to the publisher, indicating that a challenge had been made and the Board's response to it, and suggesting that the publisher be more sensitive in the future; that she supported the staff recommendation, not because she disagreed with the concern raised, but because she felt it had been handled in an appropriate way (Strauss); that he agreed with Mrs. Strauss' comments; the request for confirmation that this textbook was scheduled to be replaced next year (Gibson); the response that it was scheduled to be replaced in 2001 (Domenech); that he appreciated the suggestion that the publisher be notified so the book could be revised in its next printing (Gibson); that she agreed that the language in the exercise was insensitive; that she understood Mrs. Strauss' comments and supported writing to the publisher; that it appeared contradictory to teach students that they needed to be sensitive and, at the same time, use a textbook that was not sensitive; that she would support the motion, but it was unfortunate that the FLE lesson would be taught separately; that she thought there were other examples that could be used for this lesson and would support instructing teachers to do so while this textbook was in use; that if the Board felt strongly that the language was inappropriate and insensitive, it should do more than simply ask teachers to point out the dangers of stereotyping (Brickner); that she agreed with Mrs. Brickner; that she agreed that writing the publisher was important, but she also felt that an alternative lesson could be used; the inquiry whether the Superintendent agreed that could be done (Thompson); that he would do as directed by the Board (Domenech); that even though the Superintendent could do whatever the Board requested, there would be a cost; that effort would have to be made to teach around this section; that no one on the Board would consider the passage appropriate; that as a school district, he was sure there were likely problems with many materials, and they would be addressed in the best way available, and the book would be retired as soon as possible; that the steps that might need to be taken sometimes could complicate school operation if the system had to worry about specific passages in individual books; that he did not want to set a precedent for examining books by specific passages, unless they were tremendously offensive; that this passage was offensive, and that it was hard to say *how* offensive something would have to be to warrant such efforts; that the staff recommendation on handling this passage and the solution outlined by Mrs. Strauss might be the best way to go; that the job of teaching was complex and difficult enough without asking teachers to avoid certain passages in various books (Frye); the question whether a copy of this book were given to every student (Braunlich); the comment that they were used as class sets (Strauss); that nine schools did not use this book at all (Gibson); a request for clarification, that he thought Mrs. Strauss had said that the parent should bring this matter up with the publisher (Braunlich); a negative response; and that part of the staff recommendation was that the FLECAC take up the issue, because that was the appropriate place for such curriculum, rather than in an English class (Strauss).

Comments continued as follows: that she agreed with Mr. Frye that she did not want to set the precedent of examining individual passages in books; that it would be complex to establish regulation regarding this passage and see that it was followed, and that she did not want to tie the hands of teachers that way; that certainly the passage was offensive, but she did not think it warranted the action suggested by the parent (Kory); that she understood that this statement was not part of a lesson, but was actually on a worksheet in the back of the book; that teachers did not have to use it (Wilson); that it could still be recommended that teachers not use the worksheet (Thompson); that she supported Mrs. Strauss' comments, and felt that having the FLECAC address these issues was a very important step, as people with the appropriate expertise were on that committee; that if the language was on an exercise sheet, she did not see why it would have to be used (Belter); that she agreed with the discussion thus far; that if the instructions to

## FAIRFAX COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD

Special Meeting No. 8

3

April 6, 2000

teachers did not state that the passage was to be used to teach something differently, then it may not happen; that the Superintendent's memorandum suggested that teachers be sensitive to the issue if they used this example when teaching the lesson; that she was still concerned about the contradiction of telling students they must be sensitive to others, while this statement remained in the lesson (Brickner); that she understood Mrs. Brickner's point, but that when the sentence was read, you could see that it was not about name-calling, but appeared to be part of a conversation or essay; that if the sentences were isolated, they were an unfortunate choice of words; that under these circumstances, she would trust the teachers (Kory); that he thought the entire Board agreed that the language was offensive, and he thanked the parent for bringing the issue to the Board's attention; that this problem would be addressed, and he thought everyone would be more sensitive to offensive characterizations in books in the future; that this was a good example of a parent being aware of what his child was reading; and that this effort was not without a gain for the system (Frye).

The motion to deny the challenge and uphold the committee recommendation **passed unanimously**, with Mrs. Castro, Mrs. Heastie, and Mr. Reese absent.

Further comments included the following: that there appeared to be Board consensus that a letter should be written to the publisher (Strauss); that the Board would so instruct the Superintendent, who had been party to the discussion (Frye); that she suggested that the parent's materials be included, along with the Board's discussion and comment that the Board hoped the publisher would refrain from the use of such insensitive language in the future (Strauss); and that inasmuch as Fairfax County was such a large district and purchased so many textbooks, this school system should have sufficient influence to impact a publisher (Frye).

#### IV. **ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25 p.m.