

Ashford Board of Education
Special Meeting Minutes – October 29, 2020
7:00 pm
Meeting Held Via Zoom

Note: Per CGS 10-218, Board of Education Meeting Minutes are provided in a draft format within 48 hours of the date the meeting was held. With the exceptions of motions and votes recorded, the minutes are unofficial until they have been read and approved by a majority vote by the Board. Should edits be necessary, they will be made at a regularly scheduled meeting, noted in the meeting minutes, and so voted upon.

Call to Order

- Chair John Lippert called the meeting to order at 7:09 p.m.
- Present were members Marian Matthews, Tess Grous, Tina Fradette, Kim Kouatly, Al Maccarone, and Jane Urban.
- Also present were Superintendent Dr. James Longo, Principal Troy Hopkins, Asst. Principal Polly Borysevicz, Director of Pupil Personnel Cindy Ford, Ex Officio/First Selectman Cathryn Silver-Smith, Atty. Anne Littlefield, Zoom meeting host Scott Waddell as well as approximately 15 other members of the school staff and the public.
- Tess Grous asked Cathryn Silver-Smith for definition of ex officio. Cathryn said ex officio is a nonvoting member of a board. As First Selectman, she is Ex Officio on all town boards.
- John Lippert stated he wanted the discussion and criticisms of his performance to be in open session, rather than executive session. He also said whatever happens during this meeting, the board members will need to continue to work together. He asked Marian Matthews to facilitate the meeting.

Discussion Concerning Written Attorney Client Privileged Memorandum (legal advice regarding procedures for discussion of board member performance)

- Atty. Anne Littlefield said FOIA permits the board to go into executive session to discuss the document that reflects attorney client privilege and receive legal advice.
- ***MOTION by Jane Urban to enter executive session to discuss written attorney client privileged memorandum and invite Atty. Anne Littlefield to join. Motion seconded by Al Maccarone. Motion carried unanimously at 7:17 p.m.***
- The board and Atty. Anne Littlefield exited executive session at 7:54 p.m.

Discussion Concerning Performance of Board Chair

- Tess Grous shared her concerns about John Lippert's leadership performance in regard to voting in their new board member (Kim Kouatly) as well as conflict of interest.
- Marian Matthews said those concerns have been met and asked Tess Grous, "What is the issue now?"
- Tess Grous stated she feels like there is a pattern of things going wrong. They voted on the new member in executive session and not publicly. She mentioned a conflict of interest, with Kim Kouatly being seen with a class at Ashford School. She stated John Lippert did not communicate all the information that could have been given regarding what Kim was doing at the school (substitute, volunteer, or student teacher?).
- Jane Urban said they took a tally in executive session to gauge interest and acknowledged they did fail to make a motion outside of executive session to appoint Kim Kouatly. She stated every board member was there, that it was not all on John Lippert's shoulders. She mentioned Atty. Anne Littlefield saying, in regard to the mistake during the emergency meeting, the worst-case scenario would be a letter in the board's file since it was not done intentionally or maliciously. Jane said we keep rehashing this one mistake and questioned devoting so much time and energy to it. She said board members should be team members, working harmoniously. She stated she fully supports John and trusts his decision-making ability.
- Al Maccarone said John Lippert is a man of integrity and that he may make a mistake, but there is no malice.
- Kim Kouatly explained her presence at the school. She was a student doing an observation, which ended on 10/20/20. She was not paid. She has modified her student teaching application so that it does not include Ashford School. We learn from mistakes and move forward. We are here with the same goal, here for the kids, the school, and the town.
- Tina Fradette said it is sad that it has come to this and expressed her disappointment. She understands the concerns Tess Grous has. Kim Kouatly could have told the board prior. She said she is on the fence about the leadership of John Lippert and said they need more communication.
- Al Maccarone stated he does not understand the conflict of interest.

- John Lippert said Kim Kouatly described the situation prior to the call to order at the 09/03/20 meeting. On 09/30/20, when John was at the school with Sara Wilson, Jen Barsaleau mentioned something about Kim student teaching. The lawyer said student teaching does not violate the statutes but would not be recommended. John said he failed to follow up with Jen to clarify what Kim was doing and he failed to present the information to the board.
- Tess Grous stated that she values John Lippert, but there have been mistakes along the way. She wants the attorney to train them on board procedures. She expressed frustration in John as the leader in charge of communication. She is bringing her concerns forward and made the request for John to either resign from his position or get proper training. She said the board needs to move forward as a unit.
- Jane Urban mentioned the letters received by the board in support of John Lippert, one from Ashford Education Association and one from Jen Lindsay.
- Cathryn Silver-Smith stated she was Chair on the Board of Finance for 18 years and that it is a lonely place at the top. She said every member is accountable, not just the chair. She commended Tess Grous for trying to ensure proper procedure is followed. She said it would have been better for Kim Kouatly to mention her observation at the school during the formal meeting. She said the chair is a facilitator. She expressed support for John Lippert and said not once has she seen him get ruffled or riled. She encouraged the board members to get CABA training, to look at procedures, and to be open to hearing from each other.
- Marian Matthews said she has attended CABA trainings and a conference, which were very helpful. She said John Lippert has tried to address the issues.

Discussion and Possible Action Concerning Performance of Board Chair

- Tess Grous suggested that John Lippert stay chair and go through training as well as all of the board members. She said there was no malicious intent but rather a lack of knowledge.
- Jane Urban said we are heading into budget season and perhaps we could review and discuss one section of bylaws in each meeting.
- Kim Kouatly said she does not have the book. Marian Matthews will make sure she gets one.
- ***MOTION by Tess Grous that Chair John Lippert and entire board as a whole review and discuss as a board the rules and responsibilities presented at this special meeting (10/29/20) beginning no later than 11/19/20 board meeting. Motion seconded by Al Maccarone. Motion carried with one abstention (J. Lippert).***

Adjournment

MOTION by Al Maccarone to adjourn the meeting (8:42 p.m.). Motion seconded by Jane Urban and carried unanimously.

Sara Wilson
Recording Secretary