

**TOWNSHIP OF UNION BOARD OF EDUCATION  
WORKSESSION MINUTES – June 8, 2021**

**NOTICE OF MEETING:**

**TO ALL BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERS:**

The worksession meeting of the Board of Education of the Township of Union was held on Tuesday, June 8, 2021 at 6:00 p.m. at the Union High School Library, 2350 North Third Street, Union, New Jersey pursuant to the notice sent to each member. Public was able to attend in person or via Zoom. Action was taken.

Mr. McDowell called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

**PRESENT AT ROLL CALL:**

Mrs. Yocasta Brens-Watson, Mr. Ronnie McDowell, Mrs. Nancy Minneci, Mr. John O’Shea, Mrs. Nellis Regis-Darby, Mrs. Kim Ruiz

**ABSENT AT ROLL CALL:**

Dr. Guy Francis (6:17 p.m.), Dr. Kalisha Morgan (6:06 p.m.), Mrs. Mary Lynn Williams (7:05 p.m.)

**ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT:**

Mr. Gerald Benaquista, Mrs. Yolanda Koon, Mrs. Kim Conti, Mr. Craig Wojcik, Mr. Barry Loessel, Mrs. Maureen Guilfoyle, Mrs. Sandra Paul

**ALSO PRESENT:**

Mrs. Afshan Ajmiri Giner, Esq., Kendal Longmore

Mrs. Brens-Watson led the Board in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mrs. Koon read the statement required under the “Open Public Meetings Act”, a copy of which is on file in the office of the Board Secretary.

Dr. Morgan arrived at 6:06 p.m.

Mr. McDowell read the District’s mission statement.

Mr. McDowell stated there are two items being voted on tonight.

**COMMENTS FROM PUBLIC:**

None

**MOTION FOR EXECUTIVE SESSION:**

Moved by Mrs. Brens-Watson, seconded by Mrs. Minneci, that the Board go into Executive Session at 6:09 p.m. to discuss the following subject matters without the presence of

the public in accordance with the provisions of N.J.S.A. 10:4-12b: personnel and pending and anticipated litigation.

Please take notice that minutes will be taken of the discussion conducted during the executive session and the Board will disclose the minutes of the executive session when the disclosure will not result in unwarranted invasion of individual privacy or prejudice to the best interests of the Board of Education and provided that such disclosure does not violate federal, state or local statutes and does not fall within the attorney/client privilege.

Action may be taken when the Board reconvenes in public session.

AYE: Mrs. Brens-Watson, Mrs. Minneci, Dr. Morgan, Mr. O'Shea,  
Mrs. Regis-Darby, Mrs. Ruiz, Mr. McDowell

NAY: None

ABSTAIN: None

MOTION CARRIED

The Board returned to public session at 7:15 p.m.

Comments from Public on Resolutions:

None

Approval of Minutes:

Minutes will be approved at next week's meeting.

H. Communications

Communications are part of personnel and operations.

H. Superintendent's Report

Mr. Benaquista stated under Operations there is a request from Mark Spina. He is on tonight to share about what he wants the Board to consider. I did meet with him a couple of weeks ago.

Presentation – Mark Spina (Artistic Director) – 2022 Summer Theater Project.  
Information regarding this project can be found under the discussion item in Operations.

Mr. Spina stated we would love to be part of Union's redevelopment. We think it would be mutually beneficial. We are looking for a bridge until that space in the Township can accommodate. We would like to explore having it in a school auditorium.

Mr. McDowell stated you said you were looking for a location in Union Center. Where would that location be? I know you are looking at Connecticut Farms right now. Mr. Spina stated Connecticut Farms School is the closest auditorium to the center.

Mr. Benaquista stated we had a discussion about many different things and if the Board and district allow you to reserve Connecticut Farms, as far as the impact to our students, how your company could benefit our students if you are using our schools. It is always nice when

people are coming in using our district facilities or sharing with our students. For the whole community, when performances are being done, you are also trying to build a community when people go see a performance as well as going to local businesses. Mr. Spina stated what we were doing, we were developing a relationship with local restaurants and inviting restaurants to give discounts to theater tickets, discounts to restaurants in exchange because we want people to come to Union Center and explore. We need a couple of attractions to bring people in because we have a lot to offer here. With respect to schools, theater internships, if you want to learn critically get involved in theater because it is one critical decision after another. We could offer internships to middle/high school level. The students are always welcome to get involved in our youth programs. We can do workshops and playwrights and coming into classrooms and jump start creative writing and to give feedback on their work and if desired, do workshops for teachers.

Mr. McDowell stated reading with kids – is this something now in Union? Mr. Spina stated this is our second summer – we are currently taking registrations and matching kids up for 6-8 weeks, one on one or two on one, to work on their reading skills over Zoom, once a week for an hour over the course of the summer. Mr. McDowell asked if there was an age limit? Mr. Spina stated 2<sup>nd</sup> grade through 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Mrs. Williams asked are there auditions? How does the community get involved in performing in those productions? Mr. Spina stated our auditions are posted online for the adult actors. For the children actors, there is a press release every summer and spring for every activity that we do and it is first come first served.

Mr. Benaquista stated thank you Mr. Spina; the Board will discuss this and I will be in touch if we have any questions or if we are putting it on the agenda for a vote.

The student liaisons will present for the last time for this school year next week.

The prom – it was nice to see the kids in an atmosphere that brought back a lot of memories of what a normal year is like. It was a wonderful event. Thank you to Mr. Hoyt and the committee for putting that together. They did an excellent job. I was there and the kids were having a great time. I'm looking forward to end of the year events like in the past.

Superintendent's report on HIB for the period May 19, 2021 to June 8, 2021 – there was one reported case and that was an inconclusive case.

Last month there was a lot of discussion and many teachers and the community spoke about teachers that were non-renewed. I would like to bring some clarity on some things that were spoken about. Hopefully this will clarify some of the things.

During these very challenging times, it is not unprecedented that our school district has faced budget cuts for the last several years. The practice of the past for our district has been to non-renew non-tenured teachers so as to balance the budget for the next school year and reappoint the non-renewed teachers prior to the start of the upcoming school year as well as hire other positions that may be needed. This school year, the building of the 2021-2022 school

budget was completed in collaboration between district staff, Yolanda Koon our district Board Administrator/Board Secretary, and the Acting Superintendent Gerry Benaquista. The 2021-2022 budget was approved by the county and included budget cuts across many budget lines which included 14 non tenured teachers to be non-renewed. Since meeting with the non-renewed teachers, a great deal of misinformation regarding the non-renewed teachers has unfortunately been spread. I would like to bring some clarity to the matter. It was suggested for the last several years that the district, through attrition and resignations, would reduce FTE's and gradually and consistently increase class size to a level that the district could be fiscally responsible going forward.

As the Acting Superintendent, working collaboratively with Mrs. Koon to structure a fiscally balanced budget to be presented to the county, we both felt that the budget presented was created with extreme consideration with minimal impact on non-tenured teachers, and, compared to the past three plus years, this budget included a significantly less amount of non-tenured teachers being affected. Unfortunately, some inaccurate statements and social media posts were that the district was only non-renewing minority teachers, the district did not care about these teachers, only choose teachers at certain buildings, and "that it was all in the hands of the Superintendent." YES, to some degree "it was all in the hands of the Superintendent" this is true but the budget process undergoes several steps before it is finalized, and, all these steps include input and recommendations from staff, administrators and our BA/BS, culminating with a final vote/approval by the Board of Education, as-well-as the County Superintendent's approval. So the statement that it is all in the hands of the Superintendent is not truly accurate, for the very same reasons that I just stated.

I don't want anyone to believe that teachers were non-renewed because anyone from Central Office or on this Board doesn't care about faculty members – that is all employees. Unfortunately, we also have to make sure we are presenting a true and accurate budget to the County.

It is with great excitement that I give you the following update regarding recent grant funds received. As I have stated before my recommendation will be to use the grant funds to renew the 14 non-renewals. This decision was also a collaborative effort with the leadership taking into consideration the best interest of the teaching members affected, the district's fiscal responsibility, and future fiscal management practices.

When I say this collaboration, the teachers' union were the ones that had to deal with the non-renewal teachers. I'm happy to say, as we have throughout this year, the leadership of the teachers' association – we have had many discussions on how we can bring these teachers back. Fortunately, we got money in a grant that allows us and the Board supported our decision here. I want everyone to know that at no point will the district be satisfied with just letting 14 non-tenure teachers go if there was something we could do. We will make sure we are doing that being fiscally responsible. In with that, in changing the practice moving forward to make sure we are hiring positions that are budgeted and then can be sustained. When we hire a teacher, custodian, administrator to work with our children, it is an investment for the district and they are the ones that are working with our children. They are building the relationship and it is very

important that we are able to maintain our teachers that are affectively working with our children.

Creating a balanced budget from year to year continues to be a great challenge to the Township of Union Public Schools. If we continue to collaborate, improve our district practices, foster change that will impact our revenue, and always remember to be fiscally responsible then I believe the Township of Union Public schools will eventually not have to face similar, unpopular decisions that may have adverse effects on staff and ultimately, our students. To be noted that these unexpected funds are not recurring income that can be counted on for future sources of funding, as such, it is imperative that prudent fiscal management must be a primary focus of the district management team.

Our ESSER III funding, which is the last part of the funding that we will be receiving and we are using the money to bring back the non-renewals but the district is still facing a very tight budget and Mrs. Koon can validate what I'm saying. As well as the rising cost of health benefits, outside district contracts, as well as negotiations to settle contracts with our associations. We need to look every way to continue to bring back revenue to this district.

In closing, I would like to make everyone aware that the 14 non-renewed teachers will be part of the renewal list next week.

We will finish off next week with highlights and I wanted to congratulate Mrs. Ionta and our track coaches – five - Group 4 Section 2 winners and 11 – Group 5 qualifiers to move on and will highlight next week.

I was also able to attend the Scholars breakfast with our students and with all the other top students in the County. We have two exceptional students this year with amazing personalities that I know will go on to do amazing things. I will recognize them next week. I'm proud of and thankful that I can be part of it.

#### Education/Student Discipline Committee Resolutions:

Mrs. Ruiz presented the Education/Student Discipline Committee agenda.

#### E-1. SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT OF HIB

Superintendent's Report of Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) for the period May 19, 2021 to June 8, 2021, in accordance with the information appended to the minutes (*no vote required; for reporting purposes only*).

Mrs. Ruiz stated the Education Committee met and we discussed E-4 – there was discussion as to if these were curriculum guides or unit plans – what I wanted to highlight that these are not new curriculum guides. The only thing added was resources.

E-12 is to approve the interim superintendent to submit the plan. The plan is not complete and you should have received the survey today about the reopening of schools. Your answers are due on June 16<sup>th</sup>. The team who is preparing the plan has a lot to do. You want your voices heard and your concerns noted, please complete the survey. This is your opportunity

to be heard and there is box where you can add additional information that you may want to share. Mr. Benaquista stated they were talking about committees but with the plan being due June 24<sup>th</sup>, we realized it is not going to happen in that short period of time so I'm asking all the stakeholders to put their input in. Mrs. Ruiz stated the plan has to be submitted by June 24<sup>th</sup>.

We discussed two other items that are not on the agenda that were concerns we received from parents, students and the community. The first concern was the lack of information regarding the summer program – specifically the AP/Honors boot camp. Parents were struggling to find the location/time/dates for that summer program. We did discuss it and I spoke with Mrs. Guilfoyle before today's meeting and I'm happy that has all been cleared up. Go to the district's home page and you will see a turquoise box that says summer program and it will take you directly to chart of every summer program with the dates/times/locations and further links to apply and register for the programs. We currently have 400 students that have enrolled in the summer programs.

We also discussed the National Honor Society – it was brought to our attention that there seems to be a wait list – it was unclear because to us the criteria was pretty clear. You are either admitted or not. We learned that some students on paper met all the criteria were wait listed and we are going to look into it to see what is exactly going on. Hopefully by next week we can elaborate more on the application process and whether or not there is a wait list and why.

#### DISCUSSION:

Dr. Francis stated is there a limitation on how many can be accepted into National Honor Society. Mrs. Ruiz stated we didn't think there was but that is one of the questions that was raised and will be looked into to see if there is a cap. We don't believe there is. Mrs. Regis-Darby stated according to the rubric there is no cap. The student applies and they meet the qualifications, there is a local process and then you get accepted in the National Honor Society. Mrs. Ruiz stated that is our understanding.

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated I want to say thank you to Mrs. Moran for sitting in on our Education Committee meeting. She is proactive and answers our questions and if there are questions that need to be answered she will reach out to other people to get us the answers. Thank you for getting back to us as quickly as you did last week.

E-4 – I took a look at all 20 curriculum guides and I do not believe that they are curriculum guides; I believe that they are unit plans.

Dr. Morgan stated E-12 – the State return plan – I have a problem voting on it without seeing it. When are we going to receive the plan for tonight's vote? Mrs. Ruiz stated I raised that concern last night. It was explained to me that what we are voting on is not the plan, it is for Central Office to submit the plan. We will see the plan before it is submitted. Mr. Benaquista stated we are approving that the plan be submitted by the 24<sup>th</sup>. We can put the entire plan on for approval in July if we want. The honor society, it's not on the agenda, I didn't know about it and we are talking about it tonight and I will find out about that. I wish I had answers but I didn't know these questions.

Mrs. Ruiz stated I'm just reporting out on what the committee discussed in the meeting. We aren't looking for answers right now. We did discuss them with Mrs. Guilfoyle and Mrs. Moran and it's in the works. But with respect to E-12, I did raise that same concern last night. Not for myself, but on behalf of the whole Board, I don't expect anyone to vote on a document that they haven't read or looked at. Mrs. Regis-Darby stated it is how this is written. It is written like we are approving a plan. Change the wording – authorizing to write a plan or authorizing submission of a plan. Just look at the wording. Mrs. Ruiz stated I agree. It should say “authorize the superintendent to submit the State return plan on or before” rather than “approve the plan” because we are not approving the plan. Dr. Morgan stated submit the plan by June 24<sup>th</sup> and vote on it in July. I think it just needs to be submitted to the County Superintendent and then approve our plan. Mrs. Ruiz stated I don't think the Board has to approve the plan. Mrs. Guilfoyle stated does not. I belong to an association of directors and we had a meeting and this is what I wrote down “motion to approve the submission of the reopening plan”. Dr. Morgan stated we are voting to submit it on time. Mrs. Guilfoyle stated the reason why we just got this was the State just submitted theirs. I read their plan and it is basically all the things that we are adding to our plan. They submit their plan and we develop our plan from their submission. We are just approving the submission date. Mr. McDowell stated then the resolution is o.k. as it is written. Mrs. Guilfoyle stated this plan will be updated every six months and it will be on our website. The template wasn't in your backup because it wasn't available but the template is now uploaded.

Mrs. Ruiz stated E-12 – I think I previously spoke with you about this – when you go on our school website, you can change the language and it will change it across the website but it won't change our COVID tab. The COVID tab stays in English. I don't know what needs to be done to change that. Once it is approved, can we look into making the function available for that data also because this is important information for parents.

Mr. Benaquista stated the hosting site and we have talked about it; this summer we are switching hosting sites. There are a couple of things with our hosting site right now – you go on our website with your cell phone, you can't get anything. For COVID, we were going to upload to our hosting site, but with changing it constantly, we felt using Google Docs – it's easier and it is automatically connected but the hosting site was making it impossible to make our COVID information easy to read. The new host site, those options and capabilities will be much easier to do all the things we want it to do.

#### Fiscal and Planning Committee Resolutions:

Mr. O'Shea presented the Fiscal and Planning Committee agenda.

#### DISCUSSION:

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated F-24 – I know with School Bucks there was a service fee for using their service. Will this system also have a service fee for the parents? What about parents who still have a balance with School Bucks, since we are closing out system, what do parents need to do if they have a balance? Do they get reimbursed or transfer it over from one system to another? Mrs. Brens-Watson asked will there be an outreach to train the parents on this system?

Mrs. Koon stated yes there is an administrative fee but I'm working with the representative to give us a cost because we want the school district to cover the administrative costs so any funds that the parents put on the child's account will go directly to the child's account. She will take information from previous usage to give us a frame of reference of what we are going to do.

As far as any balances on my School Bucks, they will be transferred into the new system. Mr. O'Shea forgot to mention that this system is now linked to Genesis; so parents will be able to go through Genesis and navigate through that. The lunch applications will also be linked there for parents to fill out because that is linked to federal and State funding. We know that next year lunch will be free for all our students but we still need to have a campaign and raise the number of applications because we definitely want to increase our percentage for being eligible for State and federal funds.

As far as training and professional development, yes there will be either a webinar, Zoom meeting as far as helping parents to navigate the new system. There were questions regarding having someone translate because we do have a population of creole and we are trying to figure out how to accommodate that population.

The plan is to implement it over the summer during July and up and running by September or actually the later part of August. The lunch applications have to be approved by the Department of Agriculture and we anticipate also having that loaded into the system as well. More we can reach out to parents, the earlier we will have them completed. We need to keep advocating the parents.

Upon recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the following resolution was moved by Mr. O'Shea, seconded by Mrs. Regis-Darby for adoption:

**F-7. PRE-APPROVE DISTRICTWIDE STUDENT FIELD TRIPS**

Pre-approve districtwide student field trip destinations and purposes pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-5.8 in accordance with the information appended to the minutes.

**DISCUSSION:**

None

**AYE:** Mrs. Brens-Watson, Dr. Francis, Mrs. Minneci, Dr. Morgan, Mr. O'Shea,  
Mrs. Regis-Darby, Mrs. Ruiz, Mrs. Williams, Mr. McDowell

**NAY:** None

**ABSTAIN:** None

**MOTION CARRIED**

**Operations Committee Resolutions:**

Dr. Francis presented the Operations Committee agenda.

**DISCUSSION:**

Mr. McDowell stated O-7 – is that the result of the RFP? Dr. Francis stated yes, we met last week – me, Mrs. Minneci, Mr. O’Shea and Mrs. Koon. We had five vendors that submitted RFP’s for healthcare broker. We narrowed it down to two and Willis Tower was chosen.

Mrs. Regis-Darby asked do you believe this is the best choice for the Board? Dr. Francis stated yes.

Mr. O’Shea stated we looked at a number of things – the fee schedules and they ranged from \$80,000 to \$500,000; we looked at the references/resumes – how many school districts they worked with and what capacity. We also looked at their track record and years of service. Willis Towers go back to 1840’s when they were part of the Lords of London. They have a broad staff meaning all staff members were in the health benefit program. The range of professional staff that they will give us here at Central Office so any staff member can call their office. Mrs. Koon had the ability of checking out references and high marks were given. As far as their experience and lion share of their businesses, Willis Towers was ahead of everyone that came to us and we felt that they gave the best presentation.

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated O-8 – I believe we had discussion about Connect One Bank and someone had questions about high fees. Mr. O’Shea stated it was recommended that we go out for that but because of time restrictions and Mrs. Koon being here just recently, to transfer to another bank at this point would be very difficult because of all the accounts we have and that was a critical factor. We decided that we would stay with Connect One but I’m going to make a recommendation that we go out for RFP’s for banking for the 2022-2023 year. We have so many financial institutions in this district. As far as moneys that we will receive on our money – they are all the same and it is based on the market, timing and wall street. We need to look at what are our costs to run our programs. We have to get better communication on how to generate funds and where are they going to be as far as into the community of the school district, as far as supporting us and I’m talking about the educational system, the educational foundation and different programs.

Mrs. Regis-Darby asked what are they offering? Mr. O’Shea stated they are willing to do something for the employees should they want to open up an account. For a bank that has had an extremely long relationship in this Town, I would hope they would have come to the plate better. By January of next year we are going to go out for an RFP.

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated as a committee you are all in agreement that we should use them. Mr. O’Shea stated we felt that same way.

Mr. Benaquista stated we need Mr. Loessel to find out the financial side of it as far as running our buildings and what the company is looking for and possibly fees being waived. Mr. Loessel can you reach out to the gentleman and then have an email sent to the entire Board. If it is going to increase anything on our fiscal side, I think we have to consider that before we allow people to utilize our buildings. If it looks like you want to move it on for vote, then once we get a little more information, maybe we can discuss it again next month.

Dr. Francis presented the discussion items:

1. Letter from the Township of Union Recreation Department requesting the use of a Board of Education bus and driver for a trip to the Prudential Center on Saturday, October 30, 2021 to attend the “Gold Over America Tour”, in accordance with the information in the hands of each Board member.

2. Proposal received from Mark Spina, Director of The Theater Project, for the 2022 Summer Theater Project at Connecticut Farms School, in accordance with the information in the hands of each Board member.

Dr. Morgan asked do we normally do that? Mr. Benaquista stated they are asking for it to be donated. Mr. Loessel, when working with the recreation department can you elaborate on how that works? Mr. Loessel stated it is part of the Shared Agreement.

Dr. Francis stated we should be revisiting the Shared Service Agreement. Mr. Benaquista stated Mrs. Koon, myself and Mr. Loessel have talked about this and over the summer we are going to analyze this. Mr. Loessel has a lot of insight to what we give and get and we have to put it down on paper. When we do approve the Shared Agreement, we have to have our attorney put some things in there. It should be a collaborative effort and we should get what we need.

**Personnel Committee Resolutions:**

Mr. Benaquista stated we will be voting on P-9. Should we give the members of the public a chance to comment on P-9? Mrs. Giner stated it is up to the Board. You can open up for public comment but it is no different than a walk-on but if the Board wants to give the public an opportunity to comment on it, it would be done right before the vote.

Upon recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools, the following resolution was moved by Dr. Francis, seconded by Mrs. Ruiz for adoption:

**P-9. APPROVE JOB DESCRIPTION – IT SUPPORT SPECIALIST**

Approve Job Description for the position of IT Support Specialist, in accordance with the information appended to the minutes:

**COMMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC ON P-9:**

None

**DISCUSSION:**

Mr. Benaquista stated this was talked about in personnel last night

**AYE:** Mrs. Brens-Watson, Dr. Francis, Mrs. Minneci, Dr. Morgan, Mr. O’Shea,

Mrs. Regis-Darby, Mrs. Ruiz, Mrs. Williams, Mr. McDowell

**NAY:** None

**ABSTAIN:** None

**MOTION CARRIED**

Dr. Francis presented the Personnel Committee agenda and P-2 (Central Office Resolution) will be tabled for a future meeting.

#### DISCUSSION:

Mrs. Ruiz stated P-7 – is the language “approve student teachers and internships for the 2020-2021” – will that be changed to include the 2021-2022. Mr. Benaquista stated Mrs. Cappiello please make that change. Mrs. Cappiello stated we will do “for years 2021-2022”.

Dr. Francis stated the approval for the employees for reappointment – the non-renewals, will any of them be working the summer programs. Mr. Benaquista stated they could have applied for our summer programs. It won't affect any summer programs now that we are renewing teachers. If they didn't apply for summer positions, they could have applied. We can give you an update for our summer programs; we still need more help. It has been a challenge this year trying to get enough staff to make sure all our summer programs are adequately staffed.

Mr. McDowell stated P-11 – what is that? Mrs. Koon stated this resolution gives authorization for myself or a designee to draw down these funds from the portal from the federal and State offices.

#### Technology Committee:

Mrs. Regis-Darby gave an overview of the Technology Committee meeting.

#### Old Business

- Additional IT staff
  - Update: hiring a candidate for July 1st.
- Upcoming summer technology equipment recycle/online auction bid - GovDeals
- Upcoming summer projects
  - Upgrade old switches in wiring closets (postponed)
  - Change wiring racking in closets to have width and depth for new equipment (postponed)
  - Additional battery back-ups for wiring closets (postponed)
- Working on current proposals for district telephone and notification systems.
  - developing RFP with Pat Moran for lease financing.
- Move from Systems 3000 for payroll and personnel to Genesis during the 2021-2022 school year.
  - Update: In process of completing the requisition
- Security camera systems for middle and elementary schools
  - Update: PO has been completed for Burnet Middle School
- Professional Development - Craig
  - Update: Continue to provide teachers with technology resource training.
- District Technology Plan
  - No updates at this time.
- District website
  - No update at this time

**New Business**

- Collection of student Chromebooks
- 1st-grade students moving to 2nd grade
- 6th thru 8th-grade students
- 12th-grade students
- Week of June 21st
- Parent letter regarding keeping of Chromebooks during the summer
- New district lunch program - Payschool

## Approval of Bills:

Bills will be approved next week.

## Unfinished Business:

None

## New Business:

Dr. Morgan stated the smart assessment data that was sent to parents last week. I was wondering if there will be a presentation for the community on how our students are fairing on the start smart assessment. We didn't do NJSLA so in the fall the State asked for the district to take the start smart. I was wondering how we faired as a district; particularly in our lower grades because Mr. Benaquista stated we might have some issues with reading. I'm sure you don't have that information tonight – but that is question one.

Question two – what curriculum are we using for summer? Will the teachers be trained before they use it? Our summer program, how are we measuring our outcome?

Mr. Benaquista stated I'm not going to comment tonight but we can provide an update next week as well. About the smart data, Mrs. Moran can speak on this. Mrs. Moran stated we will prepare a presentation; keep in mind that is one piece of information it will not tell us everything about our students' learning for that school year. It is one piece of a multi-facet presentation.

Regarding our summer programs, the primary program we are focusing on is working with supervisors and teachers to identify sub standards that we felt the students really could reinforce before we go into the next school year and the pre-requisite that are done by the State as well as our online program, iReady. They put together a number of standard, alliances, resources, lessons and assessments using the teacher toolbox and online lessons that teachers will supplement with hands on projects aligned to those standards.

The way we will monitor the learning throughout the summer is instead of doing one assessment at the very end, they are going to do more formative assessments throughout. Rather than that really long diagnostic, iReady has a featured called standard mastery assessments where teachers can select a few standards or as little as one standard and students will get 2-3 questions based on that standard and that is where the teachers will monitor their learning for a few days or weeks and at the end of that time period when they feel the students have learned that standard, they can check in to see how they are progressing.

In the fall we will doing start strong again and we will be doing the diagnostic for iReady when we start school so we can get a better picture in September.

Dr. Morgan asked do parents know how to read the start strong data? Mrs. Moran stated the individual student report (ISR) does have chart and gives you a number and does explain about what those number means. In the presentation I can provide where you can go to get a better understanding of it. The State did release a family guide resources so when we present I can reference where they are.

Mr. Benaquista stated with the funds that we received, they are not just being used this year, one is until 2023 and one is 2024. With that if we are learning and we are seeing along the way next year, not just the summer program, where students are still behind, we can create smaller programs, individualized to meet the needs of the children. The biggest thing is making sure you have the data that shows the intervention needed and we already started discussion about next school year where we are identifying students that still need additional support. Part of ESSER III we have to keep 20% (\$6.7 million aside) for just that. We will set up a nice plan to continually support the students that need it.

Mrs. Regis-Darby stated I think as a district we need to look at grades K-5 for reading that focusses on the five pillars of literacy and support. Looking at all the data that are coming in – iReady data; we need as a district to purchase a K-5 curriculum that focuses on the five pillar of literacy and focuses on science and reading – if we are every going to get our children to read and master those standards, we need to get a curriculum in place.

Mr. Benaquista stated that is a discussion Mrs. Moran and I have had. Normally we are approving our programs for three years; this year we want to approve new programs for our district. Mrs. Moran stated our process for adopting a new curriculum program which includes creating a committee, a rubric, looking at programs that non-profit organizations that rank programs and look at programs for their effectiveness and they are aligned to our standards. Especially for K-5, a program that has a structured literacy program piece but also that flexibility to workshop – a lot of our students need that enrichment. The plan for next year is to apply for digital licenses for our current reading program for one more year to spend the time to really research the programs that are out there and to find the best for our students in the district. The goal is to pilot some of these programs and training our teachers and getting everyone set so that when they leave in June of next year they will be trained, we will have our material and curriculum so that teachers can plan work over the summer. We want to take our time instead of rushing into new programs and not everybody will be happy with that but I rather spend the time to find the right thing. I have taken the time to do the research and do it the right way.

Mr. Benaquista stated my disappointment was we didn't do it this year and we knew that program was ending. UTEA leadership is in the room and to make anything work, it is in the roll out. If this summer we did switch we would be fighting different battles and it is not fair to our teachers. They spend a lot of time and energy preparing for classes. With this format, part of it is not just to get the right program but make sure we do the right roll out and to be fair on our educators and employees to bring them in as a team and give them enough time to learn

because it is a change and any time teachers switch to another curriculum or program, there is an adjustment and we don't want to force it on them, we want to provide them time to learn it and make sure we are getting what we want out of it and it is right for our children.

Mrs. Moran stated about five years ago I switched the 6-12 curriculum from what we were previously using to a new program and I used the process and the math department has used it as well for a curriculum option and Ever Force is one that we suggest highly and we reflect on and they are a non-profit and they rate and review all programs. It is teachers that do it. There is definitely a way to vet programs appropriately. Mrs. Regis-Darby stated I'm happy with the collaboration. Mrs. Moran stated it is unfortunate that we weren't able to do it this year but I think with everything being virtual it is hard to create a committee and make the really important decisions and to do it virtually during a pandemic and we can't see other districts that are implementing it. It was really difficult so we made the decision to continue with what we have for one more year so we can choose the right one.

#### Comments from the Public:

Ann Margaret Shannon stated UTEA president – 850 members, speaking tonight about the 14 non-renewal teachers. I'm very happy with Mr. Benaquista's statement. I still want to speak about what tenure is. Public employees – tenure is a guaranteed right to a job. Tenure is not a generally accepted accounting principle used to balance a budget. Tenure is an ability to perform and if teachers have not performed well based on their evaluation, the district does part ways with them. These elementary school teachers have proven that they do perform well and they should have the right to a job in the Union Public School system. The UTEA's position has always been that the Board of Education should try to find a way to keep these valuable teachers and I'm happy that this is happening. When people think of non-tenured teachers they think of young, inexperienced, recent college graduates and that these 14 teachers would have 14-28 years of combined experience but in this case that would be very wrong. These 14 teachers have a combined total of over 150 years of educational experience. As Mr. Benaquista stated, the Board has a way to renew them with the American Rescue Plan which allows to use this money to keep these teachers. I appreciate this but there is more to do. The ESSER funds are not just for one school year. You can use \$2.4 million for the next two years so we don't have to do this again.

Vivek Kalola stated teacher at Burnet Middle School. I'm here today to address the non-tenure teachers in support of them. It is news to me that there is resolution to these non-tenure teachers to come back which is great and I hope the Board votes yes on it in the near future. What is important about these non-tenured is that they do have a lot of experience. They do cover a wide range of years in the district teaching and some don't have their tenure yet which is a little disappointing. They are brought back year after year yet the system needs to be fixed because these individuals have to go through the non-tenure process over and that is very burdensome and look for new positions. The other thing I recognize is the problem with the lack of diversity amongst teachers. I would like to see a future committee be established to possibly keep track of teachers that have diverse backgrounds like myself. I'm American but my ethnic background is Indian and I'm proud to be one of the very few Indian teachers here in Union Township. This is my 11<sup>th</sup> year and I'm advocating for myself and advocating for others that are in my situation. There needs to be more of that in Union. I hope that the Board puts that into

consideration and possibly create a new committee in the future that oversees the teachers and the hiring process that pertains to diversity.

Richard D'Avanzo stated UTEA vice president. (inaudible) especially as we get to summer programs; teachers are inquiring. I would like to add that through the UTEA, we donated \$5,000 to help the Union High School Prom. (inaudible) public education in general – nothing new - the lack of high school seniors that are going to college to become educators and the many hoops they have to jump over. It is great news that we were able to bring back those 14. Several years ago we had over 200 rified teachers and we have lost some and we had issues with paras so going (inaudible).

Mrs. Roseberry stated are there summer programs for students under 3<sup>rd</sup> grade – other than at Franklin? Mr. McDowell stated Mr. Benaquista will reach out to you.

Susan Lipstein stated pleased to see that we are rehiring the 14 teachers. The last thing we need to do is loose experienced teachers. Also speaking on behalf of the Education Foundation, I want to thank Mr. Benaquista and Mr. Loessel for your cooperation in making sure our very first Arts for Education Program - fundraising program on May 20<sup>th</sup> – we had kids and parents and interested members of the public paint on the Livingston School playground; everything was set up for us and maintenance was ready. This was a first in public activity we had. It went beautifully. We had a lot of families that came. We will probably do one again. It was a wonderful experience because we had a district teacher working with the kids and parents and the money is going right back to the district – to the teachers and kids. We have been working for 20 years to supplement the educational programs in our district but we could not do it without the cooperation of the district. Thank you again Mr. Benaquista and Mr. Loessel for making sure that everything ran smoothly.

Laura Detjen stated I came to support the non-renewed teachers. I'm glad the teacher brought up the issue about diversity because it was on my mind. I'm positive there was no discrimination with because there is a non-renewal process but it is always understood that last hired is first fired. If we were to look at the demographics of this, it would reveal that perhaps we might have been a little slow or delayed to hire a more diverse staff. I'm ecstatic on the proposal of reinstatement but I really hope that moving forward we continue to have a staff who represents and resembles the student population and continue dedication to a very diverse community of both staff and students. The other thing I wasn't going to bring up tonight, but I went to vote today and we are virtual today because of the safety due to the election but it seems to be a lot of campaign signs on school property. It wasn't just where I vote at Washington School. Who is responsible for removing them? Someone mentioned that it is the school's responsibility, but the school was not in session. In the future, I hope that is taken care of because I think it is totally illegal and unethical.

Mr. Benaquista stated as soon as the district was made aware, Mr. Loessel and our employees removed them within 8-10 minutes and that the custodian should continue to monitor and remove signs.

Dr. Morgan asked why were they up? I think the rule needs to be sent out again so to make sure that doesn't happen again. Mr. Benaquista stated we tried to find out who put them up but we weren't getting any answers. I don't know who did it or when they were done but as soon as we found out we removed them.

Mr. Monge stated thank you Mr. Benaquista for that great news about the non-tenured teachers. I really appreciate hearing that. I do agree with you as it pertains to identifying a gap unfortunately in personnel and to deal with it. I don't necessarily agree with is the idea on how the process was on those 14. Ms. Shannon identified the great things about those 14; one was teacher of the year and a teacher of color was one of the 14. There has to be something as part of the process and that needs to be looked at.

As it pertains to the budget, Mrs. Koon you are doing an awesome job. It is amazing the decisions that you are influencing there – the idea of refreshing reserves and having that for a vote – awesome. Replacing the healthcare broker and renewing Willis (inaudible) that was a huge gap and they never should have been replaced.

As it pertains to Connect One, you have to look at the terms and I sent you an email. Mr. O'Shea, you should know that once we did an RFP when I was on the Board, we increased our income by \$100,000 and at one point it came close to \$200,000.

Christina stated I'm excited about the 14 teachers that were not going to be renewed – I'm so happy that they were able to come back. The union was really hard and so was the board of ed and I'm appreciative of that especially in the uncertain times. I don't know why people are still questioning the intentions behind it and saying that there needs to be a different process when the process was simply non-tenured teachers. It is a scary time (inaudible) and myself we're there to fight for the teachers. We need to start focusing on the positive and the great things that Mr. Benaquista and the Board members have done for this Town. For all the renewals, I am so excited for you and happy that you are coming back. God bless.

Mr. Benaquista stated maybe I wasn't clear – it is important for everyone to know, as well as the Board, the district had only 14 non-tenured elementary K-5. It is getting harder and harder – the non-tenured teachers – that is all the district had. We even had our pre-k director speak to our non-renewed elementary teachers to see about shifting people to pre-k. Pre-k is a different training and programs and she felt we are doing a great job but we still considered that. I don't want any one to think that there was a selection. In years past we used to ask the principals, you need to cut full-time employees, and they would give us names of their non-tenured. This year the principals couldn't do that because there wasn't enough non-tenured teachers in our district and next year we will be down to nine. I know Mr. Monge stated he didn't like the process but again there was no process, there were 14 non-tenured elementary K-5.

Dr. Francis stated it was your decision. Mr. Benaquista stated it was a collaborative decision about the budget and cutting 14 teachers with looking at our district class size. Mrs. Koon, 14 positions is approximately \$1.2 million. Mrs. Koon stated yes.

Dr. Francis stated there was an article that was out and Mr. McDowell responded. It was perceived that it was the Board's decision. It wasn't. Mr. McDowell stated I think I compounded his problem and I owe him an apology. What I was quoted in the article isn't all that I said. It was what I said but I certainly under no circumstance was this towards Mr. Benaquista on the budget. I know he got his budget people together and he said there was only 14 non-tenured teachers here but what I was trying to do and I did it poorly was to explain or defend the Board's position and in that explanation the last thing I was quoted on saying was "it was all in the hands of Mr. Benaquista" that is what I said but it was not what I meant – that is not all that I said but tonight I do want to apologize to him because it came across like I was blaming him. Mr. Benaquista and I spoke about this all along but again the article came out and it looked like the Board President blamed the Superintendent for not protecting the non-tenured and that was not the case so I do want to apologize to you for having said that; you have been through enough this year without me causing more garbage so I do apologize.

Mr. Benaquista stated thank you and what I'm saying Dr. Francis is the way the process is set up, yes the superintendent ultimately has to work with the BA and present a budget to the County but the way they have it set up is that there is even a time for the public to have their opinion in it and there is a time for the Board to vote. It is a collaborative effort and that is to make sure you are as a district being responsible because if at any point during that process we would have questioned something or wanted to change something or the budget got voted down, then we would have to go back to the table and readjust it. What I'm trying to say is our district fiscally is very tight and I have been saying it for years. We need to figure out ways. I'm very proud of the last five years I have been up here. Before 2015, when the district was hiring, 75% white compared to 25% minority and I'm talking all positions. Since then, we are at about 50%. Can we do better to then proportionately reflect our student populations – absolutely but part of it is that to be able to recruit and bring in talented figures that resemble your community is to make sure fiscally you can support and retain them. The process is the process. We want to move this district forward and go in the way that I think everyone has spoken about at times and it is realistic at times where we have to go. You need that fiscal situation fixed to make the other end work sustainable. My frustration as you know, Ms Shannon and her leadership team and Ms. Lorenzo and her leadership team, we can't move forward because we are constantly up against this every year – non-renewing teachers. Usually it is all summer long and working through and trying to figure out way to how to reduce one more and it finally gets presented and we are balanced and then we have everyone back and to me I just spent endless hours, all summer, about doing this and then everyone comes back – it is frustrating. It is not that I don't want these employees, I want to be able to keep them. Your employees are your biggest investment in your district and over a period of time, if you have an employee that stays with you until they retire, the amount of money that you put into that employee is phenomenal, incredible. It is the most important person that you have to invest in because they are the ones with your students. It is hard for me to swallow when we cannot retain our good teachers. I don't want to retain teachers that we tried to improve, we documented their improvement, and done it the right way and they are just not the right fit – that is fine but the good teachers that I had to sit with, and it is hard, they said to me thank you, you are the first person that sat with me and was honest and transparent. I'm being upfront and honest because I care about you. You can get a job in a district that you're not going to have to worry about being cut then you need to do that not that I want to lose you but because I want the best for you. I'm hoping this 12 months can buy us for

them being our employees next year. I want to be totally upfront. No superintendent, no Board wants to sit here and get rid of people that are good for their students. The only way that we brought these people back was because of the funds we got, otherwise I would be standing here, not that I wanted to lose them, but fiscally that would be the right thing to do as Acting Superintendent for this district today.

Mrs. Giner stated I know you wanted to address the public comments related to this but my recommendation would be if there are more comments related to this, wait until the end.

Ann Casey stated I'm a Washington teacher. I have been working in the district since 2013 and this is my fourth notice (inaudible) short of tenure. I would like to say that while I understand that people may not understand when you go through this over and over again some of you have gone through this before, it is a very cold and unfeeling process. It is very difficult to hear people make comments about what it feels like to be going through this process. We are speaking out so people acknowledge that this is not just a one time deal (inaudible) this is an ongoing process in the Township of Union Public Schools and it is unacceptable. I say that as a teacher and a parent. We should not be in this mess every single year.

It is a very cold and uncaring process and (inaudible) people sit there are very flip (inaudible). This has been a trying month for all 14 people. We are still teaching and meeting all the needs of the children every day and it is very frustrating to hear (inaudible). While I am appreciative and thankful to hear that 14 non-tenured teachers will be presented to the Board for a vote; frankly, we should not be in this situation again. We can't let go of people who show (inaudible) education of our children. The Township of Union schools has received over \$6.6 million in federal money. We can use this money to keep teachers (inaudible) social and emotional needs as we come out of this awful situation. However, it should be noted that 10 out of the 14 teachers will be in the same situation again next week. We have funds available and I urge the superintendent and the Board of Education to use that money to keep our teachers for the next year as well. I also urge you to find other sources of money. We need to reach out to representatives; there is money out there and we need to find that money so we are not in this situation every single year. This is not about 14 teachers being let go; this is about every child in the district having less teacher contact and having more students in their room.

Teacher at Franklin stated the 14 teachers that received non-renewed letters will be renewed pending Board approval. Bringing the educators back will eliminate having to increase the size of the classroom. Only four of the 14 teachers will become tenure next school year. If the budget is not balanced teachers are at risk of receiving the same letter next week. Unfortunately, our students will suffer. They will get larger classes and will not have proper support for their social emotional needs. The UTEA mentioned that the relief be used for the next two school years. Please consider allocating \$2.8 million for the educators so our students won't be in this position next year.

MOTION TO ADJOURN:

There being no further business before the Board in public session it was moved by Mrs. Regis-Darby, seconded by Dr. Morgan, that the meeting be adjourned at 9:43 p.m.

AYE: Mrs. Brens-Watson, Dr. Francis, Mrs. Minneci, Dr. Morgan, Mr. O'Shea,  
Mrs. Regis-Darby, Mrs. Ruiz, Mrs. Williams, Mr. McDowell

NAY: None

ABSTAIN: None

MOTION CARRIED

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

YOLANDA KOON  
BOARD SECRETARY

