Concord School District
Board of Education
Communications and Policy Committee

Date: June 10, 2019
Committee members present: Jennifer Patterson, Chair; Tom Croteau, Nancy Kane, Chuck Crush
Other Board members present: Barb Higgins, Liza Poinier, Jim Richards, Danielle Smith
Administration: Terri Forsten, Superintendent; Donna Palley, Assistant Superintendent

Jennifer Patterson called the meeting to order at 5:30 pm. The agenda included a focus on policies related to student safety; developing a pathway for reviewing the policies; a review of New Hampshire school-related policies required by law; and an opportunity for public comments.

Following events in the District this spring, the Board will review, revise and adopt several policies. In addition, student, parent and staff handbooks will be reviewed to ensure specific standards are communicated across the District; and professional development for all employees and instructional programs for all students relative to the policies and procedures will be instituted.

Pathway for Reviewing Policies

Concord School District Policy #141 Policy Development/Revision governs developing routine policies or revising existing policies using the following procedure:

1. The administration will prepare proposal with the rationale for change.
2. Policy proposals will be considered by the Communications and Policy Committee, which will make a recommendation to the full Board. Recommended policy proposals will be placed on the Board’s agenda for a first reading and voted on after a second reading at the following meeting.
3. If the policy is adopted, the administration will inform appropriate staff members of the Board’s action. If not adopted, action appropriate to the Board’s direction will be undertaken.
4. Emergency policies may be adopted by a two-thirds vote of the Board.
5. Policies will be reviewed periodically.

Superintendent Forsten noted that the Committee will create a process for gathering input from stakeholders and, after this, will examine student, parent and staff handbooks, create professional development for all employees, and develop instructional programs relative to policies and procedures.
The New Hampshire School Boards Association (NHSBA) has developed sample policies for the 71 policies required by law. Five of those policies are related to the topic of students and/or staff in the areas of safety, violence, abuse, neglect and/or harassment. These five, together with the specific legal requirement, are:

Employment References and Verification (GADA)
(Prohibiting Aiding and Abetting of Sexual Abuse) required by 20 U.S.C. 7926(a) (§8546(a) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/Every Student Succeeds Act

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence – Employees (GBAA)
Ed 303.01(j), Sexual Harassment, Ed 306.04(a)(9), Student Harassment, RSA 354-A:7, Unlawful Discriminatory Practices

Sexual Harassment and Student Violence – Students (JBA)
Ed 303.01(j), Sexual Harassment, Ed 306.04(a)(9), Sexual Harassment

Pupil Safety and Violence Prevention (JICK)
RSA 189:70, Educational Institution Policies on Social Media RSA 193-F, Pupil Safety and Violence Prevention Act RSA 570-A:2, Capture of Audio Recordings on School Buses Allowed Ed 306.04(a)(8), Student Harassment

Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect (JLF)

Superintendent Forsten suggested 19 policies (and related forms) for the Committee’s review, both from NHSBA and existing CSD policies.

Employment References and Verifications (NHSBA)
Staff Ethics (NHSBA)
Staff Conduct (NHSBA)
Professional Expectations (CSD)
Employee-Student Relations (NHSBA)
Sexual Harassment (CSD)
Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence (NHSBA)
Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect (NHSBA)
Child Abuse and Neglect (CSD)
Code of Student Conduct (CSD)
Student Conduct (NHSBA)
Pupil Safety and Violence Prevention – Bullying (NHSBA)
Student Safety and Violence Prevention – Bullying (CSD)
Committee Chair Patterson stated that it was important to analyze the policies that the District did have in place, to see where there might be gaps in policies that need to be filled. Equally importantly, the Committee should review how these policies appear from the perspective of a student, or a staff member. The Committee needs to view these issues from a broader perspective so that the District is prepared for the fall with clear handbooks and professional development.

Committee member Chuck Crush suggested that the Committee needs to decide how to hear from agencies, community partners and the public and to develop policies properly, in a timely manner. He asked if Committee members could receive a synopsis of the procedure attached to each policy.

Ms. Patterson suggested that Committee members each analyze a group of policies and create this synopsis. Mr. Croteau suggested that Committee members partner for this analysis.

Board member Barb Higgins suggested looking at how easily a policy can be implemented, and how parents, students, teachers and community members could be incorporated into this study.

Mr. Crush asked whether a separate area of the website could be created to display the policies under discussion, both for Committee members and the public.

Committee member Nancy Kane asked what the Committee goal was in terms of analyzing groups of policies, and how the Committee would prioritize its work. She suggested starting with the five policies required by law.

Ms. Patterson said that the five policies required by law are in place, but the bigger question is how they interact with each other. She suggested, for example, asking whether how child abuse/neglect is reported has changed, or whether the NH DOE staff ethics policy has a CSD policy counterpart.

Mr. Crush said that, in light of the recent arrest, the Board as a whole may want to address how to help the public feel more comfortable.

Superintendent Forsten wondered whether the study process that was used for the early childhood education process would work for the examination of these related policies, and described that process.
Ms. Patterson said the current committee physical set-up was not conducive to involvement with the public. Ms. Kane suggested the Committee might be interested in the public’s input but that it was the Committee’s job to create the framework. While most of the policies are in place, creating awareness and focusing on implementation might be the next necessary task.

Mr. Croteau suggested developing essential questions and keeping the work focused enough so that it could be accomplished by the fall.

Mr. Crush suggested including teachers, the police department, students, parents, community partners and others.

Ms. Kane asked if a similar process could be used to develop the professional development part of this Committee’s work.

Ms. Patterson asked whether this group and process could be assembled by the July 8 meeting. She then opened the floor to public comment, following Policy #136 Public Participation at Board Meetings.

Concord resident Paula Czech-Lesmerises, retired RN (BS in mental health), said she has thought about the June 3 Board meeting and how she could be helpful to the Committee. She suggested that changes in the hiring process might be required, cautioning that relying on the criminal background process might be insufficient. She suggested checking how frequently a teacher had moved from school to school. Instituting a hotline would be useful. She recommended annual, mandatory training once the policies are instituted. She suggested that policies start with verbs. She described how trauma affects very young children; they may not be able to process what is happening to them cognitively; the effects are primarily emotional. An abused child is not going to voluntarily tell what is happening to them. The best way to find out is to ask a general question: “Is there anyone making you feel badly about yourself?” Ms. Czech-Lesmerises described her own experience: she was in therapy about 3 months before the psychologist asked her a life-changing question: “Did your stepfather ever touch you inappropriately?” She reminded everyone that all New Hampshire residents are mandated reporters.

Concord resident Dellie Champagne said she was hoping the Committee would prioritize and focus on reporting procedures. She commented that the child who reported her suspicions when she was a student at Rundlett, was not believed and received a 3-day suspension, has been traumatized since then and is still working to get over it. She said she had been worried about retaliation against her own children in the past.

Concord resident Virginia (Gina) Cannon stated that the lack of involvement by the community had been distressing to her. She stated that it was the community’s responsibility to get involved in these issues and give their opinions.

Concord resident Sarah Sadowski thanked the Board for its work on the policies and noted that children on IEPs are at particular risk for abuse. She spoke briefly about training for staff as mandatory reporters. She asked whether it was a fact that a student
had come forward about this individual several years ago; Mr. Croteau answered that it was true. She suggested that because the process could be intimidating, “workshopping” might be productive.

Ms. Patterson remarked that where there is ongoing criminal investigation outside the Board’s control, Board members must be careful not to say anything that might impede a criminal investigation.

Concord resident Melissa Hinebauch thanked Board members for their service to the community. She said that she has three children; two in Concord schools. She said it had been difficult getting a call from CHS saying that her child’s case manager had been arrested for sexual assault against a student, knowing that her child and a number of her child’s friends spent a great deal of time with this teacher. She said she wants to know that her children are not in danger of abuse and that the Board’s priority should be on mandatory reporting. She also said she was not informed that her child had a new case manager for an entire month.

Ms. Patterson reminded the Committee that they do want to make sure the needs of special education students are taken into consideration.

Concord resident Amy Girouard asked Committee members to spend time considering how frightening it could be for a parent to send their child to school and worry that their child might not be safe. She reminded the Committee that everyone in New Hampshire is a mandated reporter. She said that the District culture needs to change. Serious work needs to be put in around the District, especially at RMS and CHS. She said that non-speaking children are at particular risk. She asked whether staff are aware of how to assess changes in behavior in non-verbal children. She said that children are in the care of the District and trust that when they go to school, they will be safe.

Concord resident Brian Harlow said he shared legal guardianship of five children, who are currently in the Bedford school system. He noted that trauma impacts learning. The younger children will be coming to live with him in Concord. He said that a hotline for adults is great; but not for middle or high schoolers – the District needs to “meet them where they are” (Snapchat; Instagram, or other). While it would be unreasonable to expect that the Concord School District will never have a predator in its midst, as taxpayers and parents, it is reasonable to expect that the response will always be on point. He stated that it is a different experience to be a parent of a child with special needs; they are much more vulnerable to predators. He said that the testimony of an emotionally delayed child, if it ever came, would be traumatic for the child. He said that there is no such thing as an appropriate “relationship” between a child and an adult.

There was no further public comment.

The next meeting was scheduled for July 8, 2019, at which time the process of review and revision of policies would continue.
Mr. Crush said that he had made notes of the salient points made by the speakers. He cited the NH RSA relative to mandatory reporting and said attention must be paid to honor that. He suggested the Committee might want to invite a representative of DHHS to the work group. He said he was disturbed to hear concerns about trust and transparency.

A motion was made to adjourn.

Committee members voted 4-0 to adjourn (motioned by Mr. Crush, seconded by Ms. Kane).

The meeting adjourned at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Patterson, Chair
Linden Jackett, Recorder