

COLCHESTER SCHOOL DISTRICT

Board of Education Special Meeting
Colchester High School Library

Tuesday, June 22, 2021
7:00 p.m.

MINUTES (General Session)

The Colchester Board of Education held a special board meeting on Tuesday, June 22, 2021, in the Colchester High School Library. Those in attendance were Board Chair Craig Kieny, Directors: Lindsey Cox, Nic Longo, Laurie Kigonya, and Ben Yousey-Hindes; Superintendent Amy Minor; Director of Special Education Carrie Lutz; and Director of Curriculum Gwendolyn Carmolli; and approximately two dozen community members.

I. Call to Order & Pledge of Allegiance

Board Chair Craig Kieny called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

II. Discussion and Decision Regarding the Black Lives Matter Flag

Action

Board Chair Kieny recounted the history of why the school board decided to raise the Black Lives Matter (BLM) flag. At the July 7, 2020 meeting, following numerous letters and statements from students and employees, the school board passed a resolution that the BLM flag would be flown at each school for the 2020-2021 school year. At that meeting, the board committed to reviewing raising the flag on an annual basis. Board Chair Kieny read the resolution and motion from that meeting and the statement that the board wrote to the community on August 18, 2020, explaining their decision.

Based on the board's resolution from the July 7, 2020 meeting, the flag is scheduled to come down at the end of June unless action is taken under district policy E11: Flagpole Requests. The purpose of this meeting was to determine if the board would continue to fly the BLM flag at CSD schools throughout the summer and into next school year. Board Chair Kieny then opened the meeting up to comments from community members in attendance.

Genna Barnaby stated that in her opinion, the BLM logo and flags were designed specifically to depict its political activist organization and that it should not fly on school campuses. She asked the board to consider a school-created flag that would symbolize the district's mission statement.

Steve Stringer stated that he opposes racism, however, he questioned the efficacy of flying the BLM flag as a means to address the issue. He shared that the mission statement of the BLM organization challenges his personal beliefs. He offered to help the district achieve a common goal of having everyone treated fairly with respect but suggested it not be racially charged.

Kathy Henry stated she believes that BLM is a truism and that it should go without saying. She stated that the United States should enforce constitutional and federal laws for everyone and that many people of different groups have been discriminated against. She shared her experience as a woman being discriminated against and harassed in the workplace by men. She then compared that experience to BLM and said that she would not advocate for violence against men, suggesting that BLM advocates for violence against its perpetrators. She stated that students in public schools should be taught how to think, but not what to think. She stated students should discuss BLM in

appropriate classes but that the school should not insinuate that BLM is something they should automatically agree with. She asked the district to not fly the flag because it is political and the BLM organization gives most of its money to the democratic party.

Ted Stokes stated that it embarrasses him when he sees the BLM flying at Porters Point School. He listed some of the goals of the BLM organization and stated he believes the students are being indoctrinated by the school. He shared that he called the superintendent's office in the fall to voice his discontent and was told the BLM flag was raised after CHS students advocated for it. He stated the schools do not belong to the students because they don't vote or pay taxes. He stated the schools belong to taxpayers and asked that the district not fly the BLM flag. He suggested the district go with something more inclusive or abstain from flying anything related to BLM.

Alisha Jacobs lives in Essex but asked the board chair for permission to speak since her nieces go to school in Colchester. She stated the BLM flag flying at the schools lacks context in differentiating itself from the organization.

Susan Stokes shared that she feels embarrassed knowing what the organization represents. She stated BLM is unAmerican and it frightens her. She expressed concern for when her two-year-old family member is old enough to attend school and what he'll be taught. She stated that she is not a racist and that all lives matter. She asked how students who are white, brown, or Asian feel about the flag. She suggested removing the flag and only fly the American and Vermont flags.

With no other community members requesting to speak, the board shared their individual opinions and engaged in a discussion with each other about what to do next.

Director Lindsey Cox shared that as a school board member and parent of a child in the district, she is in favor of continuing to fly the BLM flag. She believes it is important as leaders in the district and as people in power, that the school board demonstrates a commitment to address systemic racism. She stated that the ultimate goal is to welcome all students and to make them feel safe in school. She thanked the community members in attendance for voicing their opinions as well as those who have emailed. She stated it is important to keep talking about racism and with that in mind, she voiced her support to fly the flag for another three months to continue the conversation.

Director Nic Longo shared his appreciation for all of the community input. He stated that his opinion has not changed from a year ago and he continues to support flying the BLM flag. He shared that the comments he heard tonight solidified his decision. He is not embarrassed to fly the BLM flag; he is actually incredibly proud. He stated he is prepared to engage in difficult conversations that may better support the students in the district. He also shared excitement for the district's new diversity, inclusion, and equity coordinator, a position the board will vote on later in the agenda. He stated this position will support the school and staff in this work.

Director Laurie Kigonya stated the district needs to prepare students to be informed adults who are supported for who they are, regardless of where they come from. She stated that it is important for community members to evolve their views and to challenge themselves to differentiate from the way they may have been raised and embrace new and different ways of thinking. She shared that students in the district are very wise and aware of what is going on in the community. She stated the board raised the BLM flag with student support and that solidifies her rationale to continue flying it.

Director Ben Yousey-Hines thanked community members for their attendance. He shared that at the last meeting, he too voiced concerns about the BLM organization and subsequently did research to prepare for this meeting. He learned that BLM is a decentralized social movement and that the government has repeatedly denied a trademark since the name is used by multiple organizations and movements. He stated that after learning more about the BLM movement, he deeply believes in its goals and he firmly declared his support for continuing to fly the BLM flag.

Board Chair Craig Kieny shared that he voted in favor of flying the flag last year for all of the reasons already articulated by his fellow board members. At an earlier meeting in June, he offered the option of flying a more inclusive flag, such as “equity for all”. He shared his concerns about the implicit connection of the BLM flag with the organization and shared that his preference would be to fly an “equity for all flag”. However, given the recent statements by board members, it was clear to him that motion of that nature would fail. He engaged the board by asking what the benefits are to flying the BLM flag as opposed to an alternative flag with an anti-racism or more inclusive theme.

Director Longo liked the possibility of Director Kieny’s idea and while he shared it wouldn’t change his decision tonight, he proposed the board explore that option over the next three months. Director Kieny added that it would be ideal to have students involved in the design of a potential new flag so it would be beneficial to do it while school was in session.

The meeting was interrupted by an outburst from an audience member.

Director Cox stated that the original motion identified the raising of the BLM flag as a symbolic action to show students and the community that the board and the district are working to best address some of the systemic inequities that have existed throughout the years. She stated the pandemic put a lot of the board’s equity training and learning opportunities on hold but that she would like to create a structure to review policies with an equity lens.

The meeting was interrupted by another outburst from an audience member. Following the outburst, the majority of the audience left the library.

Director Cox continued to say her concern with flying a flag other than the BLM flag would be a potential loss of intended impact and effect on students. She agreed that student voice is critical to this decision and that the board should get their feedback to ensure that they are honoring the district’s vision and mission statement.

Director Kigonya stated that a more inclusive flag may be a good option and suggested that maybe the student body could help design what that flag looks like so they can feel heard, supported, and make their own impact. She believes it’s a worthy conversation to have.

Director Yousey-Hines stated he wants to make sure the board is supporting students by creating spaces where every student can feel empowered to learn and to fill their potential. He stated that whatever the flag is, he wants it to be supported by curriculum with a focus on the educational components that go along with conversations. He stated he would prefer to fly the BLM flag until there can be a deeper conversation with administration, school leadership, and students. He proposed to fly the flag through the summer for the maximum allowable three months. Once school is back in session, the district would communicate the flag request policy with students and encourage them to participate in the process. Board members and the central office administrators discussed the different ways they could communicate and engage with students.

Director Yousey-Hindes moved to continue to fly the BLM flag at all district schools for the first three months of the 2021-2022 school year, July 1 through September 30, seconded by Director Kigonya. The motion passed 4-1, with Board Chair Kieny voting against.

After the vote, Board Chair Kieny stated he fully supports the reasons for flying the flag, however, he thinks the flag should be more inclusive which is the only reason why he voted against the motion.

III. Approval of Personnel Consent Agenda

Action

The following Personnel Consent Agenda was reviewed by the board.

Director Kigonya moved to approve the Personnel Consent Agenda for June 22, 2021, as provided. The motion passed unanimously.

IV. Approval of Special Meeting Minutes: June 14, 2021

Action

Director Cox moved to approve the special minutes from the meeting held on June 14, 2021. The motion passed unanimously.

V. Approval of Meeting Minutes: June 15, 2021

Action

Director Longo moved to approve the minutes from the meeting held on June 15, 2021. The motion passed unanimously.

VI. Adjournment

Director Yousey-Hindes moved to adjourn at 8:14 p.m. The motion passed unanimously.

Recorder:


Meghan Baule
Recording Secretary

Board Clerk:


~~Nic Longo~~ Craig Kreny
Board Clerk
Chair