WEST HAVEN BOARD OF EDUCATION  
July 24, 2018  
Special Meeting Minutes  
Board Meeting Room

A Special Meeting of the Board of Education was held on July 24, 2018 in the Board’s Meeting Room on the second floor of City Hall, 355 Main Street, West Haven, Connecticut. The meeting was called to order at 5:30 PM by Rosemary Russo, Chairwoman of the Board of Education with a pledge to the flag.

Agenda: Workshop with CABE on development of Goals for Board of Education  
Members and the Superintendent of Schools

BOARD MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:  
Rosemary Russo, Chairwoman  
Robert Guthrie, Vice Chair  
Susan Walker, Secretary/Treasurer  
Lauren A. Aceto  
Patricia Libero  
Patrick Leigh  
Karen Pacelli  
Rosa Richardson

BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT:  
James W. Morrissey

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT:  
Neil Cavallaro, Superintendent of Schools  
Matt Cavallaro, Director of Finance

CITY OFFICIALS PRESENT:

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES PRESENT:

Chairwoman Russo said Nick Caruso from CABE is here to help guide us with goals for our Superintendent and board goals if we have time. We are very fortunate to have him with us tonight.

Nick Caruso said we will start with Neil’s goals because if we talk about your goals it also will be the district goals. We want to make sure we are not replicating goals that have already been done so he asked Neil to update him. Superintendent Cavallaro said he has some previous goals and has made a list of priorities which we all need to be aware of going into this year. His old goals talked about fiscal management and student achievement and we may be able to develop goals from there.

The high school will be a priority. The WHHS Construction Project is in full gear and we need to do a really good job of communicating with staff and the general public as to the status of the project, what is
available, how things may change by moving classrooms and those kinds of things. We want to look at the high school because it is not moving as well academically as other schools.

We need to support academics and the administrators. Last year we lost an administrator because we eliminated a position. Our principal unfortunately has been ill with cancer so we are really down and will watch the administrative team this year to address their needs. We will look at putting some of our district wide coordinators and our Assistant Superintendent there to spend some time this year to help them run the day to day operations. We want to look at the roles of the people at the high school; our department heads and coordinators and how we will utilize them. We will look at different scheduling and all of this while a construction project is occurring. The high cost of technology throughout the school district was discussed. When the new school opens we want to be set. We have to look at professional development at the high school.

The budget will be a priority and is going to be a problem. Even though everybody says the BOE did it again, we have fewer positions this year than last year. The Mayor gave us $400,000.00 and we were receiving $600,000.00 as an Alliance District and she was going to take $200,000.00 but didn’t realize the money came directly to us so we were able to get 1M. Let’s not assume this will happen next year. In some of the early plans we have seen she will flat fund us through the city and we will only get money through our Alliance increase and that is subject to change so we have to be mindful of this. Obviously the budget is a priority and it is #1.

Our Capital Plan has not been funded; we have aging buildings, roofs that are in need of repair, trucks that are 20 years old and in need of replacement and we have to find a way to address these needs. There will be challenges going forward. Things that fell into place should not be counted on next year.

We have negotiations with the teachers in September and have a wage reopener. We are probably looking at getting a freeze for teachers next year and that means we could lose some teachers. Patrick asked if we do go to tier 4 will MARB take over our financials. Neil explained to Mr. Caruso that we are one of two cities along with Hartford where finances are so out of order that we are subject to a state review board. The city’s plan has not been approved but Hartford’s has been and they received most of the money and we are looking for some. In tier 4 MARB would actually take control of the government and that would include our finances. The teachers still receive the benefit of arbitration but the other unions do not according to the legislation. Neil said health benefits are booked to the BOE when bills are received because we are self-insured. We run a surplus because if we don’t and we have a bad year benefit wise we could very easily end the year in a deficit. MARB is saying that the city has to create some kind of a fund balance for when these kinds of things happen. We want to educate the kids but finances are going to rule the day. We are a little behind the 8 ball with technology and we want to provide access to all students and look at tablets and more communication through google docs back and forth with teachers and online books and we aren’t going to get there unless we fund a capital plan. When the city gets their house in order we can move forward with these kinds of plans.

Mr. Caruso said one of the challenges and this is for the board to think about is that when the financial situation is so grim people look to you as the reason it happened or it is your fault. The reality is that what we have is not a spending problem. You are not spending money illogically or poorly or wasting money; school districts are not doing this. For the last 25 – 30 years there has been a steady decline in resources. Who would think you would be happy because you are an Alliance District but those are the increases. Neil said the Alliance District is nice and has helped us, but suppose they look at formulas and try to level the playing field a little more, are we going to be able to rely on the positions we created. Mr. Caruso said this is a resource problem rather than a spending problem. Unfortunately it doesn’t help
in your bottom line but it may help if you have the attitude that you are doing your share and we don’t need to apologize because we need more money. We are doing what we have been asked to do; we are agents of the state and our responsibility is to support the state’s interest in public schools and to be their agent because those children 20 years from now are either going to be successful or they are not. Whatever happens to them happens because of what happens in their schools. Until they fix the budget and state budget this will be a problem. We all need to do a better job of articulating what happens if they cut funds. Communication is important because we have to get people to understand why we do it and why it is important to the community. A lengthy discussion took place.

Mr. Caruso said you have heard Neil talk about what is on his radar screen and asked board members what is on your radar screen that isn’t up here. Patrick said it is great to highlight the high school but we should do the district as a whole for academics. Nick said he is sure when you emphasize one you are not pushing the other stuff aside but you don’t want to lose sight of the idea it is all a priority. Rosemary said to piggyback on your first one we are very weak in communicating to let parents know what is going on; just communication in general. Bob said a couple of years ago we had very good communication and we had a communications director who left for greener pastures which was understood. We didn’t have the funds to keep her. Most parents are expecting to see information on their app. Neil said parents would know if the busses were 10 minutes late that is how good it was. This led to a long discussion about the need for a person in charge of this not someone who already has a position and helps with this as it is a time consuming position. Superintendent Cavallaro said this makes us proactive and we were able to highlight students, teachers, and programs that give the community a sense that the money is being well spent. This position has been sorely missed because once your website is up to date and all the meetings are posted and then it is not people notice the difference. Mr. Caruso said during our Light House training we have a module on community engagement. We could do that module for you without going through the whole process.

Rosa Richardson doesn’t believe that public schools should be open on days of elections; i.e. primaries for safety reasons. The other area Rosa addressed is changing the dress code for both teachers and students. This is a hot topic and not everyone agrees but our community has become very diverse and this is something we need to look at and research. She doesn’t want to use the word uniform because some people get offended by that phrase but based on the way our community has changed and its diversity we are not only an Alliance district but every school in our municipality gets free lunch now; so what is that telling us. For $3.95 a parent can go to Walmart and buy the uniform shirt and for $5.95 the pants.

Pat Libero said when you talk about communication we kept our budget in tact by not replacing people who left so fewer people are doing more things so you can’t give the communication position to this person or that person because they have already taken on other responsibilities. The woman we had was really good and she wrote a lot for the West Haven Voice and would research things on her own and replacing her is something we could do at some point in time if we could get money for a grant for her but in the meantime it is really difficult to ask someone else to do this because it was a full time job for her and she was at night meetings, day meetings and she was wonderful. She went out of her way to do a really great job and that is really what we miss. Mr. Caruso said when a person like that leaves and you have a problem rather than say let’s just get another person it is important to identify what your need is in communication and if there is another way. In a lot of districts you expect your school administration to be key communicators. The principals have to market their school at least with the local press. Have they ever been trained to do that? Your responsibility is to provide tools so people can be successful so maybe there is a role for your building administrators in talking with parents and people in the community. With some quality professional development and communication skills would that
help them do their job more effectively? It all starts with what is it we really need to do. We want to make sure parents aren’t cut short when their kids are sent home early and they aren’t able to be home to welcome the bus or if we close school early for a snow storm. Part of this conversation could be talked about in a module we with community engagement so you don’t have to think of this stuff all by yourself we can help work through this with you. If you have so much to do where will it have the biggest impact on what we are trying to get done?

Patrick Leigh said maybe this is a sub under the budget. Two areas we struggle with most are tuition and health because we don’t know what is coming in and going out. Patrick said we really need to pressure the legislator to put caps on some of these tuitions. These are Special Ed costs. Mr. Caruso said unfortunately you won’t see the legislature touch Special Ed. Patrick said we may get one or two kids that will cost us $500,000.00 to outsource. Mr. Caruso said we are actively working during the entire legislative session with board members to lobby them to give testimony and write letters and there is lots of opportunity for people who want to get involved to make a difference. If you have the interest we can get you on the list to be part of this. It is important work and fortunately you are not too far from Hartford compared to some board members. Bob Guthrie said when you attend these groups you realize you are not unique and other people have the same struggles.

Mr. Caruso said it sounds like there is consensus that these are the things that you really feel have to be prioritized for this year. Bob Guthrie said we know MARB is here until there are three balanced budgets; is that three years, is that five years or is that six years down the road no one knows. We know MARB is around at least for four years; that is his personal easy opinion. For the next four years our responsibility and our role is to keep trying to move forward and he thinks to continue to fight for the money and to fight for the academics and to fight for the class sizes are probably the three largest priorities. Last year we had a good number of staff show up and pack the room for the budget meetings. Numbers mean something. The Superintendent spoke, Chairwoman Russo spoke on behalf of the board and the board members stood behind her so there was unity and the next couple of years are going to be tough.

Bob Guthrie supports the Superintendent and this board to create a Capital Plan maybe it is 20 years down the road, maybe none of us will ever see it, maybe none of this will happen but we know what buildings need repairs and what needs to be replaced so make a one or two page list and present it to the City Council so when that air conditioning or ventilation goes wrong we can say we told you three years ago this stuff needs to be replaced. He gets it that there is no money but that is one of the things the Mayor is being chastised by MARB for because she set no Capitol Improvement. Whether it is in your own house or the city something is going to break and you will have to replace it. Rosa said and it is not just going to be a sewer line. Mr. Caruso said the day before school started the director of facilities would get a mini bus and all the board would visit all the schools. Board members stated they have done this previously. Mr. Caruso said you see the schools at their best but you also are seeing some of the things that aren’t working well just to remind you that there are capital needs. He suggested inviting the City Council members and the Mayor to come with you a week before school opens to make them aware of areas in need and how much effort is needed to keep older equipment going because we can’t afford to replace it. Superintendent Cavallaro said our oldest school building is Washington School which is 110 years old. When you walk up the hallways there are narrow stairwells and if you try to drill a hole to fix something and it will cost you a million dollars because you have to abate and do all the little things. How much more money do you want to put into something that has outlived its useful life expectancy. With the reimbursement rate that West Haven has 77% why don’t we have all brand new facilities instead of piece meal it all together. The last board asked the city to fund a long range study to look at our needs, take enrollment into consideration, and look at who are we are educating because we have a
growing Hispanic population so we offer a lot of bilingual programs. These are the things that are really a priority around here. Mr. Caruso said when looking at the profile today he hadn't realized that our minority population had shifted so much. Superintendent Cavallaro said he thinks the Hispanic population will overtake white as the most and then white will be second and African American will be third by the end of this school year. Mr. Caruso said having good schools matter; it matters to your property value, it matters to the businesses coming in, it matters in the type of jobs that people are getting and there is such incredible value to that. Superintendent Cavallaro said what the people in this community don't realize is what a bargain you get from the school system. Our schools are being used as community centers and resources and they are always available. No one is taking into consideration the cost of keeping a school open on a Friday or Saturday night and this is a strain on our budget right now.

Mr. Caruso said 25 years ago they looked at that and back then it cost $200 just to open the door when an event took place at night between the custodian etc. and he couldn't imagine what it would cost now probably more like $1,000.00. We said to the town we want you to come in we are not going to make a profit on this but we want to recover our costs. Superintendent Cavallaro said he knows CABE has a policy and this is something we can consider but remember you will see 50 people in line here or at the Mayor's Office; it is a battle you have to decide. Mr. Caruso feels this is a policy decision not a budget decision. Sue Walker said she doesn't think the city realizes because they look at the fact that we didn't lay off anyone but how many para positions, teacher positions, administrator positions have we lost by not hiring anyone for them so it is not that we haven't been cutting our budget down but they don't realize this because they don't see anyone saying I was laid off. Nick Caruso said Neil made an interesting point at the beginning when he said we will probably get a zero increase next year. If towns around you are paying more they will get the really good teachers. Neil said we have been lucky the last couple of contracts and he believes we owe the teachers because they did take a couple of hard zeroes and freezes and if we go back to the old cycle we will lose teachers that we have invested in and trained in professional development. They will take jobs in other districts because they see a way to advance. The younger teachers especially those in the shortage areas of math, science and world language will go they are flexible; they are not afraid to move. Sue Walker said there are some great teachers out there in other systems that we lost. Mr. Caruso said professional development can be a big plus because if a person feels supported, they feel appreciated; it is not all about the money. If it reaches a huge difference and if you have families you have to think about it but if you have an environment where people like to go to school and love to teach that has a lot to do with retention too. He worked with a district and their goal was to be a great place to work. This meant a whole lot because it meant people are treated like professionals, trained by professionals and there is a great climate in the district. Superintendent Cavallaro said we used to be able to hire interns for the district and once they were here they liked being here and wanted to work here and we were able to hire many of them; they wouldn't even think of looking elsewhere. It was a great program and a good way to get people who wouldn't think of West Haven before spending time in our district.

Chairwoman Russo thinks it is important to visit schools while they are in session so they know we are around to support them. It is important for us to know the administrators and as many teachers as we can. They feel good when you take an interest in them and their schools; it goes a long way. Mr. Caruso said absolutely that is part of your role as communicators to have part of your job be to make the staff feel appreciated and through work at the board to make sure we are all holding ourselves accountable. It is all about teaching and learning and at the end of the day we want to know kids are learning. It is important to celebrate the differences in children and to work really hard to teach them the way they learn. This is harder work but it is also harder to change the dynamics; we have to teach the teachers and help them learn how to do that; that is professional development. Rosa applauds our administrators and teachers because there have been great strides in our elementary schools and if we can take that now and
move it up it will be awesome. Mr. Caruso said if they go into the traditional model after having these teaching styles nobody will be successful. Chairwoman Russo thinks it is smart to have the coordinators and Dr. Druzolowski go to the high school now because our elementary schools struggled for a long time and we did a lot of professional development and her hope is that when we do this at the high school you will have a different mindset; you will have to change people but she also agrees that going from an older building to a new building also adds a spark to people. Superintendent Cavallaro thinks the technology alone just the things that will be available will help. Chairwoman Russo is really hopeful for the high school.

Mr. Caruso said certain things have to be a priority starting with the whole status of the high school between getting the building ready and having staff ready for the changes that will be available once the building is competed. The high school modifications have to be a major part of what happens this year. Pat Libero said last year with graduation there was no parking it was all construction and people got used to that and she thinks the team at the high school and Pam Gardner the principal helped with the transition to have shuttle buses etc. Bailey graduated at the high school on Friday and the high school graduated on Monday. The Bailey graduation on Friday went very smoothly and was very well run. They sent out an email, a voice mail and it was on the website. When it came time for the high school graduation it went very well so we are able to communicate. There has been a lot of communication about the classes moving etc. and they are really trying at the high school so we can do it but it takes a lot of effort. Superintendent Cavallaro said they did an outstanding job but those are things you don’t normally do in addition to all of your other responsibilities. That is above and beyond what the normal expectation is and there is only more of that to come this year. Mr. Caruso said this speaks to the people’s willingness to do it and part of your challenge is to make sure they feel acknowledged and recognized when they do this and support them when they need support because something else didn’t get put off in order for that to happen. What do we have to do to make sure that they feel so good about it that they will keep doing that? This is something you might want to talk about and say look we could have had a real problem but people stepped up. Pat said they had meetings with the police; fireman and everyone came to meetings in order to have this run smoothly. Mr. Caruso asked if you pay the police overtime out of your budget. Neil said for events like this yes. Our resource officers are good and this is built into their salaries but for special events like graduation it has to happen. We also have a very good security team that we contract with who does a good job. Rosa Richardson said what about elections. Superintendent Cavallaro said we utilize all of our school resource officers and give them to the city that day in order to watch the gyms etc. to make sure our kids are safe. It is an expense that we took on over the years. Rosa said so who is paying us? Neil agrees with Rosa. Sue Walker is on the Library Board also and they have talked about how some of the branch libraries will hold the primaries in the future and that will relieve Pagels and Forest. Bob Guthrie said this year a primary won’t be a problem because it is in August. Years ago there was a police officer for every building. Bob said the PTA’s would miss the bake sale money. Rosa and Sue said they can go to the library or whatever facility the primary is being held in. Rosa found in each voting district an alternate site so we didn’t have to use the schools. Superintendent Cavallaro said one of the difficulties with a primary is that you don’t know there is going to be a primary so you set the calendar and then it is very hard the second week of school to just close the buildings. We have worked very closely with the police department and we have been able to deploy the resource officers to the polling places and at our expense we have moved or added extra phone lines and other things we needed to do. Rosa said security should be the #1 priority for our students across the board for everybody not just board of education members and we need to be more vocal about it. Mr. Caruso said Neil talked about the need for a Long Term Capital Plan and an argument could be made that part of that plan should be looking at school security and while looking at the issue of school security you can control ingress and egress better when it is not open to the public.
We don’t allow the public to walk into our schools the other 365 days of the year and why should we allow it then.

Lauren Aceto asked if we are trying to come up with goals for Neil or goals for us as a board. Mr. Caruso said as these goals are unfolding they are kind of for both. Lauren feels we need to communicate with the city that the board of education is in a precarious financial situation. We need to communicate it to the residents and with the different issues that have come up from little committees on how to deal with them and give presentations to the city council and address how meeting our financial needs will benefit the city as a whole. Freezing the teacher’s salaries can damage the city as a whole because teachers will leave and that needs to be known all around. A further discussion took place.

Superintendent Cavallaro said it will be great to have a new facility in two or three years but there are kids going to school there now and that to him is the biggest priority going into the school year. Mr. Caruso said programmatic changes aren’t just for the kids in two or three years they are starting to change now to make sure that these kids are getting the best they can get. To reiterate again:

The high school is big.

The whole issue of budget in terms of communication because it sounds like you have gotten good at getting everything you can get from what you have received and to get more people to understand what a challenge this is and to solicit more support.

The 5 Year Capital plan can be folded into a goal regarding the budget because money is wasted on old equipment, boilers etc. that break and need to be fixed because we didn’t plan for it.

A Long Term Study but where does that money come from; that is more of a capital expense. You are looking at a study that accesses the needs of your buildings, population and enrollment and this would cost $100,000 to $150,000 which would come out of our budget. This is something that is necessary and we have to fight for. The 77% reimbursement rate is really 87 or 90% because you are more efficient and you are not purchasing materials and desks and things like that you have to do every year and technology has to be a part of this.

Communication - Positive school climate to make sure people are appreciated for what they do especially because MARB is here and it is so unsettled. Teachers purchase items for their classrooms because of the lack of funds in the budget. Kids learn better when they feel safe and when teachers come to school feeling great about learning.

Mr. Caruso thinks there needs to be some work on developing an action plan on communication which is a dual thing. The board will have responsibility to make sure they do what has to be done and Neil will think about himself and his staff as to what they need in order to make this work. It might mean two or three tasks for the year and those would have goals and timetables. This is a collaborative effort rather than the board setting goals that he can’t comprehend or vice versa he has goals you aren’t buying into. We are getting a really good opportunity to make sure we all agree what this means.

Superintendent Cavallaro said he will put something together and give it to the board. The nice thing he is hearing is that no one has disagreed with his original points and we were able to prioritize them. We really have a good understanding of our needs and where we want to be and how we want to move forward. Bob Guthrie asked that Neil and Chairwoman Russo get together and almost create a budget timeline for this so we stay on task and do this on a regular basis so we will be good about getting it
done. Neil said that will be fine just give me a week or so to put this together and then Rosemary and I will meet to go over it. Rosemary said that sounds good. Mr. Caruso said we can have another meeting so the board can get back together for these goals and what does this mean for the board of ed. That is important and there should be one or two concrete goals for each of these areas of need. One of which may be the workshop on communication as an example. Another meeting for phase two will be planned.

The board thanked Mr. Caruso for coming to the meeting.

Chairwoman Russo asked for a motion to adjourn
Rosa Richardson made the motion
Karen Pacelli seconded the motion
The meeting adjourned at 7:18 PM

Respectfully submitted,

Marylou Amendola
Board Secretary