WEST HAVEN BOARD OF EDUCATION MINUTES
       June 19, 2006
       Ad-Hoc Committee Meeting

The Meeting of the Ad-Hoc Committee was held at the Blake Building, 25 Ogden Street, West Haven on June 19, 2006. The meeting was called to order by Howard Horvath Jr. at 6:05 p.m. as Raymond Collins was not present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: 
Howard Horvath, Chairman
Eric Murillo
George Monahan

PRESENT

OTHER BOARD MEMBERS

IN ATTENDANCE:
Krista Pickering
Gerald A. Calabritto
Mark Palmieri
Robert Guthrie
Raymond Collins

BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT: 
Chairman, Toni Paine

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT:
Neil Cavallaro, Assistant Superintendent
Ronald Stancil, Principal
Kurt Ogren, (Provost)
Dr. Anthony Cordone, Principal
Gina Prisco, Assistant Principal
Patricia Libero, Principal
Paul DeFonzo, Assistant Principal

Howard Horvath, Chairman for the Ad-Hoc Committee opened the meeting by thanking all who attended. He wanted to start the conversation by not pointing fingers but by trying to better understand what is going on and how the Board might be able to help. The impetus for this committee and meeting is that at three Board Meetings in a row we have seen expulsions related to weapons. When it comes to this subject we all agree that we want to be safe rather than sorry. Let’s have this conversation to see what we can learn. He thought a good way to approach this would be to start with a brief status from each of the schools. Just give us a general sense of how you think the year has gone and we will come back around again. He requested a general sense of what went on throughout the year and what has been happening the last month or two where things seemed to have spiked. He then wanted to turn the meeting over to Kurt as he started this year as the new Provost with the whole intent being that he focus on safety, security, discipline and the like. He requested that Kurt tell us how he started the year, what type of assessment he did initially, how he proceeded, what are some of the things he did and the results. We will then come back to the middle schools to talk about specifics and
close with some steps for the future. All Board members thought this would be a good way to proceed.

Dr. Cordone was asked to give us a general sense of how this year went relative to last year regarding safety, security and discipline.

The suspensions this year have dropped over last year. Last year we had 101 suspensions in Grade 6. That grade is now Grade 7 and we have 57. This is where the largest decrease was and basically the majority of the suspensions has been with violence. The Peer Program has reduced the number of suspensions by approximately 40%. This particular group when we talk about suspensions is basically because of violence. Whenever there is a violent act that is not a mediation that is dealt directly with the administration. Last year the SRO counselors had taken this on and gone into the schools with a preventive approach. We also have a Character Ed Program in place which promotes respect, responsibility, integrity and traits of this type. This has been made a part of the school by every other month recognizing those students that have exhibited those types of behavior traits. We then give them a celebration of some sort. This helps with the behavior in the school.

The mind set of some of the students coming into the school is that if they didn’t like what was being said there was immediately violence. There was no talking. This year more than before Gina, the counselors and the school SRO visited every single class concentrating on the sixth grade and we reinforced what constitutes a violent act. It usually starts with a he said she said comment outside of school. A lot of messages are sent by e-mail and some on the telephone and this begins the process and it is then carried into school. Then its the he said she said hype and it goes into violence. We believe we have almost caught the violence in this particular grade by some 45% the school resource officer has helped tremendously in that he goes out and talks to the students. The kids have a great rapport with Bret. They come up and tell him things that are going on before they reach the boiling point. They will go to the counselor and they will come to us as a last resort or we will be the authority that gives them the consequences. We encourage the preventive approach by seeing counselors and by seeing Officer Bret. This has worked to some degree.

Grade 7 which is now Grade 8 has an increase. The increase has happened in the last month. It seems like they thought the end is near and I can go out in a blast.

The expulsions last year had one for violence, three for weapons and one for sexual harassment. This year’s expulsions had three for violence, two for drugs and two for weapons. The concern that we have this year is with the eighth grade and there are four incidents in the sixth grade in which inappropriate sexual comments are being made by the boys to the girls; or inappropriately touching them. The girls finally came forward and said these kinds of things were going on in the past and they have had it and want it stopped. This was something that we have seen in the 8th Grade and the 6th Grade this year. In the past maybe one such activity took place. This is an area we have to look into
more closely for next year. For eight cases to take place we have to look at what is going on.

When this type of thing happens we call the parent of the victim. Some of the boys admitted to the guilt some refused to admit it. Several witnesses gave information, their friends as well as neutral students who saw and reported it. This caused the suspensions.

Again the parents were notified and there was one arrest out of the eight cases. We didn’t initiate the arrest we initiated the suspension and the counseling for the student. When any student comes back to school they have to see a counselor. A lot of the parents are very cooperative they will come to the school and we will talk with the parents face to face. We will discuss all the issues. The victim’s daughter in the last case was very upset. Both of the student’s fathers came in said we did well.

Neil Cavallaro said they have had very good luck with the stipulated agreement getting cooperation from the parents to get the kids into counseling. At both middle schools we have done very well with this issue. Dr. Cordone and Gina Prisco were in agreement with this. Gina Prisco went on to say we try to get this done before a fight or some type of violence takes place.

Howie asked if when you mention violence you mean a fight and is it usually a guy against a guy or girl against a girl. Gina said they have had a guy against a girl but it is rare. The suspension range will differ for different times of suspensions. For example, one punch and then they separate, or for a large student body fight, or a pushing shoving match. The latest violence that took place was with two girls on the bus. Girls fight to maim; boys fight for power. The last two girls in a fight clawed each other. One girl had globs of hair pulled out of her head and had scratch marks on her face.

Patricia Libero discussed the general status at Carrigan. In terms of expulsions we had 7 carried over from last year. This year we have 8 for violence, 4 for drugs and two for pattern behavior. Pattern behavior is when you are constantly getting in trouble. Some people write referrals at the drop of a hat. You have to take into consideration who writes the referrals. Paul and she work together as Paul is new to the administration and she doesn’t feel it is fair to give him two grades and she take one grade so they split things up. They are not as savvy at the computer as the Bailey people so they have about 550 suspensions this year. They have had their share of fights and have had sexual harassment from girls to boys too. Boys have been complaining about girls bothering them. They used positive behavior but didn’t start until after January and she thinks they will have more success next year when they start at the beginning of the year. It is a good program. We have most parents’ support but some parents are not supportive. We have problems with telephone numbers being changed. There is no number to call anymore. A number will be disconnected and we call the work number and they no longer work there. If I want to suspend a student from school I’m not going to be able to do this without contacting the parent(s) before suspending him/her.
If two students are fighting and I can’t contact the parents of one student, he/she will come back into school the next day. You can’t suspend a student without one of the parents being notified. If the other student’s parents were notified he/she will be out on suspension. She finds this very frustrating that one student is still in school and the other is out of school. This is a problem both Patricia Libero and Paul DeFonzo are working on. Perhaps the administration can help in terms of this.

Howie asked Patricia to explain about the expulsions that pertain to weapons. Patricia stated that one student admitted to bringing in a Swiss Army Knife. He was not caught with this. He brought it in at the beginning of the week and brought a different one in at the end of the week. His mother said it was because he is short and is insecure and he bought it in to show off. He did not use it in a violent way he showed it to his friends and cut a corner off a book. Another boy bought a knife in because he road his bike to school and needed it for protection on the ride home on Kimberly Avenue. He was a special education student and didn’t bring it to hurt anyone in the school. Another student bought a knife in his back pack that was left there from a camping trip and he forgot it was there. They didn’t bring in the knives to stab anyone but she still bought it to the Board’s attention because they felt the students knew what was acceptable and what wasn’t. She went on to state that none of the weapons have been used in a violent manner.

Howie asked if it was a knife in all cases. Paul DeFonzo said no, one time he was very concerned because it was a 4 ¼” steak blade knife in a student’s pocket and they were concerned that he would hurt himself. They also had two situations where students in two separate Art classes threw scissors and had injuries as a result of this. One boy caught it in the side of the head and had head injuries as a result of this. Another student had chest injuries. It was stated that some elementary school teachers request students to bring scissors to school with them.

Neil Cavallaro thought that we would have seen a lot more paint ball guns or the plastic guns that look more real than they actually are. Carrigan had one paint ball gun last year and had the tattooing of a Beebe gun removed to make it appear as a 45. There were no actual firearms but there were two facsimiles. A Beebe gun has to have a bright colored piece on the tip of the barrel. If the bright colored piece is removed and you take it out and wave it around at a police man he will shoot you. Jerry Calabritto said you have a split second to decide if this is a real gun or not and stated it is a felony to disfigure the marking on the front of a fake firearm.

George Monahan asked Patti to repeat the summary of the expulsions for this year. He knows you said you had 7 carry overs from last year 8 for violence 4 for drugs and two on pattern behavior.

Howard then talked with Kurt Ogren and Ronald Stancil and asked what kind of things would be helpful as you talk to the new freshman class regarding what is going on in the middle school? He asked for an overview.
Kurt started by handing out a sheet which painted a picture. The provost position has helped quite a bit as far as discipline for consistency in particular instead of three separate people doing things it is always the same person. You also get to know the parents of the repeat offenders. If you look at the statistics the first few categories have all gone up; however he found out he was going to be Provost the day before school started. He didn’t have time to plan what we are going to do. They sat down and said this is the philosophy they would take. He doesn’t know if the right term is community policing but he is getting out trying to know the kids. If the students have minor infractions we make sure they are not brushed aside we take it seriously. By doing this the theory was that the number of the expulsions would go down. You can see that they did go down significantly. If a student is late we make sure we talk with them give them a one day school suspension with a phone call home. This is really a couple of interventions the suspension and the call home to try and correct that behavior.

This helps establish a good rapport with the students and they are now involved with alternative programs like Adult Ed and the Alternative School before it actually comes to a suspension. Either Ron or Kurt would sit down with the student and say you are a second or third year freshman and you have little or no credits and we keep talking to you every day and this is going to lead to an expulsion. Here are some options for you. As a result of this we have a lot of kids headed in the right direction.

Howie asked how many are involved the response was about a dozen. Kurt stated more between ten and twenty. This is kind of a coordinated effort. The location of the Provost Office works out well too. Next to my office are the two school resource officers so sometimes you can see me and then see the police. We can prevent a lot of things. Three of the four social workers are in the next three offices and this can be coordinated also with guidance. We also talk with students through Mr. Cavallaro’s office especially the types of students where in the past they were being expelled for conduct. They weren’t bringing in drugs or weapons but they were 18 years old and only had a handful of credits. This might not be the best program for them. Adult Education and Job Core were offered. The parents certainly bought into this because they saw the pattern and they didn’t want to see their son or daughter expelled. They want them to receive their high school diploma; this is the goal. This coordinated effort of trying to steer them in a different direction so they can be successful has worked out.

Kurt tallied up between 1,850 and 2,000 students and at different times of the year he personally saw and documented 1,085 of those students. Many meeting were for small things but many were for the repeat offenders. Instead of them being angry you are talking with them trying to make them learn about what they did and the consequence. The number of expulsions and arrests did go down significantly. Our school resource officers do a great job. We can’t document how many situations we prevented but certainly many things were squashed before they happened.

We had fewer fights then we had in the previous two years. Fights are planned before coming into school. You see a young lady who dresses nicely and all of a sudden the earrings are out, her hair is in a pony tail, she is wearing her sneakers and she has
vaseline smeared on her face. She is ready to fight. We try to prevent this and have a sit
down with the student, social workers and the police.

Females are in the majority at the high school when it comes to fighting. It averages
approximately 60/35. The girls want to maim you for life, pull clumps of hair out, rip
your clothes but with boys it could be one punch, one punch back just to safe face and it
is over. The girls are not stopping. You can have four adults trying to pull them apart they
are not stopping. Some of the reasons for fighting among sophomores and juniors go
back to something said or done in seventh grade.

Jerry Calabritto said you can ask any one of the resource officers or any officer on the
street and they will tell you they would rather step in between two guys than two girls
any day.

Howard Horvath thanked everyone for coming and is happy to hear that what we thought
would work does seem to be working. At this point he asked Ron for a summary of what
kids would be saying now about the school relative to the safety security discipline this
year versus last year. Do you have a sense of what someone would say about this year
versus last year?

Specifically the one thing we try to do is make it consistent. If a student comes in and
says he is late he automatically sees Kurt and receives a suspension. They would say it is
consistent as they know what will happen and the teachers know this as well.

Howie then asked what the teachers say now. Kurt answered that early in the year they
received a great response from the teachers. They said it was the most smooth opening
they remembered in quite a while in particular noting discipline and things of that nature.
Sometimes it was overwhelming; the record day having 38 suspensions. He is sure 26 of
those were in school suspensions. Neil thinks the turn around time in the office for
taking over and dealing with the discipline problems has been the biggest overall
improvement in that respect. He thinks this is what the teachers would say.

Kurt feels the individual teachers who write students up for referrals and can’t handle
students in the classroom for whatever reason must be worked on.

Howie asked about the idea of communicating with the middle schools about the students
coming to the high school. Is there value in this? Kurt said the students are coming from
two different places but he would say clearly the greatest number of suspensions are
freshman and then as you go on up in grade the fewest number are seniors. So the
freshman have to learn its a big place with a lot of freedom but these are the rules.

This summer Kurt will put some things together to be ready for the teacher end of it.
Some teachers have been here 25 years and have not written 5 referrals. Whereas some
teachers almost use it as a crutch to get Johnny out of their class. If we have 130 teachers
there are probably going to be six teachers that he needs to focus on and another six who
are maybe a notch down. The majority of our teachers are excellent.
They have already contacted the middle schools and requested they send them their top 20 students that we may have a problem with.

Rose McDonnell was present and stated that Kurt is doing a great job.

Howie said the point of this was to start the discussion and ultimately learn from one another. We had the benefit with the investment we made with Kurt this year and we put a program in place and have seen the kind of results we achieved and this has been a very successful endeavor and a very challenging one. He thanked everyone.

Neil had one comment to make on something that will make a very big improvement. Pat Libero has been working on this and he has spoken to Dr. Cipriano on it and he knows Bailey has a couple of good counseling pieces. We need to work on our in-school suspension program. When a student is in that room for a day it must be more than just having that student make his work up. There needs to be a strong counseling component after that.

Gina Prisco has the students write a self improvement essay while in there and it is sent home. The student comes to me then meets with a counselor. One of the problems is the student who is in there and continues to repeat. Another thing they do is the after school intervention program, if they have the money next year, which was originally a grant. The student meets with a counselor and does a written assignment with them about what they could have done better. This is done after school.

Jerry Calabritto asked if there was anything that the Board could provide to insure that we continue to provide a safe and secure environment for the learning process or even improve upon what we have.

Ron stated this is a tough financial time for everybody but it would be a whole different scenario if we didn’t have two SRO’s. This is critical.

Patricia Libero stated that Carrigan the intercom system is original with the school and there are no phones. She is trying to get one from Homeland Security and is waiting for an estimate from Delta Com. If there is a fight going on they have to go back in the room and ring a couple of times and that is how you know there is a fight. There is no privacy at all. If she were to call to ask for a student to be removed from class it comes over the intercom. She can’t call and talk on the phone. She has no security like she was used to at the high school especially if she needs someone removed from a classroom. She has Rudy Hilton and her one resource person. If Rudy is working with someone and not available either Paul or I will be pulled out of a meeting or a PPT if there is a fight and will go running. They need a security person to walk around the halls and a resource person. This situation is unique to Carrigan. There were about 550 suspensions and 163 at Bailey but there is a little difference here that is not related to the leadership at all but just to the nature of the environment and the challenges relative to poverty etc.
George Monahan had a couple of questions for Kurt. Firstly the Board is more than aware of the fact that you were asked to step in the day before school began. We are very appreciative of the good job you are doing, you are off to a good start and it certainly is extremely challenging and we hope you can continue with more improvements.

On the subject of in school suspensions which number around 2,000 and the out of school suspensions a little less than half of that, can you shed a little light on the approximate percentage of repeat offenders that now require a different form of suspension versus the out of school suspensions being almost mandatory due to the type of infraction? This doesn’t have to be exact.

Kurt stated they try to use a progressive discipline. If its for something small you just take it up and if they are not learning the lesson it will progress. Some things are mandatory out of school suspension. If you use profanity to a teacher you automatically go home for three days even if you have never been in trouble before.

Out of a little less than 2,000 students perhaps 30 are repeat offenders. These people are getting out of school suspensions again, again and again. They don’t want to be at school they are there for the free lunch and breakfast and to talk to the girls. They are not there for their education. These are the students we are trying to work with through the social workers, guidance counselors and to have them look at Adult Education, Job Core. There are some students that are 18 years old and have 3 high school credits.

George stated that there are 2,000 in school suspensions there are 2,000 students in the building. He would venture to say that 80% of the population has never received an in school suspension their entire four years of being there.

Kurt saw 1,085 students but some of those might have been just a verbal reprimand and a central detention. They weren’t suspended. Maybe 1/3 of the students end up a day in ISS out of the whole year for something minor.

Howie question if it could be as high as 1/3 that are receiving in school suspensions for some reason. Kurt agreed. Ron Stancil said this goes along with one set of rules and one set of kids. It doesn’t matter who you are. If you do something wrong this is the consequence.

George Monahan had a question as a follow up to one of Patti’s problems. If you have a child with an issue and are trying to get in touch with a parent and can’t, is there an instance where you can request the resource officer to take this child home? They can’t take the student home. They can’t transport them. If it was a truancy question we send the police to the home to make sure they live at this address why can’t we have a similar act from the police department? Neil said we have sent the police to homes to say your child is in trouble can you come and get them. The biggest help that we have in our ballpark is Craig Winkle. A lot of times the parent will call back and we will tell them your child is being suspended for fighting and can not ride the bus home and you must pick them up. Parents state they have no car and if we offer to transport the child to them
in the next half hour and they say yes we call Craig Winkle and he will transport them for us.

Bob Guthrie asked Neil if the district adopted zero tolerance 15 or so years ago. Neil doesn’t think there is a policy it is more of a commitment from the Board. We all have an understanding of what this means and the Board has made it clear they want it enacted. Bob stated that across the State you will find higher discipline expulsion numbers once you follow this policy. It does take away some of the leeway or discretionary power whether it be with the Provost or Assistant Superintendent.

Eric Murillo’s concern is for children suspended for five days or more. Do we have an alternative means to help them. Ron Stancil said we have Stiles the Alternate Program. We encourage this as the school of choice but it is up the student to say yes I want to go there. The parents typically say that it sounds like a good option. They have to fill out an application and see the facility and have an interview. Many students do go there and it is a small facility and they do much better. For the 30 repeat students have any been to Styles? Some have gone there some to Adult Ed some to Job Core. Our number of expulsions would be higher if some of those students did not go to Adult Ed, Alternate One or Job Core. It might be ten more.

Howie went on to summarize that part of the reason they all came together was because they were concerned about the weapons. What he is hearing is that they were overly concerned and there seems to be a reasonable explanation for each of the instances. Obviously it is the end of the year but we do want to pay attention to this. We will continue to be vigilant. We heard there is a quicker move to violence with less conversation. There is some sense of a trend there. We have heard a lot of he said she said conversations that we need to think about. There are some good pro-active programs that have been put in place. In Carrigan there is a problem when you are trying to reach a parent that is unreachable and unavailable and therefore the student comes back the next day and you can’t suspend them and that the intercom system needs to be replaced. Another security resource person is requested and this does sound like a critical issue. At the high school we heard the new approach and being able to deliver consistent message policy and consequence really makes a big, big difference. A consistent person dealing with this is of big value. Data is being used to take a finer look at what is going on and give some insights on how to move forward which is commendable. For the up-coming school year you will work with the teachers on the teacher end of it so they are comfortable with their classroom end of it. Howard said the Board is going to take these minutes and synthesize them and try and create a report for your feedback. You can tell us whether it is accurate or not. Based on that we will probably sit down and start to think as this group comes together soon for the next step which might be another meeting with a more specific agenda. He wanted to get the conversation going today and hope you know that the Board is here to support you and that we will do everything we can to make it a safe and secure environment.
Neil sent out a notice to administrators today and he will invite all the Board Members to a meeting next Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. for a workshop on expulsions. Procedures will be discussed. Any Board member is certainly welcome to come.

Howard sent out documents to all present to read by e-mail today. It was an interesting article in the Register regarding similar ideas as those presented at tonight’s meeting.

Howard thanked all participants for coming.

The meeting closed at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Marylou Amendola
Board Clerk