

Ad hoc committee to address myriad parent concerns

Millionaire resident offers to work with school district

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EDITOR

WATCHUNG - Following weeks of public outcry and a resident-led forum on community concerns, the Board of Education will form an ad hoc committee to fix what some say is broken within the grades K-8 school district.

Parent concerns about communication, transparency, school safety and other issues reached a boiling point after former Bayberry School Principal Michael Vignola was placed on emergency leave in May. The Board of Education, which, to the ire of many parents, said it could not legally comment on the reason for Vignola's leave, is now seeking a new principal for the elementary school.

The district is also seeking an interim superintendent and director of special services, as Superintendent Barbara Resko is to resign effective Oct. 1 to take a job in the private sector.

More than 250 parents and community members came together on Monday, June 25, at Watchung Valley Golf Club for a listening forum hosted by Bayberry School parent and Fortune 250 CEO Frank Bisignano. The forum focused on hearing parents' concerns and discussing ways to improve the school district.

Bisignano, CEO of First Data and a former executive at JPMorgan Chase, has personally offered to help the district meet its goals.

Board of Education President Margo Langer, who had attended Bisignano's listening forum, unveiled the plan for the ad hoc committee before about 90 residents at a board meeting two days later on



Frank Bisignano, Bayberry School parent and CEO of Fortune 250 company First Data, addresses the Watchung Board of Education on Wednesday, June 27. Seated, from left, are Board Secretary Ernest Turner, Superintendent Barbara Resko, Board President Margo Langer, Board Attorney Anthony Sciarillo and Board Vice President Tina Kelly.

>> **STORY ONLINE**

The school board met again on Wednesday, July 11. Please see coverage of Wednesday's meeting at echoes-sentinel.com.

>> **VIDEO ONLINE**

Please see videos from this meeting at echoes-sentinel.com.

Wednesday, June 27. Langer thanked the community for sharing feedback with the board over the preceding several weeks, which she called "an absolutely vital process of making our district the very best it can be."

She said the board had been discussing the scope and membership structure of the ad hoc committee for some time.

"We believe that we have a plan in place to move forward that will be constructive for the district," she told the crowd. "The committee will

be looking at issues related to safety and security and academic excellence. The members and terms are still being finalized. The committee will work with the administration to develop a specific charge and term and guidance for the committee. We know that you all were looking for that and we are willing to do that."

Superintendent Resko said after the meeting the committee will be comprised of various school district stakeholders, including community members and parents, teachers, administrators and board members.

Several parents encouraged the board to appoint Bisignano as chair of the committee, or otherwise engage him in the process.

Bisignano thanked the board for launching the committee.

"I want to say to the board I know that change is hard, change is difficult, but I commend you and I thank you for listening and I hope that



About 90 residents attended a Wednesday, June 27, meeting of the Watchung Board of Education. About 250 residents attended "A Path Forward," a listening forum hosted by Watchung resident Frank Bisignano two days earlier at Watchung Valley Golf Club.

SCHOOL: Principal survey online

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we all get the opportunity to do a great job together," he said. "I hope I get the opportunity to work with you all on the ad hoc committee and we know that these things aren't simple and I'm grateful for your listening and your hard work to get to this point."

Bisignano, who declined to comment after the meeting, has experience in working with school districts.

He has worked for years with a Brooklyn high school, leading philanthropic efforts, working to redesign a wing of the school and serving as principal for a day through a non-profit organization that links New York high schools and business leaders.

Meetings, Surveys Planned

Langer announced a number of additional measures to address parent concerns.

She announced the Board of Education would host two additional public meetings on Wednesday, July 11, and Monday, Aug. 20, in addition to the previously scheduled meetings on Wednesday, July 25, and Wednesday, Aug. 29.

The district also posted an online survey on what parents would like to see in a new Bayberry School principal, she noted, and hosted public forums on the topic on Thursday, June 28, and Monday, July 2. She said the district will implement a similar process for the superintendent search.

The board will also form a committee of teachers and other personnel to make hiring recommendations for the positions, she said.

In response to concerns about district PARCC scores, she invited parents to attend the Wednesday, July 11, board meeting, at which Valley View Middle School Principal Mary Nunn will go over the 2018 results in a presentation.

On school safety, she said the district is constantly re-

viewing and updating its safety procedures, and is in the process of a "comprehensive review of our safety measures with particular emphasis on our outdoor facilities."

Bisignano and others have raised concerns about unsafe conditions on the Bayberry School blacktop and a lack of adequate supervision there.

Langer said the district was awaiting the results of a full audit of its outdoor facilities conducted by a private firm in May. Separately, she noted a number of professionals would be visiting the district over the summer and early fall to perform security audits.

The board president also addressed concerns about the special education program, which persisted long before the groundswell of demands for change in the district.

She said comprehensive information on special education will be posted to the district website, and a special education survey will be "distributed, reviewed and acted upon." In addition, she said, the district will host informational meetings between parents, staff and administration to "share information in both directions."

Public Wants Bisignano Involved

A number of school parents spoke in favor of the move to form an ad hoc committee, and praised Bisignano and the forum he had hosted two days prior.

Glen Eagle Drive resident Elizabeth Bonawitz said she was excited for the formation of the committee and glad to see the board reaching for feedback on the hiring processes.

"I really appreciate that I can see change already happening," she said.

Sherwood Drive resident Ron Del Mauro also said he supports the formation of the ad hoc committee, but "hopefully it's more than lip service," he said, "and it becomes an integral part of trying to reform education."

Del Mauro, a 35-year Watchung resident who has put two children

through the school district, said the district is fortunate to have someone like Bisignano to dedicate time and energy to Watchung schools. He said he was "appalled" by some of the things he heard at the public forum.

"What surprised me was the deterioration," he said. "That didn't happen overnight. And also some of the cultural issues with people being ignored - no follow-ups, no calls - families that constantly would stand up and say I'm trying to contact someone and they didn't get back to me."

"I was appalled by that, and I'm sure it hopefully wasn't the first time you've heard that, those stories. I think something has to be done and it has to be done on a more immediate basis, because as I said the deterioration didn't happen overnight. It's been going on for some period of time and I don't think it's you versus the community. Hopefully we're all in this together."

Others described the forum as informative and therapeutic.

Many urged the board to take Bisignano up on his offer to aid the school district.

Heather Lane resident Patrick Finn said when "one of the most influential executives in the United States and the world" offers his services, the board should accept it.

"I can tell you this," said Finn, "when members of the community, more than 250, come out to a meeting just to talk about stuff, there's the alarm bell that there's a sense of urgency."

Longtime Watchung resident Anthony Ingrasia said he spoke for many when he said he would not feel positively about the ad hoc committee if Bisignano was not "a big part of that board."

Langer was asked to comment after the meeting on the public's calls to work with the Wall Street executive.

"People feel that he'll do a great job, and we hope so," she replied.