



Photo by Alex Parker-Magyar

Watchung Board of Education President Margo Langer, third from left, addresses the roughly 40 residents gathered at a Wednesday, June 11, board meeting at Valley View Middle School. She is joined, from left, by Board Secretary Ernest Turner, Board Attorney Anthony Sciarillo, Board Vice President Tina Kelly, and board members George Colonias and Ellyn Margulies.

Interim schools head hired in Watchung

By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR, EDITOR

WATCHUNG - Outgoing Superintendent of Schools Barbara Resko will be placed on administrative leave effective Wednesday, July 16, through the date of her retirement on Oct. 1.

Resko, who has served as superintendent since 2012 and director of special services since 2010, will receive full pay and benefits during her leave for "personal reasons."

The Board of Education cannot legally comment on the personnel matter, Board President Margo Langer emphasized after a Wednesday, July 11, public meeting. Resko was not present at the meeting.

The Board of Education

accepted Resko's leave Wednesday night, but also hired her interim replacement, former Green Brook Superintendent Stephanie Bilenker. Bilenker's contract as superintendent and director of special services runs from Thursday, July 12, through June 30, 2019.

Resko had previously announced her intent to retire from education on June 5. She is to take a position in the private sector some time after her Oct. 1 retirement date.

The school district is now operating with an in-



BARBARA RESKO



MARGO LANGER

terim superintendent and director of special services, interim principal at Bayberry School and interim business administrator.

While the Board of Education is in the early stages of seeking a full-time superintendent, special services director and principal, the board is pleased with the work of Interim Business Administrator and Board Secretary Ernest Turner and is not seeking a full-time replacement for the position at this point, Langer said after the meeting.

Thomas DiGanci, for-

mer principal of Watchung Hills Regional High School, has been serving as interim Bayberry School principal since May 14, three days after former Bayberry Principal Michael Vignola was placed on emergency leave.

Qualified Replacement

In a statement read to the roughly 40 residents at the meeting, Langer thanked Resko for her years of service to the school district, and wished her luck in her future endeavors.

She spoke highly of Bilenker, who boasts 23 years of experience as a school administrator.

"We believe that Mrs. Bilenker will be an out-

PLEASE SEE INTERIM, PAGE 13

INTERIM: Schools head hired

FROM PAGE 1

standing asset to our district and will be able to assist us in many areas, including the hiring of an excellent new principal at Bayberry School as well as a new permanent superintendent and a director of special services," said Langer. "She will also focus on a review of curriculum, special education programs, professional development, teacher evaluations and improvements to safety, security and facilities."

Bilenker served roughly 17 years as director of special services in Green Brook, and held the dual role of superintendent and director of special services for 12 of those years, Langer said.

Langer noted Green Brook's Irene E. Feldkirchner Elementary School was named a National Blue Ribbon School during Bilenker's tenure, and Green Brook Middle School was nominated by Somerset County for the National Blue Ribbon School honor. Bilenker was also one of 12 to receive a state Department of Education (DOE) award in the 2010-2011 school year for outstanding performance for students with disabilities in a school district, Langer said.

In addition, Bilenker has extensive experience serving as a superintendent and supervisor of special education on an interim basis in other school districts.

"Each of the school districts have demonstrated significant increases in student standardized test scores," said Langer. "Curriculum alignment, professional development and teacher and administrator evaluations are given priority status during the school year. Mrs. Bilenker believes that the main focus of her leadership is to support and enable the staff to improve instruction and student achievement across all grade levels."

Bilenker has grandchildren in the Watchung Borough School District, Langer said, and is looking forward to working with Watchung staff, students and parents.

Parents are invited to a meet and

greet with the interim superintendent at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, July 24, at Valley View Middle School. Langer noted additional meet and greets will be scheduled, and Bilenker will be present at all future Board of Education meetings.

"Mrs. Bilenker works closely with the Board of Education, the parents and community members to ensure that anyone who might have an issue is heard and is confident in the educational decisions that are being made," said Langer.

Though she will be performing full superintendent duties effective immediately, Bilenker will maintain the title of "interim assistant superintendent" until Oct. 1, when Resko's contract expires. The "assistant" qualifier will be dropped on that date.

Board Attorney Anthony Sciarillo explained the state DOE does not allow two officials to hold the title of superintendent at the same time.

Principal Search, Ad Hoc Committee

The board voted unanimously Wednesday to establish two new committees — one a principal search committee for the Bayberry position, and another an ad hoc committee on "safety, security, and academic excellence."

The latter committee, which was discussed at a previous board meeting on Wednesday, July 27, comes in response to various community concerns that arose shortly after Principal Vignola was placed on emergency leave in May.

The committee is to consist of teachers, parents, and Langer and Dennis Bakos from the Board of Education. Langer said Wednesday the structure and the goals of the committee are being finalized.

The principal search committee will be comprised of board members Tina Kelly and Ellyn Margulies, two teachers and three parents.

Langer thanked the public for participating in two community forums and an online survey on what residents would like to see in a new

principal. The public input, she said, is now being compiled to be used by the search committee as it interviews candidates and makes a recommendation to the interim superintendent.

The board would then vote to hire a candidate based on the interim superintendent's recommendation, she said.

High Oaks Drive resident Jessica Ingrassia said the principal search committee should be expanded to include more parents. She also said the committee should be involved in recruiting candidates, not just interviewing them.

Echoing comments made by a number of residents at the June 27 board meeting, she recommended the board choose Watchung school parent and Fortune 250 CEO Frank Bisignano to lead the ad hoc committee on safety, security and academic excellence.

Bisignano held a Monday, June 25, listening forum at Watchung Valley Golf Club in which he and some of the roughly 250 residents in attendance discussed ways to improve the school district.

"On the ad hoc committee, I just wanted to express I have total confidence in Frank Bisignano's insight and expertise fixing broken systems," said Ingrassia. "He's an obvious and excellent choice to head that committee if you're choosing that."

She said appointing teachers and parents from the PTO and WEF (Watchung Education Foundation) to the committee is fine, "but please remember 250 parents assembled, passed a microphone around and shared in many different ways, very personal ways, how they feel disenfranchised from a broken system."

"Please consider the optics of a committee made up almost exclusively of participants in the very system that needs an overhaul. If it appears to exclude people that are unaffiliated with this administration, it probably is not a good look given the intended purpose of the committee."