

**Joint Meeting of the Amherst, Pelham and Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committees
Tuesday, March 25, 2014
Library, Amherst Regional High School**

In Attendance:

Kip Fonsh, Region Chair
Michael DeChiara, Region
Debbie Gould, Pelham Chair
Lawrence O'Brien, Amherst/Region
Kathleen Traphagen, Amherst/Region
Trevor Baptiste, Pelham/Region
Emily Marriott, Pelham
Rick Hood, Amherst/Region
Amilcar Shabazz, Amherst/Region

Maria Geryk, Superintendent
Kathryn Mazur, Human Resources Director
Faye Brady, Director of Student Services
JoAnn Smith, Student Services Administrator
Mike Morris, Director of Evaluation and Assessment
Betsy Dinger, ARMS Principal
Mark Jackson, ARHS Principal
Rhonda Cohen, Director of Teaching and Learning
Jerry Champagne, Information Systems Director
Ron Bohonowicz, Director of Facilities and Transportation
Simon Leutz, ARHS Social Studies Department Chair
Rachel Bowen, Human Resources Assistant Director
Public and Press
Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder

ABSENT

Darius Modestow, Pelham
Dan Robb, Pelham
Katherine Appy, Amherst Chair/Region

1. Welcome and Agenda Review

7:00 PM (A)/8:20 PM (B)

A. Ms. Fonsh called the Regional School Committee to order, Mr. Hood called the Amherst School Committee to order and Ms. Gould called the Pelham School Committee to order at 7:00 p.m. Mr. Fonsh welcomed the audience and noted that, due to the gravity of the meeting, the agenda items would be changed as needed. He then read a statement regarding the most recent incident of racial harassment at ARHS which was directed toward Carolyn Gardner, ARHS math teacher (full text attached). Mr. Fonsh invited Ms. Gardner to the microphone to make a statement. Ms. Gardner was given a standing ovation by the School Committee and the audience, after which she read a statement (full text attached).

B. Approve Minutes—Ms. Gould moved to approve the minutes of the March 11, 2014 Regional School Committee meeting. Mr. O'Brien seconded and the motion was unanimously approved. Mr. Hood moved to approve the March 18, 2014 Amherst School Committee minutes with one minor correction. Mr. O'Brien seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

2. Announcements and Public Comments

7:16 p.m.

Carol Ross, community member and parent, stated that this is an opportunity for all members of the community to make a difference, noting the level of diversity in the room tonight. Jahid Kloons, ARHS student, stated that he believes the person who perpetrated the crime should be found but should not be expelled. Ali Wicks-Lim, parent, noted that she and her family are in attendance tonight so her son can see that this is a community worthy of teachers like Ms. Gardner and to see the decision makers in town face to face. Jean Sherlock, community member, noted that the NAACP sued the town 25 years ago due to racial disparity in discipline and the issues are still continuing. She said the district is taking a social services approach to solving the problem rather than a social justice approach. Ray Elliott, community member, noted that he moved to the community in 1987. He said it was suggested then that the oneness of the human family should be taught in every grade, K-12, because it can act as a vaccine against racism. He stated that students would then learn not just to tolerate one another, but to love one another. Mr. Elliott stated that a group has been created called The Citizens for Race Amity Now, with a goal of having dialogue in every neighborhood in this community to talk about all the things that divide us—not just race. Kathleen Anderson, former School Committee member, Amherst Area NAACP President, and former ARHS employee, spoke about her experience as an employee in the district. She noted that the district is willing to allow threats to the lives of people of color who work there and the people in attendance are asking it to stop. Ms. Anderson read a list of demands from the NAACP and concerned community members that include:

- Want independent investigator and transparency;
- Escorts in the school for the target teacher to provide safety;
- Surveillance to hold people accountable;
- Direct support of Ms. Gardner: volunteer escort/physical presence in classroom and to and from school;
- Mandatory training for Teacher Union board, teachers, hall monitors, para-professionals, administrators and other school employees;
- Make Cross Cultural Competency/anti-racism dialogues mandatory for all students (Ms. Anderson added that she encourages the district to make this a graduation requirement for all students).

Michael Manjo, UMass graduate student and community member, spoke about the existence of white privilege and encouraged everyone who sees instances of it to speak up and say something to stop it. Lani Sherlock, parent and SEPAC President, spoke about the impact on students of the focus on high-stakes testing and the Common Core. She encouraged parents to opt their children out of MCAS testing to send a message to the schools that they want them to focus on the things that matter to their students' lives, such as professional development in social justice. Superintendent Geryk read a statement (attached). Principal Jackson spoke, noting that a student told him that what she needs right now from the adults, above all else, is honesty. He stated that after hearing Ms. Gardner speak tonight he changed what he wanted to say, noting her use of the word "anemic" in the response to the attacks she has suffered. Mr. Jackson said that he feels an enormous sense of debt to Ms. Gardner because his inability to keep her safe has created an unacceptable, unsafe working climate for her. He noted that to the extent that Ms. Gardner was victimized, other people of color were as well. Mr. Jackson reviewed the steps that have been taken in the investigation to date, noting that the districts' IT department has developed a system through which people can share information anonymously. Mr. Fonsh stated that the schools need the help of the community and hopes they will find it in their heart to do so. Mr. Hood spoke about the student assembly he attended after the last incident and read a statement on behalf of the committee (attached). Mr. Shabazz thanked members of the community for coming out to let Ms. Gardner know that she is not alone and to affirm that we are one in our support of making our high school a place that our students can love. He noted that as elected officials, members of the School Committee are part of the system so if there are systemic problems, they are part of it. Mr. Shabazz noted that as members of the Commonwealth, we can impact whether the new PARCC test will be a diagnostic or high-stakes test. He asked for the community's help in creating a movement to work with the School Committee in making this the community we want it to be. Mr. Baptiste noted that we must embrace a productive use of tension in order to move things forward, which will require respect and willingness to accept constructive criticism. Mr. Fonsh called a five minute recess.

3. Superintendents Update

8:23 PM

Ms. Geryk noted that she emailed an update to the School Committee today regarding steps that have been taken in response to the January incident and the most recent incident. She encouraged them to send any ideas or suggestions to her.

4. New and Continuing Business

8:10 p.m.

A. Safety on Buses

Ms. Geryk noted that she and Mr. Bohonowicz have discussed the potential use of cameras on school buses, as is done in many districts, to enhance safety for students and drivers. Mr. Bohonowicz reviewed the ways in which the cameras would be used, noting that he has received feedback from some districts that behavior of both students and drivers improves just by placing the cameras on the buses. Mr. Shabazz asked what the black boxes on the buses record. Mr. Bohonowicz noted that they record data such as speed, braking, and timeframe. Mr. Shabazz asked what the financial impact would be of adding cameras. Mr. Bohonowicz noted that the cost of \$54,000 to equip the entire fleet of 9 buses and 14 vans would be funded through a capital request. Mr. O'Brien applauded the district for considering this idea since he has heard from Principals that the time of day in which students are most vulnerable is during the bus rides. Mr. Hood noted that he is in favor of using the cameras and asked if there will be a sign noting they are on board. Mr. Bohonowicz clarified that there is a legal obligation to have a sign stating that riders are being taped by both video and audio recording. Ms. Traphagen asked if Mr. Bohonowicz anticipates any backlash from the drivers by putting cameras on the buses. He noted that he has not heard any concerns from district drivers, noting that most of them understand it would be for the safety of both students and themselves.

C. Fort River SOI

DOCUMENT: Fort River Elementary School Form of Vote; Fort River MSBA Application

Mr. Bohonowicz reminded the School Committee that approval to submit a statement of interest to MSBA does not obligate the district to any course of action, and explained the reason for submitting another SOI for Fort River this year. Mr. Hood then moved:

Resolved: *Having convened in an open meeting on March 31, 2014, the Board of Selectmen of Amherst, in accordance with its charter, by-laws, and ordinances, has voted to authorize the Superintendent to submit to the Massachusetts School Building Authority the Statement of Interest dated on or before April 12, 2014 for the Fort River Elementary School located at 70 Southeast Street which describes and explains the following deficiencies and the priority category(s) for which Amherst Public School District may be invited to apply to the Massachusetts School Building Authority in the future:*

Priority 1: *Replacement or renovation of a building which is structurally unsound or otherwise in a condition seriously jeopardizing the health and safety of school children, where no alternative exists.*

Priority 5: *Replacement, renovation or modernization of the heating system in a schoolhouse to increase energy conservation and decrease energy related costs in the schoolhouse.*

Priority 7: Replacement of or addition to obsolete buildings in order to provide for a full range of programs consistent with state and approved local requirements.

and hereby further specifically acknowledges that by submitting this Statement of Interest, the Massachusetts School Building Authority in no way guarantees the acceptance or the approval of an application, the awarding of a grant or any other funding commitment from the Massachusetts School Building Authority, or commits the City/Town/Regional School District to filing an application for funding with the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

Mr. O'Brien seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

B. Teaching and Learning Update

DOCUMENT: Powerpoint Slides—Teaching and Learning Update on Social Studies K-12 Alignment Work; ARPS Multicultural Curriculum Standards K-12 Program—7th Grade, Global Studies, A Closer Look at Our Identity and Diversity Units DRAFT; ARPS Multicultural Curriculum Standards K-12 Program—9th Grade World Civilization Course DRAFT (MARCH 2014)

Dr. Cohen provided an overview of the district's work in Social Studies, including Pk-12 alignment, the elementary program grades 3-5, and World Civilizations/geography 6-7. Mr. Leutz reviewed the high school social students program and two potential models for delivering the required curriculum while offering electives, and Mr. Jackson addressed the commitments and constraints faced by the high school social students program. Dr. Cohen reviewed the next steps, which include a review of the curriculum for grades 4, 6 and 7; making materials available for public feedback in late April; planning summer curriculum work for grades three through seven and grade nine; making a high school program recommendation; and reviewing the multicultural curriculum standards. Ms. Gould asked if AP offerings will be broadened, noting that she would prefer to maintain electives over AP courses if a choice had to be made between them. Dr. Cohen said that is a conversation that needs to happen at the departmental level, but there is no reason a district would offer only AP European History. Mr. O'Brien noted the high quality of the analytical writing students do in the social studies department, stating that this needs to be kept regardless of what is offered. Mr. Hood stated that he would like to see as much Howard Zinn information in the social studies department as possible. Ms. Traphagen encouraged the district to continue to allow teachers, particularly at the elementary level, to use their creativity and ingenuity in the classroom as we move toward more standardization. Dr. Cohen spoke about the arts integration that will be taking place in grades K-2. Mr. Shabazz challenged the district to be mindful of the potential for moving to a semester schedule as this work moves forward. He asked how thoughtful, intentional community engagement is being encouraged, particularly use of local expertise. Dr. Cohen said she will be more than happy to reach out to community experts. She noted that people often spend a lot of energy trying to select the best textbook, when there is really no such thing, and she welcomes feedback and thoughts from experts on which materials would work best. Mr. Fonsh spoke about the anecdotal feedback he has heard over the years regarding the excellence of the social studies department. He asked if documents outlining scope, sequence and skills are available for parents. Dr. Cohen explained that things are not aligned at the state level yet, and the district has an enormous amount of work to do in order to make such documents possible. She noted that the work outlined tonight is the foundation for making them possible. Mr. Fonsh thanked Dr. Cohen, Mr. Leutz and Mr. Jackson for their presentation.

3. Subcommittee Updates

9:29 p.m.

DOCUMENTS (RAWG): Current Regional Agreement; Report on the RAWG Governance Subcommittee Meeting of March 11, 2014; Report on the School Location Subcommittee Meeting of March 17, 2014; Timeline Subcommittee Update

Budget Subcommittee—Mr. Hood reminded about the Spring Sprint on May 3.

Policy Subcommittee—Mr. Fonsh reported on the policies that the subcommittee hopes to bring forward at the next meeting.

The Collaborative—Mr. O'Brien reported that the Collaborative is developing new articles of agreement. Mr. Baptiste noted that Mr. Diehl is planning to meet with member superintendents regarding the articles and ways in which The Collaborative can better serve member districts.

RAWG—Mr. Fonsh reported that RAWG met for the first time last week, noting that each subcommittee was asked to provide an update of their work to the Regional School Committee. These updates have been distributed to the committee. The next RAWG meeting is May 1.

5. School Committee Planning

9:35 p.m.

Calendar and Items for Future Agenda—Ms. Geryk will send an updated calendar to the School Committees. Mr. Hood distributed a motion he would like the School Committee to consider at a future meeting. Mr. Fonsh asked if he can speak to the motion at the meeting on April 8. Mr. Baptiste noted that Mr. DeChiara asked that he request, in his absence, that his motion regarding life threatening allergies be added to the agenda.

6. Adjournment

9:41 p.m.

At 9:41 p.m., Mr. Hood moved and Ms. Traphagen seconded to adjourn the Amherst School Committee; Mr. Baptise moved and Ms. Marriott seconded to adjourn the Pelham School Committee; and Ms. Gould moved and Mr. O'Brien seconded to adjourn the Regional School Committee.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

Opening Statement by Kip Fonsh, Chair

Welcome. Thank you for being here this evening to show your support and solidarity with Carolyn Gardner. Over the past several months there have been a number of incidents that have dealt a ferocious body blow to our community, our neighborhood, and our neighbors. More tragically, these incidents have targeted one member of our community because of who and what she is...an African-American female human being. These attacks crush the spirit and rip apart the soul of all of us and no one more so than the target, the victim of such reprehensible attacks. Among the many consequences of such attacks are the escalation of anger and fear. In the pursuit of developing strategies to respond to these attacks and to prevent their future occurrence we need to transcend our anger and fear and find the strength and channel the energy generated by fear and anger. We must be prepared to work hard, seek inspiration, acknowledge the daunting challenge of our work, and dig deep for the sources of original, creative thinking, pursue innovative ideas and not be afraid to think out of the box. Encapsulating all of that is that we must pledge to one another that while we may disagree about the details of how we reach our goal, we must vow to never give up. There is an abundance of knowledge in our community. What we must find is the wisdom to do what is best for all of our children; a commitment to do no harm; remain respectful; to listen. I sat in the ARHS auditorium last Friday while 600 to 700 young men and women sat in rapt, silent attention as Mr. Jackson related to them the details of what had transpired the day before that had so maligned the entire school community. If our children can demonstrate that level of respect then surely we can all do so as well. Please welcome Ms. Carolyn Gardner.

Carolyn Gardner-Thomas' address of the Amherst Regional School Committee

I wish to thank all of you who took the time from your daily concerns to support me during this extremely painful time. Your presence here tonight and at the meeting last Friday, your notes, emails, phone calls have all served to greatly lift my spirits and to show me that I am not alone in this struggle – that our educators, neighbors, parents and children of color are not alone. I was particularly moved by the banner that my students made as their gesture of solidarity with me. It is beautiful. I felt your love and sincerity. Thank you!

My name is Carolyn Gardner. I am a mother. I am a teacher. I am your neighbor. I am the target of several malicious, hostile AND racial attacks at Amherst Regional High School - attacks which seemed to escalate over time, quite possibly because the response to them has been so anemic!

Please know that I have thought long and hard about these vicious, racist attacks. They are attempts to dehumanize ME and all people of color. But really, they dehumanize us all! The sluggish response of the school administrators leading up to this most recent attack is a sad indication that the need for racial consciousness and sensitivity is low on this administration's list of priorities. It speaks to a culture of racism that exists in this school about which there is persistent denial!

I have been a teacher for thirteen years. For thirteen years I have stood before and instructed and loved your children; for thirteen years I have fought to demystify mathematics for all children, but especially for children who somehow feel locked out of its so-called impartial and objective discourses. I am the teacher, the "other-mother" of your children; when you entrust them daily to our care, it is a task that I embrace with joy. Teaching your children is for me one of life's greatest blessings. This is why I feel it IS my job to advocate vigorously on their behalf so that they can be on the receiving end of the best possible education it is their **right** to have.

But they cannot have the best possible education when the school systematically ignores their ways of being, styles of learning, needs and wants. I speak especially about our children of color who are disproportionately left out of honors classes and, as a result, will most likely not be considered for admission to college programs that require advanced mathematics a prerequisite. Their future is contained way before they graduate high school. My presence here, therefore, is to challenge the school committee, superintendent and principal to rethink the way we do schooling so that it is an affirming and safe and validating space for ALL children. Not a place that routinely sends the subtle and not-so-subtle message to our children that, "all [students] are created equal, but some are more equal than others." Racism thrives in such spaces and it seems it is thriving here. I am here also because I was targeted and my attacks and attackers were not addressed openly but treated with silence! Racism thrives in silence, and it is thriving here. I was attacked and had to be the one to devise and lead in my own defense. My attacks were met with equivocation, indecision, sanitized statements to address them. It told me my person, my sense of security, my safety, were not this administration's top concerns. It told me all teachers are created equal, but some are more equal than others.

It was repeatedly said that the racist note did not threaten violence. I beg to differ! Given the violent history of that word, the years of violent oppression and humiliation associated with it; the use of it to commit the most awful and heinous crimes in the history of this nation – **how could you even think the use of this word does not threaten violence?** The word “nigger” attacks and demeans me, its intent to render me less than human, it makes it OK to diminish me, my son, your sons and daughters, you – but not just people of color – it diminishes the user, it diminishes us all! And it especially diminishes those who stand silently by and do nothing!

To this end, I ask you administrators for the following:

- Do not rest in your investigation until the person or persons responsible for these criminal acts are caught and brought to justice.
- I ask for your firmest assurance of my safety in this building. Clearly, if there are those who see me as less than human, then I am at risk for more attacks and who knows how that could end? Please also know that if I have to operate effectively as a professional in service of other people’s children I cannot do it looking over my shoulders.
- I ask for your commitment to the address of structural, systemic racism. It is manifested in all facets of school life without the consciousness of its pervasive existence. For instance, how can our classroom cultures become inclusive – locales for ideas that privilege none over the other. Or how may we consider the learning styles of ALL students and build that into classroom practice so ALL voices are valued and have an equal say in the learning community – not by separating students from each other through institutional tracking, but of having students learn from each other’s perspectives and point of views in the same space? How may we even consider the use of images/icons/symbols/historical and cultural references that reflect our diversity? I know these are not easy demands. But we are not called to ease! We are called to EDUCATE!

My name is Carolyn Gardner and I AM a teacher! Thank you!!

Statement by Maria Geryk, Superintendent

As a system we cannot and will not tolerate words or actions that violate the civil rights of those within our walls. When such egregious actions occur, particularly ones rooted in oppression, we are all affected, not just those within our school. In this case, none more so than Carolyn Gardner. We have failed Carolyn and we have failed many others. We will continue to strengthen the action steps we have in place now to improve the school climate. We will continue and strengthen our professional development for our adults. We will continue to work with students to strengthen their understanding of racism and empower them to take action. We will continue to address the structural barriers we have in place, many of which you’ve heard named tonight. It is our job to ensure that our environment keeps all of our students physically and emotionally safe and we are clearly not there yet. No matter how discouraged we may be, we will not allow this incident to deter us from our obligation. I thank very much the many community members who have reached out to me over the past few days and have offered their support and their help. We have a much better chance of succeeding, as many have said tonight, if we do this work together. We have another meeting this week with some of our community partners who have joined with us over the past few months—Pat Romney, Barry Brooks, Chris Overtree—and I’m going to ask their input to strengthen the action plan we already have in place. We also have meetings set up with community members who have reached out to me, including members of the Human Rights Commission. We are continuing to develop not only our work within the school but also to join the community to develop a strong community response to racism—we have our internal work and we are committed to work with the various groups that are here tonight to put this work in place. While I have apologized to Carolyn, my words will not make up for what our actions have done to her spirit or heal her pain. What I can do is move our work forward on behalf of all our students. I love the phrase Mr. Elliott said—the oneness of the human family is something I can feel deeply and we do have to work hard to love one another. I am 100% committed to reaching out to our community and having you come in and work with me. Give me your suggestions, your recommendations and we will work together on behalf of our kids. We are far from the mark.

Remarks by Rick Hood, Amherst & Regional School Committee Member

I attended the high school student assembly last Friday morning. Mark Jackson began that meeting with a description of exactly what had occurred the previous day. When he mentioned the fact that a student had brought this incident to the attention of a teacher saying “*You need to come see this, and you need to do something about it now*” the entire auditorium erupted in applause. This was not one person applauding and others joining in; it was a spontaneous and immediate applause by – as far as I could tell – everyone in the room.

The vast majority of our high school students “get it”. They get that racism is real, and wrong and that it must be called out when they encounter it. The recent work of students, staff and administration in learning to be warriors against racism, sexism, homophobia, and bullying are laudable, and are having an effect.

There will always be a minority of students – and staff – who don’t get it, and may even mock these efforts. With those people the answer has to be unequivocal: *“get with the program, or get out”*.

I know that School Committee members are not supposed to get directly involved in particular cases of student or staff discipline, so I won’t. However, as a matter of general policy, the following is my very strong belief:

Any student who commits an act of racist assault against another member of the school community loses the privilege of being a student in our school system. Period.

If students are walking down a hallway and are overheard by a staff member using the N word to a black student, or the C word to a woman, or the F word to a gay student, and the staff member does not intervene immediately, that staff member has lost the privilege of working in this school system. Period.

We are all racist to some extent; even if in the most unintended way. But I would argue that the vast majority of kids in our high school are less racist and more aware and educated about racism and white privilege than the rest of us. It would do them a disservice to label our school system as more racist than any other. So, for our kids, please don’t do that.

Finally, for those of you who look to the school system to fix the problem of racism, I would say absolutely, we must continue and expand the work we are doing. In particular we need to tear down the institutional racism that many of us don’t even see – especially those of us who are white.

But I would also say we must look in the mirror. If you think we are not a part of the solution, think again. We have work to do in our families and in our community, just as we have work to do in the schools. Open your eyes and you will see racism – and when you do, don’t be a coward, be a warrior.