

Board of Education Restores Most Positions

by Lindsay Fetzner

The Board of Education (BOE) voted Tuesday evening to reinstate most of the non-certified positions slated for elimination, a move that drew applause from many in attendance.

The board voted 5-0 to use the savings from a combination of areas to offset previously-approved non-certified reductions. The only reductions retained were the elimination of a custodian and cutting two and a half hours each week from a Gilead Hill School secretary. Drawing from a recent retirement, the creation of an elementary behavior program and surplus money, a total of 2.5 paraprofessionals and one secretary were restored.

BOE Chairwoman Jane Dube referred to the motion to reinstate positions as “the best motion we’ve had in months.”

At the start of the special meeting, Gail Gonydke, a Hebron Elementary School secretary, spoke during public comment as both a 10-year non-certified employee of the BOE and as the President of the Chapter in Connecticut State Employees Association (CSEA)/Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 2001.

Gonydke said “Parents and taxpayers joined us [at the June 15 BOE meeting] and urged you not to layoff non-certified education support staff.” She added that the “schools’ non-certified support staff provide services that directly impact the quality of the education experience for our children,” and referred to the staff as “the engine that keeps Hebron’s schools running.”

“That’s why we appreciate the superintendent’s efforts to redirect resources in order to retain most of the jobs of education support personnel cut in the budget

package for next year,” Gonydke said.

Superintendent of Schools Ellie Cruz discussed the total surplus of \$38,437. Out of that figure, \$19,562 came from frozen accounts from the beginning of the year, including items such as advertising, printing and binding, library books and textbooks. The remainder of the surplus was from the pre-purchase of the technology lease for computer equipment, approved at the June 15 meeting, in the amount of \$18,875.

In the budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year, which began yesterday, July 1, roughly \$20,000 was budgeted for the purchase of new computer equipment, due to the five-year lease expiring. Due to the fact that the board pre-purchased the lease with the surplus from the budget ending June 30, the funds were able to be directed toward line items such as salaries, and inevitably help to restore positions that were going to be eliminated.

“This money, along with the lease money and retirement, will take us a long way toward reinstating positions,” Cruz said Tuesday.

The exact savings from the retirement of Gina Dolan, a special education teacher at Gilead Hill School, is unknown at this time. The figure depends on the insurance package the teacher replacing Dolan will choose, but Cruz estimated it to be between \$14,000 and \$25,000.

The board voted unanimously for Cruz to spend the \$38,437 surplus. (BOE members Brian O’Reilly and William Moorcraft were not present at the meeting.)

Also discussed Tuesday was the proposal of an elementary behavior program in the district. Cruz said in addition to the two

students that were outplaced this year, she is “fully anticipating” a third student in the district will need specialized instruction.

“We had to step back and look at taking some [money to] create a program in the district,” Cruz said, adding that first and foremost, she is a “firm believer in the least restrictive environment.” “The highest priority is for the children to be successful academically and behaviorally.”

If the three students were not housed in the district, Cruz said they would be faced with being “close to \$100,000 in the hole” from costs associated with tuition and transportation. Although Cruz said there will still be a \$43,000 deficit going into the new fiscal year beginning July 1, she recommended applying for an excess cost grant to offset some of the costs, as well as “look[ing] at other ways to cut corners.”

With the creation of the program, one teacher and two paraprofessionals would need to be hired.

“It is certainly a move in the right direction,” Cruz said. She added that she would not only “like the children to come back home” but a huge priority was “taking care of our own with our own.” “[We’re] building a foundation for these children to be successful.”

The board voted unanimously to approve the elementary behavior program.

In response to the board’s decision to restore positions, Matt O’Connor, Communications Director of CSEA/SEIU Local 2001, said Thursday his union’s reaction “was very positive.” He added that members are pleased that their efforts to reach out to school officials and “make the case that the non-certified support staff in Hebron schools play a vital role” were heard.

However, O'Connor said there was still disappointment that the custodian position was not restored. He said he is "hopeful that we will be able to work with the superintendent and board to find the savings so the position can be preserved," as the position is important in keeping the schools "clean, safe and healthy," which are "critical to the education experience."

At the close of Tuesday's meeting, during public comment, union staff representative of CSEA/SEIU Local 2001 George Gould thanked the BOE and Cruz

for restoring the positions. However, he added, "We still think that that one position that you guys are going to cut is a very important position." Gould said there are "things we might be able to share in terms of saving the board money" in order to reinstate the custodian position. One of the options Gould gave was moving the district into the state's prescription drug plan.

In response to Gould's suggestion, O'Connor said Thursday that it is "one way savings can be achieved" and "one way the position can be preserved."

Resident Donna McCalla also thanked the board "on behalf of a lot of residents" for reinstating positions.

"This is a large step toward building confidence in the board," McCalla said.

McCalla went on to say that "creatively" averting the layoffs means "a lot to the people in the community."

The next regularly scheduled meeting of the BOE is on July 8, at 7 p.m. at Gilead Hill School.