

June 3, 2008

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on Tuesday, June 3, 2008, in the Board Room of the high school.

**Call to Order**

President Conway called the meeting to order at 6:15 p.m. A roll call indicated the following members were present: John C. Allen, Jacques A. Conway, Valerie J. Fisher, Dr. Ralph H. Lee, Dr. Dietra D. Millard, Sharon Patchak-Layman and John P. Rigas. Also present were Dr. Attila J. Weninger, Superintendent, and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/ Clerk of the Board of Education.

**Visitors**

Cheryl Witham, O.P.R.F.H.S. Chief Financial Officer; Wyanetta Johnson, Burcy Hines, Edith DeLaCruz, Theresa Phillips, Richard Neuman, Lorraine Vasquez, and Meg Reynolds, community members; Terry Dean of the *Wednesday Journal*; and Bridgett Kennedy of the *Oak Leaves*.

**Visitor Comments**

Richard Neuman, resident of 312 Linden in Oak Park, read the following statement.

“My name is Richard Newman. I live at 312 Linden.

“I would like to address the Board concerning the recent controversy surrounding Dr. Weninger’s comments at the Memorial Day assembly.

“There appears to be some disagreement as to whether the Superintendent’s failure to give proper attribution to the story he told about the POW did or did not constitute plagiarism. Frankly, it reminds me of Bill Clinton’s famous statement that it depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is.

“The fact is that Weninger apparently – and I say ‘apparently’ because I was not present at the assembly, and have not listened to the tape – quoted almost word for word McCain’s telling of the story about the POW, but Dr. Weninger said he had been told the story by his brother rather than properly attributing it to McCain.

“Whether or not Dr. Weninger is ‘technically’ guilty of plagiarism is almost, but not quite, irrelevant. Should it really make any difference that he knowingly attributed the story to his brother rather than claiming it as his own, as would have been necessary to satisfy the “technical” definition of plagiarism? Is the kind of misattribution done by Dr. Weninger really a less serious breach of the standards of ethical conduct and intellectual honesty we should demand of Superintendent?

“What is more significant however, and what those who want to dismiss his conduct as an ‘honest mistake’ choose to either forget or

ignore, is that, at least as I see it, Weninger lied. First, he said he attributed the story to his brother because he didn't want to 'politicize' the assembly by mentioning McCain. Yet later he claims he 'didn't remember' attributing it to his brother, and only admitted doing so when confronted with a tape of his speech. Which story is the truth? Or is neither the truth?

"Eric Zorn of the *Chicago Tribune*, and perhaps the *Wednesday Journal*, may be willing to let Dr. Weninger off the hook on the grounds that he is not guilty of the "technical" definition of plagiarism. But I, and other members of the community with whom I have spoken, are not. I believe that Dr. Weninger's conduct calls for the Board to consider Dr. Weninger's termination or demotion.

"What kind of an example does his conduct set for our children, when the principal spokesperson for the High School is guilty of such conduct? And, certainly the failure of this Board to take any action, or to pass it off as an "honest mistake," would reinforce a view that those in positions of power are not held to the same standards as others. Surely if a student did, in a term paper or speech, what Weninger did, the student would be severely disciplined. Why shouldn't Dr. Weninger be held to the same standard? While the "honest mistake" excuse might be acceptable in the case of a student, it should not be an excuse for someone with the years of experience, responsibility, authority and position of the Superintendent.

"Perhaps this Board is unwilling to take the kind of serious action that is warranted; for fear that its members will be criticized by the community for having hired Dr. Weninger in the first place. Having served on a school board myself – the District 97 Board when Ernest Mueller was the Superintendent -- I can understand and appreciate the pressure on Board members to "hunker down" and "circle the wagons" when the Superintendent is criticized by the community – it's "us" (the Board and Administration) against "them" (the members of the community). I sincerely hope that you will not succumb to this, and will have the courage to take the kind of disciplinary action that is clearly warranted. Thank you."

Lorraine Vasquez, resident of 409 S. Maple Avenue, Oak Park, addressed the Board of Education regarding a residency issue. She said the school had agreed to settle her case for \$11,000, but was now asking her to pay an addition \$2,000. She begged the indulgence of the Board of Education to accept the \$11,000 as final payment. She ended by saying that she now lives in Oak Park, pays taxes and her daughter, Maria Vasquez, graduated last year.

Wyannetta Johnson, 38-year resident of Oak Park currently residing at 929 S. Oak Park Avenue, Oak Park, addressed the Board of Education.

Ms. Johnson expressed her disappointment with the issue at hand. Some parents of incoming ninth graders expressed concern to her over sending their students here. H.S. Ms. Johnson accused Dr. Weninger of dividing the community, of telling half-truths, and not informing the Board of Education of things. She reiterated that some students were not doing well. She stated that students felt they were in danger, as fights occur every day. She asked when action was going to be taken to make this school the best in the world. She accused the school of firing African-American males and not deserving white staff. She said that accountability was necessary for parent groups, students, faculty, and the superintendent. While she did not recommended Dr. Weninger's dismissal, she asked the Board of Education to do something.

**Closed Session**

Dr. Millard moved to go into closed session at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, June 3, 2008, for the purpose of discussing the appointment, employment, compensation, discipline, performance, or dismissal of specific employees of the District or legal counsel for the District, including hearing testimony on a complaint lodged against an employee or against legal counsel for the District to determine its validity. 5 ILCS 120/2(c)(1), as amended by PA.93—57; seconded by Dr. Lee. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.

At 9:19 p.m., the Board of Education reconvened its open session.

**Adjournment**

At 9:20 p.m., on Tuesday, June 3, 2008, Dr. Lee moved to adjourn the Special Board Meeting; seconded by Dr. Millard. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.

Jacques A. Conway  
President

Dr. Ralph H. Lee  
Secretary