MINUTES OF THE SAN MATEO COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

Meeting Date: June 3, 2020
Meeting Location: Held Remotely
Board Members Present: Susan Alvaro, Hector Camacho, Jr., Jim Cannon, Beverly Gerard, Rod Hsiao, Ted Lempert, Joe Ross
Staff Officials Present: Nancy Magee, Secretary
Jennifer Perna, Executive Assistant
Other Staff Present: Claire Cunningham, Mefula Fairley, Jennifer Frentress, Jeneé Littrell, Patricia Love, Lori Musso, Denise Porterfield

1. OPENING ITEMS

A. Call to Order

Board President Hector Camacho, Jr. called the meeting to order at 4:03 p.m. He announced the County Board was conducting the meeting as a webinar in light of the current Shelter-in-Place order executed by the San Mateo County Health Officer for the purpose of slowing the community spread of COVID-19 and the Governor’s March 17, 2020, Executive Order N-29-20 suspending certain provisions of the Brown Act to allow governing boards to conduct meetings through remote access.

Board President Camacho noted the June 3, 2020, Regular Meeting would take place immediately following the adjournment of the special meeting.

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no persons wishing to address the Board.

3. BOARD MEMBERS

A. Discuss Response to National Protests and Call for Antiracist Action

Board President Camacho opened the floor to any Board members wishing to comment on the national protests occurring over the last several days and SMCOE’s response. Superintendent Magee noted she had a few comments to share. She thanked Board President Camacho for co-authoring the statement released the previous day, for which she has received positive feedback from staff.
regarding the content and tone of the statement itself. Superintendent Magee informed the Board that Cabinet convened an emergency meeting on Monday to plan for the week ahead in response to the protests of the killing of George Floyd. She said all of Cabinet supported her decision to make a public statement in collaboration with Board President Camacho. Superintendent Magee also stated Cabinet felt that it was not right to move ahead with the previously published Board agenda without addressing this topic, so the Special Board meeting was organized to make space for the discussion. She then turned the floor back to Board President Camacho.

Board President Camacho thanked Superintendent Magee for the context and shared he was pleased to hear of the positive feedback from staff. He stated he and Superintendent Magee were intentional in their language, and a great deal of thought went into their words. Board President Camacho explained currently there is a lot of conversation about words, but they took the time to find the most appropriate, factual, and accurate words to demonstrate the commitment of SMCOE. He then invited Board members to comment on the topic.

Mr. Ross thanked Board President Camacho and Superintendent Magee for their statement and for standing up and demonstrating the type of leadership asked of leaders during this difficult time in history. He stated he appreciated the tone and theme of equity, which Board President Camacho has championed as long as he has known him, and Superintendent Magee has taken on throughout her career and is now taking in partnership with the Board. Mr. Ross said he was happy to stand alongside them in their statement.

Mr. Ross indicated he was struggling with the Board’s role in response to the protests. He said he was unsure how long the situation will last and whether it would need to be considered for the new school year in August and September. Mr. Ross described that 1968 did not happen in a week, and he didn’t know when this would end. Mr. Ross stated while the attention of the community and the country is focused on equity issues affecting all people of color, and with the history of Black Americans in particular, this might be an opportunity to truly make progress in schools on the topic of equity. He elaborated on the complicated conversations and work involved for everyone, regardless of background.

Ms. Alvaro thanked Board President Camacho and Superintendent Magee for their statement, which she described as carefully crafted and just right. She shared feelings of frustration after years working in this field, describing her work on the Juvenile Justice Commission studying the disproportionate incarceration of youth of color, and her work on the County Race Relations Commission going to Washington D.C. with a delegation to discuss these issues. Ms. Alvaro described how it’s been one or two steps forward, and then several steps backwards. She feels distraught, not understanding how we can live in a society where this happens. She expressed that the death of George Floyd was not a killing, and she only feels comfortable calling it a murder. Ms. Alvaro stated she was aware of protests and even heard from a friend in Berlin that there were protests of solidarity there and all over the world. She asked if SMCOE was using this opportunity to engage students, as there are a lot of students of color, and even students not in that or any minority group, who likely have strong feelings. Superintendent Magee replied that the regular school year ended the previous Friday and the extended school year (ESY) program for the Court and Community program begins on June 8. She noted that staff was reeling from the power and impact of this
situation. She said Ms. Alvaro raises a good question regarding how to address this issue when students return and assured she, along with Deputy Superintendent Littrell and her team, would keep the Board apprised of how students want to engage and have their voices heard. Ms. Alvaro described understanding the students are still in remote learning, but she knows in the past, for example with the events of 9-11, students needed to talk about topics, express what is going on in their hearts, and perhaps to cry or be angry, in a safe space. She reiterated her request for SMCOE to facilitate ways for students to express themselves. Superintendent Magee spoke of SMCOE’s restorative culture and practice in schools, and assured the team would be able to formulate a plan to engage and include students. Ms. Alvaro thanked Superintendent Magee for her response.

Mr. Lempert added to the thanks and appreciation to Board President Camacho and Superintendent Magee for the outstanding statement. He added to Ms. Alvaro’s comments about the outrage and horror, which includes understanding this has been going on 24/7 for 300 years and is not something new just happening this week. Mr. Lempert commented on how little progress has been made. He shared in the first year of the Youth Commission in San Mateo County 25 years ago, student leaders in the county were joined by county police officers in a safe space, and students spoke of being afraid to walk outside, being treated differently, feeling terrorized, and not feeling supported, which startled and stunned the police officers. Mr. Lempert echoed Ms. Alvaro’s comments of the importance of student voices being heard. He encouraged everyone to stand up, regardless of color, and focus on what is being done and what can be done, which won’t solve the problem, but will make a difference. Mr. Lempert shared sensing such despair and anger, but knowing the work SMCOE does is focused on making things better and making society more just. He encouraged all to not lose sight of this fact. He suggested doubling down on the work currently being done.

Mr. Hsiao thanked Board President Camacho and Superintendent Magee for issuing the public statement. He said making such a public statement puts SMCOE on the hook to stand by the message. Mr. Hsiao wondered the direction and speed in which to respond to this convulsion in society, which has laid bare the inequities perpetrated on people of color in different periods of history. He shared he entered education to change the system and bring more equity and opportunity to families. He explained that change is hard, requiring patience and understanding, yet when the pain and suffering of those hurting is heard, there is an urgency to do something more than what has been done. Mr. Hsiao described how there are opportunities sliding off the plate, including learning loss, and an inability to get a postsecondary education for our students because of COVID-19. He said he is saddened by where society is right now and like Mr. Lempert, he feels like we have our eyes on the prize with the right goals and programs, but he is getting impatient with the pace of improvement for students and family engagement. He suggested families cannot get to economic prosperity, a comfortable wage, and a sustainable lifestyle without both sides investing in each other to make things happen. Mr. Hsiao summarized there is a lot of work ahead, but he feels empowered being part of SMCOE and part of a team focused on equity and strategic goals, and he wants to stand behind the team to move forward, even in this difficult time.

Ms. Gerard stated what was so important in the message was showing students, teachers, families, and districts that another door has been opened at SMCOE for communication with people who care. She shared sometimes individuals are uncomfortable or afraid to start talking about these issues, and right now people are talking more than she has ever seen. Ms. Gerard discussed similar marches and
riots occurring in the 1960s, and she thanked everyone for showing that SMCOE cares and the door is opened for anyone who wishes to enter.

Mr. Cannon agreed with what had already been so elegantly expressed, adding his thanks to Board President Camacho and Superintendent Magee for a well-written message, which did not surprise him. He said the quality of the writing, in addition to the message, was outstanding, as is everything coming from the SMCOE office, all of which he is extremely proud. Mr. Cannon reflected on his 50 years in education and described feeling hopeful that progress has been made, although he admitted he speaks from a position of privilege throughout his life. He shared hoping when we vote soon, there is a chance to go back to making progress, and hopefully this can be an impetus to regaining that momentum.

Mr. Cannon described the current tragic lack of empathy in many, many thousands of people who feel free to express unleashed hatred in society, but he has hopes we can return to making progress relatively soon. He spoke of conversations over the past 10 years at Zap the Gap Conferences trying to isolate the problem, and the conclusion that poverty is the root. He hopes to provide as much information about this as possible to the public. Mr. Cannon added physical and mental health are additional considerations in the response.

Board President Camacho thanked the Board for their engagement in this topic and their work with Superintendent Magee to put equity front and center for SMCOE. He feels employees and families feel the genuine concern. Board President Camacho spoke of trying to be a statesman, for which he has many models on the Board. He appreciates the influences of other Board members. He stated there are times when being a statesperson does not feel like the right thing to do, in terms of speaking openly and honestly regardless of consequences, electoral or otherwise. Board President Camacho said he woke up that morning to a text which said, “Do you think this time will be different?” and he knew immediately he was being asked whether this is the moment when things change and something happens. The only response he could think of was that most probably we will not see it, but he does think it is a moment, and he thinks things will change. Board President Camacho explained he says that because he knows SMCOE has been working tremendously hard and is committed and accountable to change these issues with students, as was communicated through the letter.

He shared looking at school board colleagues from other districts who have also put out statements and are doing similar work, but there are colleagues on city councils, the Board of Supervisors, and other elected offices, who want to do well, but feel the tension of using language about taking action. Board President Camacho continued he feels less encouraged because that is not where we need to be. He spoke of how racism and white supremacy are at the root of this issue, and recognizing that although San Mateo County is one of the wealthiest counties in the world, racism cannot be discussed. Board President Camacho discussed the concept of a curfew. He said it is a racist act to enact a curfew when it is not enacted at the women’s march, being able to enforce a curfew when you say you cannot enforce a shelter-in-place, or tasing to death Chinedu Okobi, an unarmed black man, for jaywalking in the county, and continuing to renew the contract for those tasers in support of law and order. Board President Camacho passionately conveyed if we cannot talk about racism and oppression, we cannot be agents of change, and this is where he is struggling at the moment. He clarified he is not referring to SMCOE as he is so proud of the Board, Superintendent Magee, Chief Deputy County Counsel Cunningham, Cabinet, and staff who have committed themselves to this
issue. Board President Camacho said the Board’s role is to work in schools to do what can be done, and he knows this is happening, along with the role of advocating for public education to make sure children and their families have a safe place to live. He called out his elected colleagues to ask what they are doing to change things and asserted he cannot worry about the consequences. Board President Camacho discussed the REACH Coalition, comprised of elected officials of color in San Mateo County and community-based organizations whose Boards and executive teams are people of color, because they felt they were being left out in the planning for COVID-19 recovery. He described how it took a great deal of coordination because nobody was looking for those areas of marginalization, which was mostly coming from schools.

Board President Camacho discussed the role to help colleagues at other levels of policy to understand what needs to happen, and he feels SMCOE is well positioned to use its voice to make things better. He shared appreciation for being in this fight with everyone and focusing on the accountability piece, describing the need to look at Board policies again to fix this issue in schools, the center of community and our future. Board President Camacho expressed he was proud to stand with everyone, the Black community, and all those marginalized in the county, and he declared he is ready to move forward.

Superintendent Magee thanked all for sharing in this forum and expressed her appreciation for how meaningful it is to have the Board’s support and to learn from them. She addressed concerns on how SMCOE can turn this into action for students, stating SMCOE is doubling down, to borrow Mr. Lempert’s wording, and crystallizing its commitment, passion, and focus into something powerful. Superintendent Magee assured all staff attending this meeting feel the same way, and SMCOE has a clear mission. She described the joint statement as especially significant because she did not believe too many county offices of education had released joint statements between superintendents and their boards. Superintendent Magee commended the Board as remarkable across the state and statewide leaders in this work, and stated not all Boards in the state would be able to sign on such a letter.

Board President Camacho shared hopes to write a resolution for the next Board meeting to formalize the issue and put action behind their words. Superintendent Magee assured a resolution describing SMCOE’s antiracist work would be presented at the June 17 Board meeting.

4. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 4:33 p.m. Board President Camacho reminded the June 3, 2020, Regular Meeting would take place immediately following the adjournment of this meeting.

Nancy Magee, Secretary

jlp