

Please Note: These minutes are pending Board approval.
Board of Education
Newtown, Connecticut

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting held on May 16, 2023, at 7:00 p.m. in the Council Chambers, 3 Primrose Street.

D. Zukowski, Chair	C. Melillo
J. Vouros, Vice Chair	A. Uberti
D. Ramsey, Secretary (absent)	T. Vadas (absent)
D. Cruson	25 Staff
J. Kuzma	250 Public
J. Larkin	4 Press
A. Plante	
K. Kunzweiler (absent)	
D. Godino (absent)	

Ms. Zukowski called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Item 1 – Pledge of Allegiance

Item 2 – Public Participation

Ms. Zukowski said that Mr. Ramsey has critical family concerns which is why he couldn't attend the meeting.

Kenneth Milare, spoke about book challenges.

Serena Arokium, spoke about diversity and inclusion and book challenges.

Skyler Lewis spoke about book challenges.

Ashley Hubner spoke about book challenges.

Susan Chanko, 28 Canterbury Lane, spoke about book challenges.

Joseph Crosby spoke book challenges and thanked faculty members for being there.

Ben Kugielski, 5 Surrey Drive, spoke about fascism.

El Glassman spoke about book challenges.

Lynn Edwards, 3 Sand Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Steve Linden, 25 Horseshoe Ridge Road, questioned the vote with one member missing.

Dan Grossman, 62 Pine Tree Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Chris Gilson, 38 Osborne Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Karyn Holden, 68 Berksire Road, supports all administrators, staff and students and the Board should too.

Bruce Degan, 62 Castle Meadow Road, illustrator of *The Magic School Bus*, stated that teachers and school librarians in this country are dedicated to children and take care in the books they present.

Wesley Johnson, 65 Britannica Drive, Danbury, spoke about book challenges.

Steve Landau, 8 Walnut Tree Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Matt Bracksiek, 65 Walnut Tree Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Michelle Embree Ku, 28 Platts Hill Road, read a letter from the *Flamer* author, Mike Curato, who requested that it be read.

Timothy Stan, 6 Monitor Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Derek and Dee Pisani, Parmalee Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Treasa O'Sullivan spoke about book challenges.

Lia Mayer, 49A Flat Swamp Road, spoke about book challenges.

Katherine Lye spoke about book challenges.

Beatrice Cardamone, spoke about book challenges.

Olivia Pease lives in 14 Winding Road, Bethel, spoke about book challenges.

Nerlande Foote, 14 Bear Hills Road, spoke about book challenges.

Christine Miller, 72 Forest Drive, spoke about the qualifications for Newtown educator Abi Marks who was on the special review committee. She has the training and expertise in a way this Board of Education does not. A vote against the special review committee is a vote against the experts and a vote against educators.

Laura Miller, 8 Diamond Drive, spoke about Newtown educator David Foss who served on the special review committee. He has the training and expertise in a way this Board of Education does not. A vote against the special review committee is a vote against the experts and a vote against educators.

Heather Dean, 4 Lyrical Lane, spoke about the expertise of Newtown educator Liza Zandonella who served on the special review committee. She has the training and expertise in a way this Board of Education does not. A vote against the special review committee is a vote against the experts and a vote against educators.

Laura Main, 42 The Old Road, spoke about qualifications of Newtown High School Principal Dr. Kim Longobucco who served on the special review committee. She has the training and expertise in a way this Board of Education does not. A vote against the special review committee is a vote against the experts and a vote against educators.

Doria Linnet, 27 Littlebrook Lane, spoke about Assistant Superintendent Anne Uberti who presented the results of the special review committee. She has the training and expertise in a way this Board of Education does not. A vote against the special review committee is a vote against the experts and a vote against educators.

Betsy Licht, 86 Great Hill Road, spoke about Superintendent Chris Melillo who has advised the Board to uphold the special review committee's unanimous recommendation to keep the books in the Newtown High School library. He has the training and expertise in a way this Board of Education does not. A vote against the special review committee is a vote against the experts and a vote against educators.

Nicole Maddox, 14 Nighthawk Lane, spoke about book challenges. A vote against the special review committee is a vote against the experts and a vote against educators.
Jessica Galterio, 8 Surrey Trail, spoke about book challenges

Keith Alexander, 8 Fawnwood Road, former board member, said it was important the public speaks. The Board's job is not micromanagement. Reviewing books through a committee is why you hire educators.

Mary Murphy, 25 Church Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Paul Lundquist, 141 Currituck Road, spoke about book challenges.

Jim Gaston, 18 Main Street, spoke about book challenges and possible violations of the 1st and 14th Amendments if you ban these books. The Board took an oath to support the Constitution of the United States, the Constitution of the State of Connecticut, and the Charter of Newtown. Don't violate your oaths.

Item 3 – Discussion and Possible Action on Citizen's Requests for Reconsideration of Library Media Materials

MOTION: Mr. Cruson moved that the Board of Education accept the recommendation of the Special Review Committee that the book *Flamer* remain in circulation in the Newtown High School Library. Mrs. Plante seconded.

MOTION: Mrs. Kuzma moved to postpone the vote until no later than June 5. Mrs. Larkin seconded.

Mr. Melillo spoke to the audience and stated that conversations tonight need to be civil. He thanked everyone for coming to the meeting but we have to allow people to speak.

Mrs. Kuzma felt this requires the vote of the full Board and every one of them has the chance to be heard.

Mr. Cruson stated this is causing disruption to the district and stress and anguish to Board members and feels we should vote tonight.

Mrs. Plante agreed with Mr. Cruson as we have a quorum to vote. She would not support the amendment.

Mr. Vouros said we should vote with the intent to come to a compromise or solution. Let it unfold with the proper discussion it needs.

Vote on motion to postpone the vote: 1 aye, 5 nays (Ms. Zukowski, Mr. Vouros, Mr. Cruson, Mrs. Larkin, Mrs. Plante) Motion fails.

Mr. Cruson provided comments on the book *Flamer*. If we vote against the committee it will be harder to put people in these positions. He spoke about the Miller test for books. His reaction to *Flamer* does not meet the criteria for not being in the school libraries. A vote to remove it is not in the best interest of Newtown Public Schools.

MOTION: Mrs. Kuzma moved to amend the motion to add "provided that access to the books by students 16 and younger be allowed only with written consent of their parent or guardian." The full motion would read "Move that the Board of Education accept the recommendation of the Special Review Committee that the book *Flamer* remain in circulation in the Newtown High School Library provided that access to the books by students 16 and younger be allowed only with written consent of their parent or guardian." Mrs. Larkin seconded

Mrs. Kuzma was concerned about recent phone calls with community members and staff for fear of retaliation when sharing their input. For anyone to imply that a parent who advocates for their child for what they feel is right should not be labeled anti-educators. She supports educators. She is not anti-lgbtq. She takes her position seriously and was elected to reflect many voices. This amendment is a compromise to satisfy both ends of the issue. This will allow parents to see the books first and she hopes we can come to a compromise.

Mrs. Larkin supports the amended motion and to give the decision back to the parents. She supports the theme of the books. She urged fellow members to come to a compromise.

Mr. Cruson understands the concerns and the desire to come to a compromise but he doesn't feel this is the compromise that will work. Making parents opt in to the book is shaky legal grounds.

Mrs. Plante appreciates the attempt to compromise but she is uncomfortable with the restriction. This is more restrictive than we should be. Parents can opt out so it already exists. She won't support the amendment.

Mr. Vouros said it was important to recognize that parents have the ability to say what their children should and should not read and we have already established that they have the right to alert the teacher if they don't want their child to participate. It makes sense to let the parents make the decision. We all need to be comfortable that the experts we have are doing what they need to do and hope they let the parents decide on books so we can move on.

Mrs. Larkin said the decision making authority belongs to their parents. She can't support that anyone should make decisions for anyone else's child.

Mrs. Kuzma said part of the issue is that parents don't know these books exist so there are students who could thumb through them and have access to the books without their parents knowing.

Mr. Vouros said that doesn't happen in the middle school because students don't have time during class to look at a book. He can't speak for the high school.

Mrs. Plante said she is depending on the recommendation of the Special Review Committee. If some parents want to restrict books we have a mechanism to do that.

Ms. Zukowski agrees that *Flamer* is not obscene or pornographic but it does include explicit sexual content. Regarding students leafing through books a student did write and said she goes to the library during free periods. She also spoke about age appropriate content defined by the American Library Association. Graphic content is not appropriate for children 13 or 14 years old. She supports the amendment.

Ms. Zukowski asked three questions at the previous meeting which were what age is appropriate for sexually explicit material, how do we respect the different perspectives on sexual contents that parents may have, and are there books that provide comparable value that do not include sexually explicit content.

Mrs. Uberti said they were difficult questions and would speak to the library media specialists. Extensive time would be needed to search and read the content. The overriding opinion was that *Flamer* tells a unique autobiographical story that fits the time we live in and would be helpful to students.

Vote: 3 ayes, 3 opposed (Mr. Vouros, Mr. Cruson, Mrs. Plante) Amendment fails.

MOTION: Mrs. Larkin moved to amend the motion to add "provide access to the book by students 15 and younger be allowed only with written consent of their parent, with students 16, 17 and 18 to have unfettered access to the book." Mrs. Kuzma seconded.

Mrs. Larkin doesn't want to remove the book. There are parents who have concerns about this content.

Mrs. Plante said she was uncomfortable with the Board leading to operational areas where we don't have responsibilities. She won't agree to the amendment.

Mr. Cruson agreed and he is not comfortable with an opting process. There's a procedure in place under the operational jurisdictions.

Mrs. Kuzma said we have put in hours of time hearing concerns and no acknowledgement for parents who have concerns and would support the motion.

Vote on amendment: 3 ayes, 3 nays (Mr. Vouros, Mr. Cruson, Mrs. Plante) Motion fails.

Mrs. Larkin asked Board members if there was something they were comfortable with that we don't do to acknowledge books with extreme vulgarity. Why would we put these materials with vulgarity in the hands of the students. She cares about the First Amendment and we received legal advice around the First Amendment with explicit material in the book.

Mr. Vouros trusts that the parent will know what is best for their child. The best thing to do is to help parents who are uncomfortable with what we decide.

Mr. Cruson doesn't know if there is a compromise. He would not support another age opt in the motion. He is not in favor of banning books but understands the parental concerns for these two books.

Mrs. Uberti stated that there is an opportunity for parents to reach out to the library media specialists regarding issues with books. A compromise is expanding that to ask parents to provide us with a list of books parents don't want their child to see. What would provide clarity is if that is provided to all parents it would allow us to see what's next.

Ms. Zukowski said this is a compromise at the policy level for these two books. We can move to amend the motion by adding parents who wish to not access *Flamer* provide written notification not to access *Flamer* and notification to the library media specialists at the high school.

Vote on main motion: 3 ayes, 3 nays (Ms. Zukowski, Mrs. Kuzma, Mrs. Larkin) Motion fails.

MOTION: Mr. Cruson moved that the Board of Education accept the recommendation of the Special Review Committee that the book *Blankets* remain in circulation in the Newtown High School Library. Mrs. Plante seconded.

Mr. Cruson read his statement about *Blankets*. The Miller test was not satisfied and removing the book would not hold up legally.

Mrs. Plante read her statement. She believes we should not infringe on students rights. *Flamer* was never checked out by a student and *Blankets* was not checked out until this year. She consulted a crisis counselor and said none of her students were influenced by a book. Reading books is helpful for those contemplating suicide. Books are not obscene and not pornography. They have substantial literary value. Diverse perspectives are important to our students. She asked to listen to our experts.

Vote on motion: 3 ayes, 3 nays (Ms. Zukowski, Mrs. Kuzma, Mrs. Larkin) Motion fails.

Ms. Zukowski said in speaking with our lawyer, a tie means no action. The books stay on the shelf and we will have to have another meeting to decide.

Mr. Melillo said that without a consensus, the books are status quo. We will seek legal advice and have another Board meeting to come to a consensus.

Item 4 – Public Participation

Danielle Loser, 1 Grays Plain Road, spoke about book challenges.

Joseph Crosby spoke about book challenges.

Casey Ragan stated the Board is not supporting our teachers or the people in charge and should put students and staff first.

El Glassman, has not seen anyone checking out a book.

Linda O’Sullivan, 11 Farmery Road, spoke about book challenges.

Amelia Rivero, spoke about book challenges.

Sarah Beier, 7 Yogananda Street, spoke about book challenges.

Christine Wilford, 13 Georges Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Madison Albano, 8 Cobblers Mill, spoke about book challenges.

Dan Grossman, 62 Pine Tree Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Morgan Albano, 8 Cobblers Mill Road, spoke about challenges.

Brian Tenney, NHS English teacher, spoke about book challenges.

Lynn Edwards, 3 Sand Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Trent Harrison, 59 Platts Hill Road, teacher at Newtown High School, spoke about the Board bylaws and it was not their job to change the policy around book and should accept the committee’s decision.

Steve Hinden spoke about book challenges.

Treasa O’Sullivan spoke about book challenges.

Carrie Grummons spoke about book challenges.

Timothy Stan, 6 Monitor Hill Road, spoke about book challenges.

Jason Almeter, 122 Hanover Road, spoke about book challenges.

Edward Randall 86 Great Hill Road, spoke about listening to the young people.

Mary Murphy, 25 Churchill Road, spoke about book challenges.

MOTION: Mr. Vouros moved to adjourn. Mrs. Cruson seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

Item 5 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Deborra Zukowski
Chair