

SUBJECT TO APPROVAL

MEETING DATE: TUESDAY, MARCH 15, 2016
6:00 P.M.

MEETING PLACE: JAMES MADISON ROOM (ROOM A) - TOWN CAMPUS

JOINT MEETING BOARD OF SELECTMEN BOARD OF EDUCATION

MINUTES

First Selectman Banisch called the Joint Meeting of Tuesday, March 15, 2016 to order at 7:05 p.m. Present were First Selectman Banisch, Selectman Hale, Selectman Goldberg, Selectwoman Walker and Selectman Wilson; Board of Education Chair Jean Fitzgerald, and members Kathleen Stein and Allison Keating.

Also present: Catherine Barden, MADE Coalition Coordinator
Scott Cochran, Director of Youth & Family Services
DHHS Students: Sophia Carbone, Jessica Lundgren, Maddie Dobson,
Patrick Fahey, Owen McGeary, Matthew Parker, Max Veth and
Anthony Xu.

Ms. Barden, provided an overview of the survey which was conducted to determine stressors in high school students in Madison. Ms. Barden also provided a handout of stress data (a copy is attached to these minutes). The top 5 stressors are all classified as academic stress reasons. Ms. Barden also noted that there was also a dramatic rise in drug and alcohol use between 10th and 11th grade.

Patrick Fahey stated that he would review the stressors and noted that the statistics of attempted suicides were very alarming as well. Matthew Parker stated that many of the stressors are related and that many of them compound to create a great amount of stress for high school students. Chairwoman Fitzgerald questioned where the pressure to take advanced classes was coming from; schools, parents, college entrance requirements, etc. Mr. Fahey responded that the reality is that students should be able to go to the college that suits them best, but that this concept wasn't talked about as much at the high school level.

First Selectman Banisch questioned if the pressure to succeed was equal between parents and self-pressure. Owen McGeary stated that there are parents pushing their children into advanced classes and then a student who cannot perform feels a lot of pressure. Chairwoman Fitzgerald questioned if there was something that could be done on the school level, perhaps to educate parents of this pressure. Mr. Fahey stated that years ago there was an initiative that helped to bring information to the parents and that anything that can get the parents to discuss the

stressors their children face is good. Mr. McGeary also stated that a lot of parents may be ignorant to the stresses that face their children.

Chairwoman Fitzgerald stated that the Board of Education just reviewed the homework policy in Town and that they had gotten pushback from parents. She noted that children play many sports and have extracurricular activities that also take up their time. Mr. McGeary also noted that the bar was very high in Madison because as a whole, it is a very intelligent town.

Selectman Hale questioned if there was a difference in stress as a student moves forward into each grade and Jessica Lundgren stated that there was data collected that verified there was more stress especially in 11th grade. Sophia Carbone stated that there is also a jump in depression and suicide for the older grades as well. Some of this increase can be attributed to the push to get into college, perform on SAT exams, etc. Ms. Lundgren also stated that these students have pressure to perform better in sports, i.e. to obtain varsity status. The Boards also reviewed peer pressure and if that is a stressor for high school students.

Ms. Stein questioned if there were more things that schools could do to educate students on healthy coping mechanisms for stress and Mr. Fahey stated that the students appreciate the reduction in the homework policy. He also noted that there is a peer group at the high school that works with meditation and he felt that meditation practices could be added to the routine for students. Chairwoman Fitzgerald also replied that there was an initiative last year where dogs were brought in at exam times for the students to interact with and she noted that this may be a practice to repeat.

Selectman Hale asked if the change in the exam schedule for 11th graders was going to help alleviate stress and Mr. Parker responded that having exams consecutive to SATs raised the stress level a lot. Chairwoman Fitzgerald questioned if the teachers were sensitive to the stress of their students and the students felt that some teachers were aware and accommodating of extenuating circumstances. Chairwoman Fitzgerald also questioned if time management techniques training would help students complete assignments on time and Mr. Parker stated that he thought this was a good idea. He noted that time management is an area where he could use help as well. Mr. Fahey also stated that one of the big issues is cell phone use which distracts from completing assignments.

Selectman Wilson asked if students were aware of recognizing when they are experiencing unhealthy stress levels and Mr. Parker stated that he felt many students were able to recognize this, but that there were still others who do not possess this skill. He felt that stress education would benefit the students as well as teachers and administrators. Selectman Wilson added that it was important to allow students the ability to say that they have reached their stress and or work limit and he noted that if parents and schools don't make it 'okay' for students to say they have reached their limit then the education initiatives are not going to work.

Selectwoman Walker stated that one of the things that jumped out to her was that for the most part, the females were more stressed than the males. Maddie Dobson stated that she did believe this was true and that some females only focus on school and that there is a lot of competition to perform academically as well as in sports. Ms. Carbone stated that, for instance, she and her friends were all applying for National Honors Society and that they were not sharing their application data with each other.

Selectwoman Walker also stated that another stressor that jumped out at her was that students felt pressure to perform well in school and in sports. First Selectman Banisch questioned how many of the students were athletes as well and seven students noted raised their hands. Selectwoman Walker stated that it should be encouraged from the parents down, that a student can balance sports and school and doesn't have to be the best at everything; instead, they can be good at one, or two things.

Chairwoman Fitzgerald stated that there was a double-edged sword in Madison where students are given greater opportunities and programs, but then they feel pressured to do each of these things. She stated that the parents and schools should work together to help students reach their potentials and their best mental health.

Ms. Keating asked how the survey was administered and Ms. Barden stated that the survey was done during the school day and there were 1,058 surveys tallied. Some surveys were not kept because they were dishonest and/or not filled out correctly. For instance, the surveys have some fail-safes such as, there are "fake" substances listed so if a student says that they have used a fake substance, then their survey was not used.

Selectwoman Walker questioned the survey results for suicide and depression and the students stated that they were surprised by these results and felt they were pretty high. Chairwoman Fitzgerald questioned if certain drugs were used more by students, i.e. prescriptions, and Mr. McGearry stated that he didn't see this in his experiences.

Ms. Barden stated that use of all substances decreased over the last two years except for marijuana and that there was not significant use of illicit drugs. She also noted that the heroin use rates were less than 0.5%. Alcohol and marijuana use are much more prevalent; however, upwards of 75% of students do not use these substances.

Selectman Wilson asked if the students had received feedback from their peers and if they felt the statistics were accurate. Mr. Parker stated that many of his friends stated that the stressor statistics seemed right to them; some friends also agreed that the statistics of depression and suicide were surprising.

Scott Cochran stated that roughly 60% of the students treated through the Youth and Family Services Department are diagnosed with depression; for him, these results were not surprising.

Selectman Goldberg thanked the students and staff for gathering this information and he was interested in what might be a next step. Mr. Fahey stated that a nice thing to do would be to make it better for students to be honest about their stress levels. He stated that perhaps teachers could be encouraged to take time to talk to their students about any stress they are feeling from classwork and assignments. First Selectman Banisch asked if students can talk to their parents about stress levels and Mr. Fahey stated that he felt some students find it hard to speak to their parents about their stress limits.

Owen Xu stated that there will always be the stress to get into a good college, so instead of reducing stress, students should be taught how to effectively manage their stress. He stated

that breathing exercises help him a lot and that he was able to learn this mechanism through Peer Helpers.

The boards also discussed possible peer groups that could be formed to help students and Chairwoman Fitzgerald suggested that this concept could be brought to the Principal to help them implement these new initiatives. Selectwoman Walker stated that this conversation would be helpful at the Middle School level, as well. Chairwoman Fitzgerald stated that policy and procedure changes to testing were also being reviewed at the BOE level to perhaps change up the way students are tested, i.e. by group assessments.

Mr. McGeary also stated that education for parents of younger students would be helpful, too, to educate parents in how they can help their children manage stress levels. Mr. Fahey added that students feel that they are learning things just to learn them, and not necessarily for real-world application.

Mr. Xu stated that students shouldn't be shielded from real-world experiences, i.e. if testing would be done in college, if SATs are needed for college applications then students should have practice with testing. Chairwoman Fitzgerald stated that in her experience as a college professor, there is a different way of learning/teaching in college than in high schools. The Boards and students also discussed the importance of time management and that this and priority adjustment were skills needed for the real world.

Mr. Cochran added that it is important, when thinking about the next steps, to take into consideration what public awareness was needed and to point out that budget needs should be met for the Youth & Family Services Department as well as state grant funding was needed. Mr. Cochran thanked the students for their involvement and commended them for the way they articulated their results and thoughts.

Mr. Xu also noted that perhaps a 15 minute free break could be added to the school day for students to be able to reach out to their teachers during the school day. Overall, all groups involved agreed that open dialogue and discussion was needed between parents, schools and students.

Madison resident Tina Garrity stated that she was grateful that the survey was done and she noted that the emotional stability of children had been on the back burner for too long. Ms. Barden stated that the stress management task force wants to meet with students, parents and community members on April 21st, they were looking for a space to host. Also, on April 26th there will be a parent workshop held to help parents learn stress management techniques for them and their children.

Madison resident Art Symonds stated that there is a serious problem in Madison and he stated that the town should do something about it. He thanked the Youth & Family Services board for their work.

State Representative Noreen Kokoruda thanked the Youth & Family Services Department and the students for their work and she stated that there was a need to get the teachers on board as well. Representative Kokoruda stated that she has seen first-hand the stress that standardized testing places on high school students.

Adjournment

There being no objections, First Selectman Banisch adjourned the meeting at 8:07 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Lauren Rhines
Recording Secretary