

*Natick Public Schools
SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
June 20, 2023*

The School Committee held a meeting on Tuesday, June 20, 2023 at 6:30 pm in the School Committee Room, third floor, Town Hall. Chair Shai Fuxman called the meeting to order and took roll call at 6:35 pm.

Members Present: Julie McDonough, Catherine Brunell, Cathi Collins, Matt Brand, Kate Flathers, Elise Gorseth, Shai Fuxman

Others Present: Timothy Luff, Deputy Superintendent

Pledge of Allegiance

Moment of Silence

Public Speak

Two requests. One withdrawn.
Karin Sutter - not present.

Public Session Minutes

Introduction of Bella Wong as Interim Superintendent for the 2023-24 school year
Remarks from Chair Fuxman
Remarks from Bella Wong

Teacher Representative - not present
Student Representative - not present

Agenda Item - Proclamation of Progressive Pride Flag

Policy Sub-Committee Update from Sub-Committee Chair Matt Brand

Process: June 8 sub-committee meeting
Decided to discuss it as a proclamation instead of a policy. Not take this as a policy, but rather as a proclamation.

Tim Luff - Beginning of this year met to discuss the Shurtleff case. Brought conversation about flag policy to the sub-committee and committee at that time. Needed to decide how to proceed.

Schools are limited to public forums in the evening so decided not to address the issue at all. Flying the flag outside is a form of government speech. As long as the School Committee doesn't take applications it remains government speech.

Catherine - policy sub-committee took this up in December. Received a memo from the public. which went through legal. Dropped it in January and nothing else was done until the June 8, 2023 sub-committee meeting.

Question from Kate Flathers on process. How proclamations come about. Can make a motion on a proclamation. Why is this a proclamation instead of a policy? Policy asks the district to enact rules. The proclamation can be voted on tonight.

Did not proceed with a policy because of the changing nature of the interior of school buildings (during the day they are closed, at night they are open)

Does the proclamation hold the same weight as a policy? Whatever is in the proclamation has to be done? Same as policy?

Reference of school building rental policy. Worried that this proclamation would limit what can be in the school building vs. what can be outside.. Could potentially impact students negatively.

Does the proclamation become a procedure? What is the right process for that?

Framingham had a proclamation on the progress pride flag?

Policy on this may come. Had twisted us up on the wording and decided the proclamation was the best way forward.

Clarify that we are not changing what is in the classroom.

Reference to Ad Council retreat presentation that reference flags and posters in classrooms.

Questions about whether we are creating problems?

Recommended that the SC consider the proclamation because they deemed that a policy was not appropriate. No discussion on impact to students and staff of proclamation.

Cathi Collins read the proclamation.

Proclamation in Support of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning (LGBTQ+) Students and Staff

1) WHEREAS Natick Public Schools are committed to creating an inclusive, safe, caring, and challenging learning environment viewed through an equity lens; and

- 2) WHEREAS the Natick Public Schools recognize the importance of equity and inclusion; and
- 3) WHEREAS all students deserve to feel safe and welcome in their schools, to be known by their preferred name and gender identity, as well as to see themselves represented in the curricula; and
- 4) WHEREAS everyone should be able to live without fear of prejudice, discrimination, violence, or hatred based on gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation, and that right should be acknowledged at all levels of public education; and
- 5) WHEREAS Natick Public Schools are an integral part of the Natick community and the staff of Natick Public Schools are valued community members; and
- 6) WHEREAS it is imperative that students and staff, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, feel valued, safe, empowered, and supported by their peers, educators and community leaders; and
- 7) WHEREAS the School Committee and staff are also committed to honoring, valuing and affirming LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families through its policies practices, and curriculum; and
- 8) WHEREAS the Natick Public Schools, its School Committee and staff stand by our LGBTQ+ students and staff and take seriously our responsibility to provide safe and nondiscriminatory and inclusive environments for people of all orientations and identities as they reflect our diverse community; and
- 9) WHEREAS the Natick Public Schools rejects hateful language and actions based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation; and
- 10) WHEREAS on June 15, 2020, the US Supreme Court held that discrimination based on an individual's status as gay or transgender constitutes sex discrimination within the meaning of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; and
- 11) WHEREAS the Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 76, Section 5 states that "all public school systems shall, through their curricula, encourage respect for the human and civil rights of all individuals regardless of race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin or sexual orientation;" and
- 12) WHEREAS in 1993 a joint initiative between the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ+ Youth created the Safe Schools Program in response to concerns about LGBTQ+ youth suicides and other risk factors; and
- 13) WHEREAS the 2021 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey showed that 23% of Natick Public Schools' students in grades 6-12 identify as LGBTQ+, and 69% of high school students and 61% of middle school students in Natick Public Schools have experienced a decline in their mental health since the beginning of the pandemic; and
- 14) WHEREAS the National School Board Association (NSBA) believes that education is a civil right, and no student should be discriminated against based on characteristics including gender and identity; and
- 15) WHEREAS the Natick Public Schools and its School Committee urge our citizens and community members to value and recognize the numerous social, historical, legal, and political contributions of LGBTQ+ staff and students and actively promote the principles of equity and liberty; and

16) WHEREAS, increasing visibility and raising awareness fosters a welcoming school climate where LGBTQ+ students, families, and educators can live their authentic lives and be treated with dignity and respect; and

17) THEREFORE, BE IT PROCLAIMED that the Natick Public Schools urge all to respect and honor our diverse community and celebrate and build a culture of inclusivity and equality throughout the entire year; and

18) BE IT FURTHER PROCLAIMED that the Natick Public Schools will fly the Progress Pride Flag (as attached) beneath the American Flag outside of all school-owned buildings year-round to signify that it affirms, supports, and values the gender identities and gender expressions of all students and staff and will continue to further efforts in our schools to create a welcoming safe, and inclusive learning environment for our transgender and all LGBTQ+ students.

Members of the Public Speaking on this Proclamation Agenda Item

Patti Sciarra - Precinct 7

The proclamation states that “Natick Public Schools are committed to creating an inclusive, safe, caring and challenging learning environment viewed through an equity lens”. I couldn’t agree more. My concern relates to your last paragraph – point 18. It says “The Natick Public Schools will fly the Progress Pride Flag outside all school-owned buildings year-round - etc. etc. I’m often told that words matter. But actions matter too.

When I look up the definition of equity, which you say you are committed to providing, I find the following definitions.

From Oxford Languages: Equity is the quality of being fair and impartial.

From the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: Equity is justice according to natural law or right. specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism.

Notice that both definitions reference being unbiased and impartial. So, tell me – how does a decision to fly a flag that represents one group of students meet the definition of equity?

When you choose to favor one group over another by the action of flying a flag that represents an exclusive group you are in essence telling others that they are not as important. Is that being impartial and unbiased? It sounds like favoritism to me.

By flying the Progress Pride Flag, you are choosing not to fly the Black Live Matter Flag, the Christian Flag, or flags that represent other religions or ideologies. You are overtly favoring one group over another. You were elected to represent all students, all parents, all residents and all taxpayers and your decisions and policies should reflect that mandate. Point 18 of your proclamation does not reflect unbiased equal representation. It favors one group over another. That is not equitable.

My other concern is about inclusion, another stated goal of the Natick Public School system.

Oxford Languages defines inclusion as the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources. Is a resource a flagpole and an opportunity the ability to fly a flag?

When another group wants to fly it’s flag on school flagpoles will you be able to discriminate and say no? What if Black Lives Matter wants to fly a flag – will you allow that? Or flags that denounce Asian hate, Antisemitism, or Islamophobia? Students from these groups deserve to feel safe and welcome also.

Assuming flying the Process Pride Flag falls under protected Government Speech, will that change if flags are swapped out to represent different marginalized groups? Last year the US Supreme Court voted unanimously in support of the free-speech rights of a conservative activist when the City of Boston refused his request to fly a Christian flag on a flagpole outside City Hall. Although this situation is different are we setting ourselves up for a legal challenge? Will there come a time when our flagpole activity becomes subject to a free speech challenge? Do we have an opinion from legal counsel on these possibilities?

The American flag represents all groups of people who are fortunate to live and work here. There is no need to fly any other flag. Students should be taught to respect each other's unique characteristics and differences and to value the tenets of equity and inclusion. The words and actions of the adults who teach and set school policy are an important part of that learning process. A school committee which shows favor to one group over another by its words and actions teaches neither equity nor inclusion. It demonstrates favoritism and is divisive and exclusionary.

Dani Witherby

Shared her experience of being a gay student in the 1990's in Natick- the environment was not the most welcoming.

Difference today is astounding

Queer students are louder now, they are resilient.

This proclamation is uplifting a community that is discriminated against.

I urge you to pass this proclamation.

Pam - Precinct 1

Suffering doesn't discriminate.

We are concerned about members at risk for suicide.

Read an alternative proclamation.

Ask that the NPS flies the suicide and prevention flag outside of all public schools.

Ask that you do not put one group's risk above another.

Cody Jacobs - Precinct 2

Thanked the subcommittee

The proclamation has been vetted by legal and is an important first step.

Agreeing with what one member said about what happens inside the classroom is more important than what flies outside of the schools.

We need to make this more normalized for this to be inclusive.

This is a divisive time. LGBTQ people are under attack and we have to decide what we will do with our values.

I encourage you to support it.

Tracey Sockalosky

There is not an educator in the world who isn't concerned about suicide

9% of white males vs 45% of LGBTQ students who have considered it.

We need to be a more welcoming community

This is not about equity for all comparatively - Equity is not a pie.

We have a group of people who need our support more than others right now.

El Martinez - (They/Them)

Hello my name is Él Martinez, I use they/them pronouns, My family home is located in Natick in precinct 8 and I attended Natick Public Schools for my K-12 education as an LGBTQ+ student. I am now an incoming Senior at Clark University.

I'd like to start my testimony by providing some context about my relationship to LGBTQ communities in Natick and Natick Public Schools.

In my time at Natick High School....

- I served as president of the Gender and Sexuality Alliance for three years
- I facilitated annual trainings for all incoming Natick Public Schools faculty about LGBTQ+ inclusivity
- I created and administered a survey of LGBTQ+ students at Natick High School and presented the findings to the school committee
- I amended the health education curriculum of Natick High to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ health
- I consulted on several gender identity policies for former Superintendent Dr. Nolin
- And I participated in countless events, dialogues, and initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Natick Public School system.

I have put in hundreds of hours of work, hundreds of hours of my childhood in, to ensure that LGBTQ+ students, families, and staff are safe in Natick Public Schools.

And there is still a lot of work to be done. LGBTQ+ youth, especially transgender youth, are under attack in this country and around the world and I urge you as people in positions of power to protect us.

I am here in anticipation of opposition to this proclamation by anti-LGBTQ+ people seeking to impose their views on the public school system. Many of the talking points used by those who oppose the display of pride flags in schools cite concern over the wellbeing of children or claim that flags are equivalent to indoctrination or unfairness.

The reality is that these opponents don't want us to exist. They do not recognize that LGBTQ+ adults were once LGBTQ+ children and they believe that by erasing our history and symbols, they can get rid of us. Instead of recognizing and demonstrating support for a well-documented disproportionately vulnerable population of youth, they are trying to build an education system that does not acknowledge or include us.

We cannot minimize the meaning of pride flags, especially for young people. At 15 years old, after being interviewed for a New York Times Article about my lobbying efforts in the Massachusetts Statehouse, my family home in Natick was defaced. Someone came up onto our porch and slashed the pride flag we had hanging while

I was home alone. That incident permanently impacted my ability to feel safe in Natick - to this day.

Like any other kids, LGBTQ+ youth are deserving of representation, safety, support, respect, joy, and justice. I urge you to favorably pass this proclamation and also recognize that the issues faced by LGBTQ+ youth are worthy of comprehensive policy. Our community expects actions to follow words. Thank you.

Jerry Pierce - Precinct 10

Opportune time to introduce this proclamation

Only the 2nd time in my 55 years of living in Natick that I thought Framingham did something better than Natick.

COA has a mission statement that includes all of this

Multi day seminar to go over all of this

Referenced the pilgrim church in Sherborn and the decision to affirm the LGBTQ+ community recently.

Our kids are already exposed to this - TV, the media, conversations with other kids. My partner and I raised 2 sons and they spoke about this 15 years ago.

Don't be an ostrich, please.

Lisa Tabekin -

Dangerous when we start talking about statistics when we don't really understand what they mean. I am a resident, a former school committee member and a proud member of a trans child. I am proud of the committee for writing this proclamation.

I am a member of the Suicide Prevention

Suicide is the 2nd cause of death age 10-24

LGBTQ youth are 4x than likely to attempt suicide than their peers.

Quoted statistics from the Trevor Project

Every year the MetroWest Health Survey comes back telling us that our gay students are afraid.

We will be doing a huge disservice to all of our students if we do not pass this proclamation.

Frank Foss -

Town moderator and 40+ members of this community.

Mr. Foss referenced an email he sent to the School Community.

Unity for our community is vital.

Be Careful and cautious about the things that might divide us

This agenda item fractures our community

We must recognize that our differences should bring us closer - flying any flag that doesn't represent all of our community does not do that.

United community.

Debbi - Precinct 1

This flag is something that unites us. Brings us together. Unity. Brings us together. It's not divisive. Important for children in our community. Signal of safety. Makes children feel safer. Benefits community.

Chris Therrien - Precinct 2

Foster children who were LGBTQ+ who were in the system because their parents didn't want them.

Sara Doyle - Precinct 5

Support for the flag. As a teacher in this town. From a teacher perspective, the most important thing is for kids to feel safe. Urge support for the proclamation.

Katie Joyce - Precinct 5

Being LGBTQ+ is not political or religious. It is a part of human existence. Students do not feel safe. Look for signs of safety everywhere they go. Look at the flag and see safety. Children need a safe space. Do not feel safe everywhere.

Tracy Sockalosky - Precinct 10

Precedence of "unity" as a reason for not doing anything. Civil War. Little Rock. At times we need to take a stand. Difference groups need protection at different times. For precedence, just look at history. Detrimental to the community.

Emily Grant - Precinct 8

Supports proclamation. Appreciate a positive vote. Students in Natick - when they feel welcome, they do better. Anything we can do as a community to help them, we should do.

Claudia Trevor-Wright - Precinct 6

Anti Semitism is on the rise. A lot in MA too. Marginalized communities support marginalized communities. Support this effort. Have seen swastikas in this community as well. Support this flag because it means inclusion.

Patti Sciarra - Precinct

Divided society. Divided town. Agree with issues. See division. More conversations like this so that we can all learn to live together.

Motion by Cathi Collins "vote positive action on proclamation as amended."

2nd - Matt Brand

Kate Flathers - spoke about the importance of mental health. Would like to better understand government speech. What happens if there is another community in crisis? How does this proclamation impact

Does this put us in a position that we are fighting other symbols that we don't agree with?

If you decide "government protected speech" then you are able to do this. It is a statement of the School Committee.

Matt Brand - appreciated everyone who spoke. Read colors of what flag mean:
Red - life

Conversation with my daughter - How would you feel about this flag? Do you feel not included? When everyone feels like they belong, then I feel like I belong. My friends and I would love this. Have to make tough decisions. Never a good time to make tough decisions. A lot more conversations to be had.

Cathi Collins - are we showing a preference for LGBTQ+ community? Does not see it that way. Reference to Metrowest Health Survey. 25 ½% report they have been bullied on school grounds. Higher numbers at the middle school. Putting up the flag is a sign of inclusion and a symbol to kids of safety. Reference to American flag and where it flies (other states.) Supports proclamation.

Elise Gorseth statement - (read into record)

We are going into a year of uncertainty as we work to attract our next permanent superintendent. Hiring a permanent superintendent has to be our #1 priority. Should we decide to make big changes during this next year, we must first ensure they are going to benefit students in the long term. We also need to know how prepared the district is to implement change, be prepared to educate the community about the need for change and to ensure our administrators and staff have the resources and support they need.

With this in mind, I feel that we must first check with our interim superintendent and central office staff to see what they need to support principals and teachers as our community adjusts to a change like this. This may or may not require delaying the vote while work with them.

While I fully support the concept of flying the Progress Pride Flag, we need to ensure we have support for our staff as they deal with the inevitable questions, concerns and fears that will come from our community. And above all else, we need to ensure that any decision we make is right for the students.”

Shai Fuxman - hard decision. Difficult decision. Focus on data on Metrowest Health Survey data. Staggering difference in depressive symptoms and having a suicide plan by sexual orientation and gender identity. Data is a call for help. This is a school climate issue. Move ideas forward that help students feel safer. Importance of courageous decision making. Symbol of inclusion. Represents everyone, including those who feel invisible in our schools.

Catherine Brunell - thank everyone for coming and giving their perspective. How can we affirm this in a way that this is not a political act. We are kicking some stuff up for students in a way that we did not actually invite. Give each school level the how? Thinking logistically. Came to us in December. Got buried. Want to make sure we have thought through this. Not a political act so it is a community act.

Julie McDonough - if it makes students feel safer, just do it. But we have to work on our process.

Calendar
METCO
Flag

Bella Wong - MASS. LGBTQ+ commission. Served on that commission for 6 years. Impressed with respectful discourse. Issue of intersectionality. Not talking to just one thing or the other. Makes it that much harder. Highest factor for homelessness. Family rejection. High risk. Not always the fairest thing to treat everyone the same. People have different risk factors and we make accommodations.

Donna McKenzie - Precinct 3

Parents brought this up. Children who were struggling. Believes issue is political. Might have agreed to fly it for a month (June) and would have flown other flags at a different time. Dream of a day when these flags are not necessary.

Question on Logistics

Total cost is \$4200 of flags and work required to modify flag poles to support a second flag.
Discussion

All those in favor:

6 - yes

0 - No

0 - Abstain

Motion to approve consent agenda:

Motion by Matt Brand

2nd by Cathi Collins

4 - yes

0 - No

2- Abstain

Policy Discussion: GBEEA

Due to a cyber-security incident, we would like to add 2 sentences to the policy to require multi-factor authentication for all employees. Should do it now to apply it to all new employees. This makes it possible for Dennis to make the change now.

Policy sub-committee reviewed the change. Policy sub-committee recommended supporting policy change based upon Dennis' recommendation.

Kate - bypass 2nd read of policy-sub-committee. Concerns about doing this again. It's another fire drill. What is the lack of compliance? Language is not clear. Does it apply to all applications or just to Google.

Catherine - why is this an emergency?

Tim Luff - Technology director would say it helps with additional security breaches. This would allow him to “require” that it happen.

Matt Brand - longer that you wait to address it, it becomes a matter of responsibility. If you have an opportunity to reduce your risk profile as quickly as you can. This was the first time to get it on the agenda.

Julie McDonough - Move to add the phrase “through their NPS Google Suite accounts” following the word MFA in both places.

Matt Brand - 2nd the motion

All those in favor:

6 - yes

0 - No

0 - Abstain

Motion to approve amended policy with amendment made in this meeting.

All those in favor:

6 - yes

0 - No

0 - Abstain

Prepayment Agenda Item:

Cathi Collins - Motion to authorize the Deputy Superintendent to prepay up to \$2.4 million in Special Education Collaborative and out of district tuition.

Matt Brand - 2nd motion

Unusual amount of savings this year. Do not expect it to continue. Used ESSER money. Substitute savings. Open and unfilled positions.

All those in favor:

6 - yes

0 - No

0 - Abstain

Catherine - Ask to bring back the final savings number when finalized. Tim Luff said he would do so.

Enter into licensing agreement with Y for after school care program at Johnson.

Tim Luff - ask to approve licensing agreement. MOU will be created. Will include cost. Will meet with Johnson staff tomorrow morning. MOU will include security. Current licensing agreement with Y to use East School.

Catherine - consider the spots at the Y. What is the long-term plan? Is this only for 2 years? We are creating a problem in 2 years. What happens if this is not available in 2 years? If this closes in 2 years, where do the kids go? Can they go back to ASAP in their own school?

Tim Luff - we have to think about what will happen in 2 years.

Kate Flathers - relying on external vendor. What does that mean long-term? How are we going to make sure that this is long-term? Get feedback from Johnson staff on the impact of childcare in the building.

Considered change of use? Conversation with the building inspector. What are the variables that make it a change of use and what is the impact? Assume that we could not continue to operate it for childcare once the school closed and we had to file a "change of use."

Authority to modify licensing agreement. Do not want to invite the YMCA now and then tell them that we don't need them in 2 years.

Shai Fuxman - focus on decisions at this time.

Tim Luff - negotiate a different rate for building use. Modification to rates.

Public speak - worried about ADA compliance.

Brinley Vickers - Precinct 8

Question: What is the process? School Committee will see licensing agreement and MOU?

Will Johnson families be given a priority to attend after school care at Johnson?

Is it two years? Or is it a year at a time?

This would be a one year license.

Students who don't currently have childcare anywhere would be given spots at Johnson.

There are many questions about the bussing, the transportation, the cost, etc.

We are not responsible for bussing students to Johnson.

Matt Brand - Move to enter a licensing agreement with the YMCA for the use of surplus space at the Johnson Elementary School and that the licensing agreement and resulting MOU will come back before the committee for approval. Such approval will not be unreasonably withheld.

2nd motion - Cathi Collins

All those in favor:

6 - yes

0 - No

0 - Abstain

2 step process. Licensing agreement and MOU. And then a longer term plan about what happens in 2 years.

Matt Brand made a motion to adjourn at 9:25 p.m.
Cathi Collins seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote

Shai Fuxman - yes

Julie McDonough - yes

Catherine Brunell - yes

Cathi Collins - yes

Matt Brand - yes

Kate Flathers - yes