

BELMONT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
REMOTE MEETING
March 26, 2021

Present: Ms. Andrea Prestwich, Chair
Ms. Kate Bowen, Secretary
Ms. Amy Checkoway
Mr. Michael Crowley
Ms. Tara Donner
Ms. Evelyn Gomez
Mr. John Phelan, Superintendent
Ms. Janice Darias, Assistant Superintendent
Mr. Anthony DiCologero, Director of Finance, Business and Operations

1. OPENING BUSINESS

1.1 Return to Open Session

Committee Chair Andrea Prestwich called the meeting to order at 3:38 p.m.

2. MAJOR BUSINESS

3.1 EDCO Dissolution (vote)

Chair Prestwich provided Member Checkoway with running the meeting, as the Belmont School Committee's Representative on the EDCO Board.

Member Checkoway reiterated the purpose of the meeting as the discussion and vote on the termination of the EDCO collaborative as of June 30, 2022.

She provided an update previously about the unfortunate financial situation this organization is in, a 16 member district organization. The EDCO Board has been working over the past 18 months to keep the organization intact and close a large budget deficit, however the gap has increased and the enrollment has continued to decline. An external audit reported in conclusion of the audit that the organization was not viable. The board recommends dissolving the organization. The board recognize the services that it provides are extremely important and the EDCO leadership is committed to providing a transition and to pursue the possibility of keeping some of current programs intact and transferred to another host organization or district.

At present, 10 of the 16 member districts have taken a vote to dissolve. The Belmont School Committee must take a vote, however due to the majority vote, the board can proceed with plans for dissolution. Member districts are faced with financial liability and the leadership will work with the state to minimize liability on member districts. Belmont has two students in EDCO programs currently.

Committee members discussed the importance of the programs, in particular the program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Appreciation for the testimonies provided to the district was expressed, as well as the gravity of the anxiety in the proposed loss of the program. Members acknowledge a commitment to providing something of similar quality and to continue and ongoing dialogue with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. The process for transition is not yet underway, but details on possible options will be shared over the coming year. Appreciation was expressed to Member Checkoway for her service on the EDCO Board during this difficult and time-intensive period. Superintendent Phelan expressed appreciation for the many years of educational programming that EDCO has provided for this community, as well as other program including professional development programming, and is committed to addressing the needs of our students.

Public Comments were heard from Thea Cabral, Steve Weiner, Amanda Perrin, and Rebecca Wangh. Some as former graduates of the programs and parents of future students, relayed the importance of cohorting the deaf and hard of hearing students to provide culture and community, as different from IEPs alone or mainstreaming. Parallels were drawn to programs such as STRIDE and METCO that address unique needs of students by group, as a way to express the moral imperative of providing an educational experience similarly as a minority community. Funding should not be an excuse to not address appropriately. Statistical information shared included that 2-3 children in every 1000 births are born deaf or hard of hearing with no correlation to geography, race, or providence; 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents; language deprivation is a serious concern. Quotes of former students and their peers, as well as teachers were shared in support of the program and its positive impacts on their educational outcomes and professional careers. An Inuit story of a blind boy, who once abandoned by his community, survived and rose to be a valued member of his community with his deficit becoming a cherished strength. Community members asked for continued voice, empathy and engagement on addressing the educational programming needs for the deaf and hard of hearing students in the process of dissolution of EDCO and transition to new services.

Member Bowen acknowledged that one of the public commenters was unanticipated, and is a distant relative, but did not pose a conflict of interest and she was able to perform her duties.

On a motion offered by Amy Checkoway and seconded by Tara Donner, it was VOTED (5-1-0) on a roll call vote to support the termination of the EDCO Collaborative as of June 30, 2022.

Members Bowen, Checkoway, Crowley, Donner, Prestwich, aye; Member Gomez nay.

4. ADJOURNED

On a motion offered by Tara Donner and seconded by Kate Bowen, it was VOTED unanimously on a roll call vote to adjourn the meeting at 4:25 p.m.


Catherine Bowen, Secretary

Respectfully Submitted by:

