

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in special session on Wednesday, July 16, 2025, at 7:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Mrs. Caramanello (arrived late), Mrs. Cowan, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella (arrived late, via Zoom), Mr. Roraback, Mr. Stone

Board members absent: None.

Guest: Mr. Thomas Mooney, Shipman & Goodwin

Administration present: Dr. Leggett, Superintendent of Schools

Mrs. Dahlheimer called the special meeting to order at 7:03 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Mrs. Cowan, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Moore, Mr. Roraback, and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Executive Session

- **Discussion of attorney-client privileged communication regarding indemnification of Board members (proposed for executive session)**
- **Discussion of student matter (proposed for executive session)**
- **Discussion and possible action on request for investigation of Board member**

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Dr. Darcy, to enter into executive session for the discussion of the attorney-client privileged communication regarding indemnification of Board members, the discussion of student matter, and the discussion and possible action on request for investigation of a Board member.

In favor of entering into executive session for the discussion of the attorney-client privileged communication regarding indemnification of Board members, the discussion of student matter, and the discussion and possible action on request for investigation of a Board member: Mrs. Cowan, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Roraback, and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

The Board of Education then moved into Executive Session. Invited into Executive Session were Dr. Sydney Leggett, Superintendent, and Mr. Tom Mooney, attorney. Mr. Mooney left the Executive Session at 8:47 pm.

The Board of Education returned from Executive Session at 9:07 PM.

Discussion and possible action on request for indemnification

Mr. Moore stated that, in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-235, the Board of Education has approved Mrs. Dahlheimer's request to be indemnified in her role as Board Chair.

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the indemnification of the Board Chair, Mrs. Dahlheimer.

Mrs. Cowan noted to community members that anything said during executive session cannot be repeated. Mrs. Cowan also stated that she personally believes it is very difficult to distinguish the difference between how a person acts in a Board role versus as a parent/resident of the district.

Mrs. Petrella explained that individuals appointed to public positions may, at any time, face the risk of being sued for statements or votes that others may disagree with. She emphasized the importance of indemnification as a form of protection, noting that such coverage depends on whether the actions in question were carried out with malice.

Mrs. Caramanello explained to her personally there is a difference between having a role on the Board of Education and general decisions made. Those decisions can subject a person to retaliation from the community or prove to be inappropriate.

ROLL CALL VOTE: In favor of approving the indemnification of the Board Chair, Mrs. Dahlheimer

- Mrs. Caramanello: Nay
- Mrs. Cowan: Nay
- Dr. Darcy: Aye
- Mr. DelVecchio: Nay
- Mr. Mennone: Aye
- Mr. Moore: Aye
- Mrs. Petrella: Aye
- Mr. Roraback: Aye
- Mr. Stone: Aye

Result: Motion passed (6 Ayes, 3 Nays).

Discussion and possible action on request for investigation of Board member

Dr. Leggett explained the process and legal issues surrounding the investigation of a Board of Education member. A complaint would need to be issued to Dr. Leggett with specific evidence and then the Board of Education would place that complaint on the agenda to discuss and review in executive session. If an investigation is held and there are no findings, business proceeds as usual. If an investigation is held and there are findings of wrongdoing, there are two outcomes. The first option would be for the Board to add a separate agenda item to consider removing the member from their officer position. The second option would be for the Board to discuss and vote on whether to issue an official censure of the member. Dr.

Leggett noted there is no action that the Board can take that will remove a member from the Board. The only two ways for a member of the Board to be removed is if the Board member is not re-elected or if they are no longer a resident of the district.

Mr. DelVecchio made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to add the investigation of a Board member as an agenda item for the next Board of Education meeting.

All in favor of adding the investigation of a Board member as an agenda item for the next Board of Education meeting: Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Cowan, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Public Comment

A. In-person Public Comment

Karen Buckley, from Durham, inquired as to why Mrs. Dahlheimer did not remove herself from the room when the Board went into executive session so as to not duly influence the discussion. She also questioned whether the agenda item “Discussion and possible action on request for investigation of Board member” was spoken about in executive session, seeing as how it was said during the meeting that it was part of the executive session but not noted on the agenda. Dr. Leggett explained that Board of Education members do not need to leave the room during discussion. Secondly, she noted that the agenda item Mrs. Buckley referenced was discussed during the executive session but remained on the agenda to allow for the sharing of specific information with the public.

Juliana DeFilio, from Durham, voiced concerns over abuse of power and harassment. Ms. DeFilio believes that the actions taken by the Chair toward Coach Anthony DeFilio were separate from her duties on the Board of Education. She expressed her disappointment regarding the vote, noting that she believes it does not represent the community.

Tyler Meeker, from Durham, requested that a member of the Board who voted in favor explain their position, specifically how they believe this action will benefit the town.

Craig Bradanini, from Durham, stated that he and the community members are in attendance tonight in support of students, families, and community members. Mr. Bradanini emphasized the importance of leaders being held accountable for their actions, ensuring that the values instilled in the students are consistently upheld by those who serve the schools.

Ryan Walsh, from Middlefield, stated that culture is set by what leadership is willing to tolerate. Mr. Walsh expressed his disappointment that the Chair will not listen to community feedback. He believes the Board Chair has set an authoritarian culture of fear, mistrust, and division. Mr. Walsh explained that the members of the Board have an opportunity to set a course for an improved culture where the community can mend and grow. Mr. Walsh urged the Board members to remove the Chair.

Elizabeth Shoudy, from Durham, expressed concerns over text messages. Ms. Shoudy urged the Chair to resign, stating that she believes it is what's best for the community.

Jennifer Sass, from Durham, expressed that the Board Chair had made remarks to her that she found unkind. Ms. Sass stated that her son was spoken about in a hostile manner by the Board Chair. She also questioned the Board as to how much the attorney will cost and if insurance will cover it.

Christina Levesque, from Middlefield, thanked the three Board members who voted against the indemnification. Ms. Levesque stated that she believes that the Chair has demeaned the Board members and should no longer be protected. She stated that the Chair's actions have caused harm to the community and expressed her belief that any fiscal responsibility resulting from those actions should rest solely with the Chair. She also expressed that the Board of Education's valuable resources should be given to real matters and discussions that will better the community. Ms. Levesque called for the removal of the Chair.

Tyler Meeker, from Durham, expressed his disappointment at the lack of eye contact from the Chair during public comment. Mrs. Dahlheimer assured Mr. Meeker that she is listening to everything that is being said.

Thomas Hanchuruck, from Durham, called for the Chair to resign.

Meaghan Onofrio, from Durham, called for the Chair to resign.

Karen Buckley, from Durham, asked the Board to answer questions that the public has asked them during this meeting. Mrs. Buckley also inquired as to whether or not the Chair will be involved in the discussions on future agendas regarding the investigation, suggesting that Mrs. Dahlheimer recuse herself. Dr. Leggett explained that if a Board member is under investigation they will recuse themselves from any actions. Due process requires that the Chair be present during certain portions of the investigation. Mrs. Buckley expressed concerns about taxpayer money going toward two attorneys for the Chair and Board. Dr. Leggett noted that, in general terms, indemnification is covered by school insurance. Anything personal or private will be separate. Mrs. Buckley inquired about the amount that the school insurance will cover. Dr. Leggett responded that she does not have an exact amount to share. Mrs. Buckley suggested that an amount be shared at the next Board meeting. She also recommended that the financial aspects of the Curriculum Director position be re-evaluated.

Julie Sass, from Middlefield, stated that the Board members should be doing what is best for the children and community. Mrs. Sass also expressed concern that her children would not be treated fairly by the Board because of the actions of the Chair. She encouraged the Board to change the Chair's responsibilities.

Jason Levesque, from Middlefield, expressed concern that the Board is not focusing on the children. Mr. Levesque called for the Chair to resign.

Juliana DeFilio, from Durham, inquired about the school insurance coverage for the attorneys. Ms. DeFilio asked for clarification on what qualifies as personal or private matters. She also expressed concern over a lack of accountability from the Chair.

Nicholas Constantino, from Durham, expressed disappointment at the lack of eye contact from the Chair during public comment.

Jeff Quinn, from Durham, thanked the Board of Education for giving community members the opportunity to speak. Mr. Quinn praised Coach DeFilio, noting the amount of effort he puts in every day for the children. Mr. Quinn noted that he believes there is no support from the Board Chair.

Dominic DeVecchio, from Durham, explained that the general statute pursuing indemnification indicates that the Board member must be acting in a discharge of her duties or within the scope of employment or under the direction of such Board of Education. Mr. DeVecchio asked the members of the Board who supported the indemnification if they believed that the Chair sought the opinion of the Board or discussed these matters with the Board of Education. He asked if the Chair requested a vote or motion for the support. Mr. DeVecchio believes that the Chair's actions are those of a private citizen, a parent regarding concern for their own children, and not in her official capacity as Board Chair. He suggested the Board members reread and reflect on the language of the statute.

Elaine Diaz, from Middlefield, expressed concerns over unkind comments made about her by the Chair.

Thomas Hanchuruck, from Durham, asked the members of the Board who voted to approve the indemnification to explain their reasoning. He asked for the Chair to resign.

Skyler Kaczor, from Durham, stated that he graduated with the class of 2025 and was a member of the football team. Mr. Kaczor expressed disappointment with the Chair's actions regarding the football coaches. He also noted that he believes the Board does not act with judgement or care for the community.

Carmen DeFilio, from Durham, has been playing football for four years at Coginchaug High School. Mr. DeFilio expressed disappointment at the Board of Education in regard to the handling of the situation at hand.

A.J. DeFilio, from Durham, spoke positively about his father, Coach Anthony DeFilio. Mr. DeFilio also expressed his concerns about the Board Chair's actions.

Emily Smith, from Durham, thanked the members of the Board who voted against the indemnification. Ms. Smith noted that she would continue to fight for her father, Coach Smith, and Coach DeFilio.

Dalton Bates, from Durham, stated that as a former Coginchaug football player he had nothing but good experiences with the coaches. Mr. Bates noted that he has seen no support from the Board of Education and believes it has ruined the district.

Jen Smith, from Durham, explained that her husband, Coach Bill Smith, was one of the coaches targeted with allegations made by the Chair at the school and also state level. Mrs. Smith emphasized the negative effects of false accusations. She also stated that the degrading comments made by Mrs. Dahlmeier were not made as a Board Chair, but rather as a private citizen.

Skyler Kaczor, from Durham, expressed his support for Coach DeFilio and Coach Smith.

B. Remote Public Comment

Ed Remillard, from Durham, explained that he believes he has seen the Board of Education, including the Chair, do tremendous things for the students that other Boards would not have been able to accomplish. He stated examples including Pickett Road, the fieldhouse, athletic lighting, the new track, and the full-time athletic trainer now on staff. Mr. Remillard complimented the Chair and noted that she has the courage to make tough decisions. Tyler Meeker, from Durham, expressed (in person) that he believes Mr. Remillard is friends with the Chair and has used inappropriate language with him in the past.

Katie Ayotte, from Durham, noted that in the last Board meeting there was discussion about using restorative practices in the schools. Ms. Ayotte explained some of the key components to restorative practices, including building healthy relationships, reducing and preventing harmful behaviors, repairing harm and restoring positive relationships, resolving conflict and holding individuals accountable for their actions, and addressing and discussing the needs of the school and community. Ms. Ayotte stated that she believes the Board is not practicing these principles currently.

Adjournment

Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mr. DelVecchio, to adjourn the special meeting of the Board of Education.

In favor of adjourning the special meeting of the Board of Education: Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Cowan, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:10 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Jennifer Scarrozzo