**Providence Public School District**

**797 Westminster Street**

**Providence, RI 02903**

**POLICY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES**

**May 1, 2024**

1. **Convene Meeting**
   1. Call to Order – 5:30 PM

Chairwoman Hughes – Good evening everyone the time is 5:32 PM and I am calling the Policy Committee Meeting to order

**Attendance: Melissa Hughes, Anjel Newmann, James Scott, Nkoli Onye, Michael Keegan, Paula Dillon and Aubrey Johnson**

**This Meeting is Livestreamed on Youtube.com – Providence School Board**

**Policy Committee Meeting – 5/1/2024**

1. **Approve Agenda**
   1. Approval of Agenda as Presented

**MSV** – **Newmann, Hughes (2-0) MOTION APPROVED**

1. **Consent Agenda**
   1. Approval of Minutes

Chairwoman Hughes – There were technical difficulties and the minutes from March were attached as opposed to April so we will vote on the April and May minutes at the next Policy Meeting in June

**Chairwoman Hughes - We welcome Dr. Nkoli Onye to present and share with us about the development of this Silent Prayer Policy**

1. **Policy & Planning**

4.1 Silent Prayer Policy – Dr. Nkoli Onye

**Dr. Nkoli Onye – Thank you very much for all of you who don’t know me, my name is Dr. Nkoli and I am serving as the Chief of Equity for the Providence Public Schools and what you have before you is a draft of our Prayer Guidance and Policy. As the chairwoman noted admirably, it is slightly different from what was posted and it has been updated since that time and we can through it if that’s okay. One of the things that we did was we add to the definitions and the examples for the definition of prayer. Initially, it only had an example for Muslim Prayer and we felt that it was really important to include other examples because often times people think that this is only for Muslim Students and it is actually for any student that needs this opportunity to pray. We expanded on the definitions and added a couple more examples of Christian Prayer and Jewish Prayer as well. Another reason why just strategically I think that this is important so that people can see many of the similarities amongst these groups so there are really not a lot of differences in terms of practices etc. The guidelines are standard from what you see on other policies where I referenced out the Core of Beliefs Policy and Commitments Policy for the foundation and serving as the foundation of this policy and next there are implementation strategies which you can see I did lift out the accommodation of prayer during the work day for adults by changing the formatting around on page 3 so that stood out. I rearranged the order so we start off with prayer space conditions, accommodation of prayers during non-instructional time for students, accommodation of prayer during instructional time and then accommodation of prayer during the work day for adults. Initially it was a little muddled so I wanted to make it to stand out and then we go into organized prayer moves and activities and I listed all of the activities there as well. On page 5 we focus on training, oversight and communication which is a very important part to call out the policy around what the district will do. The District Superintendent and his or her designee as well as what happens at the school level regarding training, accountability and communication of this policy to all major stakeholders, students, parents and families and staff. The training must happen on a yearly basis at the very least to make sure that everyone understands the policy to eliminate any confusion, misconceptions etc. This is also creating a more welcoming environment where students feel a sense of belonging. We round out with the compliance with the laws confidentiality requirements which is similar language to all of the other policies I have brought before you and the references coincide with the Rhode Island General Laws. When people ask me questions, I refer them back to the US Department of Education guidelines. As you can see the revisions began in September and we have had several revisions since then in October, April and the latest was May specifically today. Do you have any questions or feedback?**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Dr. Onye thank you so much for walking us through this current draft of the policy and I think it spells out a lot of really important things and I like the way you designed it to be specific about accommodations for both adults and students. One historical question I would love to hear more about since Board Member Newmann and I are relatively new to the School Board. Can you talk about what was the idea to start creating a policy like this? It looks like this would be a brand new specific policy and obviously it refers to other policies that we have on hand like the Racial & Ethnic Equity, Bullying and Harassment, Students Rights & Responsibilities are all important policies. Can you share with us a little bit about why your department or PPSD feels like we might want to have a prayer specific policy?**

**Dr. Onye – Yes, that’s an interesting question. I came to Central Office in 2008 and this came up several times in different areas and individuals would answer the questions of different organizations but we did not anyone who owned it and also did not have a policy. I happened to be at Stuart during COVID, I did a stint at a middle school for the very first time in my life which was a tremendous opportunity for me because I learned so much. We had an influx of students from Afghanistan and we had to quickly rearrange our schedules to make sure we accommodated those students and when I called around, our guidelines were we didn’t really have any particular guidelines and I did speak to the ELL Department and they were really helpful but we just designed something to make sure that things were working so it was ironic that when I came here to take this role we were working with the ELL Department again because this continues to come up with many of our students who are new to the country and I was asked to take the lead in putting this together. They were giving out guidance and our office as the Equity Office was giving out guidance which was amazing so we decided to partner and come together and we actually all worked on this at the very beginning and also shared it with some of our parents and one of the things I really want to do is I have a couple of students particularly Muslim students to make sure that nothing was missing and get their feedback as well.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – I really love listening to all of the detail and it sounds like this is really a responsive policy to meet the needs of our students and we are trying to find the best way to accommodate them and equip our staff and administrators with the tools they need to serve our students well.**

**Anjel Newmann – Thank you, I think this is really great to see everything laid out and is very thorough and it’s very clear to me that so much time and work have gone into this and it’s evident that people’s voices have gone into the research and it’s very evident that it is all in here so thank you for your work. I guess one question I have not just related to the policy but the nature of how schools work now, what would you say is the programmatic structure barriers to fully honoring this policy at the schools?**

**Dr. Onye – I think it’s lack of information and ignorance in terms of the law and what is allowable. Some people have said to me it’s a public school and that is now allowed and it’s actually not true so I think this is going to be very helpful once we pass this policy and all of the other policies we passed this year I really would like to get it in front of our principals during our summer training. I would like to have them review them and tackle all of the pieces and ask questions and then take a look at the implementation strategies. It’s also to do with facilities because when I was at Stuart I was lucky with finding some space within the building that was clean, private, comfortable and there was no water coming through the roof and it was good space for being in for 15 or 20 minutes that are needed for prayer and having to designate folks because I couldn’t be the designee because I could be anywhere in the building as principal so I had to find people who I knew could be there and escort the students to the space and wait for the students to bring them back to the classroom. I had two (2) people per time so that if someone was absent the other person was there. We need to find spaces that are clean and students could put their rugs down and to have enough physical space because there might be more than one (1) student at a time.**

**Anjel Newmann – I really appreciate that time and effort you have put into this and I know that some students need a sink so they could wash up before their ritual.**

**Dr. Onye – We are also building a culture of understanding and awareness and it’s actually a time for schools to celebrate the diversity of their school and also teach other students about other students and their different religions and practices and traditions.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – I have one (1) other comment or questions and then I want to see if anyone else who has joined us have any questions as well. This policy is great and is focused on prayer and I was reading a little of the reference materials that you had and there was a guide that was from ING maybe and it was a guide for Religious Practices of Muslim Students in Public Schools and that was specific to Muslim Students but it made me think about other students from other religions or practices might have and that document touches on a little bit around attire or fasting practices or other things like that and I don’t necessarily see that in here. Is there room in either this policy or in another place to potentially articulate other aspects of religious observance that might not be included yet in this policy? I have heard from families of Muslim Students that they can have a particularly difficult time during Ramadan or other times of the year when they might need to be fasting and making sure that we have accommodations for students who are spending their lunch period in a different space so they are not having to watch other students eat their lunch. So is there room to potentially include some language here in this policy and if not here maybe with the implementation guidelines.**

**Dr. Onye – Yes definitely. Under page 6 second to last bullet at the top it says be aware that some students could be fasting in certain seasons such as Ramadan or Lent and it may be difficult for them to participate in rigorous exercise in the afternoon. So if you are having a pizza party it’s probably not a good idea but if you do maybe those students can go to the library or work in the garden or visit another classroom. We need to be cognizant of the fact that these students are fasting and maybe just drinking water and the kids could be faint or very tired so we could definitely add some more of that language here.**

**Anjel Newmann – When it comes to fasting I think of my friends and family and sometimes fasting can make you very irritable. Fasting it something that takes up a lot of energy and I know for me when I’m fasting I snap sometimes and I apologize.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – To Miss Newmann’s point, I think that this could be a complicated practice and we want the adults to be able to be responsive but to your point, I think that folks just don’t know.**

**Dr. Dillon – One of the things we had in my previous district was to let you know that these are times that are not good windows for testing because the students can’t concentrate as well when they are fasting so you might want to add something in there that talks about limited testing or that a student can have a make-up window after their fasting window is over.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – I know we have a few other guests here tonight from the district and the community so is there anyone else who has questions or comments about the Prayer Policy? Please introduce yourself Ms. Johnson.**

**Aubrey Johnson – Aubrey Johnson and I am Co-Chair of the Parent Advisory Council and I just have a quick question. In terms of what they provide to the student, should there be anything in here or should there be something in here that says they would provide rugs or something for them to pray on? I know that at Gilbert Stuart we had things for them.**

**Dr. Onye – Usually students come with their own but we could put something like that in there if we find out what they need to accommodate them.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Thank you Dr. Onye. Do I have a motion to approve this policy to go to the Full Board Meeting for first read?**

**MSV – Newmann, Hughes (2-0) MOTION APPROVED**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Next item on the agenda is item 4.2 on the School Closing Policy. The update here is that the School Closing Policy as it’s currently drafted went before the School Board for a first read and was approved there last week at that meeting and this is one of the last opportunities to comment on the School Closing Policy. At this point we have discussed the policy a couple of times at length here in this committee and did have minimal if any questions at the School Board as a whole and I am going to ask our advisor here, have we heard any additional comments since the previous draft from the district or other commenters?**

* 1. School Closing Policy

**James Scott – I am James Scott the Director of Intergovernmental Affairs for the record and I have not heard any additional comments and there have no edits or changes to the policy since we last discussed it last month. Since I started in this role two (2) years ago one of the major things I spearhead was getting the district out to neighborhood meetings to talk about the Facilities Plan. We have been to Mt. Pleasant, Silver Lake, Olneyville and all over the city meeting with City Council people and I will be working with Deputy Superintendent Scott with that.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Miss Newmann, do you have any comments or questions on the School Closing Policy?**

**Anjel Newmann – I do not at this time.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Excellent. We are going to move on from that item and the next item on the agenda is item 4.3 the Graduation Policy Draft and I know we have some folks her from Academics and again like the School Closing Policy.**

* 1. Graduation Policy Draft

**Dr. Dillon – There have no additional changes to the policy and we are looking forward to working with the principals in the future but at this point we have received no further requests for changes to the policy as read last week.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Miss Newmann do you have any other questions regarding the Graduation Policy?**

**Anjel Newmann – No, I am good at this time and I truly appreciate you all for coming out.**

**Dr. Dillon – No problem, anytime. I will be coming not only to this meeting but to School Board as well.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – We appreciate you all for being here and I think we are ready to keep that Graduation Policy on deck and pass it along to the Full Board for second read and adoption at our next School Board Meeting.**

**Aubrey Johnson – I have a two (2) questions, one is, for Social Studies one of the requirements is the Civics Project and so I know that a lot of the 8th graders are doing a Civics Project this year and I want to know if they do it this year is that going to count towards high school graduation?**

**Dr. Dillon – At our high schools here in Providence they also have a Civics Course that has a project embedded in it and in other districts they are counting the middle school one for graduation so it is allowable but at this time, it’s only the high schools.**

**Aubrey Johnson – So if 8th graders took it now it would be allowable? It would just be the project not the class, right?**

**Dr. Dillon – Yes, it would be allowable. The middle school class would not count and we would need to write into the policy that the middle school project counted. At this point, we have written it into the high school.**

**Aubrey Johnson – I have the same question for Computer Science. So if 8th graders took Computer Science this year are they going to have to take it again to the credit for high school?**

**Dr. Dillon – For Computer Science to count it has to be the Discoveries Computer Science or AP Computer Science and if it’s specifically the Discoveries Computer Science yes it’s allowable for the 8th grade class to count as a high school credit.**

**Dr. Keegan – I just want to make sure I am correct but the current Discoveries Course doesn’t include all of the standards that are required. For example, if they took it in middle school this year that course doesn’t address the standards being reworked and recreated to address the standards that need to be covered in the Computer Science Requirement. Over the past several years we have offered different Computer Science Courses in middle school and high schools all across Providence and the requirement wasn’t as specific as it will be for the class of 2028 but there are lots of courses out there that are described as Computer Science that don’t actually address all of the standards that need to be now. We are working as the T&L Department now to make sure we are vetting all of our courses to ensure that moving forward it will be designated in our course catalog.**

**Dr. Dillon – In order for it to count it has to have cyber security in it and the current courses do not.**

**Dr. Keegan – So Generation Citizen which you are probably familiar with is the vendor company organization that we have been partnering for years and now the actual Civics Project they are working with the middle schools and high schools so all students are completing an actual Civics Project and some go to the City and the State House to present and it has a real world scenario around it and so they are getting more than what we be required to have our students do. This is a strong partnership and a great opportunity for our students to apply and solve community based problems by applying what they learned in Civics II creating solutions. The teachers actually get a lot of coaching from Generation Citizens and all of the students are participating in the research and application projects.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Is it fair to say that your recommendation would be to keep it as the high school requirement at this time?**

**Dr. Dillon – I would love to see the students continue to have the civics engagement both in middle and high school but I do think the idea of removing that extra PBA Course and I feel that we are not having the student do the civics piece they are not going to get that same level of opportunity around that kind of project with the research and the critical skills. Yes, that would be my recommendation.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – To get it in laywoman’s terms, we are still asking that students in order to graduate that sometime in high school they are completing this type of project at that high school level.**

**Dr. Dillon – Yes, at that high school level, exactly. The level of engagement in the middle and high school definitely is an area where we see a lot of student engagement and excitement and they are seeing what they are doing in school has relevance.**

**Anjel Newmann – I would say that a civics engagement is just as important as learning that. A civics engagement is just as important as learning science and those are content areas you can’t just take once and be a master at it. These are core skills to what it means to be a citizen.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – I think that by keeping it in as a graduation requirement we are demonstrating that this is just as important as math and science. Does anyone have any comments or questions as drafted today? We will see this policy again at our next school board meeting for the second read and adoption and then you will all be able to do some work around that with the implementations and regulations there.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Next on our agenda we have a check in update on the Suicide Prevention, Response & Recovery Policy. This also recently passed on the first read at our April School Board Meeting. Mr. Scott, are you aware of any updates or changes to that policy.**

* 1. Suicide Prevention, Response & Recovery

**James Scott – I am not aware of any changes and we really don’t expect any to be made.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Excellent. We will see this policy at our May Board Meeting for second read and adoption. Finally, on our agenda we have a Discussion Relative to Policy Planning and Mr. Scott I know you have some information to share with us tonight. So at a previous meeting I believe last month the Policy Committee had some conversation around what is a policy, what is a regulation around policies and what is a resolution. Mr. Scott can you talk a little about this?**

* 1. Discussion Relative to Policy & Planning

**James Scott – Absolutely. Basically the goal here is the Board recently got back into the business of doing resolutions because it hadn’t happened for a while and I think we got a lot of them at once over a period of a couple of months. I have come up with a reasonable process that could move thing through quickly and it won’t create additional road blocks but we can also make sure we do the right thing. The process as I outlined it lets say Chair Hughes comes up with an idea for a resolution that calls for free iPads for all students and the resolution proposed by the Board Member and the first step is to bring it to the Board Leadership and then the School Board Leadership approaches the Superintendent or his designee which could be myself or Martha depending on what it is and we have a discussion about the resolution and we have a little time to review it to see if it’s already being addressed by an existing policy and how does it interact with state and federal laws. The Superintendent’s team review it for fiscal impact, we review the funding, we review the language and we look at what is already being addressed by existing policies and then we have to have a legal review like in the MLL Resolution. We have the legal review done by Charlie and then it needs to be voted on by the Board and once it passes it’s the will of the Board. Those steps give us protection and it gives the Board Members protection and I think it gets moved on a reasonable timeline because some things you might pass as resolutions as well as support things going at the state house such as a bill which needs to obviously be moved more quickly but I think this would give us a reasonable process that is not obstructive and also it protects everyone’s interest involved.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Thank you for this overview and I think this is helpful and I have a couple of questions or comments. I want to be clear that any School Board Member can introduce a resolution at any time and the board agenda gets generated by both the Board President and the Superintendent who work as a team to approve whatever agenda we have for school board meetings and I think there are probably times when the agenda has a lot of stuff in it and so there may be times when we may ask for practical reasons to move a resolution for time. I like the pieces here where we are checking to see if we are already doing this and I will mention that the Prayer Policy that we spoke about earlier this evening that we did have a Board Member who introduced a Prayer Resolution recently and that prompted us to realize that we did have a policy that was in process but had stalled for a little bit and so that was helpful to hear because we then went back to look at all of the policies we were reviewing over time so I think that resolutions even when they don’t necessarily pass, they can be a helpful tool for us to think about our work across other spaces and other committees.**

**James Scott – I think by a nature of boards it somehow has one voice and how leadership brings it doesn’t mean we don’t need to discuss it with the individual Board Member but I think it should start leadership to leadership interface. These are just my thoughts and I am open to feedback and suggestions.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – I would just suggest on that point to maybe have those one step together. I would recommend to potentially allow both and allowing Board Member to initially bring that up. I want to be cognizant and careful of limiting the Board Members ability to take that first step and not necessarily limit that scope. I would maybe clarify within here to loop in the relevant departments, maybe under the item that says elements of the resolution that are already being addressed.**

**Anjel Newmann – I definitely agree with what you said and I also appreciate you for bring this because I wasn’t clear on how resolutions happen and having a process is important but I think us as a Board should be throwing resolutions around unless it’s based in a community year ask.**

**James Scott – Okay I am taking all of your suggestions into account, I will make some more changes and bring this back to you again.**

**Chairwoman Hughes – Excellent. We look forward to hearing back from you on this process. Do I have a motion to adjourn the meeting?**

**MSV – Newmann, Hughes (2-0)**

* 1. AdjournMeeting – 6:55 PM

**A Motion was made at this time to adjourn the meeting**

**MSV – Newmann, Hughes (2-0) MOTION APPROVED**