

Josette Keelor Education Writing W07

Warren County School Board tables VSBA membership vote for further discussion

**By Josette Keelor
The Northern Virginia Daily**

FRONT ROYAL — At a well-attended Wednesday work session, the Warren County School Board tabled a discussion on whether to renew its membership with the Virginia School Board Association.

Several community members turned up for the discussion and the intended vote. The School Board heard from VSBA President Teddy Martin II and President-Elect David Woodward, who attended the work session via Zoom and discussed the benefits of the board continuing its membership.

School Board member Melanie Salins made a motion to table the discussion after listening to the two representatives, glancing over a copy of the VSBA contract during the meeting, and hearing from 13 residents, most of whom urged the board to withdraw from the VSBA.

“This is a big decision, and I don’t think we should just rush into it,” Salins told the rest of the board. “We have to have an exit strategy, ’cause they own us.”

The board voted unanimously to table three action items — the approval to renew the membership for the 2022-2023 year, the approval to renew the VSBA Policy Services Agreement for the year, and the selection of a delegate and alternate delegate to the 2022 VSBA Annual Convention.

The board will revisit the issue at their next work session on Sept. 21.

Although remaining in the VSBA offers various benefits that include legal counsel and up to \$3,000 in financial assistance if the school system is sued, the board is considering that the school system already has legal counsel with Sands Anderson and that the VSBA’s support, which only covers so much, depends on the school system following VSBA policies to the letter.

“The issue is with their contract,” Salins said. “At no point in time would we actually own any of these policies.”

The board would essentially be renting school division policies each year, she said, but if the board leaves the VSBA, because of copyright law written into their contract, Warren County Public Schools would need to start from scratch on its school division’s policies.

“Why are all counties members?” Salins said. “Well, because the VSBA holds the policies hostage.”

Learning from Martin and Woodard that the board's membership is still active and the deadline to renew is not as imminent as they'd thought, the board decided to discuss the matter further while seeking legal advice.

Salins also expressed concern about the VSBA not efficiently answering the board members' questions.

Before the Zoom session, the board had sent several questions to the VSBA, but Salins said that many of her questions had not been answered before or during the representatives' presentation and were not fully answered afterward when she reiterated some of her concerns.

"How do we get all these questions addressed?" she asked Martin and Woodard. "How do I get your attention for an answer?"

Martin assured the board that they would get answers to them in the coming days, and School Board Chairperson Kristen Pence suggested that the board submit their latest questions in writing so they could move on with the work session.

Salins expressed concern that some of the VSBA's members have shown a clear preference for political matters, giving the impression that the VSBA has liberal leanings and issues policies accordingly.

"They are definitely a political lobbyist group," said Steve Kurtz, who spoke during the public comment sessions urging the board to vote no.

He also pointed out that the school division's membership gives them only one vote in statewide educational affairs that might not suit a rural area like Warren County.

Being part of the VSBA is a way of going around local delegates, he said.

Three speakers urged the board to renew its membership, while a couple of speakers thanked the board for taking on this difficult matter and urged them to consider the information before making a decision.

Noting that many of those urging the board to leave the VSBA were doing so for moral reasons while those urging the board to stay seemed in favor of the financial benefits, Emma Powell told the board to consider all the information before deciding.

If it's advantageous, stay with the VSBA, Powell said during the public comment period. Otherwise, disengage.

"You have to decide what influence they have on you," she said.

Middle school FBLA club teaches leadership in business, life

By Josette Keelor
The Northern Virginia Daily

STRASBURG — Nathaniel Gilmore and his group of 10 eighth graders are pioneers.

After starting a new chapter of the Future Business Leaders of America at Signal Knob Middle School in August 2021, the club has been laying the groundwork for the students who will follow in their footsteps.

“Here’s an opportunity to set the stage and set the standard,” Gilmore recalled telling his students before asking them, “What happens next?”

The club is all about leadership, and one of the clearest signs of that objective is in the fact that none of its members are sure yet if they’ll continue with FBLA after they move up to high school.

For now, they meet every day from 8 to 8:25 a.m. as they pave the way for the sixth, seventh and eighth graders who follow behind them. Part of that goal will be recruiting new members at the end of the school year to replace them after they’re gone.

“It’s a learning scenario for them and a learning scenario for me,” Gilmore said.

Gilmore, who teaches business and information technology at the school, is as new to FBLA as his students are.

Arriving in Strasburg last summer from his previous post at Sandhills Middle School in Gaston, South Carolina, Gilmore brought along an interest in color guard and drill teams.

“When I got here, I said, ‘What’s needed and what can be benefitted from?’” he recalled.

He noticed that the school didn’t have an FBLA chapter, which is more common at the high school level, so he started one.

Being a leader is about making difficult decisions, Gilmore said, recalling how he told his students that probably less than 5% of Americans are true leaders.

“I wanted them to see the little things that make a big difference,” he said.

“I wanted them to see the magnitude of their impact if they decided to take that type of road.”

FBLA teaches students about business as well as public speaking, fundraising, decision-making, working as a team, investing in the stock market and taking charge of their finances. Students can earn scholarship money for college, and for many it’s also an introduction to being in a club that meets frequently and elects club officers.

Signal Knob’s officers are President Ashanté Davis, Vice President Jocelyn Pope, Treasurer Gabriel Haynes and Secretary Rylie Robinson.

“I’m just here along for the ride,” Thomas Stieringer joked at a recent meeting.

But that clearly isn’t true. For one thing, he and Jocelyn spoke about their club at the Shenandoah County School Board’s February meeting.

For another, he’s one of the more outspoken members when it comes to explaining the ins and outs of the club.

Thomas credits the club with helping him improve his public speaking skills and keeping calm while speaking to groups such as the School Board.

Jocelyn praised the club for helping her give speeches and learn about teamwork, and she's considering joining the debate team in high school.

"[FBLA] is to show what we can do not only as individuals but together," Jocelyn told the School Board on Feb. 10.

"Even though we're kids, we are still as capable as doing things that adults could do, and we have just as good ideas."

So far this year, the club members have met with professionals at Preslee Real Estate and at chick'n EATZ in Strasburg.

They held a fundraiser selling candy from October to December, and they're learning how to invest a hypothetical \$100,000 in the stock market and maintain stock portfolios.

The club started from nothing when it was first announced at the start of the school year, and interested members were immediately tasked with recruiting other members, Gilmore said.

Also in the club are Yoisel Balderas, Joseph Smith, Jeannie Purnell, Piper Broers and Raven Moats.

Gilmore thanked Principal Holly Rusher for giving him the latitude to build the club, using the experience as another lesson for his students.

"I tell them, don't take that lightly, because not all bosses would do that," he said. "She's taking a chance on us."

Shenandoah school board OKs religious education

By Josette Keelor

The Northern Virginia Daily

The Shenandoah County School Board voted Thursday to allow some elementary students to leave school during the school day for religious education.

The motion made by Vice-Chairperson Dennis Barlow and seconded by board member Andrew Keller says the board will coordinate with the county affiliate of Weekday Religious Education Association Inc. to produce a policy to coordinate the program.

The board voted 5-1 to approve the program at its board meeting, with board member Cynthia Walsh opposing it because she thought it wasn't the right time.

"I am not regretfully going to support it tonight," she said.

Although she showed support for the proposal during a discussion period, Walsh said the recent spikes in COVID-19 cases are already putting a strain on classrooms without adding another reason for students to leave during the school day.

“I would support it if it was after school or before school,” she said. “I would support that now.”

The topic of weekday religious education was the main point of discussion during a public comment session.

Five residents spoke in support of an opt-in, outside-funded program for fourth-graders, saying that it would provide moral and emotional stability for children.

Pastor David Howard of Strasburg Presbyterian Church said his church was interested in providing a site that students from the county’s northern campus could access during school hours.

He said that various residents have approached him about the idea.

“We are really grateful for this opportunity to offer weekday religious education,” he said. “We will work closely with you and we will seek to meet whatever requirements that you may have.”

Opposing the idea was Dennis Atwood, of Maurertown, who said he has found “no explanatory documentation regarding this proposal with any School Board meeting materials from tonight back to June 2020.”

The School Board heard from the Rev. George Bowers of Antioch Church of the Brethren in Woodstock at its July meeting, and Atwood said he obtained from Keller a 1½-page document that Bowers provided to the board at the time, though Atwood couldn’t find the document at the School Board’s website.

He argued that churches should be more than capable of providing religious education to their congregations using their own resources.

The proposal is focused on fourth-graders who would elect, with their parents’ or guardians’ permission, to take approximately one hour out of their school week for an off-campus program.

Atwood expressed concerns about the transportation and the disruption to the school day, saying a successful after-school religious club at W.W. Robinson Elementary in Woodstock offers a similar program without requiring transportation.

Affecting 21 classes across the county’s three elementary schools, he said, “This would be a significant administrative burden” on teachers.

Superintendent Melody Sheppard said allowing for the program will require a district-wide policy.

Referencing programs that school divisions in Staunton, Rockingham County and Page County have implemented, she said a group at the Shenandoah County School Board office pulled together language from those divisions to offer a similar draft policy.

The policy would allow the board to consider requests from other community groups that want to offer release time for students.

“This all comes from the court opinion of J. Doe vs Shenandoah County … in 1990,” Sheppard said.

In the case, outlined at law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/737/913/1446607, members of the Weekday Religious Education Inc. were accused of coming into classrooms at W.W. Robinson Elementary to pressure second-grade students and bribe them with candy to fill out and return enrollment cards to be part of the program.

“On another occasion the WRE instructor came into the classroom and, without having prior parental permission, removed all of the school children including the plaintiff, and escorted them to the WRE bus parked in the school parking lot,” the complaint reads. “Once on the bus the children were recruited to join the WRE program.”

A judge found in favor of the plaintiff and issued a temporary restraining order against the defendants.

Asked if the Shenandoah program would have a logistical minimum or maximum limit for attendees, Bowers said that whether two students or 400 want to join, the program will accommodate them.

Sheppard said that she and a group from the School Board office met with Bowers and his group several times throughout the fall to discuss options for the program before drafting a policy proposal.

She said the interest in drafting a policy takes into account the school division’s results from its first-quarter Standards of Learning tests.

Virginia Weekday Religious Education has been going on for more than 75 years, according to the Virginia Council of Churches.

Addressing criticism that it initially wasn’t “adequately recognizing the separation of church and state … in 1955 all Weekday Religious Education Classes moved off public school property,” the council says at

vacouncilofchurches.org/about-vcc/history/weekday-religious-education.

The board’s discussion recognized that the timing of starting this program has its pluses and minuses.

“There are kids that have had some suffering going on throughout this duration that could benefit from a little peace, and if we’re going to wait for the most opportune time, we may not find that,” said board member Brandi Rutz.

“I’m gonna vote for it, but it’s not without concerns,” Keller said. “I get the need, because not only is it the worst time to do it, it’s also the best time.”

Other public comments highlighted opposition to the school division’s mask mandate and asked new board members to rescind the previous board’s decision on the recent name changes of the southern campus’s elementary and high schools.

Revisiting her argument from an October board meeting stressing the physical and psychological harms that she said masks have on children, Carolyn Thomas, of Strasburg, said they promote “compliance to nonsensical rules and that discomfort is expected and nobody cares.”

After searching for “a compelling reason that child welfare is irrelevant to the board in regard to masking,” she likened the more than \$8 million that schools accepted from the National Education Association and Virginia Department of Education to uphold the CDC’s safety requirements during the pandemic (which includes masking of students) to the 30 pieces of silver that Judas accepted from the chief priests to betray Jesus.

The board unanimously approved its committee assignments and the Capital Improvement Plan for 2023-2027. The next meeting will be at 7 p.m. Feb. 10, when the board will discuss the 2022-23 budget. Meetings are accessible on the school division’s YouTube channel or through its website, shenandoah.k12.va.us.