

200+ Attend Meeting As School Board Chooses History Books

Jim Shiley

9–12 minutes

With more people from the community in attendance for a school board meeting than most there could remember, the board adjourned from their normal meeting room at Central Services, and reconvened in the Hot Springs High School cafeteria, in order to accommodate the estimated 220 who wished to attend.

The hot button topic that brought most of those attending out was the anticipated board vote on curriculum materials for K-12 social studies and music education. Tabled from the April 26 special meeting of the school board was a decision on whether to approve those materials recommended by committee and Dr. Edgardo Castro the district's Director of Learning Services.

Recommended and discussed at the late April meeting were taken from a list provided by New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) of 24 publishers, narrowed down to four that were being examined in detail and that have been available for public scrutiny and comment since mid-January.

Those being voted on were, for K-5, elementary social studies Savvas Learning Company, for middle school social studies, grades 6-8, McGraw Hill and for high school, Cengage Publishing.

Part of the appeal of these was the availability of additional materials, with National Geographic being part of the Cengage Group, and the History Channel affiliation with Savvas.

Of the approximately 43 people who rose to speak during the public input portion of the meeting nearly all were expressing their opinions regarding the recommended textbooks and related materials under consideration. The bulk of those were voicing their disapproval of texts. Reasons for urging the board to reject the curriculum materials were strongly expressed feelings that they did not reflect their values and beliefs. Many stated that the books contained critical race theory (CRT), and sex education, particularly discussions around topics of sexual identity, gender preference and other broadly LGBTQ topics and that they celebrated or promoted these lifestyles and choices.

Many speakers urged rejection because they felt it important that the materials ultimately used should reflect their values and faith. Most also said that teachers should confine themselves to teaching reading, writing, math and science, and that sex and race had no place in the classroom, and should be left to be taught in the home, by parents.

Several teachers who served on the committee involved in the selection of the materials stated that they saw no CRT in the books that students would be using. The district also had posed this question to the publishers and had received letters from each stating that CRT was not contained in the materials. It was further stated by those supporting the adoption of that teaching sexual orientation and gender identification were not included in the materials that the students would be using. This was disputed by many of those urging rejection of the selections. One specific

passage in the text was identified that talked about celebrating LGBTQ diversity.

The large, boisterous crowd cheered loudly, showing their support of each that rose to urge rejecting the materials. For the most part, everyone in attendance remained respectful of all those who rose to speak, regardless of the position they were supporting, listening and even politely applauding or otherwise respecting contradictory viewpoints. Most objecting to approval of the selected material stated that whatever is finally decided on should reflect the values of the community and stressed their opinion that as a small, rural, agricultural community, the values of many here are different from those embraced in Albuquerque or Santa Fe or other bigger cities.

Those speaking in favor of approval of the materials stated that they had not found specific passages or sections that promoted what those in opposition said they objected to. Further, some teachers clarified that the materials under discussion, as any school textbooks, are only a starting point for how instruction is done in real life practice, and that a variety of additional material and resources are used, as has been the case in schools for generations.

Teachers asked that their professional training, expertise and experience be respected, that they want the best possible education for students going forward, to prepare them for life after graduation, whether that be in careers, the military or going on into college and vocational schools.

In opposition, speakers stressed that there were areas that dealt with values, religious beliefs and lifestyle choices that were the domain of home and family and needed to be left out of the

schools.

Board member Julianne Stroup stated, as she had at last month's meeting, that there were other publishers who could supply materials that were not on the NMPED list and urged the board to take more time and look into these. It is allowable for districts to use materials from other publishers, though they would need to be properly vetted and would have to allow for teaching to the standards set by NMPED.

Board member Mark Hedge said that regardless what material was selected, those under consideration or others, that there will be people disappointed with or angry about the selection.

After hearing public comment, when the vote was taken, the curriculum materials recommended for high school and middle school instruction was approved by a 3-2 vote, with Dr. Barbara Pearlman, Mark Hedge and Christine LaFont voting for approval and Jamie Sweeney and Julianne Stroup voting against approval. A motion was made to approve the materials for elementary education but was not seconded and so was dropped. Material for music education, which no one spoke against, were approved unanimously.

OTHER BOARD MEETING NEWS

The calendar for the 2023-2024 school year was approved. Difficulties arose due to an increase in mandated instructional hours required by NMPED. Solutions involving shortening the lunch period from its current length of 45 minutes or lengthening each school day by several minutes each were rejected by the union. The compromise found was to shorten the fall break, which now will only be October 4-6, placed to coincide with the Sierra

County Fair.

Under the new calendar there will be 185 days of student instruction and 191 staff days. This will allow the schools to meet the mandated number of student instruction hours. For this summer, it means with the last day of school falling on May 24 (half day) and students starting back on July 31, summer break will be about nine weeks long. Look for the school calendar on the Sentinel's web page at gpkmedia.com and to be printed next week.

- The board voted unanimously to approve an amended contract for Terry Berridge to provide social work services. Because the schools are still trying to fill an open position for a social worker, she has been covering all the schools and reached the limit of the approved hours of her current contract.
- Each year the board is allowed to recognize an individual or group and nominate them to receive the New Mexico School Board Association's Excellence in Student Achievement Award. This is presented to those who have gone above and beyond in working for the students of the community. This year it was presented collectively to the district school's Mental Health Services team, including school counsellors, social workers, contract workers in those areas and others.
- The board unanimously approved a request from HOSA, the health occupations student activity group to travel to Dallas, Texas for the International HOSA Leadership Conference, where a number of our students will be competing in area specific health care judging. Two students, Carol Bolke and Abie Dankert rose to speak about the importance of this opportunity, that it enhances

their education in preparation for further post-graduation studies in health occupations. HOSA also sent students to this conference last year.

- The board unanimously approved a request for the HSHS National Honor Society chapter engage in fundraising for a proposed June 2024 trip to Washington D.C. and New York City. Though the trip will not take place for a year, because of the amount of money needed for the trip, the group needed to start immediately. They will be visiting historical and cultural sites in both cities.

- The board saw students from the Robotics Team display the results of their work this year, a fully functional and operable robot that was designed for competition. It needed to locate and pick up a plastic frisbee-like disk and shoot it out, attempting to send it through a hoop. Robotics is a student activity that encourages engineering design, construction and programing. Students enter into competitions with their robot creations. The HSHS team works under the direction of JROTC Instructor First Sergeant Robert Haro.

- The board accepted a donation from Foxworth Galbraith, of \$600 worth of supplies for the district.

- In the lead up to Graduation Week, May 15-19, the board unanimously approved the list of graduating students. They will be walking the stage to receive their diplomas on Friday, May 19 at 7:00 p.m. in Tiger Stadium at the HSHS campus. The board also voted on a student to receive School Board's annual scholarship. That student's name was withheld so they can be called up to receive it on Scholarship Award Night, at HSHS on May 17.

The next regularly scheduled School Board meeting will be 5:30 p.m. on Monday June 12 in the Board Room at Central Services, 910 North date Street.