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# SUSAN ABBOTT

August 13, 2010

School Committee Members  
DENNIS-YARMOUTH REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
c/o Superintendent Carol Woodbury  
296 Station Avenue  
South Yarmouth, MA 02664

Re: Public Comments at School Committee Meetings

Dear School Committee Members,

I would like to recommend that the Committee adopt a specific policy with regard to the public comment period which is required to be held at open meetings of municipal government bodies.

In the past, the Chairman has randomly and subjectively applied limitations and restrictions on the topics upon which the public is permitted to address during the public comment period of the meeting. Sometimes topics are allowed to be addressed by the citizens (and by Committee members, for that matter), which are not on the agenda and other times, the Chairman calls the speaker out of order.

I understand that there is also a provision for the public to submit a written request to the Superintendent five days prior to a meeting to have a topic of interest placed on the agenda.

It is not reasonable to expect the public to follow this procedure when the comment they wish to make or question(s) they wish to ask are brief and can be limited to the standard 3-minute speaking time allotment which other governmental bodies permit. If a citizen wishes to address a topic which they feel will require more than this brief comment period, this is when they should be required to submit a written request to have their topic of interest placed on the agenda.

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The school district community should have an opportunity to comment to the School Committee on issues that affect the school district and are within the scope of the Committee's responsibilities. The Committee, as an elected governing body, should wish to foster and promote this dialogue rather than inhibit it.

It is my recommendation that a set amount of time (perhaps 30 minutes) should be set for public comment at the beginning of each School Committee meeting and each citizen who wishes to speak should be given an initial 3 minutes to do so. If time permits, or there is ongoing discussion which warrants it, the Chairman may permit an extension beyond the 3 minutes. In order to ensure a fair and equitable opportunity for the public to speak, a sign-in sheet should be provided and citizens should be heard on a first-come, first-serve basis.

If a citizen wishes to have a topic placed on the agenda, he may certainly do so and may follow the procedures which are in place, by submitting the written request five days prior to the meeting. If a topic is raised during the public comment period which the Chairman feels has taken up too much time, the citizen should then be encouraged to submit a written request to have it placed on the agenda of the next School Committee meeting.

This procedure is very similar to that which is set out by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (a copy of which policy I have attached for reference).

It is ever more apparent to me, with each interaction I have with this Committee and the Superintendent, that set policies and procedures are either completely nonexistent or regularly circumvented when the Chairman/Superintendent find it convenient to do so. Roberts Rules of Order are not followed with any consistency; meeting agendas are meaningless until it serves the Chairman/Superintendent to stick to them. This Committee and the Superintendent's mantra appears to always be "less is more". The less published, the less information available, the less specific, the less access the public has to anything meaningful, the more wiggle room within which the administration has to avoid being held accountable to any rule, law, regulation, policy, procedure or measurable result.

There are very reasonable, practical and easily initiated resolutions to most of these issues. Simply put, "more is more" when it comes to transparency and accountability. If there is nothing to hide, then do not hide anything.

By copy of this letter to Superintendent Woodbury, I hereby request that this item be placed on the August 30<sup>th</sup> School Committee meeting for discussion.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to receiving a response to my request.

Kind regards,

Susan L. Abbott

/sla

enclosures/attachments

c: Carol Woodbury, Superintendent  
School Committee Members (via email)