

# BETHANY PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT



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## **Board of Board of Education**

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October 10, 2017

### **Greetings from the Bethany Board of Education!**

Now that the first month of the new school year is behind us, we are writing to introduce ourselves to those of you who are new to the BCS community, to extend our best wishes for the coming school year, and to invite you to our upcoming autumn **Board Open Forum**, on October 18.

The Board of Education consists of nine elected residents of Bethany. We set policy for the school and oversee its operation, guided by state law and Department of Education policies. We do not run the school on a day-to-day basis; that is the job of the Superintendent, the Principal, and the rest of our excellent professional staff. Rather, we set policy and goals, negotiate contracts, work with the Superintendent to develop the budget each year, and in general oversee the administration to ensure that the school is run well.

This year is off to a smooth start, and there are lots of great things happening at the school.

- Our performance on the standardized Smarter Balanced Assessment took a big jump last year; these standardized tests shouldn't be over-emphasized as they are only one measure of how our children are doing, but they do matter, and it is gratifying to see our students making real progress.
- Our Superintendent, Colleen Murray, is now in her third year with us, and she has brought energy and a deep knowledge of elementary education, and especially of curriculum and teaching strategies, that can be largely credited for this progress. We are focused on making sure that every student is both supported and challenged and has the opportunity to grow.
- We have expanded our offerings in science and technology, and we have a new math specialist with extensive experience who will be providing support to both children and teachers in that area.
- The SOAR program, which provides behavioral support when children most need it, is making a real difference in keeping students in the classroom.

- The school facilities are in great shape. We have been able to complete a number of significant maintenance projects in the past year, including the roof replacement and the new gym floor. A new playground for our youngest children, including those with physical limitations or other special needs, is under construction and should be ready before the snow comes. And a new video studio, adjacent to the Learning Commons, will let our students learn new skills as they produce video announcements for the school and incorporate video into educational projects.

Those of you who are interested in learning more about the operations of the school, or who have thoughts or concerns to share, may wish to attend one of our monthly Board meetings. The Board of Education meets monthly, typically at 6:30 PM on the second Wednesday of the month, in the Learning Commons. The schedule of meetings is posted on the school website. Meetings are open to the public. Agendas are posted at least 24 hours in advance, both online and in Town Hall. The Minutes of each meeting, summarizing what was discussed and any votes that were taken, are also available online, after they have been reviewed and approved. While these meetings are not the venue for a back-and-forth discussion, there are opportunities for public comment; there are also typically reports from the PTA and presentations by students or teachers highlighting some of the exciting things that are going on at the school. More details about how the Board operates are included at the end of this letter.

Twice each year we hold a Board Open Forum, to allow for the kind of back-and-forth discussion that is not possible at regular Board meetings. The autumn Open Forum will be held on **Wednesday, October 18 at 6:30 PM** in the Learning Commons. This is an opportunity to bring questions and suggestions to the Board and to engage in discussion on a range of issues. We have held such Forums twice a year for the past several years, and they have been quite successful. We are pleased to do so again this year.

We have to end this welcome letter on a more somber note. While things are going well here at BCS, the state of education in Connecticut more broadly is less rosy. In particular, significant cuts in educational support that we receive from the State are being discussed, as part of the broader conversation about how to balance Connecticut's troubled budget. Such cuts could have a big impact on us here in Bethany, and we are very concerned about them. At the end of this letter you will find a short piece that we recently published in the Bethany Bulletin outlining these concerns. We're sure they'll be discussed further at the Open Forum.

We wish you all a productive school year and look forward to working together!

In partnership,

*Christopher Pittenger*, Chair

*Dorothy Seaton*, Vice Chair

For the Bethany Board of Education

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

**Who are the members of the Bethany Board of Education (BOE)?** The nine members of the BOE are elected to staggered six-year terms, with three seats up for election every two years. The next election will be in May of 2019. The Board is led by a Chair and a Vice-Chair, who convene meetings and work with the Superintendent to set the monthly agenda. Some members of the Board are parents with students in the school; others are not. All are Bethany residents, citizens, and taxpayers.

**What does the Board do?** The BOE sets policy for the school and oversees its operation. The BOE does not run the school on a day-to-day basis; that is the job of the Superintendent, the Principal, and the rest of our excellent professional staff. Rather, we set policy and goals, negotiate employment contracts, work with the Superintendent to develop the budget each year, and in general oversee the administration to ensure that the school is run well.

**When and where does the Board meet?** The Board meets once a month, typically on the second Wednesday of the month (there is a schedule of specific meeting dates on the BCS website). Meetings are in the Learning Commons, generally at 6:30 PM. From time to time, additional meetings are scheduled to address particular issues that require extra time or special attention, such as the development of the budget. Special meetings are posted at the Town Clerk's office, in the Superintendent's office, at the school, and on the BCS website.

**What is discussed at meetings?** The Superintendent and Board Chair develop the agenda for each meeting about a week in advance. The agenda is posted in the Town Clerk's office, in the Superintendent's office, at the school, and on the BCS website, at least 24 hours before the meeting. Meeting minutes are posted online once they have been reviewed and approved, which is usually shortly after the next month's meeting.

**Who can attend BOE meetings?** BOE meetings are open to the public. They are also recorded and posted on the District website, so as to be accessible to those who cannot attend in person. There are exceptions to this for 'executive session' when confidential issues (like specific personnel matters) need to be discussed. When an executive session is called for it usually takes place at the end of the regular monthly meeting.

**Can I speak at BOE meetings?** There are 'public comment' times set aside at the beginning and the end of each BOE meeting for comment from any member of the community who wishes to speak. This represents a very valuable way for us to hear concerns about issues of school policy. Comments are generally limited to three minutes per person, in the interest of keeping the meeting moving.

**What issues can I bring up?** The most productive use of this time is to address issues relevant to the meeting agenda or of general school policies and to bring things to the Board's attention – either complimentary or concerning – that may influence policy. Concerns about individual students or staff members are best taken up with classroom teachers, the Administration, or other members of the staff (such as the school nurse), who are in a better position to address them than the Board as a whole. Such individual concerns should not be raised in the public Board meetings, out of respect for confidentiality.

**What will the response be?** In general, there is not a discussion of issues raised during the public comment session. This is because (i) the meeting is constrained by the agenda set in advance; (ii) a full response to issues raised may not be possible immediately and may require some research and discussion between the Administration and the Board; and (iii) Board meetings generally have a lot of ground to cover, and the schedule does not permit lengthy discussion of things not on the agenda. All issues raised in the public comment session are carefully noted, however, and will be followed up by the Superintendent or in a later meeting of the appropriate Board committee or of the full Board. Our Open Forum sessions, which are held twice each year, are set aside for more general back-and-forth discussion.

**How about the rest of the meeting?** Other than the public comment periods at the beginning and the end of the meeting, visitors are not able to participate in the Board meeting. Again, this is because of the need to make it through a lengthy agenda efficiently. You are welcome to stay and hear the discussion and any votes, and to comment on the proceedings in the public comment period at the end.

**How else can I contact the Board?** All Board members have BOE email addresses; these are posted on the website. Inquiries, requests, or suggestions can also be sent via the Principal or the Superintendent's office. In many cases, the Administration can address your questions directly and efficiently; in others, when appropriate, they can be added to the Board's agenda for the next meeting. Any issues involving individual children or school employees should be addressed to the Administration first; the Board generally does not have access to information about individual students or staff members.

**What are the Board committees?** The details of many issues that the Board deals with are delegated to specific committees, each consisting of several Board members. Specific committees include Finance, Transportation, Curriculum, Negotiations, Facilities, and Policy; the Board can create other 'ad-hoc' committees if needed to address particular issues that arise. Committee meetings are posted in the Town Clerk's office, in the Superintendent's office, at the school, and on the BCS website. While Committee meetings are open to the public, the discussion is limited to Board members addressing the posted Agenda, and there is not typically the opportunity for public comment. Any such public comment should be reserved for our monthly Regular Board Meeting.

**Letter concerning budget**  
**Published in the Bethany Bulletin, October 1, 2017**

The Bethany Community School is an exciting place these days. Kids are settling into the school routine, and there is a sense of energy in the air. We're making great strides in individually addressing each child's needs, as well as their particular strengths and interests. Our children are making steady progress on state tests and are well positioned to thrive as they move on to Amity.

The broader picture of what is going to happen with public education in Connecticut over the next few years is less rosy. The State is facing a massive, multi-year budget deficit. There are a range of perspectives on how this came about and how to address it in the long term; but in the short term, all agree that we have a major fiscal challenge. Some of the proposed solutions being discussed in Hartford and around the state could have dramatic effects on our public schools, including BCS. The challenge for the Board of Education (and for the Board of Finance) is compounded by the fact that everything is so unclear. We are writing this in late September, and as of today we have no clear notion of when there might be a state budget, or what cuts and challenges it may include.

The worst-case scenarios being discussed at the state level are scary. Bethany receives money from the State to offset the cost of education, at both BCS and Amity. State funds support other town expenses as well, but the educational support is by far the largest. This money comes into the town as revenue and helps keep tax rates down. Last fiscal year, Bethany received a bit over \$2 million. According to the Governor's most recent Executive Order, as well as some of the legislative proposals being bandied about in Hartford, this support could drop catastrophically. In addition, Bethany could be required to fund teacher retirement costs that have previously been funded by the State, as much as \$350,000.

These dramatic cuts may not come to pass. But if they do, there is no way that Bethany can absorb them without substantive cuts to education – which is, after all, about 70% of The Town's budget. At BCS, we are in the early stages of discussing what this might look like – this year, next year, and in the future. We cannot achieve the sort of major savings that might be required without laying off staff, cutting programs, and endangering the exciting progress that we are making as a district.

If these matters concern you as much as they do us, we encourage you to contact your state legislators to emphasize the urgency of passing a state budget that protects education and serves the needs of Connecticut's schools and its children.

Again, this is a great time at BCS, and we are really excited about the wonderful education that we are offering Bethany's children and the continuous progress that we are making as a district. We will do everything in our power to maintain this momentum, regardless of what happens at the State level. We thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

*Christopher Pittenger*

Christopher Pittenger  
Chair, Bethany Board of Education

*Colleen Murray*

Colleen Murray  
Superintendent of Schools