

## **Open Work Session**

### **Public Safety at Pittsville Elementary and Middle School and Role of School Resource Officer**

**March 20, 2018**

Dr. Donna Hanlin, Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Don Fitzgerald, President of Board of Education, John Palmer, Board Member, and Captain Babe Wilson came before Council. Dr. Hanlin thanked President Cannon for saying what he said earlier about transparency. She said that is critically important to her, and is something they work on every day. She said she sent Council information about the incident when it first occurred in Pittsville, and she followed up with President Cannon at the end of the week to bring some closure to what they had been able to find, and to where they ended their week. She said, as Mrs. Lewis said, things have smoothed out very well in Pittsville with working with the Sheriff's Office very closely. She said, immediately following the Board Meeting, the Board of Education made arrangements to have School Resource Officer (SRO) presence the very next morning not knowing yet how they were going to fund it. She said she spoke with Mr. Ford, her Chief Finance Officer, before they even left the Board Meeting Tuesday night about finding money and looking at their accounts, and they were able to do that within their SRO account. She said they are able to fund the SRO for the rest of the year, and, as she has talked with Captain Wilson, they should be able to do the same into next year. She said she sent Council an email, and she would like to answer any questions Council may have.

Mr. Fitzgerald said they will try to help answer questions. He said, at the Board Meeting, they heard from the parents loud and clear, so, as a Board, they knew what they had to do, and Dr. Hanlin followed up on it. He said they need to hear stuff because they do not hear it all the time. He said they had a meeting last night, and Mrs. Lewis was there along with parents from all the schools who could make it, and the Board assured them safety is number one. He said there is stuff that is going to happen in the County, such as going around and checking every school. He said Dr. Hanlin presented that last night through Kim Miles, who did the talking for her last night, but they are committed. He said, with the times now, they are committed to make sure schools are safe.

Captain Wilson said, again, he would like to echo everyone's sentiments, and this is an excellent opportunity for the SROs to increase one more for this year, as well as to project for next year. He said their school climates and community safety are absolutely number one, and each of their schools are communities. He said, with that, they have 15,000 plus students, 3,000 employees, and every day for 271 days they are a part of it throughout the school year. He said even during the summer they have other resources in place to help during the summer school activities. He said, again, he appreciates everybody's support and concern throughout this process. Mr. Cannon asked Captain Wilson to also thank Sheriff Lewis for Council, to which Captain Wilson responded, absolutely.

Mr. Fitzgerald said, in years past, the working relationship has not been there. He said it is here now from everybody, and what makes this County so great, he feels, is that they can work together. He said they might not always agree on stuff, but they can work through it. He said, when it comes to their children, there is nobody that is going to push that more than this man sitting right here. Mr. Cannon said Council appreciates that, and recognizes it.

Mr. Cannon said he appreciates them all being there. He said one thing he sees is that it almost seems as if, from his perspective, social media sort of exaggerated a lot of what happened, and sort of twofold, threefold, and fourfold turned this into a very mass hysterical type situation. He said it is great to bring it to the forefront, and see follow up and action resulting from that, but he is wondering if there is

anything they need to consider where they could create another avenue for the students or parents to go to. He said the rumors were incredulous, to which Mr. Fitzgerald responded, that is the problem with social media. He said he talked to Mr. Dodd about this before the meeting. He said, if the truth is put out there, that is fine and dandy, but rumors are not always truthful, and that is where part of the issue was, and he knows Dr. Hanlin has some ideas on this. Dr. Hanlin said she has a long list of safety initiatives that Mrs. Lewis mentioned earlier, one of which is a very strong campaign about "See Something, Say Something" to encourage their students to be responsible with information they hear or see. She said she will tell Council, in this case at Pittsville, those students did tell an adult. She said the students who heard something or saw something did do that, and that is how they were able to work quickly with the Sheriff's Office because they are going to take every rumor out there very seriously. She said, unfortunately, even after that, there were just incredible rumors on social media that were simply not true, and that is very difficult to control except through their own communication. Mr. Cannon asked if there is any way to put up a true/false Facebook Page from the Board of Education where they could go on and say "The rumor that a gun came to school the next day is false" with a slight statement, or anything to that affect. He said they talk a lot about "fake news," and then people can go to a particular site that says "Here is what everyone is saying, but here is the real story." He asked whether the Board of Education has that ability to possibly create some type of medium, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, they have a website and a Facebook Page, and they do post information, but Mr. Cannon's ideas are good, and they may consider it. Mr. Cannon said it might help tone everything down a little bit when it gets out of control. Mr. Palmer said there was an incident with social media where Mr. Butler was able to contact the owner of the social media, and they have agreed that, when an event happens within the Board of Education, instead of putting up rumors or something that is not verified, they are going to contact him first. He said that is a very big step, so they are looking forward to see how that is going to work out. Mr. Fitzgerald said the biggest thing is the students because the students know what is going on. He said, in this County, the high schools and middle schools have some good leadership. He said a prime example is on the 14<sup>th</sup> for the 17 minutes, the general public thinks the Board decided what went on, but that is wrong. He said the students of each school Student Government decided. He said they have great leaders in all of them, and they are the ones who are going to help them out. He said it is not going to be the Board or Council, but it is going to be the school leaders working with the authorities to make things right. He said he knows how he is, and he knows Dr. Hanlin is the same way, which is zero tolerance.

Dr. Hanlin said one of the biggest things, rather than going through her whole list of things they are doing in terms of safety initiatives, is that they are working with the Maryland Center for School Safety, and they are going to be conducting within the next week or two an audit for school safety and security that will help them identify how they need to spend funding to harden their schools to make sure they are as secure as they can be, so that is a big step, she believes.

Mr. Dodd said, since Mr. Brumbley mentioned the shooting in St. Mary's County, he briefly looked it up, and it sounded like the involvement with the SRO was significant. He said they did not give many details, but they kind of eluded to the SRO response, so he can see the value of that. He said he was looking at Dr. Hanlin's statement, and she said in the last month there were three different threats. He then asked if that was all at Pittsville, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, there have been a few others as well. She said the school principals have sent out messages to their school communities, and threat assessments have been completed. Mr. Dodd said, since the incident in Broward County, this has happened all over the Nation with all of these threats, and several times throughout the State. He then asked if the School Board had an assembly with the schools teaching the kids that the threats are not going to be tolerated, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, it is happening in various locations in different ways. Mr. Dodd clarified,

did assemblies happen, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, yes, school administrators are working with their staff and their students. She said one of latest initiatives may be what one of the parents spoke to earlier where they talked about how their child came home and said "This is the real deal, this is credible." She said they may have been talking about the ALICE training, which is a new training that all of their administrators and one faculty member to this point have been to. Captain Wilson said it is an orientation regarding how to respond to active shooters, and changes the philosophy of the past. He said they have had quite a bit of discussion in law enforcement, as well as other communities and Counties, on the responsiveness of law enforcement in the schools, and, basically, it is a run, hide, fight philosophy, and it is Nationwide. He said there are some hybrid programs that are out there also, but, as Dr. Hanlin said, Mr. Ed Clark of the Center for Safe Schools is allowing each school government to decide which way they are going to respond to their community needs. He said it is in the infant stage, but it is definitely being pressed upon throughout Wicomico County.

Mr. Joe Holloway said he had a whole list of questions, but most of them have been answered about beginning to work together. He said the biggest questions he has, and the one he is having the most problem with, is that the statement was made that they had funding for an SRO for the rest of the year and possibly next year. He then asked why Pittsville was left out in the first place. He said it was the only school without an SRO, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, she does not have the history of that, but she can tell him that, especially after the incident in Florida, she had a teacher and a parent communicate with her expressing the history that they have been asking for an SRO at Pittsville, and it was one of the things they were going to be considering when they looked at the audit. She said her guess is it has to do with the school size, and the number of issues that are in schools. She clarified, again, she cannot speak to the history of that. Mr. Joe Holloway said Mr. Fitzgerald has been on the Board a lot longer. He then asked Mr. Fitzgerald if he can speak to that, to which Mr. Fitzgerald responded, it happened before his time with the SROs. He said he does not know why the decision was made not to have one down there. He said he cannot sit there and answer that. Dr. Hanlin said she would like to explain why they have the funding. She said they have nine staff on their SRO roster, and, at the beginning of this year, they had two senior SRO individuals who left the SRO ranks who were higher paid. She said, in place of them were two less experienced individuals, so over the course of the year there has been a surplus that has been coming about leaving enough to fund for the rest of the year. She said, again, as she indicated to Captain Wilson, when they backfill or add additional SROs, as long as they keep in mind that they only have a certain amount of funding, at this point, they can add a tenth.

Mr. Joe Holloway said the other big concern he has heard from parents was this student was allowed back in the school the next day. He said there were rumors he was in handcuffs, and he understands that was not true, but he is going to ask Captain Wilson another question regarding that. He then asked why the student was allowed back on school property, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, the student was asked to come in with their parent to meet with the school administration. She said, in hindsight, the timing of that was not good because students seeing him in school caused more concern. She said that is something, obviously, they have talked to school administration about, and that has been addressed. Mr. Joe Holloway said the student was brought back to the school, so that was concerning to a lot of parents, and apparently the Sheriff's Office was involved on Monday night. He then asked Captain Wilson if it was guaranteed there was no access to weapons, to which Captain Wilson responded, he cannot discuss the investigation itself, and he will tell him it is still ongoing in regards to that, and juvenile information is confidential. Mr. Joe Holloway clarified, Captain Wilson cannot say whether the student did or did not have access to weapons.

Mr. Joe Holloway said, in the email to Executive Culver's office, and also in Mr. Cody's email, it was said there were three incidents. He then asked why the SRO issue was not addressed when the first incident happened in Pittsville, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, to be quite honest with Council, she was not familiar with the first incident, and that has been addressed. Mr. Joe Holloway clarified, the superintendent did not know about the incident, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, she does not even want to answer the question because she does not have enough information, but she would like to think it is because it did not rise to that level. She clarified, she does not know that to be the case, but, again, those kinds of issues have been addressed because they have to take every single incident, as they did in the third incident, very seriously. Mr. Cannon asked if Dr. Hanlin would be able to send Council an email to that effect of what those incidents were, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, she has to be very careful about student privacy. She said she can give Council general information, to which Mr. Cannon responded, they understand.

Mr. Joe Holloway asked if the student is being disciplined, and if that student at some point in time is going to be allowed back in Pittsville, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, due to student privacy issues, she can only tell Council that they are administering the Code of Conduct to the full extent. Mr. Joe Holloway said he does not think that answers his question, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, she knows it does not, but she has to be very careful about student privacy rights. Mr. Joe Holloway said a problem that he thinks a lot of people are having is the transparency of some of the issues, and he understands about Captain Wilson's investigation, and he does not have a problem there, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, it is the law. Mr. Joe Holloway said the superintendent not knowing about a threat is highly irregular, he thinks.

Mr. Joe Holloway said another complaint he has heard is apparently some folks have invited Board of Education members to the schools for walkthroughs, and the Board of Education Members have to get permission from the superintendent before they go. He then asked if that is correct, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, no. She said she likes to know because administrators need to know so that they can make arrangements for those visits so that instruction is not disrupted. Mr. Joe Holloway asked if a Board of Education Member could just call a principal and say they would like to stop by the school, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, they go through her office. Mr. Joe Holloway clarified, they have to go through her office, to which Mr. Fitzgerald responded, it does not stop a Board Member from going to any school they want to go to. Mr. Joe Holloway said the Board Member he spoke to said he might have known there was not an SRO in the school in Pittsville if he had been there at one time or another.

Mr. Kilmer said Mr. Dodd, Mr. Davis, and himself all have kids in public schools, so this is something of definite concern to them. He said his kids are in elementary school, so this does not immediately affect them, although they have come home and talked about how in the past couple of days they have had these drills, and things like that, so he knows there is more attention being put on that, and he knows there have been steps taken over the past three or four years to make it more difficult to get into schools. He said he knows, as a parent, it is more difficult to get into the school now, so, hopefully, more so even with people that should not be there. He said he does think there is a need, and he does not know how they do it with the privacy laws and whatever State laws are a problem, but, as a parent, part of the issue is they feel in the dark a lot of the time about what is going on in the schools. He said there is so much happening there, and then when they hear the rumors, and the rumors travel much faster than facts and truth. He said he does not know how they would do that, but he knows, as a parent, that is part of the issue where they feel like they are in the dark, and all they have is this other stuff to believe. He said, to the extent there can be better communication and better transparency, perhaps, as part of their audit, looking at some of these State laws that may prevent this sort of transparency and

sort of communication they need to have with the parents, maybe that should be part of it. He said they could then talk to the State Delegates and say some of these State laws really get in the way of what they need to do to make sure parents have the information, they can effectively communicate, and even effectively deal with some of the discipline problems. He said they have heard a little bit of concern about discipline, and that the teachers are not backed up. He said they have heard before where students who do cause trouble may not receive the discipline that people think they need to receive. He said he talked to Dr. Fredrickson about this when he was the superintendent, and he said that comes down from the State, and their hands are tied with a lot of these things. He said it would be good to know what can be done, what is a hindrance, and what maybe needs to be changed with some of these things where there are a lot of rumors and a lot of stories, but they need to advocate for change. He said, as a parent, more information is good, more communication is good, and more transparency is good. He said they understand mistakes get made and not everybody is perfect, but communication would definitely be a big step in the right direction.

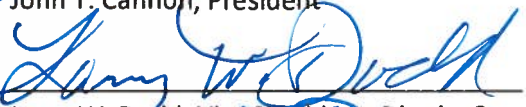
Mr. Palmer said he has one more question. He said he is curious about the history of the SROs in Wicomico County, and, personally, they are going to be looking into that. He said what he is really interested in is the funding for this area. He then asked if it always comes out of the school fund, or does it come from the County. He said many present today have not been around long enough, except Mr. Joe Holloway, and maybe he knows how funding originated in the past for the SROs in their programs. He asked if the original need came from the schools, or was it requested by the County, to which Mr. Joe Holloway responded, he remembers it coming in front of Council, and he believes the discussion was whether the County would pay for it, or the Board of Education. He said he thinks from the Sheriff's Office it came down that the money would flow through from the Board of Education. He said the SROs are not there all year, and they are off in the summertime, so they go back to regular patrol or whatever. He said that way it would be easier to differentiate the payments, and that is how he remembers it. Mr. Cannon said he is sure Mrs. Hurley can review what they have at their disposal to try to get Mr. Palmer the information he might need on that.


Mr. Joe Holloway asked if the automatic phone dial up mechanism they have for sending out about snow days can be used in any way, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, yes, and it is being used. Mr. Joe Holloway asked if it could be used for dispelling rumors also, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, as soon as they have the information, they send a parent message out to the parents of the school community about when an incident occurs, so they are doing that. Mr. Joe Holloway asked if they state whether it is credible or not credible, and whether action has been taken, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, yes. Mr. Palmer said something came up last night about contacting parents where many parents are changing phones from one company to another, and the schools are having difficulty communicating because the parents are not updating their new phones with the information the schools need to get through to them. He said they are going to go through again to update that, but all parents should please be sure they can communicate with the school. Mr. Joe Holloway said that is a good idea, and maybe a note in the report card would help.


Mr. Dodd said, in reference to the phone calls, he thinks the issue is still happening in the public school system where there are a father and mother in two separate households, and only one phone call is sent out, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, it is because they have not signed up for it. She clarified, they have

to sign up for it. Mr. Dodd said Dr. Fredrickson told him before he left that the reason was that they can only assign one phone number per child, to which Dr. Hanlin responded, that is not accurate. Mr. Davis also said that is not true because he gets three phone calls. Mr. Dodd said he only gets one. He said he has heard this from many parents, especially the fathers. There was no further discussion.

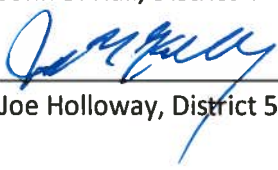
  
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John T. Cannon, President


  
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Larry W. Dodd, Vice President, District 3

  
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Ernest F. Davis, District 1

  
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Marc Kilmer, District 2

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John B. Hall, District 4

  
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Joe Holloway, District 5

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Matt Holloway, At-Large  
  
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Laura Hurley, Council Administrator