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April 8, 2008

Board of Education – By Electronic Mail
Community Unit School District 200
School Service Center
130 West Park Avenue
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

Re: Comment on Proposed Revisions to Board Policies 2.200, 2.220, 2.230

Dear Board Members:

Good decision making by this Board requires maximizing stakeholder input and community feedback, not limiting it. The proposed revisions to public comment policies would significantly restrict parent and community speech at Board meetings. Some have made the Orwellian claim that these restrictions on speech will “prioritize” and improve communication. In fact, they are slanted to impose new burdens on parents and residents who choose to take time from their busy schedules to try to make positive contributions to the dialogue within our District. Restricting input will ultimately harm the Board and the District by limiting the flow of ideas. A culture of learning requires listening to more than one point of view. The proposed policy changes are not only a bad idea, they are unnecessary, and they should be rejected.

The changes claim to solve a “problem” – “too much time spent on public comments” – that doesn’t exist. Over the last four years, there have been about 75 Board meetings total. I have counted the number of public comments, and the Board averages less than two comments of a general nature (everything other than Hubble), amounting to less than five minutes of Board time per meeting. The recent Hubble referendum was an important issue, and generated significant public comment. However, that issue is not likely to recur, and as we have seen in the last several meetings, public comments have already decreased dramatically.

Still, the public needs the chance to comment at meetings because Board members themselves often don’t speak on important issues – like when they approved the current quarter-billion dollar teacher contract with only 2 minutes of public discussion (May 24, 2006) or spent over \$20.5 million on construction bids with no discussion or even disclosure during the meeting of the amount for which they voted (March 26, 2008).

The changes would filter out exactly the type of public comment the Board most needs to hear. The most important concerns on parents’ minds often are not on the Board’s agenda, as we saw with Longfellow parents speaking about redistricting (March 12, 2008), or with concerned Monroe parents about the tornado (September 12, 2007). Why should we force parents who wish to speak for their young children to spend up to three or more hours away from those children during family time? And if more than 10 parents wish to speak, and are willing to wait their turn, why should they be cut off by the proposed arbitrary 30 minute limit?

The Board wants to treat comments on non-agenda items less favorably, yet the only way to make effective comments is to speak before an item reaches the agenda. Over the last four years, I could not find a single agenda item that was rejected by the Board; in fact, almost every one was approved unanimously. Agenda items, other than a limited number of items that require advance posting, normally appear only once. This puts parents in a bind; if they want to address an item before it reaches the agenda, the new policy would make them wait for hours; but if they wait until an item is on the agenda, they will no doubt be told that staff has already studied the issue, it cannot be delayed, and it will be rubber-stamped anyway. Longfellow redistricting, for example, will first appear on the formal agenda at the last possible meeting it can be approved and still implemented in time for next school year. If parents had waited until that meeting to speak, they would have been too late.

If the Board were really concerned about parents with agenda concerns having to wait too long to speak, it wouldn't make them sit through the non-business "reports" it has recently added to its permanent agenda, like it does now. As long as the Board can find meeting time for self-congratulation, it can find time to listen to its constituents.

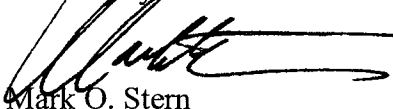
Other opportunities to contact the Board or administrators are not a substitute for public comment at regular meetings. Longfellow parents had already had a meeting with administrators. That wasn't enough – they wanted the Board's full public attention to spotlight their concerns. Parents upset about violations of the Board's R-rated movie policy only got results after they spoke publicly on a "non-agenda" item and made the papers. The Board has suggested that it will hold its "conversation meetings" just four times a year, on Saturday mornings (often the busiest day for families). Why should parents with a pressing need have to wait three months?

It is much more time efficient for a group to have one speaker than for several people to repeat the same thing, yet the proposed changes would eliminate the ability of neighborhood groups and others to pool their minutes with a single spokesperson. A three minute limit is too short for the average person who is not a trained public speaker, and particularly disadvantages those community members whose first language is not English. The Wheaton City Council allows speakers five minutes, yet it has no trouble accomplishing its business.

Finally, the changes also allow additional opportunities for the Board to restrict speakers it doesn't want to hear. The Board President can require secrecy for any comments relating to any personnel, meaning that parents concerned about a particular administrator or bus driver, for example, could no longer speak publicly on that issue. He can also prohibit anyone from speaking more than once on the same topic – ever – meaning that it would be impossible for anyone to follow up on any issue. Already, we have seen speakers treated unequally. This year (January 23, 2008), one person, without attending a meeting or signing in, was allowed to submit a letter, which the Board President then read aloud as public comment because it supported the Board's political goals. However, others who don't sign in, or who have submitted written remarks critical of Board actions, have not been accorded this same privilege.

Please reject these unneeded and harmful changes.

Yours truly,



Mark O. Stern