

The Regional District 13 Board of Education School District Climate Committee met in regular session on Wednesday, June 3, 2026 at 4:00 p.m. in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Committee Members Present: Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Almodovar, Mr. Finch, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, and Mr. Moore (arrived 4:34 p.m.)

Committee Members Absent: Mrs. Cowan

Administration Present: Dr. Leggett, Superintendent of Schools and Jennifer Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education

Dr. Darcy called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m.

**Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

**Public Comment**

There was no public comment.

**Approval of Agenda**

*Mrs. Petrella made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to approve the agenda as presented.*

*All in favor of approving the agenda as presented: Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Almodovar, Mr. Finch, Mrs. Petrella, and Mr. Roraback. Motion passed.*

**Approval of Minutes – April 22, 2026**

*Mrs. Petrella made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to approve the April 22, 2026 Meeting Minutes as presented.*

*All in favor of approving the April 22, 2026 Meeting Minutes as presented: Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Almodovar, Mr. Finch, Mrs. Petrella, and Mr. Roraback. Motion passed.*

**Attendance/Tardy Data**

Dr. Leggett reviewed the student attendance data and identified concerns about chronic absenteeism within the district. Dr. Leggett explained that the reported attendance rate of 95% can be misleading because it is calculated based on total attendance days across the student population rather than the number of individual students who are missing significant amounts of school. While the overall attendance percentage appears strong, a deeper review of the data revealed that 127 students have been

absent for more than 10 days, highlighting a more serious attendance issue than the aggregate percentage suggests. Dr. Leggett noted that the initial attendance figures appeared encouraging, but the underlying data showed a need for closer examination and intervention.

To address these concerns, the district continues to send notification letters to families when students exceed attendance thresholds and has begun collaborating with Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services (DMYFS) to develop a more comprehensive approach to addressing absenteeism, truancy, and tardiness. Dr. Leggett also discussed pursuing the state's LEAP grant, which provides support for attendance initiatives. Dr. Darcy recalled that the grant previously focused heavily on home visits and was primarily targeted toward larger urban districts, but noted that the program may have changed since her initial experience with the grant. Dr. Leggett and Ms. Keane noted the grant may have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic and the district intends to explore whether it could help support the district's attendance improvement efforts.

The conversation also included a review of Cog Academy, the district's in-house alternative education program designed for students who are at risk of not graduating or who require a more individualized educational setting. Cog Academy, which serves approximately 10 to 12 students, operates as a separate school within the district and provides flexible programming tailored to student needs. Dr. Leggett noted that attendance rates are lower among Cog Academy students because many are already struggling with chronic absenteeism, which is often one of the reasons they are enrolled in the program. The academy focuses on providing individualized attention, flexible schedules, and alternative pathways to graduation, including opportunities for students to attend partial days or balance school with employment experiences.

The committee also discussed alternative approaches to credit recovery and student engagement. Dr. Darcy discussed a strategy which allows students to focus on completing one course at a time rather than managing a full schedule of classes simultaneously. Ms. Keane agreed and explained that some students already use this model through online learning and credit-recovery programs, with instructional plans customized to meet individual student needs. Ms. Keane noted that this approach can help students see progress more quickly, earn credits in a shorter period, and maintain motivation by reaching clear milestones.

Dr. Darcy questioned how the district plans to further analyze attendance data. Dr. Leggett explained that the next step is to disaggregate the information by identifying students who have accumulated more than 10 absences and then examining patterns within those absences. Dr. Leggett hopes this approach will determine whether trends exist, such as students missing school more frequently on Mondays and Fridays, during certain seasons, or for other identifiable reasons.

Dr. Darcy questioned what population of high school students were represented in the absentee data. Committee members expressed surprise when they learned that all 127 students with more than 10 absences were middle school students, noting that the number seemed alarmingly high. Mr. Finch questioned how attendance is calculated, including whether the data reflects only full-day absences or includes partial-day absences. Dr. Leggett indicated they would verify record keeping increments for attendance thresholds. Dr. Darcy also questioned whether the data includes excused and unexcused absences. Dr. Leggett also clarified that the attendance figures include both excused and unexcused

absences, which prompted discussion about the value of further breaking down the data into those categories.

In addition to analyzing attendance patterns and types of absences, Dr. Darcy suggested examining the academic performance of chronically absent students. Dr. Darcy noted that if students are maintaining strong grades despite significant absences, that presents a different issue than students whose attendance problems are negatively affecting achievement.

### **Challenging Behavior**

Dr. Leggett reviewed the district's annual data on challenging behavior incidents, noting that the figures represent the full school year to date, with only a few days remaining in the academic calendar. Dr. Leggett explained that these reports differ from the behavioral data previously reviewed through LinkIt because they involve formal challenging behavior incident reports that require investigation and follow-up. Such reports may be initiated by the district, a parent, or a student when an incident significantly disrupts a student's education or ability to learn.

The data showed two challenging behavior incidents involving two students at Brewster, two incidents involving two students at Lyman, twelve incidents involving seven students at Strong Middle School, and three incidents involving three students at the high school. Dr. Leggett noted that these figures do not capture every behavioral issue that occurs in schools, as some incidents may be addressed through other processes, such as Title IX or Title VI investigations. Instead, these numbers reflect only the formal challenging behavior cases that required investigation under Connecticut's new school climate law.

Dr. Leggett described the implementation of the new law as an evolving process, noting that districts across the state have been learning and refining procedures throughout the year. Dr. Darcy suggested that future data analyses might benefit from separating elementary and middle school populations, particularly once the new school configuration is implemented, to better understand where issues are occurring. Dr. Leggett reflected on how the shift away from traditional bullying investigations toward the challenging behavior framework initially required an adjustment for school leaders. However, Dr. Leggett noted that the new approach has created more opportunities for restorative practices and has helped clarify investigative processes, particularly in situations where multiple policies or legal requirements may apply simultaneously.

Dr. Darcy raised questions about the nature of the incidents, including how many involved physical violence, racial issues, or other forms of discrimination. Dr. Leggett expressed caution about providing highly detailed breakdowns because the small number of incidents at some schools could make individuals identifiable. Dr. Darcy questioned if the district could receive a breakdown of physical or verbal incidents. Dr. Leggett indicated that broader categories, such as physical versus verbal incidents, will be shared in future reports. Dr. Leggett also emphasized that the challenging behavior data does not include students with significant behavioral needs who are supported through individual behavior plans. Those situations are managed through ongoing interventions and do not necessarily result in a formal challenging behavior investigation unless an incident occurs between students that requires one.

Mrs. Petrella questioned the impact of restorative practices on student behavior and whether the district can measure their effectiveness. Dr. Leggett explained that it is likely too early to determine the full impact because this is the first year of implementation. Dr. Leggett expressed hope that over time, longitudinal data will show a reduction in behavioral incidents as restorative practices become more deeply embedded throughout the district. Dr. Leggett also emphasized that effective restorative work is primarily proactive rather than reactive, with roughly 90 percent of the effort focused on building positive relationships, fostering respectful communication, creating supportive classroom environments, and teaching students how to interact constructively with one another. Only a small portion of restorative practices occurs after an incident has taken place.

Dr. Leggett noted that a more comprehensive report on restorative practices would be presented at the next board meeting, including a summary of activities undertaken during the year and recommendations for future implementation. Dr. Darcy acknowledged that while measurable outcomes may take time to emerge, restorative practices are supported by research and are generally viewed as an effective approach to improving school climate and reducing behavioral issues.

Mr. Finch shared firsthand observations from the classroom, describing students as kind and receptive to restorative approaches. After participating in professional development and implementing classroom circles, Mr. Finch found that students responded positively to opportunities for dialogue and reflection. Rather than reacting defensively to traditional disciplinary measures, students appeared to feel more respected and valued through restorative conversations, and problematic behaviors often diminished following those interactions. Committee members also noted that students have adopted the language and concepts associated with restorative practices and school climate work, citing examples of students appropriately identifying behaviors such as microaggressions and engaging in thoughtful discussions about their impact.

Dr. Darcy also revisited questions previously submitted by Mrs. Almodovar regarding behavioral data collection. Dr. Leggett clarified that the district's behavior reports include only incidents that rise to the level of office referrals. Everyday classroom management issues are not recorded because doing so would create an unmanageable reporting burden and distract educators from instruction. Dr. Leggett noted that focusing on office referrals also provides a degree of consistency, as administrators can review incidents and ensure they are categorized similarly across schools.

Dr. Leggett also discussed the importance of calibration among teachers and administrators when reporting behavioral incidents. As part of that effort, school leaders participated in an exercise where each administrator brought a sample incident and worked through how it should be documented in the district's reporting system. The exercise helped identify areas where reporting forms needed improvement and generated valuable conversations about consistent interpretation and classification of behavioral incidents. Dr. Darcy suggested that restorative practices can also support greater consistency by providing a common framework for addressing student behavior across schools.

The discussion concluded with a brief reference to questions about teacher support, which Dr. Darcy indicated would be addressed more fully during the upcoming survey presentation. Dr. Darcy thanked Mrs. Almodovar for providing feedback and questions in follow-up communication and encouraged continued discussion and electronic communications in the future.

## Climate Survey

The committee discussed the development of a school climate survey that would be administered to students, staff, and parents or guardians. Dr. Leggett emphasized that the primary goal is to gather meaningful information about school climate while creating a survey that can generate reliable, longitudinal data over many years. Dr. Leggett discussed identifying a core set of questions that would remain consistent from year to year to allow the district to track trends and measure progress over time. In addition to these permanent questions, the survey may include a small number of rotating questions that could address current issues or emerging topics of interest.

Dr. Leggett explained that while the state climate law initially appeared to require districts to use a specific survey instrument, clarification from the state indicated that districts may develop their own surveys as long as the questions are drawn from research-based sources. This flexibility allows the district to customize a survey to meet its unique needs while avoiding the cost of purchasing a commercial survey platform. Dr. Leggett recommended reviewing several established survey models and then having the committee create a comprehensive instrument that reflects the district's priorities.

Dr. Leggett also discussed the timeline for implementation. Because the next required climate survey will not be administered until the following spring, Dr. Leggett felt there was sufficient time to carefully review options and develop a thoughtful survey. Dr. Leggett suggested coordinating survey schedules with Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services (DMYFS), potentially alternating years so that district and community surveys do not compete for participation and survey fatigue is minimized.

To support the committee's work, Dr. Darcy assembled examples from several existing climate surveys. These included materials from Fairfield Public Schools, which had been recognized for its survey efforts, the Panorama survey platform that gained prominence through early state-supported school climate initiatives, and survey materials from Amity. Dr. Darcy used artificial intelligence tools to extract and organize survey questions from available reports, creating spreadsheets that categorized questions by respondent group, including parents, teachers, elementary students, and secondary students. Dr. Darcy noted the value of reviewing established survey questions but also cautioned against creating an instrument that is overly long or repetitive, as lengthy surveys can reduce response quality and participation rates. Mr. Roraback agreed that some survey questions can become too repetitive or ask respondents to answer questions they may not feel qualified to answer. As a result, Dr. Darcy expressed interest in identifying a focused set of meaningful questions that would provide actionable data without overburdening participants. Consideration was also given to selecting an appropriate time of year for survey administration, with Dr. Leggett noting that late spring or June may not be ideal because students, staff, and families are often focused on the end of the school year.

Committee members began reviewing sample survey questions together. The Fairfield survey served as the starting point for discussion, and members examined questions related to communication, student progress, school climate, and family engagement. The review was intended to help the committee identify elements they liked, determine what information they most wanted to collect, and begin shaping a survey framework that could provide consistent, meaningful data for future years.

Dr. Darcy emphasized that the survey should focus on areas that align with the district's long-term goals rather than attempting to measure everything. Dr. Darcy noted that questions about whether a child learned a lot during the school year may not be as valuable because the district already has academic performance data to assess student learning. Instead, there was strong support for focusing on measures of school climate, belonging, and student support, such as whether students feel connected to their school and whether every student has a trusted adult they can turn to when needed. Dr. Darcy noted that these types of questions could provide meaningful data for tracking progress over time and evaluating the district's efforts to improve school culture.

Dr. Leggett also discussed the value of aligning questions across surveys for students, staff, and parents so that responses from different stakeholder groups could be compared. Dr. Darcy explained that survey instruments can be structured to allow direct comparisons among the perceptions of students, parents, and staff, providing a more complete picture of school climate. Dr. Leggett viewed this alignment as particularly useful because it could reveal areas where perceptions differ significantly between groups and help guide future improvement efforts.

Several members expressed concerns about overly lengthy surveys and agreed that shorter, more focused surveys would likely produce higher-quality responses and better participation rates. There was also discussion about response scales, with Dr. Darcy advocating for a four-point Likert scale rather than a traditional five-point scale, arguing that eliminating the neutral middle option encourages respondents to indicate whether their perceptions are generally positive or negative, making the results easier to interpret and reducing the tendency for participants to default to a neutral response. Dr. Leggett also suggested retaining an option such as "no opinion" for respondents who genuinely feel unable to answer a particular question.

Ms. Keane also reviewed the wording of specific questions and discussed the importance of using clear, inclusive, and modern language. For example, concerns were raised about outdated phrasing and gendered language in some survey items, with participants recommending revisions to ensure questions are inclusive and relevant to all respondents. The committee agreed that careful attention to wording would be an important part of the survey development process.

Dr. Darcy proposed the Climate Committee would select the objectives, and the subcommittee could choose and refine the survey questions and bring the draft survey to the Climate Committee for review. The discussion expanded to include the role of students in shaping the final survey. Mr. Moore suggested involving students through focus groups or review sessions once a draft survey has been developed. Committee members agreed and felt students would provide valuable feedback about which questions are meaningful, which questions seem confusing or unnecessary, and how long the survey should be. Rather than asking students to create survey questions from scratch, members believed it would be more productive to provide a draft and invite feedback on its relevance and clarity.

The committee also discussed its emerging partnership with Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services (DMYFS). Dr. Darcy suggested that while the district's survey should focus primarily on school climate, belonging, and educational experiences, DMYFS could address broader community and wellness topics through its own surveys. By alternating survey administration years and sharing data, both

organizations could gather valuable information without overburdening students, staff, and families with frequent surveys.

As they reviewed sample questions, members identified several items they found particularly useful. Questions about participation in clubs, activities, and athletics generated interest because they could provide insight into barriers that prevent students from becoming involved in extracurricular opportunities. Ms. Keane suggested that understanding factors such as transportation challenges, work obligations, scheduling conflicts, or lack of interest could help the district improve student engagement and access to activities.

The committee continued discussing the design of the climate survey, with particular attention to making elementary student surveys developmentally appropriate. Dr. Leggett expressed support for using visual response options such as emojis or smiley faces, similar to a pain scale, to make the survey easier for younger students to understand and complete. Members also noted that some existing survey language may be too advanced for elementary readers and should be simplified. For example, words such as “consequences” might be familiar to students when spoken by adults but could still be difficult for younger children to interpret in a written survey. The group agreed that questions should be rephrased in age-appropriate language while preserving the intent of the items.

The committee confirmed that a smaller subcommittee had been created to develop the survey, consisting of district representatives and a representative from Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services. As members reviewed the survey examples, Mrs. Petrella observed that many questions could be aligned across parent, staff, and student versions of the survey, allowing for direct comparison of responses among stakeholder groups. Dr. Darcy planned to use AI tools to help identify equivalent questions across the different survey forms so that the committee could more easily select parallel items.

The discussion then shifted to identifying the major themes the district should measure longitudinally. Members strongly supported focusing on student belonging and school safety, referencing research such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to emphasize the importance of safety and belonging in learning. Additional themes included whether students feel academically challenged, whether teachers are enthusiastic and use varied instructional approaches, and whether students have opportunities for engaging programming. Some members suggested that questions about academic challenge may be most appropriate for students rather than parents or staff.

Mr. Moore also highlighted the importance of outdoor and nature-based learning opportunities. Mr. Moore noted that students have repeatedly expressed interest in learning experiences outside the classroom, and committee members felt that the survey should include questions related to programming, enrichment, and engagement with the natural environment. For high school students, members discussed asking whether they feel prepared to leave school and enter college, careers, or adult life. Dr. Darcy recalled feedback from a graduate who felt academically prepared but not fully prepared for the social and cultural diversity they encountered after graduation.

Near the end of the meeting, Dr. Leggett updated the committee on the draft Vision of a Graduate, Vision of Instruction, and strategic plan. The climate and culture goals and objectives had been shared with committee members for feedback, and initial responses were positive. Dr. Darcy planned to place both the

presentation clip and supporting documents into a shared folder so committee members could review them together.

**Public Comment**

There was no public comment.

**Adjournment**

*Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mr. Finch, to adjourn the meeting.*

*All in favor of adjourning the meeting: Dr. Darcy, Mrs. Almodovar, Mr. Finch, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, and Mr. Moore. Motion passed and the meeting adjourned.*

Respectfully submitted by Meghan Shortell-Fratantonio