For Immediate Release  
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Farmington Violates State Order  
Residents shut out of town meeting; lack of transparency cause for concern

Dozens of Farmington residents and teachers were prevented from participating in a May 4 Farmington Board of Education meeting held virtually on the Zoom platform, violating a state order requiring transparency and public participation during the coronavirus pandemic. The Board of Education meeting included public comment on the school budget, which impacts all town residents.

“We know that these are unprecedented times, but the town must allow the public to participate in public meetings and ensure all voices are heard,” said math teacher and Farmington Education Association president James McNamara. “The Board of Education was hearing comments on the school budget, and that impacts all of us, but especially our students and teachers. To be denied a voice in the budget process violates the governor’s executive orders as well as our constitutional rights.”

“I was disappointed because I was denied access to an important public meeting and unable to share my views,” said Farmington resident and West Hartford teacher Theresa McKeown.

McNamara was able to share his concerns about the harmful impact that potential cuts will have on students and teachers but was then dropped from the meeting.

“I was unable to listen to the remainder of the public comment portion of the meeting. Dozens of Farmington educators who have been working tirelessly and training in new distance learning platforms to keep students engaged during the crisis, were unable to speak out, and contacted me to express their concern. To have our voices squelched like this is disrespectful to all the amazing, dedicated teachers in Farmington and across the state, not to mention the students who need them now more than ever.”

In order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the state is observing social distancing measures and restricting gatherings to no more than five people, preventing in-person public meetings. On March 14, Governor Lamont issued Executive Order No. 7b, which requires all public meetings held by municipalities to allow the public access in real time by telephone, video, or other technology.

The online May 4 Board of Education meeting violated that order when it capped participation at 100, leaving dozens of residents upset and unable to participate in the proceeding and share their views on education matters.
“The town is abusing this new public process and not giving a voice to its residents,” said Farmington teacher and life-long resident Jaimee Johnson, who tried unsuccessfully to join the meeting to participate in public comment. “The Farmington Board of Education failed its residents and undermined the entire process, which is supposed to be transparent.”

There are also indications that private discussions were held during the meeting, which is a violation of the Freedom of Information Act.

The Connecticut Education Association sent a letter to the chair of the Farmington Board of Education requesting all materials relating to the meeting and correspondence between the superintendent and the members of the Farmington Board of Education and Town Council.

“We need to ensure that public meetings are held in the rays of sunshine, not the secrecy of shadows,” said CEA President Jeff Leake. “The governor has issued an executive order to ensure town governments continue to operate while protecting the health and safety of all our residents, but those orders must be followed and must not violate the public’s right to transparency or participation in the process. We urge the state to issue further guidance to clarify the process and what is expected of municipalities.”

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The Connecticut Education Association is Connecticut’s largest teachers’ union, representing active and retired educators across the state.

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