

ACTON PUBLIC SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes (approved 5/16/13)

Library
R.J. Grey Junior High School

March 21, 2013
7:00 p.m.

Members Present: Mike Coppolino, Xuan Kong, Kim McOsker, Paul Murphy (7:10 p.m.) Deanne O’Sullivan
Members Absent: Dennis Bruce
Others: Don Aicardi, Marie Altieri, Deborah Bookis, Liza Huber, Steve Mills, Beth Petr

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m. by Kim McOsker, Chair of the Acton Public School Committee.

STATEMENT OF WARRANT

APS warrant #201319 dated 3/19/13 in the amount of \$114,379.63 was signed by the Chair and circulated to the Committee for signatures.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the 2/14/13 APS SC meeting were approved as amended.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - none

EDUCATION REPORT – *Reader’s Notebook Collaborative Project*

Edward Kaufman, Principal of the Merriam School presented with Kathy Collins, author of *Growing Readers & Reading For Real*, and Merriam staff members Maryann Ayers, Kerry Cusick and Kate Shiebler. Ed began by citing *Notebook Connections* as a book they used as a resource. Kathy Collins gave seminars for staff last summer and was then invited to work with the Merriam staff during the year.

Kathy stated that there are lots of ways that people make sense and understand meaning when they are considering text. When she asked the staff to read a passage and respond to it, they all came back with different answers. A goal is to find a variety of ways to teach reading and tools to use. Inference is a key skill for students to grasp, moving students beyond the literal reading of text.

Ed concluded, “It should be the teacher’s aim to give every child a love of reading; a hunger for it that will stay with him through all the years of his life.” (Mayne, 1915)

When asked why all of our elementary schools don’t use this method, Dr. Mills said that one of our key values is the individuality of each of our schools, and there are many ways to teach reading. Comparing a student’s work over time is very important, compared to MCAS type of measures of progress. He did point out that this kind of teaching can be expensive because it takes time for teachers to review their own work and share it with colleagues and collaborate. This is why he pushes for teachers to have more time to work together. The Merriam staff described the high level of student engagement, ownership of work and excitement resulting from the notebooks that leads to improved learning.

SCHOOL COMMITTEE BUSINESS

7.1 Morrison Farm Implementation Plan

Bill Mullin did a short presentation on this upcoming Town Meeting article that will be funded by Community Preservation Act money. It has been endorsed by several school staff members as educational valuable.

7.2 ALG Update

Xuan Kong reported that ALG had not met since the last School Committee meeting.

7.3 Board of Selectmen and FinCom Update

7.4 Health Insurance Trust (HIT) Update

Kim McOsker reported that the last meeting was a vote on the rates with an average of 10%. Good trends are happening. This will go in effect on July 1st.

7.5 OPEB Task Force Update

Don Aicardi reported that they reviewed the Town Meeting presentation that Steve Noone will be giving.

7.6 Merriam Principal Search Update

Marie Altieri reported that the search committee is in place and work has begun to find the new principal.

7.7 Regionalization Update

7.7.1 Positive Outcomes of Regionalization/Educational Benefits – *Steve Mills*

Dr. Mills does not feel like it is his role to speak about some of the Regionalization issues, such as how the savings will be split and spent because it is up to the citizens to decide that kind of question. As Superintendent, it is up to him to publicize the educational benefits of regionalization. We pride ourselves in Acton on having 5 distinct schools. Currently Blanchard School is better resourced than our Acton schools, although they do have a declining enrollment problem. Blanchard could offer extra performing arts instruction so some Acton families who might choose it over one of the Acton schools. No one will be pressured to go to school outside of their town.

Dr. Mills emphasized that there are no plans to close a school. There are still classes like art, music and some special education being held in not the most appropriate spaces. Blanchard has an ELA specialist and librarian and behaviorist that would be able to work with us as well. There are significant chances to increase professional opportunities by regionalizing. The Superintendent's checklist has 110 forms that are required every year. Now Acton and Acton-Boxborough do two sets and Dr. Bates in Boxborough does one set. Regionalization would reduce that to one set and free up significant time for staff to do more educational work and have more flexibility.

Regarding budgetary relief, savings could be considered as resetting the clock. The budget would always be reset to that level going forward. Dr. Mills will continue to be an ex-officio member of the Regional School District Study Committee (RSDSC). They are looking for a formal endorsement of Regionalization on April 10 from the School Committees as the June 3 Town Meetings get closer.

Mike Coppelino said there are a lot of naysayers about the savings and that it will get folded in to the budget. He asked if a line called "savings due to regionalization" could be included in the budgets. Dr. Mills replied that whatever savings are realized ultimately go back to the taxpayers to decide on. Paul Murphy emphasized that some people will ask "what is the educational benefit to me?" He hopes people will support it even if there is something in it for someone else, but not necessarily themselves.

Deanne O'Sullivan asked about Boxborough accepting up to 60 Choice Program students if regionalization fails. Each student would bring in \$5000. The Regional School District must accept these students through grades 7 – 12. The \$5000 would not affect the Acton and Boxborough assessment figures. Deanne is concerned about class size and how cutting a section reduces the chance to have smaller classes. Kim pointed out that there would be a guaranteed class size increase at the Jr High and High School without regionalization because Blanchard would accept these choice students.

A question was asked about bus times if we regionalize. Marie believes that JD Head would say the bus issue is negligible. On Budget Saturday, Marie had a chart that mapped out enrollment and class sizes.

Martha Bethel spoke from the audience. She does not see a lot of educational benefit, and advocated for money to be spent on additional staff to help teachers spend more time with individual students. She feels the proposal is just about giving money back to tax payers.

Xuan Kong stated that the \$800,000 really should not be coined as savings but as financial opportunities. The assumed \$800,000 is based on the education level as it is now. \$500,000 is from K-6th grade bus costs being subsidized by the state so that would not affect any class teachers/assistants. This is simply because we are regional. The other \$300,000 is removing redundancy from the Central Offices. For the first year there is a \$50 per student regionalization transition bonus offered by state. None of these numbers take away from current services. This money can be used to reinvest in education or taxpayer relief. The RSDSC has not taken a position about how to deploy this \$800,000 of savings. That will be up to the future elected leaders.

Peter Ashton agreed with Xuan that in the first five years enrollment does not play a role in assessment because assessments will be determined using the cost share formula. They are designing it to minimize the impact on Acton. The RSDSC has been looking at revising the model to make it more dynamic, instead of the current static one. They want to look at the difference between regionalization or not by using this. Peter cautioned people about what they are concluding from the model. He said that trying to project this far out (FY22) for budget or enrollment is very inexact. He stated not to worry about what the absolute values are, but the differences between what you would get with and without regionalization are what is important.

Deanne asked if we regionalize, would we look at a model where every school provides special education services. Dr. Mills explained that there is a significant variance between the special education services offered at the elementary schools. One of the restrictions is space, particularly at Douglas.

Paul views the \$800,000 as a chance to meet some of the school's financial needs for the future. A question was asked how the schools will reconcile the different funding mechanisms for the assistants when Blanchard's are very different from Acton's. Dr. Mills responded that we would never make all the schools the same. He values how different our schools are. Marie pointed out that Acton also pays for assistants and is working toward a model similar to Boxborough's.

Xuan stated that because this was his last meeting as an Acton Public School Committee member, he wanted to address his colleagues about regionalization.

He said that it is difficult to leave the process in the middle of it but it has been beneficial for him to see it from two sides. There are many educational benefits to regionalization but they are difficult to quantify. Both Superintendents have said that regionalization is a way to deliver better education to our students, although it will not change students' experiences that much. The bigger difference will be found in the school system-wide operation. The financial benefits must be viewed as a way to give a more positive impact to the students. There are a number of different projections and assumptions. The most recent projections suggest that Acton would save money even beyond the first five years. For the first 5 years, Acton is guaranteed to realize \$700,000 for the transportation reimbursement and administration efficiency, but there is a question after that. It will be up to the citizens to decide what is better for Acton after 5 years. Xuan also commented on reviewing the Agreement at five year intervals. He feels it will be very difficult to change the Agreement at future Town Meetings, particularly if one side would end up paying more.

He spoke about the statutory method of assessment [an assessment method based on both real-estate value and student population of each member town of a region] and that the Boxborough members feel the enrollment based assessment is the agreement made before and that it cannot be changed. The existing Regional Agreement covers grades 7-12 and there is no stipulation about how to finance it if the Region is to include grades K-6. According to the consultant hired by the RSDSC, the statutory method is the legislative intent of education reform and that is how the state decides how much educational aid each school district would be given by the state. Also, in a recent survey by DESE, 76% of the districts use the

statutory method. Acton and Boxborough are funding their elementary school using statutory methods. We pay what the state does not cover and anything we chose to spend above that we assess the taxpayers. That is the essence of the statutory method. By expanding the region to include the elementary schools, the purpose is to create a better education for the students, financial efficiency and receive more financial aid from the state. Xuan suggested that a better solution in the long run may be to implement a method similar to what John Petersen proposed, or continue to assess grades 7 - 12 by enrollment and assess the elementary grades using the statutory method.

Xuan concluded that in the end, money is just part of the equation when considering regionalization. Everyone must weigh the risks and benefits of the finances. The key rests in the elected officials and the administration to determine our future educational success.

7.8 Kindergarten Registration Update

Marie Altieri reported that registration is exactly where we were at at this time last year, at 252 students. The lottery will be done after vacation. Three years ago, we had 340 students. Kindergarten classes now average 19 students when we used to have 23 students. This is even after dropping two sections. At this point, there will be 14 sections with 19 students per class. High demand exists for All Day Kindergarten.

7.9 Recommendation to Approve Gift from Douglas PTO

Xuan moved, Paul seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to accept the gift from the Douglas PTO with gratitude.

7.10 Request for naming Acton Public Preschool Program – *Liza Huber*

Dr. Mills said Carol Huebner has been a dedicated leader and founder of the Preschool Program. Liza will play a leadership role in the committee to help make this decision. We do not have other programs named after anyone. Xuan believes that naming an academic program after a person is much more significant than a building or track because an academic program touches students' lives more than a building. He cautioned the Committee to really think about the impact and implications that naming this program could have on that program and others. Paul stated that policies notwithstanding, he thinks this would be a wonderful thing to do in Carol Huebner's honor.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

8.1.3 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Presentation has been rescheduled to May 22.

8.3 SpedPAC APS 2012 MCAS Analysis, 2/22/13

Dr. Mills said that in this report the SpedPAC was disappointed that they could not meet with the elementary principals and he will make sure that meeting happens.

Xuan reported that he emailed the gun control letter to MASC and invited them to join the effort.

NEXT MEETINGS:

- April 1, 7:00 pm, Acton Town Meeting begins in ABRHS auditorium
- WEDNESDAY, April 10, 7:30 pm, JT SC/AB/APS meeting at RJGJHS Library
- May 2, 7:30 pm, ABRSC meeting at RJGJHS Library
- May 16, 7:00 pm, APSC meeting at RJGJHS Library – Education Report from Conant School
- Special Town Meetings in Acton & Boxborough for Regionalization, moved from April 29 to June 3

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of documents used: see agenda