

**ACTON-BOXBOROUGH TRANSITIONAL (ABTSC), ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL
(ABRSC) and ACTON PUBLIC SCHOOL COMMITTEES (APSC)
Minutes (approved 5/1/14)**

**Library
R.J. Grey Junior High School**

**Saturday, February 1, 2014
8:30 a.m. ABTSC FY15 Budget Meeting
Followed by Joint ABTSC/ABRSC/APSC Executive Session**

Members Present: Brigid Bieber, Mary Brolin, Dennis Bruce, Michael Coppolino, Kim McOsker, Paul Murphy, Maria Neyland, Deanne O’Sullivan, Kristina Rychlik
Members Absent: none
Others: Don Aicardi, Marie Altieri, Deborah Bookis, Liza Huber, Steve Mills, Beth Petr

ABRSD FY’15 Budget Presentations

The ABTSC was called to order at 8:31 a.m. by Chairperson, Maria Neyland.

1. Welcome & Superintendent’s Introduction

Maria Neyland described the structure for the day. Steve Mills stated that every penny that is spent in our schools is public money and to be discussed. Money should be transparent. Assistant Principals, his largest line item, are as much about direct service as teachers. The DESE slide 19 shows a list of all good new initiatives, but they should be next to each other, equally needed but spaced out, not prioritized all on top of each other. The proposed FY15 Budget abides by the Acton Finance Committee “Point of View” document and meets the Regionalization savings commitment to cut \$1 million. There are no requests for additional staff, just a realignment of existing resources.

2. Current Priorities within the Long Range Strategic Plan

Panel Presenters: Andrew Shen, JoAnn Campbell, Curt Bates, Deborah Bookis, Liza Huber

The new presentation format mirrors this year’s budget process because it is a new unified shared belief about what is most important for our new PreK-12 District as a whole.

1. Clarifying the Budget Planning Process
2. Guiding Principles
3. Challenge #1: Fully Integrating into PreK-12 District
4. Challenge #2: Increase in Resource-Intensive Populations of Students
5. Challenge #3: Expanded and Additional Mandates

Maria Neyland noted how much education has changed, even since her children (now seniors at ABRHS) started school. She thanked the panel for their excellent presentation.

The Committee discussed the challenges in meeting the time requirements for all the new teacher evaluations and agreed that it must be a struggle for staff. Curt Bates said that he is responsible for 29 staff members and is spending 186 days a year doing evaluations. Curt’s Assistant Principal assists with some of the evaluations. Steve Mills encourages his elementary principals to access the expertise of some of the directors (such as the curriculum director) to help with the evaluations. It is best to have multiple evaluators, like the model at the Junior High. Department leaders are also full time teachers at the Junior High. This works because department leaders and assistant principals are all in the building. The question was asked if it is an inherent conflict with RDLs (Regional Department Leaders) and BDLs (Building Department Leaders) evaluating peers.

JoAnn Campbell said that our EDCO colleagues are all dealing with sharp increases in mental health issues. This is one of the main themes this year at ABRHS, although they are not addressing the “why” of it, at this time, due to how complicated that topic is. Liza Huber would like to move toward a K-12 Task Force, expanding the current one led by Julie Towell. The majority of people in this existing group are in regular education. Mary Brolin commented that it is really important for us to recognize these mental health issues, especially the invisible ones. In some ways, the school district is a social service agency now. There are mandates requiring the schools to address these issues. The Committee discussed the changing needs of the ELL (English Language Learner) students.

Dennis Bruce asked what the minimum number of hours would be for one teacher evaluation with the new rules. Curtis Bates stated that a major difficulty is that most of the time the work must be done during the school day. Marie Altieri estimated that it takes 15 hours per teacher for a one year plan and 8 hours per teacher for a 2 year plan. Paul Murphy observed that things usually don’t happen at the minimum. The reality is that things usually take longer.

Maria said that the Committee “can’t thank the staff enough for highlighting these important issues.”

3. Special Education Overview and Trends

Liza Huber recognized Joe Gibowicz, Julie Towell, Suzanne Szwarczewicz, Matt Kidder and Todd Chicko who were in the audience. She thanked the special education parents for their support. Liza addressed circuit breaker funding, out of district costs, the CASE assessment formula and the offsets of grants, circuit breaker and Medicaid.

Liza confirmed that there is no special funding for students on a 504 plan or who are homeless. We do have a number of homeless students now. As suggested by the FUTURES review, Liza and her staff are working on Medicaid as a possible source of funds but it will not contribute anything for next year. FUTURES thought \$200,000 might be received. The Committee discussed slide 42, Out of District Regionalized Expense Projections (including CASE). CASE is grappling with a real time model of assessing the school districts involved right now. This is a big change that would create a large increase in cost. The other element of the formula is that we were always able to count on an assessed amount but the new proposal would result in a fluctuating tuition amount. Dr. Mills explained that CASE is proposing a very high tuition increase for our district, but he hopes it will come down. The \$5.2 million figure is not final.

The Committee talked about bringing Out of District students back into our district with regionalization. Liza and her staff are identifying students that may be able to return to the district, and are hoping to find 5 – 7 students each year. The amount of potential savings from this is unknown at this time.

Dennis stated that a question for all presenters to keep in mind is how regionalizing is affecting each issue for next year.

Given the uncertainty of the numbers, Maria asked Liza if she could provide numbers for a final budget vote by the meeting next Thursday. Mike Coppelino understands the CASE increase, but finds it concerning that from FY13 to FY15, the private day tuition doubles. He asked for an explanation of that for Thursday if possible.

4. Specific Personnel Requests for 2014 – 2015

Presenters: JoAnn Campbell, Andrew Shen, Curt Bates, Damian Sugrue, Liza Huber, Ed Kaufman
Advocating for the full time elementary schools’ Assistant Principals, High School Principal JoAnn Campbell stated that what happens at the elementary level has a direct impact on the students that she and Andrew Shen work with at the Junior High and High School. Curtis Bates spoke strongly in support as well based on how Blanchard uses their full time Assistant Principal.

5. Enrollment and Staffing for 2014 – 2015 (and beyond)

Marie Altieri stated that \$416,000 of savings has been realized from regionalization and any new staff has been offset by reductions in staff beyond the staff savings from regionalization. The total change is a reduction of 4 FTE. See slide 71 “Realignment of Staff”.

6. Discussion and Dialogue

It was noted that the increase of the current half time elementary school assistant principals to full time is not a new request. It was high on the list last year but did not make the cut. A member commented that regarding the principals, “there is not enough bandwidth for one person to do it all” given all of the added mandates and initiatives. The request was made to be clear that Acton elementary schools currently have half time assistant principals and the request is to increase that, not add full time positions. It was asked if the need for speech/language support has declined and therefore is the justification for moving the .4 direct service to more administrative services. Liza said the need has not declined.

Nancy Sherburne advocated for the addition of two elementary special education teachers (which were below the funding line). Paul Murphy asked for the cost impacts of these.

LUNCH BREAK

7. Financial Landscape and Implementation of Proposals

Don Aicardi presented a proposed FY15 ABRSD budget of \$77,068,000.

It was asked how the OPEB contribution amount is decided. Don responded that it is up to the School Committee and that this amount affects the District’s bond rating.

The Committee reviewed slide 10 “Another FY14 to FY15 Comparison” and discussed the difference between the two totals which would be the change that Acton is paying from this year to next due to regionalization. It was confirmed that there is a savings of a million dollars from transportation and personnel reductions and another million dollars as a shift from Boxborough to Acton. It was agreed that comparing the current year’s budgets of the three districts with next year’s proposed budget for the new PreK-12 region was very complicated. Many people asked questions about how the comparisons were made, including Steve Noone from the Acton Finance Committee. The Committee agreed to continue the discussion at their next meeting on 2/6/14.

8. Preliminary Capital Plan for PreK-12 Region

JD Head began by stating that one of his goals is to achieve carbon neutrality. He talked about how the Lower Fields and Track projects both came up mid year and were significant activities. JD and his staff look forward to working with the staff at Blanchard and getting to know their building. While Blanchard has cheap electricity due to Littleton Light and Power, their natural gas consumption seems high for a building that size. The Committee discussed the Blanchard window replacement project listed. Maria explained that they got to their capital plan using a grant and a consultant.

The Committee appreciated the list of projects in the plan. Knowing the High School roof needs to be replaced in 2024 is important. It helps to know the useful life of investments when making budget plans. Mike Coppolino asked whether the energy manager’s salary, despite her excellent work, would continue to be justified. JD replied that the energy savings is double the value of her salary and the District is seeing the returns now and the department is proud of it.

Mary Brolin thanked JD, and asked for the 10 year plan to be laid out year by year so they could plan better fiscally. If that were the case, money could be set aside to save for these important items.

Mary Ann Ashton suggested that the Committee consider looking forward for the existing buildings. The last time a study was done for Acton buildings was in 1999.

9. Closing Comments and Reflections

Dr. Mills stated that it is his job to advocate for what is a reasonable budget. He is responsible for what is listed above and below “the line”. The actual proposed budget increase is 3.8% and it includes a 10% increase in health insurance and a significant contribution to OPEB. Maria stated that today’s presentation was about the needs of the district, and next Thursday’s meeting will be about the cost assessment. Steve Mills will be reconvening the Long Range Strategic Planning committee soon.

10. School Committee Deliberation and Open Discussion

Paul expressed concern about the number of things that were being removed from the Blanchard School and moved to the new regional district. He asked, “where is the benefit from regionalization?” He also questioned whether our below average per pupil spending is something that we should be proud or ashamed of.

Brigid stated that she is very supportive of the budget and new format. She appreciated the many examples of why things are important to students. Nancy Sherburne made some great points about items below the line, but there is just not enough money to cover all the needs. Brigid agrees with the request to fund full time Assistant Principals because it has been validated. There is a real need there, with not enough staff to do what needs to be done.

Mike said that at this stage, he is not clear or comfortable on the fiscal status or viability of the budget going forward. He urged the Committee to defer voting at this time.

Kim agreed about deferring the vote on the proposed budget due to the large amount of new information and because more information on special education expenses and assessments will come out on Thursday.

Maria emphasized that this would be a preliminary budget vote, with a final vote at Thursday’s meeting.

Dennis asked a number of specific questions about budget items. These included how many custodians are there per school and how their responsibilities are structured at Blanchard which is more of a community center for the town. It is hoped that this will lead to a reduction in overtime for custodians. Dennis asked about the increase in textbook amounts and the athletics revolving accounts. Steve Desy and JoAnn Campbell will present the athletic budget at an upcoming School Committee meeting.

The Committee was asked if there was consensus to wait on a preliminary vote.

Several members argued that a preliminary vote would be valuable because it would tell the Administration that the Committee supports their requested needs. The number could be lower in the final vote. Other members felt the numbers were still too uncertain.

Acton Finance Committee member Bob Evans asked the Committee to consider that while per pupil costs are below state average, compare that to being one of the highest tax rates in the state. Acton’s residential tax rate can only support so much.

Dennis Bruce talked about the School Committee’s credibility during all of the regionalization presentations and the importance of living up to your word that the benefits of regionalizing would be well thought out and communicated, including the financial savings and bottom line. He advocated for not voting yet, but for taking a step back to be sure all of the numbers are correct.

Maria Neyland stated that the Committees have lived up to the regionalization presentations including the promised million dollars of revenue savings for next year.

A preliminary **ABTSC VOTE** on the proposed FY' 15 Budget was not taken due to uncertainty over some of the financial numbers. Maria Neyland asked the Committee to be prepared to vote at their next meeting on 2/6/14.

JOINT SCHOOL COMMITTEE EXECUTIVE SESSION

At 2:50 p.m. the ABRSC and APSC were called to order by Maria Neyland and Dennis Bruce, respective chairs.

At 2:50 p.m., it was moved, seconded and unanimously

VOTED by role call: that the **Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee** go into Executive Session to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining.

(**YES** – Bieber, Brolin, Bruce, Coppolino, McOsker, Murphy, Neyland, O’Sullivan, Rychlik)

Maria Neyland declared that an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining position of the Board and the Committee would return to open session solely to adjourn.

At 2:50 p.m., it was moved, seconded and unanimously

VOTED by role call: that the **Acton-Boxborough Transitional School Committee** go into Executive Session to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining.

(**YES** – Bieber, Brolin, Bruce, Coppolino, McOsker, Murphy, Neyland, O’Sullivan, Rychlik)

Maria Neyland declared that an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining position of the Board and the Committee would return to open session solely to adjourn.

At 2:51 p.m., it was moved, seconded and unanimously

VOTED by role call: that the **Acton Public School Committee** go into Executive Session to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining.

(**YES** – Bruce, Coppolino, McOsker, Murphy, O’Sullivan, Rychlik)

Dennis Bruce declared that an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining position of the Board and the Committee would return to open session solely to adjourn.

The ABTSC was polled to go out of Executive Session at 2:52 p.m. when it was realized that they were not part of the strategy discussion (prior to any discussion taking place). The ABTSC was adjourned at 2:51 p.m.

At 4:00 p.m. the ABRSC and APSC were polled to go out of Executive Session and were adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: see agenda