

Board of Education
Newtown, Connecticut

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, January 12, 2010 at 7:30 p.m.
in the board room at 3 Primrose Street.

Present:	L. Bittman, Chair	J. Robinson
	K. Fetchick, Vice Chair	L. Gejda
	D. Leidlein, Secretary	D. Raymo
	D. Nanavaty	2 Staff
	R. Gaines	9 Public
	W. Hart	2 Press
	C. Lagana (absent)	

Mrs. Bittman called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Item 1 – Consent Agenda

Mrs. Bittman noted the amended minutes given to the Board.

MOTION: Mrs. Fetchick moved to remove the minutes of December 21, 2009 and January 6, 2010 and the high school field trips from the consent agenda. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. Vote: 6 ayes

MOTION: Mrs. Fetchick moved to approve the consent agenda which included the donation of \$500 to the special education program at Sandy Hook School, the donation of seven pallets of paper from Fujifilm to be used in the schools, the donation of two Dell PCs at a value of \$500 to the physics lab rooms at Newtown High School, and the donation of a 2001 Jeep Grand Cherokee at a value of \$6,500 to be used in the auto shop program at Newtown High School. Mr. Gaines seconded.

Mrs. Fetchick noted that the field trip forms were different and asked if we had a policy on the number of chaperones needed.
Dr. Robinson said we removed the Washington, D.C. trip because the request form was not signed.

Mrs. Fetchick said the purpose of the trips was not stated.
Dr. Robinson said the Board is not required to approve field trips but we have a fiduciary responsibility for out of state trips which is why she asked for their approval. The trip to Virginia Beach is for a band competition.
The band trip was added to the consent agenda.
Vote: 6 ayes

Dr. Robinson introduced Ed Arum who will be taking over as Interim Director of Business. Diane Raymo's last day is Wednesday. He retired from Region 15 and has been serving as Interim Superintendent in Torrington.

Mr. Arum said he has been in Torrington for the last six months. It was a pleasure to be in Newtown.

Item 2 – Public Participation

Charles Hepp, 4 Winter Ridge Road, gave the Board material which was a review of the Strategic School Profiles. He broke them down by SAT scores and average class sizes. The class sizes are getting larger each year and he asked to take those into account in working on the budget. He asked that this data to be posted for parents.

Item 3 – Reports

Correspondence:

Mrs. Leidlein said a letter was sent to the Board from Donna Randle-Monteleone which included a letter From Governor Rell regarding the Valentine's Day project. We also received a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Gomes regarding a residency situation.

Chair Report:

Mrs. Bittman had a request from John Kortze regarding the air quality report and had asked Dr. Robinson for more information. When the Executive Board met to discuss the agenda we spoke about the need for an enrollment study and the various Board sub committees. She took part in a conference call with Dr. Robinson regarding the Race To The Top. She spoke to Jeff Capeci regarding the set up of the CIP and being in sync with the town. A letter was passed out from John Kortze in which he referred to a Board of Education shortfall. She spoke to him and said we have forecasting on our financial reports now and asked Dr. Robinson to send him a copy.

Mrs. Fetchick gave an update of the Board of Finance meeting. The letter was mentioned but there was no discussion.

Mrs. Bittman said the Newtown Arts Commission was in touch with her to see if there was any synergy between our art program in the school and what they are doing.

Mr. Nanavaty said that by statute the Board of Education cannot have a shortfall. We have to be in the black or bottom line zero. If we are not, the administration has to curb our spending. This board has always been zero or in the black. He asked if the Board of Finance amended the Selectmen's budget to decrease what has been approved by the voters.

Mrs. Fetchick said they did.

Mr. Nanavaty asked that the amended minutes be posted.

Superintendent's Report:

Dr. Robinson said that Mark Granville would be conducting a test for the air quality in the middle school on Wednesday as it was done in 2002 and will give us the results this week. We will be doing these studies in a more consistent fashion and test the air for more than one day. She is sure there will be a change from that study with the work that has been done to improve the schools.

Students are doing their junior-senior projects. Last year we had a student give her presentation at one of our meetings. She encouraged the board to drop in to see them.

Head O'Meadow is doing a whole school community art project under the direction of the Art Spot. Students, teachers, parents and staff members are working on the panels that will be displayed in the entrance to the school. She encouraged Board members to participate.

A sample of the posters being hung in the high school were shown. They are pictures of our high school students and deal with respect.

The high school expansion is still on schedule. She walked through interior spaces which are taking shape. We will set up times for the Board to walk through.

Financial Report:

MOTION: Mr. Hart moved to approve the financial report for the month ending December 31, 2009. Mrs. Fetchick seconded.

Mrs. Raymo said this report maintains a working balance of \$5,822. A few accounts have changes. We needed \$90,746 because one teacher was not originally accounted for and one returned from a leave of absence. We will know by the end of January our excess cost amount. Our target for projected revenue is \$1,298,007. We must reach that target to pay the deficits. We are expecting a 79% reimbursement. It was 90%.

Mr. Hart said we should highlight what we are doing about the shortfall and take a look at the budget and decide what we can change.

Mrs. Raymo said that would be costs with some flexibility to control. We don't have a lot of money that has not been obligated.

Mrs. Fetchick asked how we were restricting purchases in the supply account. Mrs. Raymo said our purchase orders go through a level of approvals before being processed and she reviews.

Mrs. Fetchick asked to be more specific in the financial report to list restricted accounts. Mr. Hart suggested that the first page to go in back of the report. The first page should bullet the big items with descriptions to follow.

Mr. Nanavaty said we are not in a deficit because we have a \$5,822 surplus. The reality is that until we know the state funds we will receive regarding special education we won't know where we are. The financial report should be a breakdown of areas of concern. The town is anticipating a \$900,000 reduction in state funds. As far as we know we are budgeting for the minimal amount for the state. We should give it some time. For next year's budget we are looking at a 50% reimbursement from the state. We don't have any control over DCF referrals.

Mr. Gaines agreed that we should have a crisper report for a quick summary to let the public know we are suffering from this revenue shortfall.

Mrs. Fetchick said the Board of Finance had a discussion about our out of district placements and she explained our responsibilities.

Dr. Robinson said that we often don't know the student. We get a 603 form from DCF that designates the nexus which is the student's home. The placement of one student became our responsibility when the parent moved here even though the child did not attend our schools. In September we recognized that we had a problem with referrals. By October we froze the budget because of the number of students being placed. Library and text books are not being purchased. We have very little discretionary money.

Mrs. Bittman asked Mrs. Raymo what changes she made during her time with us. Mrs. Raymo said we needed historic data in written format. The new financial report was an excellent step to help the Board and community know the financial status of the school system. We are working to automate this report to come out of the financial system.

Mrs. Bittman told Mrs. Raymo that she would be missed.

Vote: 6 ayes

Item 4 – Old Business

Discussion of Health Insurance:

Mary Griffin president of TR Paul, the broker for the Board of Education, introduced herself and Karen O'Connell from Anthem. Mrs. Griffin said the overall renewal was 23.9% which was huge.

Ms. O'Connell said it is extremely early to give the renewal figure. We take an annual trend and multiply that out. The annual trend is 12.5% which turns into 20.5%. It shouldn't go higher than that. If we wait a couple of months it should come down. Our claim history has been bad at over 22%. Membership grew by 80 members which also drives up costs.

Mrs. Griffin gave out the first and last page of the renewal. Because we have a plan that includes the town and Board of Education when Anthem looks at the rate they look at both. We started out with \$11.2M in claims and we projected that number to reach 16.1%. The annual trend for medical is 12.5% and we had to up that to 20.5%.

Mrs. Fetchick asked why we were going from 12 to 19 months.

Mrs. O'Connell said 12 months is the annual but we have to estimate up 7 months.

Mr. Hart asked why the rates went up 27%.

Mrs. O'Connell said our administration fee will also go up which is a percentage of the total premium. We have programs in place to try to curb costs.

Mr. Nanavaty said we are looking at a new plan for the teachers. We were promised increases of 3% to 5%. This Board is not going to be able to go the town for \$2M for health insurance. We might have to look elsewhere and choose a different group. We

hear the same thing from Anthem every year. We negotiated a plan with teachers that is fixed and should save us money.

Mrs. Griffin said the teachers were willing to buy up in the PPO plan. We negotiated a POS plan. We took into account that there is a lot of inflation in this. The town got a higher rate increase of 29%.

Mrs. O'Connell said this renewal is based on the PPO, not the POS. We don't know where the membership will be.

Mr. Nanavaty said that in the past with the century preferred plan we were treated with 22% increases. We cannot afford a \$2.5M increase.

Mrs. Griffin said the premiums are being built off the lower number in the PPO plan. During negotiations the plan and rate was procured by the consultant for the teachers. Their representative went to Anthem for a number. We don't have a final number on the rate but have been told 1%. As we move forward the number will come down. She is comfortable taking it to 15%. We are potentially looking at a self-funded plan. Removing the PPO will see improved experience over time.

Mrs. O'Connell said the 1% is the difference between the price of the PPO and POS. It hinges on where the teachers go.

Mrs. Fetchick asked how long it takes to go to other carriers.

Mrs. Griffin said it takes a month.

Mrs. Fetchick asked if there was a way to change the May enrollment period to see where we are.

Mrs. Griffin said that the president of the teacher's union was meeting with his group. We intend to go to each school so we will start the educational component early so they will be informed before the start of the enrollment process.

Mrs. Bittman asked if there were districts like us that have made this change and if it was possible to look at their savings and then estimate for us.

Mrs. O'Connell said it could be as high as 30% year to year. It is important to fully explain the plan.

Mrs. Griffin feels that more people will take the HSA .

Budget Update:

Dr. Robinson said she was asked to have an introduction to the technology and maintenance budget tonight. They will be back with details during the Board's budget deliberations.

Carmella Amodeo spoke about the technology budget which reflects a 1.8% increase for the Blackboard Connected fees and the additional fees for Cambridge SPS to track our strategic plan. The district instructional goal is to have a teaching station in each classroom. We have not addressed the inadequate technology resources for student and teachers.

Mr. Gaines asked what the utilization was of the tech support at the high school.

Mrs. Amodeo said she is 100% utilized and she was still sending other personnel to work at the high school. The role for the person based at the high school has broadened because she also helps train the teachers.

Mrs. Fetchick asked if we would purchase technology when we open the high school addition and how it would affect the student to computer ratio.

Mrs. Amodeo said we met with Mark D'Agostino but hasn't seen the final document yet.

Dr. Robinson said that he will put out the RFP which has to be approved first. The high school is moving from Smartboard to the Eno type of technology. The RFP should be out in about two months.

Mrs. Leidlein asked about replacing obsolete equipment at Reed School.

Mrs. Amodeo said this year the Reed computer equipment reach 7 years so they are due to be replaced.

Mrs. Bittman said a lot of students are coming to school with computers. She'd like to explore that option because it could save the district money if they use theirs.

Mrs. Amodeo said there will be a wifi connection in part of the high school.

Dr. Robinson said we are also discussing options for handheld and downloading of books. We don't have universal support from the community so we have to educate the parent population regarding this.

Mr. Faiella went over some of his budget items for each school.

Mr. Nanavaty asked what the plans were for the modulators at the high school. If the town intends to purchase them it would be easier to move them to Sandy Hook School. The ones there were going to be temporary.

Dr. Robinson said there are 8 classrooms which the town purchased. We also have four in the older unit. We don't know what the town's plans are.

Mr. Nanavaty said if we own them we should look to replace the ones at Sandy Hook.

Mr. Faiella said it would be cost prohibitive because of the expense to move them.

Dr. Robinson said the facilities subcommittee should have that talk with the town because they need space.

Mr. Hart asked if the plan was to take them out to which Dr. Robinson said it was.

Mr. Hart said the cost to dismantle them should be in the budget.

Mrs. Fetchick asked if the work on the high school bleachers was part of the expansion.

Mrs. Bittman said they weren't.

Dr. Robinson said we are trying to be as realistic as possible in this budget climate. The AARA funds will only be with us one more year. We have increases in health insurance, our contracts, and owner/operator contracts. When you get the budget you will see what

the principals asked for and my budget. Then we will have the Board budget. The principals were told to come in flat and they did. She is hearing from other districts that they are coming in at 7% or 8%. We are looking at position cutbacks with our enrollment changes at the elementary level. We are going to put the health in the budget for 15%. The budget presentation is January 26 in the high school lecture hall.

Capital Improvement Plan:

Mr. Nanavaty said we were missing the ranking of the projects which the town has done for years on their CIP. He mentioned that the town's breakdown was not like our CIP. It conflicts with what we were given and they have a separate page for each year.

Mrs. Bittman said our priorities are clear by the year they are in.

Mr. Hart was uncomfortable with lumping all of the middle school projects together.

Mrs. Raymo said she originally had them separate and would make that change.

MOTION: Mr. Gaines moved to approve the Capital Improvement Plan for the five fiscal years 2010-2011 to 2014-2015 as presented. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. Vote: 6 ayes

Mrs. Bittman said there has been a discussion regarding full-day kindergarten and we were looking at the enrollment study by Chung for \$17,400.

Mr. Gaines said it is important to understand the enrollment but doesn't know where the \$17,400 would come from.

Dr. Robinson said she couldn't assure the Board that we have the money at this time. We should vote only if the money would be available after we get the state reimbursement.

Mr. Nanavaty asked where the savings would be with a full-day kindergarten program. Dr. Robinson said it is the reallocation of \$288,000 that we spend on buses at noon to transport these students. She has not worked out a comparison to present to the Board. That amount is in the budget. The choice is to spend on buses or kindergarten. The alternative to doing the enrollment study is to look at the birth rate. We know we have an 11% trend from students coming from private kindergarten programs to first grade. We can assume if we had full-day kindergarten it would be 11% over.

Mr. Nanavaty said he doesn't see a savings in buses. Right now our buses are at capacity. We had cut two buses to save costs. If we add 11% more students we will be adding one or two additional buses to eliminate overcrowding.

Dr. Robinson said the crowded conditions on the buses are more severe from Reed School up. She has not completed the budget study on this.

Mrs. Bittman said that some of the predictions were lower than what we had.

Mrs. Fetchick said we need to agree on whether full-day kindergarten is educationally better for our children than what we are offering today because it is more instructional than it used to be. She would like to see both the pros and cons. What happens to those children who can not handle a full day of school? Do we really have the space for

full-day kindergarten? What happens when children from private full-day programs decide to move into the public school program? Do we still have the space? If we have the space now, what happens when the enrollment ramps back up? Can we afford the program? How would these additional children affect the busing?

Mr. Hart said we need a good handle on enrollment. We have to wait until the state decision.

Mr. Nanavaty said to keep in mind that we aren't buying textbooks right now. We are holding back on our expenditures until we see what money we will get. Enrollment is important but now is not the time to spend the money.

The Board decided to table this for now.

Item 5 – New Business

Race To The Top:

Dr. Robinson told the Board that the State of Connecticut is entering the competition for the Race To The Top for federal funds that are being released. The State is asking the schools to sign the MOU that the district will participate in the activities and the work plan for the grant application. A change in some activities would take place. We are slated for \$16,000 a year because we are not a low income district. The work plan and accounting we must do separately would cost more than the amount we would receive. Her recommendation is to not participate.

Mr. Hart said this was spoken about at the CABA convention that Connecticut was not going to get the money because of how they used the AARA funds.

Mrs. Bittman said there is also no out-clause. If there is cost we have to incur then why should we do this?

Mrs. Fetchick said she was not in favor of it.

Dr. Robinson said we have been participating with the state and will continue. If we were an urban district we would receive more funds. There is too much additional work

MOTION: Mr. Gaines moved that the Board of Education not authorize the Superintendent to sign the Race to the Top MOU to participate in the grant activities. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. Vote: 6 ayes

BOE Committee Assignments:

Mrs. Bittman presented the Board subcommittee assignments for 2010. Mrs. Leidlein said she could serve as an alternate because she was not assigned to another board in town.

Item 6 – Public Participation - none

MOTION: Mr. Gaines moved to adjourn. Mr. Nanavaty seconded. Vote: 6 ayes

Item 7 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:44 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Debbie Leidlein
Secretary