

Board of Education

Regional District 13

May 6, 2009

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in special session on Wednesday, May 6, 2009 at 7:30 p.m. in the library at Coginchaug High School. Board members present: Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Boyle, Mrs. Flanagan, Mr. Hennick, Dr. Ochterski, Ms. Parsons. Members absent: Mr. Currlin, Ms. Gara, Mrs. Golschneider, Mr. Hicks
Also present: Mr. Melnik, Mrs. Viccaro.

Mr. Hennick called the meeting to order at 7:40 p.m.

Mr. Hennick explained to the public that although public comment was not listed on the agenda, comments will be allowed on the two agenda items only.

Mr. Hennick said the last two weeks have been the toughest since he has been on the Board. He asked members to remember the core ethical values and to treat each other with respect and civility.

Regarding the public health situation, Mr. Hennick said after going to Monday's public meeting he is confident that the District did the right thing and followed protocol. He thanked the administration and staff for what they did, but found serious flaws in the way things were communicated to the Board and to the parents. He asked Kerrie Flanagan to take the lead in developing communication protocols for the Board so this will not happen again.

Regarding concessions from the unions that were discussed at the District Meeting, Mr. Hennick feels that he communicated badly at the meeting and for that he apologized. He explained that the idea of concessions was brought up around Labor Day. The Board asked Mrs. Viccaro to talk to the unions on their behalf. Did they actually ask for concessions, no, not formally, but they clearly talked to the unions and the answer was no. The Board had just gone through binding arbitration and feared losing things if the teachers' contract was opened again. In hindsight, he feels that they were wrong, the concessions were needed. It was a Board decision to go forward without pursuing concessions. With the budget going down he would like to begin discussions about give backs. He wants to contact the Board's labor attorney for direction.

Mrs. Flanagan said that looking at both the health situation and the budget issues she feels the Board needs to take steps to improve to not repeat the mistakes. She would like the Board to dedicate a meeting prior to the budget vote to review the budget and to talk about the controversial items to be clear how to respond to the public. The Board needs to go into these meetings better prepared and to know what people are dissatisfied with. There were many items that came up at the meeting that the Board had not heard before the District Meeting.

Mrs. Adams said very few people come to these meetings so the Board needs to find a better way to hear about what others in the public are feeling as well. There are also many people who really don't care what the Board does, they only care about the bottom line.

Mrs. Boyle said it is not clear to the public when the process starts. The entire community needs better access to the budget book.

Mrs. Parsons has heard that the big budget book is too much for the public and the small book does not give enough information.

Mrs. Flanagan said the Board is not trying to hold back information and suggested asking the public for more information on what they want to see. She suggested forming a group with residents over the summer to review the books and to get their input.

It was also suggested that the Town Times be used more to communicate with people during the month of March about the progress of the budget meetings.

Public Comment: Anne Levine of Durham said she didn't understand what the Board members hadn't heard before. She has been at all the meetings and didn't hear anything new. Mr. Hennick said the strong feeling about concessions was not known.

A resident who supported the budget was frustrated that the budget did not pass. She asked if anyone in the room voted no and why?

Scott Wheeler of Durham said he voted no and the reason was that substance is lacking in the budget flier that he received. What he sees in it makes no sense. He sees budgets cuts everywhere except for teachers' salaries and benefits. He viewed our educational system as eroding while the teachers continue to get raises. Without more information available he has nothing else to go on. He understands that he did not take the next step and go to the library to review the full budget but he doesn't think that most others will either.

Mrs. Flanagan said that it is also challenging to understand the budget book because items are still being reclassified and that makes it unclear unless you spend a lot of time adding things up.

Steve Wlodkowski of Durham said he voted no because in the economic times we are in people feel that common sense should prevail. The average American believes that we are all in this together. The teachers and the administrators have taken a hard stance and it shows that the kids aren't really that important to them. They will allow layoffs and class sizes to get larger just to protect their own job. It's no longer about the kids. In industry people are approving concessions to avoid layoffs and to keep people working. If it is really about the kids they should be conceding for this year. They should be in the same boat as the rest of America.

Ernie Judson of Durham said perception is reality. He suggested that the Board should be getting out to meet with some of the senior groups in the towns. We have legislated away our ability to control the budget. The Board is walking a fine line because there are some people who already believe the budget is too thin. If too many cuts are made you will lose their vote. The Board needs to work to change the perception.

Rick Handley of Durham said there are a number of things that came out not as intended during the budget season. The issue of the ID teacher resurfaced issues between the programs again. He would like to see a policy of equity between the programs to eliminate this. He was also disappointed in the Middlefield Board of Finance. Their issues should not have been brought up in an editorial in the paper. He said this year is different than any other the Board has seen. The Board needs to learn as they go forward to keep costs under control.

Josh Stockdale of Durham said that generally he is against unions but unions always get about the same raise, in good times or bad. The private sector gets more in good times. He agreed that if we can get the unions to concede we should try. He was also very disappointed in Mr. Hicks comment in the paper about cutting the ID teacher from the budget after he voted to support it. He understands if the Board doesn't want to listen to him on this issue, but Kevin Brough spoke in favor of the extra teacher and he is the expert. Mr. Stockdale appreciates the opportunity to talk openly tonight without the three minute limit. He thinks the Board should consider rearranging how the meetings are run to allow feedback during meetings. He always feels that he has to bring everything up just in case it is discussed or voted on later in the meeting.

Maureen Hamilton is a parent and a teacher in the District. She served on the newest Strategic Planning Committee. She said the one thing everyone agreed on in the meeting was that people are the most important resource in achieving educational excellence.

Kari Sullivan of Durham said this was her 1st meeting. The only communication she receives is the Town Times and the budget mailing. She asked if it would be possible to post the meetings on the internet for people who can't get to meetings. She feels that the negative letters to the editor hurt the vote.

Denise Brennan of Durham said the public doesn't understand what the word "mandates" means. She suggested that an article be put in the Town Times better explaining what unfunded mandates are, what the District has to do to meet them and how much it entails.

Karen Meiman of Durham understands why the budget went down but she would hate to see anything else cut. Economic conditions are making people upset. Trying to reach the unions will produce the best effect in the community. Cutting the education budget further will be detrimental to the children. Mrs. Meiman suggested the Board consider having a regular column in the Town Times to keep people up on the activities of the Board.

Ernie Judson said he will email Matt Lessor and Ed Meyers to suggest that they write their next Town Times column on binding arbitration.

Josh Stockdale said in 1970, when he was in school, special education kids were not in classrooms but were hidden elsewhere in the school. Today, the special education children are in the regular education classroom and teachers have to spend a lot of their time with them. Class sizes cannot be as large as they were in the past.

Steve Wlodkowski feels that teaching is an honorable profession but there has been a dynamic change. He would like the Board to approach the unions but to be proactive. Let them know they can be a part of the solution and let the public know that the Board is trying; get the facts on the table.

Lynn Stanwood said she has heard people who voted no say they did it because the budget keeps going up while the school system is going down.

Rick Handley feels that the Board needs to talk to the Middlefield Board of Finance.

Kevin Boyle of Middlefield said the Board lost the PR campaign. There were too many negative letters and the positive letters came out too late. The Board needs to do a better job on PR.

Mrs. Flanagan agreed. She said they need to manage the message of letters to be sure they are covering key points. Mrs. Flanagan wanted the public to be aware that when they are asking for concessions from the teachers' union they will be risking opening up their contract. This contract was settled through binding arbitration and some issues may resurface that could cost the District down the road. Give backs next year could be costly in subsequent years.

Anne Levine suggested that the first Board article for the Town Times should explain this issue to the public.

The Board discussed a probable date for the next referendum. If it is held on June 2nd with a District meeting June 1st that should give enough time to meet with the unions. The date will be finalized at the next Board of Education meeting on May 13th. The referendum must be held within 30 days of the last one; it must be noticed 5 days prior to the District Meeting.

Mrs. Viccaro said she had information from Karen Brimecombe today that one fourth grade parent has decided to switch their child to the Contemporary Program and two other children will be moving away. That now will make the class sizes for 5th grade ID at 25, 25, and 25.

That is the upper level of the class size policy. The 5th grade Contemporary Program will have class sizes of 22, 22, 21, 21, and 21. The ID program will continue to be closed for enrollment.

Mr. Hennick asked Mrs. Viccaro and Mr. Melnik to prepare a new list of possible cuts for the next meeting. Board members were asked to review the budget to look for any other suggested cuts.

Mrs. Viccaro told the Board that at this point cuts will be staffing, programs and positions.

The Personnel Policy Committee will take the lead on the negotiations with the unions. Mrs. Flanagan would like information on any concessions that have been agreed to by teachers in the state so they can see what makes sense for District 13.

Mrs. Viccaro pointed out that the District calendar has 181 days and we are only legally obligated to attend 180 days. The District would still meet the State CEU requirements if we cut back to a 180 day calendar.

Mrs. Boyle agreed that the idea of Town Times articles from the Board is a wonderful way to communicate. She liked the idea of video taping the meetings and suggested putting the tapes in the town libraries. Mrs. Boyle enjoyed the style of tonight's meeting. Even as a Board member she sometimes feels that there is not enough time to engage at the meetings.

It was decided that Mrs. Adams will be the Board member to coordinate letter writing for the Town Times. A link to her email will be put on the front page of the District website.

The possibility of starting an email distribution list to parents for budget information was suggested by a resident. Mrs. Viccaro said she will talk to the IT Director about the possibility.

Theresa Opalacz of Durham asked whether DATTCO has been able to eliminate a bus run in their new proposal. Mr. Melnik said they are still working on proposals.

Mrs. Flanagan thanked the public that came out and spoke at this meeting, especially those who voted no and spoke up about their reasons. It will be very helpful for the Board in moving forward.

On a motion by Mrs. Flanagan, second Ms. Parsons, the Board of Education unanimously approved to adjourn.