

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC) MEETING
Minutes (Approved 5/19/16)

Library
R.J. Grey Junior High School

April 7, 2016
7:00 Open Business Meeting
7:30 p.m. Executive Session

Members Present: Diane Baum, Brigid Bieber, Mary Brolin, Amy Krishnamurthy, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, Kathleen Neville, Maria Neyland, Deanne O’Sullivan, Kristina Rychlik, Eileen Zhang

Members Absent: none

Others: Marie Altieri, Glenn Brand, Clare Jeannotte, Beth Petr, members of the public and some school staff

Chairwoman Kristina Rychlik called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

1. Chairman’s Introduction – Kristina Rychlik

1.1. FY17 School Committee Leadership

Kristina Rychlik reminded the Committee that the election of new officers would take place at the beginning of the meeting on 5/19/16. Her last meeting as Chair will be April 28th. She introduced and welcomed the new member from Acton, Eileen Zhang. The meeting was not taped because originally it was only an executive session and no one was available when Acton TV was asked on such short notice.

2. Statement of Warrant

Warrant #16-020 dated 3/24/16 in the amount of \$1,787,392.69, warrant #16-020PR dated 3/31/16 in the amount of \$2,604,350.01, warrant #16-021 dated 4/7/16 in the amount of \$859,972.38 and warrant #16-021 Blanchard Student activity dated 4/7/16 in the amount of \$500.00 were signed by the Committee members.

3. Public Participation – none

4. Kindergarten Registration Update – Marie Altieri

4.1. Recommendation to Add One Additional Kindergarten Section for FY17

Dr. Brand stated that planning for our kindergarten classes is a very complicated process using multi-year projections and numbers that change often as families move into the community. Marie Altieri explained that this year’s projection was for 284 kindergarten students, but we are now at 310-313 students. If the District kept the planned 15 sections there would be about 21 students per class with another 15 -20 students that would register by September. As a result, the Administration recommended that an additional section be added for September resulting in 16 kindergarten sections. This would create an average class size of 19.4 – 20.3 by September. Last year the District had 23 fewer kindergarten students than projected, and this year there are 26 more at this time. Marie explained that the projections are done on a calendar year basis and it could be that more birthdays fell in the fall than the spring. Also, the real estate market has turned around and homes are selling quickly. The enrollment projections will be updated now based on students in the classrooms, instead of using the October 1st numbers. Marie stated that it is unusual to add a section after the budget is done but the student numbers are significant. The total cost to add a kindergarten class at this point is \$57,000. This is not in the voted budget so it will have to be reallocated from elsewhere. Staffing is fluid and Marie is confident that there will be some salary savings between now and when school starts. The Administration is not asking to increase the budget.

The discussion turned to which school would have this classroom and the many factors involved. With the original plan of 15 kindergarten sections, there would be 3 sections at Merriam, McCarthy-Towne and

Conant and 2 sections at Blanchard, Douglas and Gates. The only schools with empty/available classroom space are Blanchard (two) and Conant (one). There has been a long term plan to reduce classrooms over time due to declining enrollment. The District reduced sections for 2 years at Gates and then Conant. Now it was planned for Douglas, although it looks like it will be for 3 years, not 2. Enrollment projections show all but one Acton school eventually having 2 sections. Marie acknowledged that reducing a section is difficult because it means moving staff. At Gates and Conant, staff have retired so no one has had to move out so far. At Douglas, that is not the case for next year. She emphasized again that it is difficult when a school goes back and forth between 2 and 3 sections at a grade level, although it has been done over the years.

Another factor is the number of requests for each school that comes from families. This is not the top priority for consideration, however, because space and a multi-year plan regarding staffing must be addressed.

The District recommends adding the extra kindergarten classroom to the Blanchard School for next year.

The decline in enrollment makes some people think that the District will have more space available, but it is not true and educational space will continue to be a problem. This can be difficult with our open enrollment program. Dr. Brand will bring a more thorough analysis of the space issues and needs to the Committee and community as part of the Capital Study.

Comments from the School Committee:

The Committee discussed if 15 more Kindergarten students were expected before September, causing class sizes to average 20.5 students (outside of our class size guidelines), should they consider adding two sections instead of one. Marie emphasized that 15 is an estimate based on the past summers and the new online system being used may change that. It would be difficult to add two new sections after the budget was voted. She was comfortable adding one section at this time.

Noting the strong demand for Douglas and that they used to have 3 sections, Mary Brolin asked why there is not space available for the additional section now. Dr. Brand explained that spill over space is needed for other programs, not just classroom sections. Examples include: ELL and OT services need space, as well as other Special Education services. Douglas School was built for 270 students and they now have 483. The modular classrooms at Douglas are very old and worn. The District does not have a long term modular plan and although it would be costly, it might need to be explored due to space needs. Dr. Brand has spoken to Dr. Whitbeck and his staff about pressure on the school buildings and where there are constraints for services like PT and OT being done in very cramped spaces. Where there is opportunity to provide relief, the principals and Superintendent are trying to address this. It was also pointed out that the Statements of Interest just submitted to the MA School Building Authority (MSBA) for the Douglas, Gates and Conant Schools identify these needs very clearly, and Douglas has been designated as the Top Priority.

Kathleen Neville commented that ranking the schools is very stressful for families and the discussion about where space is available changes the dynamic. Marie said that if a section is added, the District will ask the families again for their preferences.

Marie spoke about the hybrid kindergarten model for half day/full day. This has been very successful at Blanchard, and a pilot was just done at Conant. The District has said that if at least 7 students chose all day, the school could consider doing a hybrid section. Two hybrids are being planned at Blanchard. Douglas would also like to have 2 hybrids, but there are 15 requests for half day, making that not workable.

The Committee discussed the stress created for staff when numbers of sections in a school changes. Marie Altieri noted that it can be positive for teachers to try something new, but it can also be difficult. The District has been looking at this for the past five years and each principal that has been involved has planned how they would manage the changes. Merriam has had many years of this experience. It takes significant planning to do well. The Committee asked how it is decided which staff member(s) will leave if that is the result. There is a seniority list and the District has to go in that order but it starts at year 4, when a teacher has professional status or tenure. Staff with fewer than 4 years of teaching experience have nonprofessional status and they are equal in line for a job. If a nontenured teacher's position is eliminated and there are no appropriate openings in that school, the Human Resources department makes all principals aware that a particular teacher is available for any openings they might have. AB is a big school system and openings do come up. The person would be considered for those appropriate openings, but not necessarily guaranteed a position.

Diane Baum emphasized that the Committee's job is to maintain the District as tight as they appropriately can. She suggested that there may be some new enrollment and kindergarten models that the District could consider looking at. In a perfect world, she felt school choice could be a top priority, but with the ongoing space issues and tight budgets, she understands that it is not possible.

Marie Altieri thanked Diane for the information that she shared about Lexington and said they would look at other ideas. Choice, space and staffing are all our priorities. Marie also pointed out that choice between our elementary schools changes year by year and grade by grade and if that was the top priority, the District would be moving staff around all the time.

Comments from the Audience:

A number of parents shared their concerns.

A Douglas parent questioned why the District would create a "bubble" by adding a Kindergarten section at Blanchard, and create a "loss" at Douglas. She felt like Douglas was being considered an undesirable program because of the condition of the building. She suggested a special forum for parents to dialogue would be helpful.

A parent whose oldest will start kindergarten in the fall was upset that after all of her efforts to learn about our elementary schools and making a careful decision, it was not going to be considered due to space issues. Another parent was told that 99% of families got their first choice for kindergarten and she felt this was misleading.

A Gates parent was sympathetic. She said that 5 years ago the Gates PTO found out that they would have a kindergarten cut the day of the lottery. No one wanted to go to Gates for kindergarten the next year, despite the explanation that enrollment was dropping and Conant and Douglas would be losing sections in the future. Gates is being asked to cut another section as well and take an additional 4th grade next year.

A father with 3 children in the system asked the Committee what the tolerance for going over 22 students per class was, and how the District was provisioned for the \$57,000 cost and perhaps the additional amount if two sections are added. Marie explained that the September numbers are estimates and they would just have to watch the situation as the weeks go by. She stated that unfortunately there have been larger kindergarten classes in the past.

In response to a question, Dr. Brand explained that part of the budget process included adding an additional 4th grade section at Gates. Mrs. Newman and Mrs. Kotyk looked at their space and identified their library as the best option for this classroom, but it has not been finalized yet.

A parent suggested that moving the 6th grades into a middle school might be considered. Kristina Rychlik said it is being considered as part of the Educational Plan for the District, but there is no space at the Junior High.

Kristina summed up that these are complicated issues, and the School Committee's role at this time, is about budgeting because this is a cost that was not planned for. This money has to be spent and must be taken from somewhere else in the District's budget. Even though it may seem like a small amount, it is still difficult to come up with because finances are so tight.

Dr. Brand stated that throughout all of this discussion, the reality of trying to take care of our older buildings has been a challenge. Some are in desperate need of attention and he is developing a Capital Plan to address this now. At best, if the District gets the support of the two Towns and some financial assistance from the State, it will be years before work is finished. He emphasized that he will not leave creating and maintaining a safe learning environment for our children only up to the Building Projects. He thanked everyone for their participation in the meeting's discussion.

The Committee took a brief recess at 8:10 p.m.

5. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

At 8:25 p.m., it was moved, seconded and unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: that the **Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee** go into Executive Session to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining with the Office Support Association (OSA), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and Acton-Boxborough Education Association (ABEA).

(YES – Baum, Bieber, Brolin, Krishnamurthy, Minkin, Murphy, Neville, Neyland, O'Sullivan, Rychlik, Zhang)

Kristina Rychlik stated 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 ABRSC returned to Open Session at 10:00 p.m. and adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: Agenda, Kindergarten Section Planning Memo and handout

NEXT MEETINGS:

April 28	ABRSC Meeting 7:00 p.m. in the Jr High Library
May 9	Boxborough Town Meeting begins, 7:00 p.m. in the Blanchard Gym
May 16	Boxborough Local Elections
May 19	ABRSC Meeting 7:00 p.m. in the Jr High Library