

AMHERST SCHOOL BOARD
September 3, 2009
FINAL MINUTES

Chairman Head called the meeting to order at 6:10 p.m.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Present

ATTENDANCE

Amherst School Board: Nancy Head, Dwight Brew, Peg Bennett, Peter Maresco, and Rob Graybill.

Administrative Team: Dr. Mary Jennings, Porter Dodge, Gerry St. Amand, Elizabeth Shankel, and Nicole Heimarck.

Minutes Recorder: Heather Loewy Nichols

A. Principals' Reports

II. ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mr. St. Amand submitted a report to the Board for review.

In response to a question from Ms. Bennett, Mr. Dodge stated that the all the disciplines are represented by a minimum of five teachers on the Instructional Leadership Team but not necessarily all the grades.

B. Superintendent

Dr. Jennings submitted a hiring report to the Board noting that the complete staff has now been hired with an eye towards getting quality and experience but still the district saw some savings as the people who exited had more experience than those who were hired.

C. Clark/Wilkins Recess

DISCUSSION (taken out of order)

Mr. St. Amand stated that he is the person responsible for the decision about recess. He explained that there was a group that met and discussed the pros and cons and noted that it was not accidental that the information regarding recess did not go out to families. He explained that he wanted to wait until after the first faculty meeting and try it for four weeks to be able to assess the pros and cons. He further explained that grades 1 through 4 have a 25 minute recess at lunch and kindergarten has no recess built into their day. He stated that the plan was to implement the change and see how learning time would be affected. He further explained that he is looking for a clear block of instruction time for math and reading. He noted that he did a survey of other schools in the area and found out the following information about recess:

- Riddle Brook, in Bedford, starts school at 8:00 and have their recess at 10:30 with lunch following.
- Peter Woodbury, in Bedford, has no am recess; they have a 30 minute

lunch followed by a 30 minute recess

- In Hollis, kindergarten has a 15 minute recess at the end of their day; grades 1 through 3 have two 20 minute recesses.
- In Merrimack kindergarten does not have recess but preschool does.
- Charlotte Ave, in Nashua, has a short morning recess; 1st grade has their recess at the end of the day and all other grades have recess following lunch.
- Reeds Ferry I, in Merrimack, has no AM recess.

Mr. St. Amand stated that he is aware of the connection between physical activity and wellness and he is focusing on working with all the staff to come up with activities that can integrate movement within the curriculum. He stated that he does believe that activity and movement are important but that they do not have to be during an unstructured time rather they can be directed.

In response to a question from Mr. Maresco, Mr. St. Amand explained that the only recess grades 1 through 4 have is lunch recess and while some teachers have not formally identified movement activities in the classroom they have been able to implement them. He also noted that he has had to explain that classes can go outside and suggest activities that could be done outside. He further noted that there is opportunity to use the multipurpose room.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand explained that teachers should plan on students needing a change in activity and then take them out for a planned activity. He further explained that this is something that many teachers have been doing already but they have not purposefully called it a movement break. He explained that he does not want students to go out for unstructured free time without a reason as to why they could not be learning then.

In response to a question from Mr. Maresco, Mr. St. Amand explained that he has learned that the kindergarten expectations in Amherst are not as rigorous as neighboring districts or in the state and the school needs to solidify the students course skills. He stated that he does not think this can happen in a 2.5 hr day with a 15 min recess especially when one considers the time necessary to get ready to go out and to get ready for working again. He noted that on extended days kindergartners will get recess and that they can still get in movement during non recess days.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand stated that structured learning still means a lot of freedom and freedom of choice and that he does not expect teachers to just let their student out but rather they can take out groups for

an active educational activity. He stated that instruction has to be the primary focus but not the exclusive focus.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Mr. St. Amand stated that he is confident that the instructional time will be different and explained that all of the teachers in grades 1 through 4 need to submit weekly plans that include 60 minutes of math and 90 minutes of literacy without a break and 30 minutes of math and 45 minutes of literacy in kindergarten, which is a shift from past practice as last year the staff had been given the directive but they were doing so with breaks in between.

In response to a question from Mr. Brew as to what his response would be to parents who think their children would learn more with the break, Mr. St. Amand stated that he wants to look at a period time without the recess to evaluate the benefits.

In response to a question from Mr. Brew, Mr. St. Amand stated that the feedback he received from other districts is to consider a full day or 2.5 day program. He noted that teachers said at the end of the first and second day students were tired but this is typical of the beginning of school. He also noted that he does not think the change has been given an opportunity to work and that he does not think it has to be all or none, possibly recess could occur a couple of days a week.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand stated that he felt that it would be easier to start without recess in place rather than pull it away later. He also noted that not having recess allows the staff to schedule many special subjects and services.

In response to a question from Mr. Maresco, Mr. St. Amand explained that in the remaining 75 minutes of kindergarten most teachers have morning circle, work on social skills, have student recognition, and time to connect with the group. He also noted that there is a social studies and science curriculum in place and that usually the activities are rotated through the use of centers.

Ms. Heimarck explained that the social studies and science curriculums are the two most recent curriculums to go through review and they have been made very investigative and hands on. She further explained that the science has an increased expectation on inquiry based science, with student and group base experiments in the school yard and careful eye has been given to get the students outside.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand stated that the

kindergarten does not have art, music, or physical education; they do go to the library although not for a formal lesson.

In response to a question from Ms. Bennett, Mr. St. Amand stated that he electronically sent the staff notification of the change and the response from some of the teachers in the upper grades was that they were expecting it and while some teachers were not happy about it they were overall respectful of the decision and willing to discuss it with him. He noted however that he has not been able to address the decision with the full staff yet but he has not gotten as much feedback from staff as he expected.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Mr. St. Amand stated that he would like four weeks to determine the affects of the change and he also noted that there has been a bus situation which makes it difficult to assess at this time the affect because most of the students have not had a full week of 2.5 hour days.

Kristina Newbold, parent of a kindergarten student from 6 Old Lantern Way, explained that learning is done through play and without recess the kindergarten students can not make friends from other grades. She also stated that 45 minutes is a long time for structured activity and is upset that she had no time to prepare her child or to look at another school.

III. PUBLIC TIME

Lucienne Foulks, of 9 Davis Lane, stated that she is in agreement with a lot of what Mr. St. Amand said about integrated movement but she is disappointed to hear the opinion that unstructured play is not useful learning time. She stated that she sees the removal of recess as a punishment for the child. She also stated that she is concerned about whether the great ideas about incorporating movement will be applied by the teacher and she suggested looking more closely at how the curriculum is applied rather than taking away fresh air and sunshine and time to blow off steam away.

Scott Bennett, of 11 Nathan Lord Road, stated that he printed out some journal articles which talked about how unstructured play is fundamental to child development and he noted that there are academic studies that express the importance of free play where children can work out their own issues. He noted that it is harder to see the connection of recess to school and other students but it is important and he does not see it as a luxury.

Jennifer Messner, of 3 Sycamore Ct, stated that her third grader came home and said that everyone's recess had been stolen and Ms. Messmer did not know what her child was talking about because there was no notification. She stated that notification would have given parents the opportunity to warn their children. She

also questioned whether instead of the extended lunch recess two shorter breaks had been considered. She explained that this could give a break to the teachers and the students and would not mean losing extra instructional time.

Kathy Romano, of 8 Edgewood Run, explained that since the bus schedule has changed the bus comes later so the children get to school later meaning they have lost 10 minutes of morning recess. She stated that she is concerned about borderline children who do not have a diagnosis or qualify for services and making sure that the services are available and the teachers are trained to give these students what they need.

Lisa Lim, of 4 Deer Hollow Drive, stated that she has a child in kindergarten and one in first grade and questioned whether this is the first time that Amherst has been a School In Need of Improvement. Mr. St. Amand stated that it is the first year and Ms. Head suggested that Ms. Lim should contact Mr. St. Amand for more information.

Ms. Lim stated that she is a parent that likes to be informed and she will work with her children to prepare them for the next day at school and she feels not informed enough to be able to do so.

Denise Alderson, of 76 Thorton Ferry Road II, stated that her second and third graders feel punished by the homework and lack of playtime. She explained that her kids do not get home until 4:20 and with winter coming all their outside time needs to happen at school. She stated that she is concerned that they need to get playtime and feels that children will rebel more and not take in as much with decreased play time.

Mr. Bennett stated that play is not the sugar of the day rather it is fundamental to brain development; it is not a treat, it's an important topic.

Michelle, of 12 Holt Road, stated that independent play is important and can not happen in a controlled environment.

Ellen Unger, of 0 Old Milford Road, stated that she has been a teacher and a parent and sometimes unstructured recess is the only place a student may show their strengths such as gross motor movement and imagination. She further noted that sometimes these early successes lead to scholastic success later in life.

Ms. Head stated that if parents have concerns they should contact Mr. St. Amand and noted that the Board would appreciate having an update at the next meeting.

Dr. Jennings noted that Ms. Shankel is working on the bus situation.

The Board pulled the minutes and transfer from the Consent Agenda.

A MOTION was made by Mr. Brew and SECONDED by Ms. Bennett to approve the minutes of August 25 as amended.

Voting: 5 ayes; motion carried.

Ms. Shankel asked that the transfer be deleted as it was no longer needed. The Board agreed.

A. Opening of School Enrollments

Dr. Jennings submitted a report to the Board regarding the projected versus actual enrollment. She explained that projected students this year for the elementary schools was 704 and 815 in the middle school and the actual enrollment at this time is 713 and 811 respectively. She noted that the Board budgeted for 700 elementary students and 798 middle school students. She further noted that the district has lost 175 students in five years and that the 2013/2014 school year will be a space crunch.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Mr. Dodge stated that the school can handle this many students. Dr. Jennings noted that this is why the six modular classrooms were added but further noted that the core areas will still be stretched.

In response to a question from Mr. Maresco, Dr. Jennings explained that having a few more students than were budgeted for is not a budget impact; it really means there will be just a few more students in a particular class.

B. Renovations

Jim Miner explained that the district is reaching the end of the two year renovation project. He reviewed the items that have been completed so far in Phase I through III. He noted that still in progress for Phase IV is the conversion of the boilers which will save 30,000 gallons of fuel as they are 95% efficient. He noted that the conversions are complete but the boilers still have to be tested. In response to a question from the Board, Mr. Miner reviewed the total amount that has been spent on the project.

Ms. Shankel explained that it is important that the district complete the recommended renovations costing \$5,000,000 as this is the amount that is needed to apply for building aide, and the district is being rebated because they made a commitment to spend \$5,000,000.

IV. CONSENT AGENDA

V. PRESENTATION

In response to a question from Mr. Brew, Ms. Shankel explained that spending \$5,000,000 will result in 30% aide coming back to the district.

Mr. Miner reviewed the rebates he anticipates getting including for the AMS natural gas conversion and Clark Wilkins PSNH Utility Rebate Program for a minimum of \$31,856.

The Board thanked Mr. Miner for his work.

C. Review of SINI/DINI Process

Ms. Jennings explained that the school has been labeled as a school in need of improvement because of a sub group of students not reaching their target growth. She further explained that the administration had to go through a process this summer with outside consultants and while they will not have a report until the next meeting, they will review the process they went through this meeting.

Ms. Heimarck stated that the process was kicked off on June 18th during a teacher in-service day. She stated that the timing of the rescheduled service day allowed for full faculty input in the SINI process which is key since they are developing a process that all teachers will have to implement. She explained that they did a three hour data review and they asked staff to look at data and describe what they were seeing, then interpret the data, then outline what the implications the data had on instructional practice.

She then presented slides to the Board in which she has teased out those students identified and non-identified and who fell in substantially below proficient and partially proficient focusing on math as that is where the SINI designation originates from. Mr. St. Amand noted that there was almost a class and a half worth of students who did not meet proficiency.

Ms. Heimarck explained that the number of identified students is smaller so their percentage of below proficient is higher but noted that this is symptomatic of a larger issue.

Mr. St. Amand stated that the district should almost appreciate that this sub group brought this issue forward because there are many regular education students who are also not making proficiency and if these 24 students do not receive the interventions they need they are at risk for being identified at some later date.

Ms. Head confirmed that the identified students are not necessarily identified in math and that if the school is reaching the regular education students they will

also reach the special education students.

Mr. St. Amand noted that there are special education students who score proficient or above in math, except in the 5th grade.

Ms. Heimarck stated that this is symptomatic of a larger issue and noted that the numbers grow as the grades get higher.

Dr. Jennings noted that the district hired a non biased person to facilitate the discussion so both staff and administration could be involved.

Ms. Heimarck reviewed additional slides and noted that in Grade 5 two complete classes worth of students scored under proficiency.

Ms. Heimarck explained that the staff was also asked to evaluate the school and self report based on their perception. She stated that it is important to look at what teachers feel is happening in their school and noted that the teachers had to provide evidence for their rating. She stated that they did a lot of data gathering and then had faculty members aggregate the data. Ms. Heimarck further explained that all the information came to the School Improvement Team which included teachers and parents. Mr. St. Amand noted that within a day of the request he had at least 20 parents volunteer but he could not use them all. He thanked Joe Romano, Theresa McNally, and Shelly Kayser for their participation.

Ms. Heimarck noted that the two external facilitators were very important as they allowed the administrators to participate on an equal level. She further explained that they engaged in a standard analysis process using the performance tracker to identify points of weakness and to determine whether they were aligned through out. She noted that the items the special education student missed most, numbers and operations and geometry with measurements, were in alignment with the lower performers.

Ms. Heimarck and Mr. St. Amand noted that the process was much more time consuming then they thought it would be and that in the past schools had a full academic year but this year they had only 90 days or less.

In response to a comment by Mr. Graybill, Ms. Heimarck stated that the district will be doing some sort of presentation outside of a Board meeting and inviting students and the community to hear about the plan.

In response to a question from Mr. Brew, Ms. Heimarck stated that the

Mathematics Coach Jen Eckleman has already put a lot of strategies in place so she is hoping to see growth this year. Mr. St. Amand stated that he feels the best move the district made was bringing a math coach on board but noted that the plan will not have been implemented for very long before the next testing phase.

In response to a concern voiced by Ms. Head, Ms. Heimarck explained that the suggested list of indicators is about leadership and organization rather than teaching to the test.

Mr. St. Amand noted that one staff meeting a month will be dedicated to grade level discussion.

In response to a question from Mr. Maresco, Ms. Heimarck stated that they were very deliberate in merging the SINI plan with the district goals.

A. Policy JLCF – 2nd reading

Dr. Jennings explained that this is the 2nd reading of policy JLCF and it has been aligned with the changes Souhegan has made.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Ms. Shankel stated that carbonated drinks will be prohibited at school functions and school sponsored events, during school hours.

Mr. Dodge explained that fundraising events require that at least 80% of the food be healthy.

In response to a question from Mr. Dodge, Ms. Shankel stated that this policy adds items like flavored waters that are not carbonated and do not exceed the guidelines as presented.

Mr. Brew stated that he believes that there are teachers that use treats as a reward and he does not want to approve a policy that will not be followed. He stated that he wants to have Mr. St. Amand and Mr. Dodge review the policy and report back to the Board anything that would be at issue with the educational plan.

Mr. Graybill stated that he has concerns about the statement that the goal is to teach the community about healthy living and he would rather see something more descriptive about targeting the parents of school age children. Ms. Head agreed.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Mr. St. Amand stated that scheduling recess before lunch is becoming the norm. This is the second year that the Fourth grade has had lunch after recess and the staff is seeing students

VI. DISCUSSION

eating better and very few playground incidences, however, he noted, right now because they are sharing space with the gym it limits the lunch scheduling options for Wilkins.

Dr. Jennings noted that the Policy Committee has not yet met and encouraged them to meet before the SAU meeting.

B. Appointment of District Clerk

Ms. Shankel explained that Jan Bunkner has been serving as District Clerk and she recently resigned but because there is not an election until March they looked for a volunteer and Nancy Baker offered to take the position until March.

Mr. Brew question whether the SAU notified people in the community and stated that he thinks that as a practice they should make everybody in the district aware of the fact that there is an opening and suggested posting the position in the paper and waiting until the next meeting to fill it.

Mr. Maresco noted that for an interim position the SAU might need someone sooner.

The Board decided to post the position and thanked Ms. Baker for stepping forward.

Mr. Graybill stated that he wants it to be a standard course of practice to be inclusive.

A MOTION was made by Ms. Bennett and SECONDED by Mr. Brew to enter into non-public session under RAS 91-A:3 II (a). A unanimous roll call vote was taken in the affirmative.

**ACTION ITEMS
(taken out of order)**

**VII. NON-PUBLIC
SESSION**

Chairman Head declared the Board to be non-public session at 8:14 p.m.

The Administration and Board discussed a 1-time bonus award for Jim Miner for his willingness to oversee the renovations and therefore avoid taxpayers having to fill the additional position of Clerk of the Works.

A MOTION was made by Mr. Brew and SECONDED by Mr. Maresco to come out of non-public session. A unanimous roll call vote was taken in the affirmative.

Chairman Head declared the Board to be in public session at 8:20 p.m.

Control of the meeting was given to the Vice Chair, Ms. Bennett.

A MOTION was made by Ms. Head and SECONDED by Mr. Maresco that the ASB recommend granting a one-time bonus in the amount of \$5,000 be given to Director of Building and Grounds, Jim Miner for his exemplary performance overseeing the renovations and in recognition of his dedication and professionalism in completing the projects on-time and under-budget. Voting: 5 ayes; motion carried unanimously.

Control of the meeting was handed back to Ms. Head. A review of the meeting was discussed.

A MOTION was made by Ms. Bennett and SECONDED by Mr. Maresco to adjourn the meeting.

Voting: 5 ayes; motion carried unanimously.

Chairman Head declared the meeting adjourned at 8:31 p.m.

**VII. REVIEW OF
MEETING/
ADJOURN**