

AMHERST SCHOOL BOARD
October 8, 2009
FINAL MINUTES

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

I. CALL TO ORDER

Present

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

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

Minutes Recorder: Heather Loewy Nichols

ATTENDANCE

A. Superintendent

Dr. Jennings reported to the Board the events that have gone on since Sunday noting that the events have affected everyone in different ways, but everyone is saddened. She stated that there are a lot of emotions going about and the entire school district from administration to staff has taken their role very seriously and come together to take care of the needs of the children. She explained that tomorrow there are no classes and teachers have an in service day which they have changed to allow for the faculty to meet with professionals who are skilled in crisis intervention. She further explained that they will have meetings at each of the schools to review the next steps and next week they will be meeting with parents and staff and offering workshops to parents and Amherst citizens to help them deal with any issues they may be having. Dr. Jennings also noted that the school guidance counselors, nurses, and psychologists will be meeting with professionals to help them be more effective in dealing with the students.

II. ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mr. St. Amand explained that at Clark/Wilkins they have not had a general information session with the children, but have communicated with staff and extended support to them. He noted that individual students have brought up the issue. He stated that he notified parents via email about the vigil and he has extended support in the Principal's newsletter. He noted that they do have a lot of staff members who are connected to the students.

Mr. Dodge explained that at the middle school they took care of the children first and that the reality is just starting to sink in for some of the teachers, especially those that had the students in their class. He also noted that a sibling of one of the accused is in the school. He explained that the middle school guidance counselors and psychologist went to help at Souhegan and he expects that they will need more support in the future.

Ms. Head stated that the entire SAU and Board are terribly sad and sorry about the tragedy that has come to the community.

Mr. St. Amand noted that he has encouraged children to speak to a trusted adult if they have questions.

B. Principals' Reports

Chairman Head noted that the Board received the Principals' reports in their packets and asked if there were any questions.

In response to a question from Ms. Bennett, Mr. St. Amand stated that a draft wellness practice was sent out that encourages healthy snacks with a request for feedback. He noted that there are a significant number of children and adults with allergies and chronic health issues in the school and they are proposing offering a healthy snack to the birthday child rather than having birthday snacks sent in. He also noted that Halloween parties are coming up and they are asking that the classes be limited to one food or beverage that does not meet the guidelines.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand explained that the school is piloting a DIBELS math tool for Kindergarten and grade 1. He explained that the school has been selected as a pilot school and that the test takes about 20 minutes to complete on a computer. He stated that the response of the children to using the computer has been generally enthusiastic. He noted that the literacy DIBELS is fairly reasonable and basic but the Math DIBELS is more complex. He further noted that he thought it was a great year to take part in the pilot given their School In Need of Improvement designation in mathematics.

**Ms. Bennett stated that she would be interested in hearing from the Kindergarten, first and second grade teachers that are piloting the Scott Foresman curriculum. Mr. St. Amand stated that it is a great idea and noted that he thought the teachers would like to speak to the Board.

**In response to a request from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand stated that he will send the written Response To Intervention process to the Board before the next meeting.

C. ASD Ways and Means Committee

The Amherst School District Ways and Means committee introduced themselves and Ms. Head noted that the different committees include food service, transportation, Amherst Middle School, Clark/Wilkins, facilities, technology, SAU, curriculum & professional development, and special education and asked

the Board to think about which committee they would like to be on.

Tracey Lowden, of 4 Pinewood Drive and mother of 2nd grader, stated that she is unable to attend the public forum regarding the changing of the start time. She stated that she appreciates that her daughter will benefit from the research regarding the sleep needs of high schoolers but she is worried about the impact of the change on the younger children, especially for the children of two working parents. She stated that the change will mean their children will have much longer days because they will have to go to before school and after school care. She noted that the size of the after care program at Wilkins has tripled and she is not sure why they would have children start school at the same time that their parents have to start at work. She stated that the change should not be at the detriment of the younger students.

III. PUBLIC TIME

In response to a question from Chairman Head, Mr. Brew asked that the minutes of September 3, 2009 and the transfer be pulled from the Consent Agenda.

IV. CONSENT AGENDA

A MOTION was made by Mr. Brew and SECONDED by Mr. Graybill to approve the Consent Agenda as follows:

B. Treasurer's Report

1. August 2009
2. September 2009

D. Donations

Voting: 4 ayes; motion carried unanimously.

A MOTION was made by Mr. Brew and SECONDED by Mr. Graybill to approve the minutes of September 3, 2009 as amended.

Voting: 4 ayes; motion carried unanimously.

A. Update: Elementary Recess

Mr. St. Amand reviewed a revised recess policy and stated that the majority of the parents and teachers appreciated adding the 15 minutes back in but noted that it was not the universal opinion. He stated that changing the length of the day did disrupt some daycare arrangements.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Mr. St. Amand stated that the staff got multiple copies of the proposed revisions and there was a lot of input and back and forth conversation. He stated that the policy became fairly condensed as people recognized the value of making it concise. He also explained that the grade level teachers had to be in universal approval of the ultimate plan. Mr. St. Amand thanked the staff and noted that there was input from people beyond the

V. PRESENTATION

teachers.

B. SINI Plan Clark/Wilkins

Mr. St. Amand introduced members of the SINI team including Kathleen McIntyre, Mary Beth Gilpin, Meg Trainor. Ms. Heimarck stated that this has been a large hardworking committee and noted that they just met last week as a full committee.

Ms. Heimarck explained that Clark/Wilkins has been designated a School In Need of Improvement through the No Child Left Behind program which is linked to the NECAP assessment. She explained that the special education sub group did not achieve their overall index target. She further explained that when the schools was designated a SINI in May of 2009 they were notified that they needed to develop a SINI plan which was an extensive process that occurred over the summer. She noted that beginning next week the full plan will be posted on the SAU website and parent and community forums will be offered.

Mr. St. Amand stated that the staff had this presentation yesterday and noted that they were quite participatory especially considering the events of the last week.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Ms. Heimarck explained that the plan will ideally be submitted tomorrow for approval from the state.

Ms. Heimarck explained that on June 18th a rescheduled teachers' in service day was held and the SAU was able to seize the opportunity of having all the staff present to partake in the plan process. She further explained that all the staff did a 3.5 hour data walk and reviewed the 2008 NECAP grade 3 results in Levels 1 and 2 and they noticed that in some cases there was more than double the amount of Special Education students to Regular Education students in Levels 1 and 2. She noted that the special education issue was an indication of a more global issue.

Mr. St. Amand stated that there are 30 children currently in 4th grade who did not make proficiency and 21 of them are not identified.

Ms. Heimarck stated that the raw numbers increase as the students progress through the school. She also explained that in addition other data points were reviewed on the 18th and then over the summer the team dug down deeply into other performance indicators as well as the standards analysis. Ms. Heimarck explained that the team not only needed to look at the students' performance, but also the teacher data so they had each teacher complete an assessment continuum of school wide improvement outcomes. She explained that the faculty needed to

answer specific questions on a scale of 1 through 5 for 4 categories and then the SINI team aggregated the results.

Ms. Heimarck explained that in the SINI action plan it was necessary to identify the goals for improvement, a specific global strategy to get there, and then identify the professional learning outcomes and student learning outcomes. She explained that Clark/Wilkins has three goals in this plan that specifically speak to the root causes of the under achievement of students at that school. She stated that Goal One is that the Clark/Wilkins staff will improve student learning by expanding their knowledge and implementation of effective, research based instructional strategies in mathematics with the first strategy being improving student achievement by improving staff knowledge of the progression of student learning. Mr. St. Amand stated that, for example, small group instruction versus large group instruction is a research based instruction.

Ms. Heimarck noted that in addition to the goals and strategies the team needed to identify proposed activities, timeline, oversight, resources, implementation monitoring, and effectiveness monitoring. She explained that they need to ask if they are seeing the desired outcome, if not why, and will then need to modify the activity accordingly.

Ms. Heimarck stated that Strategy 2 of Goal One is to expand staff expertise in the use of the instructional strategies in Mathematics.

Mr. St. Amand noted that one way to improve this by using the coaches to teach the other teachers differentiated instruction strategies.

Ms. Heimarck stated that Goal 2 is that the Clark/Wilkins staff will develop and implement a common structure for consistent collection, review, analysis, and utilization of the student mathematics data.

Mr. St. Amand stated that it is critical that the district address the needs of the students and noted that the fourth grade teachers have been able to meet and discuss every student who has received a score that put them at risk and they are getting much better at using the data to inform instruction.

Ms. Heimarck stated that the introduction of the math DIBELS is being used for this goal as they did not have a nationally normed curriculum tool to assess the Kindergarten and first grade students.

Mr. St. Amand noted that he has mandated a specific time of uninterrupted instruction in Literacy and Mathematics.

In response to a member of the public, Mr. St. Amand stated that most of the teachers at the elementary level are more comfortable teaching literacy than math and that in the past there has not been the emphasis on math.

A teacher present stated that the teachers were asked a number of questions anonymously and then the team met over the summer and determined what their weaknesses are with regard to the deliverance of math. She further explained that there is a range of what teachers are comfortable with and they realized that they need to teach less broadly with more depth. She stated that they also looked at ways to make teachers more comfortable and to have more tools in their tool box to teach in a variety of ways. She further noted that the team also looked at staff development and alternative ways of delivering the same message. She stated that they want to use the data but realize that one test does not define a child and they need to look at all the information in order to serve the child better. She explained that flexible grouping allows them to group students together who may learn in the same way.

Ms. Head noted that the district does have a math coach who specializes in math.

In response to a question from a member of the public, Ms. Heimarck explained that the coach works with both students and teachers but is primarily for the teachers

A teacher from the SINI team stated that the SINI designation has provided the opportunity for the staff to work together more.

Meg Trainor explained that the use of the data has enabled them to see trends of strengths and weaknesses and has allowed them to have a conversation with a teacher and ask how they can support the teacher in something that they are not as comfortable with.

Ms. Heimarck stated that Goal 3 is to promote improvement in student learning in math by increasing collaboration with parents and community.

Mr. St. Amand explained that this committee plans on taking on the additional task of working with parents to help their children.

Ms. Heimarck noted that many of these activities are already in place; even though the plan has yet to be approved by the state they are taking action such as the math DIBELS and the targeted Professional Development.

Mr. St. Amand explained that one meeting per month is dedicated to grade level

meetings as this was presented as a need in the questionnaire.

Ms. Heimarck stated that the administration asked teachers to form small groups, identify a problem, confirm a hypothesis, develop an action plan, and evaluate the results. She noted that the development of the action plan phase starts tomorrow.

Ms. Heimarck explained that Title 1 funding is targeted assistance based on what percentage of the students receive free and reduced lunch but the services paid for by Title 1 funds are given to the students who are performing below proficiency standards. She noted that the district received \$25,000 this year for Title 1 funds and also because this is their first year as a School In Need of Improvement they received an additional \$20,000. She stated that they are looking at using the money to fund a before or after school learning opportunity and working on getting Mahesh Sharma to visit the school to observe and support their practice.

Mr. St. Amand noted that combining Clark and Wilkins into one entity has allowed for both schools to benefit from the Title 1 funding. He explained that the plan is to hire a .5 math specialist whose job is to primarily serve the at risk students in Kindergarten and first grade during school hours.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand stated that this position would work exclusively with children allowing the math coach to be more dedicated to the teachers as last year her position was a .5 teacher and a .5 coach.

In response to another question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand stated that because they use Title 1 monies to fund the position they can not count on the position remaining and if the district feels that the position has value then the district could keep it but he is not planning on it at this time.

Ms. Heimarck explained that this is a position to provide intervention for students while teachers get more comfortable.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Ms. Heimarck explained that the coach position is becoming more of a coaching position and less of a student intervention position.

In response to a question from Ms. Bennett, Ms. Heimarck explained that once the plan is approved by the state the district can post the .5 position as an anticipated vacancy but they then have to wait for the Title 1 approval before starting the position.

Ms. Heimarck explained that the team wrote the SINI plan to address the varied needs of all students as they also need to insure that the students who are already meeting high standards continue to obtain those standards.

In response to a question from Ms. Bennett, Ms. Heimarck explained that there is a system wide development committee and they designed the focus for the year and concept and rolled out the plan for the buildings. She noted that the teachers had a significant voice in choosing their groups and they were allowed to choose their own topics so they would remain engaged.

Mr. Graybill stated that he appreciates the effort that has been put into the plan and noted that it will ultimately come down to the principals for the implementation. In response, Mr. St. Amand stated that the school has gone through quite a few significant changes but the teachers are becoming more accepting of the teaching practice changes.

Ms. Heimarck noted that the plan is already posted on the Clark/Wilkins site and will be posted next week on the SAU website.

C. Budget Assumptions FY11

Dr. Jennings reviewed budget assumptions in the following areas with the Board and asked them to tell the administration if the Board is uncomfortable with any of the assumptions.

- Revenues
- Local Economic Climate
- Enrollments
- Class size/ Student Load
- Staffing Considerations
- Staffing Benefits
- Staffing Contracts, New Hires, and Retirement
- Operations
- Initiatives Affecting Budget
- Expendable Trusts

Dr. Jennings explained that these assumptions are what the budget is based upon and the administration does not want to build a budget on a faulty foundation.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Ms. Shankel stated that there are about 80 students on free & reduced lunches. Mr. St. Amand noted that in comparison the district has had years where they have had a single digit amount of students on free and reduced lunch.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Dr. Jennings stated that the differences between the number of students budgeted for and the actual number of students would only have a big impact if they were all in the same grade.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Mr. St. Amand stated that this year one kindergarten class has 17 students and one has 15 which equals a 16:1 ratio. He also stated that the first grade classes have between 17 and 19 students.

Dr. Jennings stated that there is research showing that if you can keep classes below 18 students it has a positive effect on the students in future years.

In response to a comment from Ms. Bennett that the Life Skills class has 30 students, Dr. Jennings stated that the goal to have less students in the class.

Mr. Dodge explained that it depends on the choices of the children and that he has had to turn some kids away in order to try to keep special class sizes at around 24 students but there are occasions where they have had as much as 30.

Dr. Jennings explained that first they hire the teachers and then they allow the students to choose the specials they would like to take which sometimes leads to some courses being over subscribed and some being under subscribed.

Ms. Head and Ms. Bennett stated that they want to make sure that the classes have only as many students as is safe.

Mr. Dodge stated that music and art are overwhelming taken and there is only one technical education and one life skills class so they fill up quickly as do the languages.

Mr. Heimarck noted that as the special areas go through curriculum revisions there is significant impact on student interest.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Dr. Jennings stated that these are the same assumptions that were used last year.

Paul Prescott stated that he is concerned about having more than 24 students in specials because that is how many stations there are.

Mr. Dodge stated that the scheduling of the students will be impacted but he does not want to overload the classes for safety reasons and he can give the kids the program they need with the current staff.

In response to a question from Dr. Jennings, Ms. Shankel stated that last year the insurance company told them to expect a 10% increase and they budgeted for a

7.8% increase but the increase was only 3.1% in the end.

Mr. Graybill stated that budgeting for a 5% increase makes him nervous; he would rather use something higher for health insurance premiums.

Ms. Shankel stated that the carrier gives them guidance each year and it is likely that they will have that guidance by the time the budget is before the Board.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Ms. Shankel stated that the AEA contract base increase is 3.8% and with the steps included the increase is 5% for the current year.

**Mr. Brew suggested that the administration look historically at the hiring practices and change the step assumptions.

In response to a question from Mr. Brew, Ms. Shankel stated that they district will be using much less oil this year because of the gas conversion.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Dr. Jennings stated that next year the district will be funding year one of a new technology plan.

In response to a question from Ms. Head, Dr. Jennings stated that in Amherst the food service program has been self supporting.

Ms. Shankel stated that it is a struggle for the food service program to be self supporting as it was very close this year and they did have some capital expenditures out of the general fund. She noted that there are very few self supporting programs in the state and it may not be able to continue.

In response to a question from Mr. Brew as to whether the district is looking at refocusing the professional development rather than just adding to it, Mr. Dodge stated that they are not looking at giving any new initiatives rather just digging deeper and getting better at the current initiatives.

In response to a question from Mr. Brew, Ms. Shankel confirmed that even if the district comes in with a flat budget it may still create a tax increase.

Mr. Brew stated that the tax payers are going to be looking at what it takes to run the district and while there was not anything that he thought was a terrible idea he thinks that the Board probably wants to give guidance as to where they want to budget to come in.

Ms. Head stated that she feels strongly that they have to answer to the concerns of the community as enrollments are down and have been and they have been

asked several times about decreasing staff.

**Dr. Jennings noted that the district has decreased staff in the last three years and suggested that the administration could bring that information to the Board.

Mr. Brew stated that when putting the budget together they need to take into account that they have made purchases in the past that should result in savings in the future budgets, for example, the conversion of the Amherst Middle School heating system from oil to natural gas and connecting Clark, Wilkins, and the Brick School by fiber to save on recurring network costs.

Ms. Head stated that when looking at the technology summary she would like to look at what happened with the last plan.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Dr. Jennings stated that there are no other big ticket items.

Ms. Head noted that the district has to be fair and realistic to a community that now has 80 students qualifying for free lunch.

Dr. Jennings reviewed the budget time line.

A. Appointments

1. SAU Advisory Committee representative

A MOTION was made by Ms. Head and SECONDED by Ms. Bennett to approve the nomination of Charlene Carper for SAU representative to the Advisory Committee.

Voting: 4 ayes; motion carried unanimously.

2. Amherst School District Clerk

A MOTION was made by Ms. Head and SECONDED by Mr. Brew to approve the nomination of Nancy Baker to the position of Amherst School District Clerk.

Voting: 4 ayes; motion carried unanimously.

A. School Goals: Implementation Plans

Dr. Jennings stated that tonight there will be a brief overview of the revised goal for the Amherst Middle School that by June 2010 70% of the Amherst Middle School students at each grade level will meet or exceed individual target growths as measured by NWEA.

Mr. Dodge stated that they did increase the goal because now they have the collective goal of 90% by 2014 as a district. He explained that each grade level

VI. ACTION ITEMS

VII. DISCUSSION ITEMS

will look at this and see this as their challenge to have their students meet the challenge. He stated that they are going to use student conferencing to discuss the student's scores with them and look at ways for them to improve their scores. He also noted that there will be a mid year check to make sure that no one falls behind.

B. Policies 1st Reading

1. DJ- Finance Policy

Mr. Brew stated that there are three or four policies related to purchasing coming to the Board soon and he would like to address them all at one time. He stated that he does not have a problem with this policy but he wants to be able to look at them all at once and he would like to have this one show up with the others for a second reading. The Board agreed.

2. IHBA – Student Evaluations Specific Learning Disability

Dr. Jennings explained that this is the policy that the Board was supposed to approve in June and that would make the district in state compliance.

Ms. Sparks stated that the Board previously saw this policy at an SAU meeting and noted that the regulations say that each LEA shall adopt a policy describing the procedures that will be used to determine if a child has a specific disability and this is the one that most school districts are adopting.

In response to a question from Mr. Head, Ms. Sparks explained that they are now saying that the district can use a variety of tools to determine a disability versus just using the discrepancy model.

In response to a question from Mr. Graybill, Dr. Jennings explained that the alternative start proposal will come to the SAU and then filter down to the individual Boards.

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

Voting: 4 ayes; motion carried unanimously

Chairman Head declared the meeting adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

**VII. REVIEW OF
MEETING/
ADJOURN**