

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in special session on Monday, June 8, 2009 at 7:30 p.m. in the library at Coginchaug High School. Board members present: Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Boyle (7:50p.m.), Mr. Currlin (8:35p.m.), Mrs. Flanagan, Ms. Gara (7:45p.m.), Mr. Hennick, Mr. Hicks (7:48p.m.), Dr. Ochterski, Ms. Parsons. Member absent: Mrs. Golschneider. Also present: Mrs. Viccaro.

Mr. Hennick called the meeting to order at 7:37 p.m.

Mr. Hennick told the public that the Board did not anticipate being in this situation. They felt that the first budget was reasonable; it did not pass so they cut \$350,000 more. Now they are in a position where they may have to think about cutting even more. Mr. Hennick welcomed public comment.

Betty Wakeman Long of Durham said it is not a new thing to turn down the budget in Durham. The Board needs to keep a good school system and to think of the kids first. She has been told that teachers can pick one medical plan over another at a savings of \$5,000 per staff member to the District. She feels the District should be encouraging teachers to switch to this plan.

Mr. Hennick said that all staff has been given presentations on the Health Savings Account Plan. Thirty-five staff members are currently participating in the plan. The response from staff has been slow in coming.

Mrs. Viccaro said that the teachers' association is meeting on Wednesday to present the HSA program to their members. The enrollment period has been extended and she is hopeful that additional teachers will sign-up for the program.

Mrs. Flanagan said that several efforts have been made to educate the staff about the HSA program. It is not for everyone. It typically takes a while for a new program like this to build up steam and take affect.

Ernie Judson of Durham said there are a number of parents who work very hard on every referendum to help to pass the budget. He doesn't think the support will be there if programs and staffing get cut. Mr. Judson read a letter that he has sent to State Legislators regarding the unfunded mandates that the District is obligated to include in the District budget. He has asked them to respond to his letter through the Town Times.

Theresa Opalacz of Durham agreed that programs should not be cut. She asked if any further work has been done to see if combining bus runs is a viable cost savings. She knows that some parents don't support a K-6 combined route but she thinks they would rather see that than have programs cut. Regarding the stimulus money, Mrs. Opalacz would rather use this money to offset the budget than to cut programs. She also questioned the need for portable classrooms at the schools if enrollment is going down. Mrs. Opalacz asked about the increase in the number of ABA assistants and if more can be done with less.

Mrs. Viccaro said the District has seen a significant increase in the number of students on the autism spectrum. They have tried to do what is right for each individual child. Mrs. Emory agreed and said the number of students has doubled.

Mr. Hennick said the stimulus money will be discussed later in the meeting.

Dr. Ochterski said changes to the bus routes were looked at but will not take place next year, they did not want to bring any additional change on board when there was a possibility that the contractor may have been changing. Alternate configurations are still being looked at but no clear savings have been found. No final decisions have been made yet.

Mrs. Adams questioned whether there could be any savings from the portables. Mrs. Viccaro said the District has to pay for the leases on the new portables whether they are used or not. There would be no value in trying to sell the older portables.

Mrs. Opalacz said she appreciates the decisions that the Board has to make but cuts have to be made somewhere and something has to give. There must be savings with closing up a portable and not heating it or providing air conditioning. She would rather see ABA positions cut back than lose a program at the high school.

Donia Viola of Durham suggested that the Board continue to pursue combining bus runs. She is still concerned about having permanent subs in all of the buildings and feels that interns are a cheaper, better way to go. The District will benefit from their training and they may even be hired down the road. She asked how much money is in the Capital Reserve Fund and if it can be taken out if it is not being used. She suggested elimination of programs that are only used by a few students. Mrs. Viola also suggested that the District sign-up for the Healthy Food Choice program that will give the District money back for participating. She feels that \$7,000 is a lot of money and shouldn't be turned away. Many other Districts participate in the program.

Rick Handley of Durham said if Coke is willing to give the District \$100,000 to put their name on the new field he is all for it. He does not want any programs cut at the high school or students will be back in more study halls. He said the support is weak for this budget and he doesn't want to make it worse.

Josh Stockdale asked for a further explanation of the ways the District can spend the stimulus money. Mr. Hennick explained that if the Board chooses to take the money and spend it on something that is already budgeted for special education they will have to put the money back into next year's budget. Mrs. Viccaro said the money is earmarked for special education. The District can reduce the budget for special education by up to 50% of the stimulus money but they are still required to provide maintenance of effort in the next year so the budget will be increasing by whatever is deducted. She recommends using the money for items that can be used by special education but can benefit other students as well such as technology.

Phil Biagiarelli of Durham said it sounds like the District shouldn't take the stimulus money.

Dave Marron of Durham has supported the budget but is disappointed in the public. He asked if the Board can use more realistic figures in the budget to see if there are savings already there. He does not want to degrade the value of the school system by continuing to cut programs.

Mr. Hennick explained that the Board has worked very hard over the last two years to eliminate accounting gaps. The Board will begin to discuss where they are going with the budget at this meeting.

Anne Doyle of Durham is concerned about the apathy of the voters and said many people are not hearing the right information. She asked if the Board has considered placing an ad in the newspaper to clarify what the cuts are. Mr. Hennick explained that the Board has to be very careful to follow election laws and he is not sure if an ad by the Board would be allowed. A resident suggested that a parent organization could place an ad.

Katie Forline of Durham agrees that voter apathy has been the problem. This budget is already bare bones. The District doesn't need less, it needs more. She would like to see what would happen if only \$1 was cut and the Board tries again.

Mrs. Viola suggested that a brochure be sent out to all residents prior to the next vote on where the money from the budget goes and the cuts that have been made. She asked again about balance of the Capital Reserve Fund.

Ms. Parsons said the Capital Reserve Fund was started two years ago. It was started with \$150,000 and \$312,000 was added a year ago. Of that money \$127,000 is being used to match the security grant. Only \$26,000 is left in next year's budget to go toward the Capital Fund. The rest of the money is planned to be used to replace the roof at Brewster School within the next couple of years. The estimated cost for the Brewster roof was approximately \$800,000 when calculated last year.

Dr. Ochterski said the Capital Reserve Fund money was approved by the public for three purposes only. If it is to be used for anything else it has to go back to the public for another vote. The Board cannot choose to put the money back into the operating budget.

Scott Wheeler of Middlefield asked what the teachers have decided about a furlough day and if the Board received a written decision.

Mrs. Viccaro said that all of the unions met after the first budget defeat. Each of them met with her to share their group's response. At that time the teachers decided against a furlough day. Today the support staff union voted in favor of giving a furlough day as long as the teachers give a day and as long as the budget passes. The teachers' association will be meeting on Wednesday afternoon to vote on the day. Mrs. Viccaro expects to hear the result of the meeting prior to Wednesday night's Board meeting.

John Corona of Durham said the financial difficulty may continue past this year. He has reviewed the electric and oil bills for the District for the last year and the District spends \$500,000 on each. He is sure there must be some savings in this area. In the past Mr. Corona asked for information on the financial burden of the athletic complex when it comes on-line. He asked if anyone had this information for him yet. Mr. Melnik was not present at the meeting and no one else had the information. He suggested that the cost increase to run the facility will outweigh the gain from the furlough day given. Mr. Corona said the existing track could be replaced for about \$500,000. He thinks the project should be scaled back.

Katie Forline said the teachers are not the bad guys; they have been receiving conflicting legal opinions. They are trying to do the right thing.

Ernie Judson questioned the money being spent on the security upgrades. He said that close to \$250,000 is being spent on security against something that will likely never happen. Mrs. Viccaro said the security grant is based on advice the District received three years ago. The District did not receive money until the third round of the funding process. Much of this money will be used to upgrade phone systems at two of the elementary schools. Mr. Judson feels that down the road it will cost the District more because security guards will be needed to monitor the cameras that are being installed.

Rick Handley feels that the District may need to rethink having a Capital Reserve Fund. He doesn't want to be paying for something now that can be bonded for later at a 2% rate.

Mrs. Flanagan explained that the Brewster School roof was excluded from the project to contain costs. It costs the District \$100,000 to initiate a bond and there are bond administration costs every year associated with a bond. The Board does not want to have to go back to the taxpayers again when these expenses can be planned for. There have been years that the Board has not been able to get money into the operating budget to fund major maintenance items. By including building envelope as one of the three approved items in the Capital Reserve fund they will be able to manage emergency repair work such as a leaky roof.

Theresa Opalacz responded to the question about the cost of maintaining the artificial turf field. She said she recalls hearing that the maintenance will be cheaper in the long run until the turf needs to be replaced. She also thinks that having a reserve fund is appropriate.

2009-10 Budget: Mrs. Viccaro said the support staff met today and agreed to a furlough day as long as all unions agree and the budget passes. She will contact the cafeteria and the custodians' union representative tomorrow to see if they are in agreement. The total savings if all unions agree to a furlough day would be \$90,000 but some of that (\$7,800) has already been deducted from the budget.

The District will be receiving \$438,140 in stimulus money. Of that \$16,684 is dedicated to preschool. Up to 50% of the money can be used to supplant the special education budget with the exception of money that is going to be used for coordinated early intervention services. That leaves approximately \$135,000 at the Board's discretion.

Mrs. Flanagan asked Board members where they felt the budget needed to be at to be able to pass.

All of the members have heard that the lack of teacher concessions is the major issue. Some have heard that the budget has already been cut too deep and others think it can go lower. Most felt that if the concessions come through for all unions they would like to go back with the budget without cutting further. If the concessions do not come through then the Board will need to discuss further cuts.

Mrs. Flanagan said the Board needs to communicate that the District has an excellent teaching staff. They want to lay this issue to rest and move on. How this is communicated to the public is very important. She feels the Board is walking a fine line on passing the budget. It may start to work against them if they get concessions and continue to make additional cuts.

Mrs. Viccaro agreed that the District has a great teaching staff who works hard to provide a great education for our kids. These are unprecedented times. She has the utmost confidence in the people she has hired to provide the best education they can with the tax dollars they are given.

Mr. Hicks suggested pursuing early retirement as an option. He thinks we could still get people at the top end to consider it. Mrs. Viccaro said 3 out of 7 of the teachers who have 37 or more years have already declared retirement.

Dr. Ochterski is glad that teachers are getting another chance to look at the option of the HSA plan. Dr. Ochterski also commented that he does not think it would be wise to consider adding a question of why people are voting yes or no on the ballot. He said this has come up in the past and it was decided that it may not give the Board the information they need.

Mrs. Adams said she spent some time reviewing the class sizes at the high school. All of the smaller classes are upper level courses. She does not want to cut these courses and punish the regular education students.

Mr. Hicks made a motion to adjourn, second Mrs. Adams to adjourn.

Mrs. Flanagan asked if the Board wanted to consider any other options or wait to hear the outcome of the teachers' vote on Wednesday.

Mrs. Viccaro said the administrative team met on Friday and came up with \$20,000 in possible cuts; after that programs and staffing get impacted.

Ms. Parsons asked if they can find out the number of teachers that may be considering changing over to the HSA plan after the presentation. The Board could put an estimate into the budget from the number.

The motion to adjourn was unanimously approved.