

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in special session on Wednesday, April 25, 2018 at 7:30 PM in the Benchwarmers Gymnasium at Frank Ward Strong Middle School, Durham, Connecticut.

Board members present: Mr. Augur, Mrs. Boyle, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino.

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Veronesi, Superintendent of Schools and Mrs. Neubig, Business Manager.

Please note: Not all the names of those who spoke were captured on the recording of the meeting.

Mr. Moore called the meeting to order at 7:30 PM.

The Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Next Board of Education Meeting

District Meeting - May 7, 2018 at 8:00 PM in the Auditorium at Coginchaug Regional High School

Utilization Committee Overview of Three Options

Dr. Taylor explained that they will give a brief presentation and then move into questions and answers. To give a brief outline, they will talk about the background and context of why the process was started, the prior work that was done before this year as well as this year's work, and a sense of the time lines.

Dr. Taylor explained that the main driver of the utilization study was declining enrollment. In 2008-2009, the District had about 2,100 students and declining enrollment was beginning at that time. A study was done, providing projections of where that declining enrollment might go and where the District might end up. The projection has been updated several times since, but the drop in enrollment was from about 2,100 students to what's projected in 2023-2034 of about 1,400. It then became clear that the District does not need all the buildings with that much of a drop in enrollment.

In the last two to three years, there have been cuts in ECS funding from the state. In 2011-2012, Durham received about \$4 million and Middlefield a little over \$2 million. Within the last two years, that \$6 million total reimbursement has dropped by about \$800,000. That number is projected to continue to decrease in the next few years and may all go away at some point. This has, obviously, placed a substantial burden on the towns.

As a result of those two issues, the Board of Education initially closed Korn School. At that time, the other schools had the capacity to handle the closing of Korn School. That closure resulted in about \$500,000-\$600,000 in savings every year. During that time, the Board began looking at the longer-term continuing decline in enrollment and a variety of configurations and options were reviewed. What was eventually settled on was a preK-5 in two schools or one school and the overall costs for these options of

renovate-as-new at Memorial and Brewster would have been about \$12 million to the towns and \$25 million overall, not considering any State reimbursement. The other option was to have one school at the Korn site as a single preK-5 school and that also would have been around \$25 million. Those options were being considered before changes began to be made to the ECS funding.

Mr. Augur explained that the Utilization Committee began by defining their mission and agreed that it was to focus on maximizing the efficient use of the District's resources, including flexible space, while meeting the programmatic needs as determined by the administration. Over a series of meetings, they went through all the information that was displayed in the hallway and whittled it down to three options that have been communicated.

Option A is a single-building track for all, focuses on using Brewster (pre-K-2), Memorial (3-5), Strong (6-8) and Coginchaug (9-12). This would mean three student transitions. The capital costs associated with this option focus on the need for some additional classrooms at Brewster. Estimated annual savings would be approximately \$925,000, mostly related to personnel. The architectural firm emphasized that this would be the best use of the available building space from a grade standpoint. The youngest grades need the largest square footage. Mr. Augur reminded everyone that this is very different from building a new school, but would be the best use of what the District has. This would leave, however, the high school as the most under-utilized space.

Because of the high school being under-utilized, they looked at Option B which includes the eighth grade at the high school. Brewster would house pre-K-4 with a parallel K-4 at Memorial and Strong would house 5-7. That results in two student transitions. Some classrooms would still need to be added at Brewster. The estimated annual savings would remain the same. Because of the building configuration at Coginchaug, the eighth grade cannot be truly separated from the rest of the students. Memorial is more undersized, with the average classroom size being a bit smaller.

Option C is really just a reference point to help guide everyone and would leave everything as it is. There are three transitions for the students. Estimated annual savings would be zero, but additional capital expense would be required at Lyman. Construction and portable costs would be avoided and Strong and Coginchaug would remain relatively under-utilized.

Mr. Augur explained that the Board needs to make a decision in the near future so that proper planning is allowed for implementation in two school years from now.

Dr. Veronesi explained that this has been exciting work for the growth of an incredible district. She explained that up until last year, they had been working with the K-5 model until they realized it may be more responsible to not present a configuration that would have such a heavy burden on the taxpayers. In looking at different options, it became clear that a one-track system meant that they needed to look at the two program approach model. Educational research points out that a K-8 design could be best practice, but that doesn't make sense with the existing buildings in our district.

Dr. Veronesi explained that at the heart of any decision-making is a very compelling and passionate support of an ID/HOT program, particularly at Lyman School. They have started to vision forward, while simultaneously trying to put behind constraints on thinking within the program model. They are trying to courageously look forward to something that is good for all students. She affirmed that the community is

very involved here and they have looked at many choices, but they have also had to look at how these choices can be supported.

A lot of the design elements that have been identified look like what exists at Lyman School and she explained that no one has said the District should get rid of the ID/HOT program. Looking at a single track design, they do need to look at what would be best. This work is happening simultaneous to the work that the Board is doing on building configuration. Dr. Veronesi is heartened by the fact that people are coming and sharing ideas, but reminded everyone that growth and change cannot be decoupled.

Dr. Taylor reviewed the time line aspects of this process. The survey was mailed and within the next week to two, the information will be compiled. This information will be one small aspect of the entire process and will not dictate the end result. They will continue to receive updates from Dr. Veronesi regarding the strategic visioning and, at the end of June, there is a hard line for submitting to the State for reimbursement. The Board will then have to decide on whether to proceed this year with choosing an option or delay it another year. If the decision is made, the strategic visioning process will continue along with the building components that will need to happen. The entire process will take approximately two years.

Dr. Taylor reported that there was a typo in the District's website on the survey and explained how people can access the survey. He then opened the meeting for questions.

Question and Answer Session

A member of the public asked what the Board's plans were for Lyman School should they decide to close it. Dr. Taylor explained that they did not want the same process to happen that has occurred with Korn where it has remained on the books for so long. The idea would be to sell it or get rid of it in some way, shape or form, but he explained that it is a challenge. There would be no plan to keep the building or the land that it is on moving forward. Mr. Augur added that he hoped the two-year time limit would allow the citizens of Middlefield to think about what they may want to have happen to the building. Dr. Veronesi stated that some people have asked if Lyman School could be used for senior housing, but that is not something that the Board of Education has looked into.

Katie, a member of the public, was curious what happens if there is a rise in enrollment in another decade. Mr. Augur explained that, based on the total square footage of the District, even after Lyman is closed, we will be at a point of over-population. There is enough space available at Coginchaug to fit an extra grade there. She felt that an increase in enrollment would happen in the lower grades and what the plan is for that. Dr. Taylor explained that he has looked at that and if the lower classes went to 110, 120 or 130, we would hit the set point for number of students per class and that would force additional consideration about use of space. Things may have to be shifted and there is space available to do that. Mr. Augur pointed out that the projections at the lowest grade levels are sensible with a flexible space plan.

A resident from Middlefield asked for more easily-accessible information on the District 13 website. Dr. Veronesi explained that all the information is on the website. Dr. Taylor explained the steps to get to the minutes of the Utilization Committee meetings, back to 2011. The resident suggested a prominent link on the website to the information.

Erica from Middlefield asked about the K-5 at Brewster and Memorial in Option B. She wanted to know if the program at Memorial would be the HOT program or if they would be on the same track. Dr. Veronesi reiterated that they would like to see an approach that characterizes the entire district and so there is a potential for two HOT schools. If Memorial were to be a K-4 school and Lyman School essentially moved there, it would be a HOT/ID program. She also suggested that the other pre-K-4 school would be similar, rather than different.

Bob Booz, from Durham, asked about the annual savings of \$925,000 per year. He asked if that would, in fact, reduce the towns' tax loads or would the budget have to stay at a state-approved level. Mr. Augur explained that there are state-mandated requirements about minimum budget requirements, but that does not mean no reduction. The District can also apply for a waiver when a school is closed which they did when Korn was closed and it was received.

Missy Booth, from Durham, asked if the Board was married to these three options or if there may be another option available. There is talk about keeping the ID/HOT program, but being totally against eighth grade in the high school. She asked the Board to look at the possibility of two K-5 schools (not renovated as new) and keeping the eighth grade at Strong. She suggested moving the ID program (K-5) to Brewster School. Mrs. Booth also mentioned moving the pre-K program to the high school which allows high school students to work with younger children. Dr. Veronesi explained that they had asked Silver Petrucelli to look at that in January, 2017 and they will, in fact, come back with a two K-5 option for next Thursday's Utilization committee meeting that isn't as costly. While there is clearly room for pre-K at the high school, our pre-K program includes both special needs students and typical peers and they require daily support from a psychologist, a speech pathologist, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist and sometimes other professionals as well. For children in preschool, especially those with special needs, transitions are incredibly difficult. Dr. Taylor explained that they are not wed to the three options and encouraged the community to send in any information. Mr. Augur commented that he likes that strategic visioning is heading toward more of a single program standpoint because that will maximize transportation as well as the buildings themselves.

A resident from Durham asked if the logistics of both Options A and B allow for the two programs. Dr. Veronesi explained that a single-track design (option A) doesn't make sense to have two distinct approaches in the same building. She doesn't feel that's best for the children or the culture of the school. She has also heard from students and parents that the two program model in the same building has created a sense of competition. Dr. Veronesi felt that there are elements of the ID program that support the things the District believes in and have asked if a HOT school could exist in a pre-K-2 building and a 3-5 and they believe that it can. There could also be options for multi-grade and single-grade in the same building. Dr. Veronesi doesn't like the idea of "taking the best of both" because she doesn't believe it portrays what the vision is. The ID program is an approach and a philosophy with practices. Brewster School is a wonderful school, but she would not give it a label as a program. Lyman School is based on a strong arts program, arts integration, democratic practices, including student senators, Hello Chorus, Art board, Literary board which are all parts of a program and an approach. Dr. Veronesi summarized that there is not a yes or no answer to the question as she believes there are parts of the ID/HOT program that can continue to exist with all students in the same school. The resident agreed that both programs are great and it's what is best for each child. She interpreted Dr. Veronesi's answer to be that the District will get rid of both programs and make it one awesome program. She does not like option A or B, but doesn't hear the answer that the options will accommodate both programs. Dr. Veronesi reiterated that it would not be her recommendation to the Board of Education to run two parallel programs in the same school.

Dr. Veronesi explained that the flyer does not say two K-4 programs, but in fact two K-4 configurations. The resident believed that the perception would be that there would be two separate programs. Dr. Veronesi stated that the work has led to the belief that they'd like all students in the District to have a similar rewarding experience.

Dr. Taylor explained that this is what the configurations will allow and is not necessarily dictating what will happen. With Option A, something has to change and the two programs cannot be accommodated as they currently are. Option B allows the potential for two programs, but does not necessarily mean that that is where the District is headed. Mr. Augur explained that there is a separation between Utilization and the efficient use of space with Strategic Visioning.

It was then asked if Option B implies neighborhood schools. Dr. Veronesi stated that that has not been decided yet and that would be where Utilization meets Strategic Visioning. Mr. Augur also explained that the boundary line could change every year, based on enrollment.

Sarah Wozniak, who has a second grader at Brewster School, stated that they are very happy there and stated that she would have a huge concern with an eighth grader being on the bus or in the school with a senior in high school. Her concern is large enough where she would consider going outside of the district to another school system. She also pointed out that a Lyman bus comes by her house every day, followed by a Brewster bus, both with five or six kids on it and the money that is being spent to do that. Dr. Taylor commented that students, from seventh through twelfth grade, are already on the same bus.

Mr. Augur asked if this part of the meeting could be used for questions only and all comments be held until next Thursday's meeting.

Clay Howe, from Durham, thanked the Board for holding this meeting. He stated that they moved to Durham because of the school system, but it's been 18 years since they had a child in school. He stated that they never received any communication from the District about these issues and that not everyone looks for information on the internet. He asked that information be communicated to everyone in the District, not just those with children in school. Dr. Taylor stated that an attempt was made to mail the information to everyone in both towns and he apologized if it didn't get to some people.

John DiNatale, from Middlefield, asked why there is a sudden rush to make this decision. He suggested that it be delayed in order to gather more information. He is totally floored to hear that the options of two elementary schools isn't Lyman at Memorial and Brewster at Brewster. He is thrilled to hear that the program would be more Lyman-like across the system, but also felt that 95 percent of people would assume that two elementary schools would mean two systems. Dr. Taylor reviewed that there was a time line for this year, but there is also some question within the Board about the time line. Mr. Augur reviewed that time lines are much more important when the project is \$25 million than it is \$3 million. Dr. Veronesi explained that if the District misses the June deadline for submission to the State, it has to wait an entire year for approval. Mr. Augur also explained that reimbursement rates have gone down over time and that is also a consideration.

A resident from Durham, asked the current talent pool will support the future options or will we have to scramble to available teachers in the future. Dr. Veronesi stated that the District is not concerned about that. He asked how we'll make sure that the best teachers stay and Dr. Veronesi stated she was not concerned about that, based on the current staff.

Mike Gillon, from Durham, asked if the Board has looked at any other school districts that have eliminated the HOT or ID program and its impact. Mrs. Geraci looked at Regional District 18 (Lyme, Old Lyme) who had two elementary schools, one of which was a HOT school a number of years ago which they converted into a hybrid program about six years ago. She had a conversation with the principal who's been there for 16 years and they converted for a number of different reasons, a lot of that being the teachers who didn't like to have to choose from a particular pool of artists. He also explained that they, as a school, decided it was not the best program, created their own and just simply did it. He felt the first year was trial and error and they, for example, did assemblies every other Friday but that was too much so they now do the last Friday of every month. They kept several other community-based events and it has been pretty seamless ever since and has not received any negative feedback. Their CMT scores actually improved dramatically and they are now in the top 10 in the State of Connecticut.

Mr. Gillon then asked about the March 26th meeting when a vote was taken and stated that he felt that Option A was the clear choice. He asked for the Board to explain why Option A is their clear choice. Mr. Augur referred Mr. Gillon to the minutes of the Utilization meetings where a number of Board members went into detail about why that was their choice. Dr. Taylor explained that there are some people on the Board who prioritize unity which is what Option A is. Dr. Veronesi also explained that there are 47 towns in Connecticut that have a HOT school designation. She did mention that there is no statistically significant difference between the two elementary schools in our District as measured by standardized tests or even in-school formative assessments.

Melissa DiPietro, from Rockfall, asked if the Board would consider waiting until Strategic Visioning can catch up to Utilization. She feels like it is like putting the cart before the horse. She also asked if it would be reasonable to get the opinion of a different architectural firm. Dr. Taylor explained that the District has worked successfully with Silver Petrucelli in the past and it would be a consideration of the cost to the taxpayers to go out again and possibly get the same information. He also stated that the architectural firm is not making suggestions about the selection of the options.

Vicki Kearney, from Middlefield, asked if fifth graders would ride on the bus with high schoolers if Option B were chosen. Dr. Veronesi stated that she did not know yet. Mrs. Kearney thought that maybe times would shift and Strong School would take the Memorial time slot which would be a separate bus route. She also thought it would have an impact on extracurricular activities. Mrs. Kearney also asked how seventh and eighth graders would participate in extracurricular activities when they go to two separate schools at two separate times. Dr. Veronesi loved that these questions highlighted the complexity of the situation. She also mentioned that it has been suggested to have the high school start later. Dr. Taylor agreed that, with either option A or B, busing in the middle school would be an issue. Mrs. Kearney also mentioned that eighth grade would get out of school earlier than seventh grade and they would be potentially unsupervised for an hour.

Nancy Earls, from Middlefield, asked who is actually on the Strategic Visioning committee. Dr. Veronesi explained that it started with just teacher representation from every building, starting with an asset model in terms of programming, people and places. With two meetings a month, the first meeting is with teachers and the second meeting is open to parents and Board members as well as the community. Dr. Taylor reviewed that, at the last meeting, there was 15-20 teachers, 10 parents and some other community members. Dr. Veronesi announced that the next meeting was May 15th from 5:00 to 8:00 PM in the CRHS library.

Karen Meiman, from Durham, asked about science education and the fact that the director seems to be pigeon-holed in space. She wanted to know if the program will continue with these new options. Her second comment was that the cost savings statement in Option C was misleading as some staff will be lost in that option as well. Dr. Veronesi explained that there are no plans to discontinue the program with Mrs. Michael and encouraged Mrs. Michael to talk to her if she feels that she needs more space. In fact, teachers are saying they want their students to have more time outside. Mr. Augur reported that Utilization has more recently been discussing safety and the safest environment is not necessarily the one that brings easy access to the outdoors and everything needs to be looked at. Mr. Augur also explained that the savings mentioned relate to more building-related costs than teachers. Mrs. Merman also commented that the ID/HOT program has existed in the District for over 40 years and students and families moved to town because of that program. She wondered why the Board would propose taking it apart and begged them to think about all the people who are passionate about that way of education. Mrs. Meiman will not support any budget moving forward if the ID program is dismembered.

Tina, a member of the public, asked if the Lyman building will be able to be sold without renovations or are there going to be renovations necessary to maintain the building in order to sell it and what those costs will be. Mr. Augur felt that it relates directly to what the plan will be for the building. The Town of Middlefield should maximize their time invested in thinking about options. The Board of Education will be looking to dump the building.

A resident from Middlefield agreed that the one constant in life is change and it is true that Connecticut is shrinking. Four out of five moms she talked to moved to these towns for the ID/HOT program. She is concerned that the community will shrink if the ID/HOT program is gone. Enrollment projections will be all wrong because the programs are no longer there. She suggested opening up the choice and turning it into a magnet program and asked the Board to consider more choices and keeping something the same.

Dr. Taylor reminded everyone to please just ask questions and not make comments as this is really meant to be a question and answer session.

An attendee asked how members of the public can contribute to strategic visioning and how public that process is. She asked if there were minutes from those meetings. Dr. Taylor explained that nothing is happening outside of the meetings and the public can participate at those meetings, with the next one being on May 15th.

Amy, from Middlefield, asked if the Board has considered the cost of magnet schools. If several families in the District decide to send the children to magnet schools, she believes that the District has to fund the cost of those children to go there. She also asked about the terms HOT and Integrated Day being combined and she pointed out that they are two completely separate things. A school can be a HOT school and not have an Integrated Day program and you can have an Integrated Day program and not be a HOT school. She asked if the Board was valuing the HOT school designation or the Integrated Day programming. She felt that there were many ways to interpret multi-aged classrooms and student-led learning. Dr. Taylor stated that there are many variables to consider in making a decision and they would not be able to reliably give a projection of how many students would shift to a magnet program based on building or programmatic changes. Mr. Augur did state that there are currently two students in the District who go to magnet schools and they are aware of the costs associated with that.

Tina, from Durham, had another question about how to maintain a HOT school with a K-2 configuration. The democratic process at Lyman is between the second and fourth graders. She asked what that would look like with a K-2 configuration. Dr. Veronesi felt that tonight may not be the night to talk about that and she could not describe exactly what that would look like at this point. Dr. Veronesi does believe there are ways to make it happen and just because the fourth graders are not in the same building doesn't mean they couldn't work with the younger children. She felt that they were trying to take what they believe is important, broaden their perspective and consider that perhaps there are ways to grow and do things better. Dr. Veronesi knows that HOT schools can exist in a preK-2 school, but couldn't say exactly what it would look like. Tina asked that the public knows more about how the programs will look and how they will happen before the taxpayers are asked to make a decision on building configuration. She would need to understand more before she can support any building configuration.

A member of the public felt that after reading the mailing and listening to everything tonight, they are being asked to answer the questionnaire on a physical thing without knowing what the programs will be like. She felt that that is probably the most difficult thing for them to do.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, stated that he had attended a meeting several years ago with Dave Webster, the First Selectman of Middlefield at the time, who stated that there is life after District 13. The communities do not just evolve around the school district. Mr. Parmelee's interest in education didn't start when his children entered the system and didn't end when they left the system. He related stories of when Central Office was in a bank, when there was talk about closing Brewster School and having a daycare at the high school. Mr. Parmelee reminded everyone that the towns of Durham and Middlefield own the schools and sometimes the District acts like they are an independent agency. He would like to see the 57 acres in this parcel (Strong, Korn and Coginchaug) stay intact and would like to see Korn School re-utilized in the education system. Mr. Parmelee is concerned about the security of the students, staff and the real estate. He thanked the Board and the Utilization Committee for their hard work and for holding this meeting.

Donia Viola, from Durham, asked about the cost of changing over the design of any of the options that are chosen and when the District would expect to go for bonding. Mr. Augur had stated that Utilization was talking about safety and security as well and there are other elements that are being considered that may be part of a bond package and more information will be forthcoming.

Lee Matterazzo, from Rockfall, asked how many portables are at each school and asked about forfeiting the costs if they are kept for more than five years. She also commented on security in the portables. Mr. Augur explained that the cost of a portable is eligible for State reimbursement, but if you keep it more than five years you have to refund that money because the State only wants them to be a temporary use. Mr. Augur believes there are two portables at every school.

A resident from Middlefield asked if any of the \$4 million in Option C is reimbursable from the state for capital improvements. Dr. Taylor explained that it wouldn't be as it is all maintenance. Items that would need to be done at Lyman include paving, ADA compliance, water heater, water chiller, etc.

Chris Champagne, from Middlefield, thanked the Board members for their service, particularly those involved in the Utilization process. He realizes that it must feel like the end for the Utilization Committee members, but for those in public it feels like the first or second inning of the ball game. He thought that the Utilization Committee was seeking feedback from the community and that there would be a dialog, or

a collaboration, which they would reconsider. Mr. Champagne's concern is that the Board will be making their decision in just a matter of weeks and he feels that the community is concerned about preserving the programs that they have. He thought that it had to be done by June or the District would lose millions, not just a fraction of that. He encouraged the Board to continue what was happening tonight asked why they needed to vote on a definitive plan in just a couple of weeks if the cost difference is not significant. Dr. Taylor explained that there had been no date scheduled for a vote and the only date is really the June 30th time line from the state. Mr. Champagne read from the flyer which noted the April community info session, survey and May 2018 BOE vote. He felt that this is probably one of the most important decisions Board members will make on behalf of their communities and he asked them to take the time they need to make sure no stone is left unturned.

Dr. Taylor suggested that if anyone had any additional questions, they could approach the Board to ask them privately. He thanked everyone for coming.

Adjournment

Norm Hicks made a motion, seconded by Christine Geraci, to adjourn the special meeting of the Board of Education.

In favor of adjourning the meeting: Mr. Augur, Mrs. Boyle, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion passed.

Meeting was adjourned at 9:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First