

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in regular session on Wednesday, March 31, 2021 at 7:00 PM remotely.

Board members present: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Ms. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore (arrived late), Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino (arrived late)

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mr. Brough, Interim Human Resource Specialist, Mrs. DiMaggio, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, Mrs. Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education and Mr. Whiting, Network Systems Manager

Mr. Hicks called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

**Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

**Approval of Agenda**

*Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Dr. Taylor, to approve the agenda, as presented.*

*In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Ms. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Dr. Taylor. Motion carried.*

**Public Comment**

None.

**Approval of Minutes**

**A. Board of Education regular meeting - March 24, 2021**

*Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to approve the minutes of the Board of Education regular session meeting of March 24, 2021, as presented.*

*In favor of approving the minutes of the Board of Education regular session meeting of March 24, 2021, as presented: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Dr. Taylor. Motion carried, with Ms. Geraci abstaining.*

**Next Board Meeting - April 7, 2021 with 7:30 PM Board of Education meeting and 8:00 PM Public Hearing on the 2021-2022 Education Budget**

**Discussion and possible vote on amendment to the Plan of regionalization for Regional School District 13 to permit the closing of John Lyman School**

Dr. Schuch explained that they had an executive session at the Utilization Committee with the attorney to provide more information. The Utilization Committee is recommending an amendment to the original charter of the district to specifically authorize the Board of Education to close John Lyman Elementary School and make that change in the charter, rather than giving blanket approval for the Board of

Education to close any school at any time. The vote to change the charter would require a majority of each town independently. Dr. Schuch would also suggest the board have a discussion about how they wish to communicate this decision to the public. The timing of this also needs to be decided, with one group advocating for a referendum as soon as possible and another for a referendum with the election in November.

Mr. Moore felt the issues are the timing and the vote to move ahead. A regional plan amendment includes a lot of scheduling, including a draft question, a report that needs to be written, a public hearing and then the referendum. Dr. Schuch had forwarded a schedule from Attorney Ritter that was anchored to a November referendum, but the timeline can be modified. Mr. Moore mentioned that it would need to be noticed 60 days in advance of the November election, rather than the normal 30 days.

Mrs. Booth reviewed that Attorney Ritter had stated that they could not use any board funds for promotion of the amendment once the board votes on a referendum date. Attorney Ritter stated that the board could vote on this as late as June or July and still make a November referendum. Dr. Schuch felt that they could, in fact, display the proposed timeline from Attorney Ritter and Dr. Friedrich shared the timeline with everyone.

Ms. Geraci asked if people can still approach district employees for information once the referendum date has been set. Dr. Taylor explained that once the date for the referendum is set, no school resources can be used to express a position on the issue. Everyone still maintains their rights to free speech as individuals. Dr. Friedrich added that the board can use resources to provide information and probably should. Dr. Schuch noted that the attorneys would be happy to review any information prior to it being published.

Mrs. Petrella stated that they have yet to talk about the wording of the document itself because what they received seems to be incorrect and Mr. Moore explained that he had that sent out so everyone was aware of what they presented last time. They would need more precise language for this time and Attorney Ritter would assist in that. Mrs. Petrella also thought that the board would be discussing whether or not they are going to utilize additional support to get the information out to the public. Dr. Schuch thought that that conversation would be academic until the board actually votes, however he would be happy to engage in that now. He noted that two people from ThoughtExchange were present at the meeting and could give a presentation on how they could assist with the communication.

Dr. Taylor asked if it would make sense to break this issue up into parts, with the first part being to vote on making a plan adjustment, the second being a discussion around the timing of the referendum and third to discuss about resource utilization for PR purposes. Dr. Friedrich reviewed the proposed plan from Attorney Ritter that anticipated a November referendum. Dr. Taylor summarized that they are just trying to establish whether they want to move forward with this. Mr. Yamartino reviewed that this had been previously voted down and the board does not have the authority to close John Lyman School. They have also delayed much needed improvements there. Mr. Yamartino felt that the board and the community needs to make the decision of whether they fund the improvements or close the school.

Ms. Geraci asked to stop rehashing everything and vote, but Mr. Yamartino felt it was very important that they lay out the background about this so that no one feels they are trying to sneak anything through.

*Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Ms. Geraci that the board moves forward to put a referendum question before the public to close John Lyman School.*

Mr. Moore felt that the motion should be to amend the regional plan to allow for the closure of John Lyman School. Mr. Yamartino withdrew his motion.

*Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Dr. Friedrich, that the Board of Education amends the District 13 regional plan to provide for the closure of John Lyman School in Middlefield.*

*In favor of amending the District 13 regional plan to provide for the closure of John Lyman School in Middlefield: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Ms. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion carried unanimously.*

Dr. Taylor explained that there are basically two options: to move forward now with the process or holding off until the November election. Mrs. Booth felt that they should wait until November so that there will be time to get the message out and allow for a greater amount of voters. She is afraid that if they try to do it earlier, they will not get all the information out to the community and risk having a smaller amount of voters.

Mr. Yamartino would prefer to have the vote sooner rather than later because they have to make decisions based on that vote. For instance, if Lyman is voted to be kept open, they would then have to go to referendum for the capital to make the improvements. They will also have to meet the deadline of November 15<sup>th</sup> for filing for state reimbursement. He felt that construction would be delayed for two to three years and he would not feel comfortable having John Lyman School running without that construction. Conversely, if the vote is to close John Lyman School, there may be a need for capital improvements at other schools. He also mentioned that the Meriden Hills Baptist Church would like to acquire John Lyman to make it a K-12 school and house their church as well. Mr. Yamartino felt that they would try to find an alternative property if it is delayed long enough and that would leave the district with another school sitting idle. He also reminded people that the referendum for the acquisition of Powder Ridge was held in August and had a 50 percent voter turnout. Mr. Yamartino hoped that they could have a referendum at the end of June.

Ms. Geraci leaned more towards a November referendum as she felt the highest voter turnout would happen at that time. She felt that the board has made some mistakes in the past and bringing a PR firm in is a good idea. Ms. Geraci would be open to moving the referendum up, but just would want to get the largest turnout possible.

Mrs. Petrella would be inclined to have a later date to be sure to get the information out to the public the right way this time and as widespread as possible since it already has a history with the communities.

Mr. Hicks agreed that a later date would provide more time to get a clear picture of the pulse of the two towns.

Mrs. Booth also felt that hiring a PR firm would not happen overnight.

Mr. Yamartino added that a referendum vote in September may still leave enough time to have an additional referendum in November for capital improvements, if necessary. He reminded everyone that the plan amendment can only be voted on by registered voters and the referendum for capital improvements can be voted on by those same voters plus anyone who pays property taxes in town. Mrs.

Booth added that Attorney Ritter had stated that the November referendum would have to be noticed by Labor Day. Mr. Yamartino explained that it could be a separate referendum or be noticed by September 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>. Mrs. Booth reminded everyone that every referendum costs money. Mr. Yamartino was concerned about the expenses, but felt it was more important to get the timing and messaging right.

Mr. Moore suggested that all of the work is done in order to get on the November ballot or sooner, if possible. Mr. Roraback was concerned about the Durham vote in November as there is nobody really up for reelection and it may be a low turnout. Ms. Geraci mentioned that there will be four Board of Education members up for reelection. In Middlefield, the Boards of Selectmen and Finance will have elections.

Mrs. Neubig added that there is a lockout period on the voting machines so they would need to be sure to allow enough time between the referendum and the election. She also added that a vote in September would mean kids would be in school.

*Mrs. Booth made a motion to hold the referendum at the November elections.*

Dr. Friedrich reminded everyone that if they vote to set a referendum date, they will no longer be able to use district resources to promote the issue. He suggested that they vote on a schedule to allow a vote in November. Mrs. Booth withdrew her motion.

*Mrs. Booth made a motion, seconded by Ms. Geraci, to plan for the referendum to amend the document of Regional School District 13 to be done at the November election.*

Mr. Yamartino would prefer to change the wording to be no later than November so that an earlier vote may be possible. Mrs. Petrella agreed with that as well. Mr. Hicks felt the motion would be okay for an earlier vote as it is just planning for the vote. Ms. Geraci felt that the flexibility would still be there.

*Mr. Yamartino made a motion to amend the motion to say no later than the November election.*

Dr. Friedrich suggested the following: to develop a plan to hold a referendum for amending the RSD 13 regionalization agreement no later than November, 2021. Mr. Yamartino and Mrs. Petrella agreed. Mrs. Booth agreed to withdraw her motion, but would prefer something concrete rather than flexible.

*Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Mr. Yamartino, to develop a plan to hold a referendum for amending the RSD 13 regionalization agreement no later than November 2021.*

Dr. Taylor pointed out that the motion effectively accomplishes nothing about whether they would like to move forward with a short timetable or the November election. He believes they should plan for November which would allow them to set effective timetables and have discussions with PR firms. He felt that they could always vote to do something sooner if they are done earlier. Dr. Friedrich explained that no later than would be a specific commitment. Dr. Taylor stated that he hoped that they could decide tonight whether this needed to be kicked into high gear or whether they would have some time. Mr. Yamartino felt that it needed to be kicked into high gear, regardless of when the referendum is. He felt that they should have had PR firms in place by the first of this year, but not just for this specific issue. Dr. Taylor reiterated that he felt that the most effective date is the November election as it maximizes voter participation and the chance of success. Mrs. Petrella stated that there is no way she would rush this

process and admitted that she did not feel it would pass last time. She wants to be sure that enough of the right information gets out with enough time for people to be able to make an informed decision.

Mr. Yamartino agreed that he would also want the correct information to get out. He also did not feel that it was going to pass last time. He reminded everyone of all the incorrect information that was passed around on social media the last time and that the board members could not comment on it. He hoped that the PR firm could stay on top of all of that this time. He would prefer earlier than November, however.

Mrs. Booth didn't see the point of September or October if they won't be able to have an additional referendum in November anyway. Mr. Yamartino agreed, but felt that it would give them more time to put the next referendum together, if necessary. Mrs. Booth didn't believe one or two months would make a big difference and noted that she would not be in favor of construction at a school during the school year.

Dr. Taylor felt that the best thing to do would be to bring this forward in November and move forward from there. He felt that would ensure the success of what the board would want to see happen.

Mrs. Booth asked to clarify that if they set a date now, they could not use district funds to hire a PR firm and Dr. Friedrich confirmed. Mrs. Neubig felt that the board had to agree on what the question or change to the amendment will be and send that question to a definitive referendum date. This vote tonight would not start the clock ticking as it is not sending the question to referendum.

Dr. Schuch felt that any PR firm would need to know the timeline and they would also need to let the community know when the referendum would be. He does believe he still hears two camps, one being in November and the other hoping to have it done earlier. Mr. Yamartino added that the PR firm could also help with making a decision on the date. He also believed that a bonding referendum can be noticed within 30 days. Mr. Moore explained that the municipal election time frame requires 60 days.

*Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Mr. Yamartino, to call the question.*

*In favor of calling the question: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion carried, with Ms. Geraci opposing.*

*In favor of developing a plan to hold a referendum for amending the RSD 13 regionalization agreement no later than November, 2021: Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Yamartino. Motion carried, with Mrs. Booth, Ms. Geraci and Dr. Taylor in opposition.*

Dr. Schuch felt that the board is looking to have strategic communication with the community which can be done in a number of ways. The district is under contract with Thought Exchange, a crowd-sourcing platform. If they were to assist the district in this effort, there would be no additional expenses. Dr. Schuch also explained that the staff is also willing to do whatever they can to communicate, including a video if the board desires.

Erin Moore, an account manager with ThoughtExchange, explained that she has been working with the district for about two years now. Kristen Provo, a customer success manager at ThoughtExchange, has worked with the district for the last year.

Ms. Moore explained that ThoughtExchange gives the district a way to have constructive conversation with groups. There will be an opportunity to hear feedback and she reviewed how ThoughtExchange is different from other platforms. They have been around for about 10 years and have helped education leaders in over 500 school districts. They work to get support on the district's strategy. Ms. Moore felt that ThoughtExchange could help the board find out how well informed the community is about the referendum and then fill any gaps.

Ms. Provo then explained that there are two ways to run an exchange, live or asynchronously. She then invited everyone to participate in an exchange and explained that no one's identity will be associated with their thoughts. After adding thoughts, everyone will read, consider and rate the thoughts of others. She then allowed time for the participants to add their thoughts and rate others.

Ms. Provo felt that this could be used at the board level as well as at the community level. She gave examples of what types of questions could be asked. Ms. Provo then reviewed the thoughts and ratings that were given and opened it up for questions and/or comments.

Mr. Yamartino felt it would be a great way to get a pulse check and help to inform the board as to which topics they should focus on. He stated that 70.5 percent of the people from Middlefield that actually voted in the last referendum were over the age of 50 and asked what they felt was the demographic that would be most likely to interact with ThoughtExchange. He wondered if people in their 60s, 70s and 80s would participate. Ms. Moore stated that her 74-year-old mother participates and they do have a number of best practices to help with getting that participation. Mr. Yamartino asked if they had demographics as to what groups specifically participate and Ms. Moore explained that they do have the opportunity to ask up to 10 closed survey questions which can be demographic, including age, which would then help them to analyze which groups liked which thoughts.

Mrs. Neubig asked if someone would be able to call in and Ms. Moore explained that that cannot be done as the identity needs to be kept confidential.

Dr. Friedrich asked how they would know the percentage of people in town that actually answer the survey by age. Ms. Moore explained that the district would need to promote the survey as best as possible as participation is voluntary, but they can then look at the total number of who is participating as well as demographic information. Dr. Friedrich asked what their experience has been with the rate of participation in the communities and if they have been successful at reaching the older age groups. Ms. Moore will research that information and get back to the board with an answer. Dr. Friedrich also asked if they had any suggestions on how the board might best use ThoughtExchange. Ms. Moore felt that they should take a temperature check soon, look at the results and use that information to inform some next steps. One possibility may be to create an FAQ about the referendum. Dr. Friedrich then asked if they have specifically dealt with a referendum question in the past and Ms. Moore stated that they deal extensively with budget votes, grade configurations, bonds and levies as well as capital projects and renovations. Ms. Moore also noted that they have webinars to help people learn more about ThoughtExchange.

Mr. Yamartino felt it would be a great tool to get the message out and hear people's questions and feelings. He asked if it can be done as a link from the district's website and remain open for a longer time period. Ms. Moore explained that that can be done and exchanges can be kept open for a determined

amount of time, say five to 14 days. They will also encourage reminders so that people can come back in to read more thoughts as well.

Ms. Provo also noted that the board can use a live exchange to manage thoughts and ideas in real time. Dr. Friedrich asked if duplicate entries can be identified and Ms. Provo stated that they are, if the duplicate entry is from the exact same IP address or person.

Ms. Provo then noted that they also have a suite of analytical tools to dig into the conversation and communication tools to communicate back out. There are also summary reports and slide decks available. Dr. Friedrich noted that the board can be guided by Dr. Taylor whose research lives in multivariate analysis of medical best practice. Ms. Moore then showed the word cloud of words from the prior exchange, based on ratings.

Mr. Yamartino asked if the word clouds are qualified with a sentiment analysis as well and Ms. Moore stated that they do that with their differences tool. They will also provide a summary report to show how an exchange is closed.

Mr. Hicks thanked them for their presentation and their patience sitting through the beginning of the meeting.

Dr. Taylor felt that there were still too many questions remaining and asked for some directives for the Utilization Committee. He felt that ThoughtExchange is a great system for information gathering, but is not a survey company. He also did not get the impression that they are a marketing or PR firm and he felt that the board needs help with dissemination of information through multiple media. Dr. Taylor understands that the administration can help with that, but he would like them to concentrate on the students instead. He also feels that there is still a timing issue, even as far as hiring a PR firm.

Mr. Yamartino agreed with needing a direction and also mentioned that he thought there may be some money available in Professional Services to hire a PR firm. He would like to see that done tonight and asked Mrs. Neubig and Dr. Schuch what the board would need to do that. Mrs. Neubig explained that there are funds available in Professional Services, so the board could just issue a directive for that.

*Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Dr. Friedrich, to authorize Mr. Moore and Dr. Schuch to move forward with engaging a firm for the purpose of communication of this objective.*

Ms. Geraci felt that she would want to meet the marketing firm and added that she was disappointed in ThoughtExchange and felt that they need a more full-on marketing firm. Mr. Yamartino noted that he had suggested forming a communication committee and was told that that wasn't needed. He did not feel that he had the time to interview different firms. Ms. Geraci thought maybe just reviewing proposals would be a help. Dr. Taylor would also like to see the information about each PR firm. Dr. Friedrich trusts Mr. Moore to consult with other board members and also agreed that another committee would just prolong the process. Mrs. Petrella reminded everyone that Mr. Moore had done the research on the executive search committee to hire the new superintendent and felt that this would be the same process.

Mr. Roraback does worry about the public perception of the board hiring a PR firm. He would like to go back to the old days of having a gathering, providing a simple explanation and getting it done, possibly in September when people are engaged. He is not in favor of hiring a PR firm, though he does acknowledge

the benefits. Dr. Friedrich pointed out that the towns have changed rather profoundly since those old days. Mr. Yamartino felt that this is such a complex issue that they do require help with it. He explained that he would be looking for a firm skilled in clear and concise communication. Mrs. Booth felt it would be helpful to have help with the communication as well.

*In favor of authorizing Mr. Moore and Dr. Schuch to move forward with engaging a firm for the purpose of communication of this objective: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Ms. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Dr. Taylor. Motion carried.*

**Discussion on Korn School building**

Mr. Yamartino noted that his understanding was that the Board of Selectmen have elected to not move forward and there is now a petition in town to ask them to reconsider. He felt that the board should now move forward with potential demolition and how it can be funded. Mr. Yamartino suggested that this be delayed to the next meeting, given the late hour.

Dr. Friedrich asked what the steps will be to craft a bond referendum to fund the demolition. Mrs. Neubig explained that they will have to get quotes first, then send a bonding question to referendum with 30 days' notice. Once it is approved, the district would go out to bid and get a timeline for the demolition and then issue the bonds. She felt that it could be done in three months and be structured so that the bonding would not hit the debt service until the following year.

Dr. Friedrich asked if they could, in fact, add the bonding question to the November election and Mr. Yamartino felt that they may not want to do that because it is a different group of voters. He suggested they explore that with the Registrars of Voters.

**Public Comment**

None.

**Adjournment**

*Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Dr. Friedrich, to adjourn the regular meeting of the Board of Education.*

*In favor of adjourning the regular meeting of the Board of Education: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Ms. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion carried.*

Meeting was adjourned at 9:11 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz  
Alwaz First