

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a Special District Meeting on August 11, 2021 at 7:00 PM in the Julian Thayer Auditorium at Coginchaug Regional High School, 135 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut. Board members present: Dr. Friedrich, Ms. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino.

Board members absent: Mrs. Booth and Mrs. Caramanello

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools and 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. Pietrasko, Director of Infrastructure and Security Technology

### **Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

### **District Meeting**

Mr. Hicks read the call to the meeting, warning of special district meeting and return of the call into the record.

*Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Ms. Geraci, to nominate Norm Hicks as moderator of the Special District Meeting.*

*In favor of nominating Norm Hicks as moderator of the Special District meeting: Dr. Friedrich, Ms. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion passed unanimously.*

### **Public Hearing**

Mr. Moore explained that following several building studies, enrollment studies, enrollment projections, focus groups, a false start on closing Lyman a few years ago and strategic planning effort, the board voted to establish a single educational program in December, 2018. Following that, in January of 2019, the board voted to establish a grade configuration that did not include John Lyman School. In anticipation of the projected savings from closing John Lyman, the board then voted to make classroom improvements at Brewster School, including closing the portable units. The bond counsel determined that the current Plan of Regionalization did not provide the authority for the board to close a school. The board then brought an amendment to the public in 2019 and 2020 with language which gave the board broad authority to close schools. It also had amendments for the election of Durham members for the Board of Education to follow Durham's charter. That referendum was defeated in February 2020 and was rejected in both towns.

The board then began to consider an alternative which basically stopped because of COVID-19. During the budget process this spring, they looked at the costs and it was noted that there were significant costs at John Lyman. They then began to draft another amendment to the Plan of Regionalization, specifically to close John Lyman School only. Mr. Moore noted that the specific language is available on the table tonight.

Tonight's public hearing will be followed by a referendum. The Board will set the data for the referendum later tonight and deal with any changes that may be necessary as a result of the hearing. Following the referendum, they will move ahead with whatever the result is. If the result is approval of

John Lyman School, they will work with a community group to schedule the closure and to look at grade configurations. The initial plan has a grade configuration of preK-2 at Brewster, 3-5 at Memorial, 6-8 at Strong and 9-12 at Coginchaug.

Mr. Moore explained that the board is here tonight to answer the public's questions. Dr. Schuch will also talk about reimagining education in the entire school system and the single educational program.

Dr. Schuch thanked everyone for attending tonight. He felt it was important for everyone to understand who does or does not support this as well as the underlying issues and the direction to follow. Dr. Schuch explained that they used ThoughtExchange to gather information and noted that 138 people participated. Of those 138 people, they shared 110 thoughts with 2,751 star ratings.

Approximately 48 percent of the respondents identified themselves as parents or guardians of either current or former learners at John Lyman School. There were also 23 percent of respondents who were parents or guardians in the district and 17 percent were employees of the district. Of the participants, 35 percent live in Middle field, 53 percent in Durham and 12 percent out of town. Dr. Schuch had also asked who intended to vote in the referendum and 77 percent of respondents do plan to vote, 13 percent do not and 10 percent are still deciding.

Dr. Schuch explained the rating system that was used to rate the 110 thoughts that were posted and reviewed the top six thoughts. With 4.1 stars, small classroom sizes benefit everyone was the number one topic. With 3.7 stars, I like the smaller environment, allows students to feel a sense of community and belonging and what would happen to the building if Lyman closes (we paid to maintain Korn for years) and if we're going to pay for a building we should use it were the next three. The next one was student enrollment goes up and down, will the funds be available to build another building in the future. Others included that the staff at Lyman have provided an exceptional learning environment for both of my children; the rapport that current Lyman Staff have is a crucial element to the positive learning climate at the school and how will the closing of John Lyman School benefit the taxpayers in both towns.

ThoughtExchange has artificial intelligence that tries to find issues that actually divide people in significant ways. There is a group that says that John Lyman and the integrated program should remain open, it's an exceptional program and school and an attraction to the community. The people on side A rated that five stars and the people on side B rated it 1.1 stars. One thought stated do not close it and it was 4.8 to 1. Side B's comment was close it, enrollment is down and we have to adjust our footprint to reflect where we are and where we're headed. That group gave it 4.8 stars and the other group rated it 1.1. Another thought was with so few students enrolled there, it makes most sense to close that building, reallocate resources and expand programming. Rated 5 stars from side B and 1.3 stars from side A.

What the artificial intelligence also did was to ask if there was anything that the two groups agreed on and it identified one thought which was how will the closing of John Lyman School benefit the taxpayers in both towns. Dr. Schuch interpreted that, whether you want to close the school or not, everyone wants to know what the taxpayers will reap from this decision. He felt that the board needs to explain to everyone how the closing of the school will benefit the taxpayers and would also want to explain how keeping John Lyman School open impacts the taxpayers.

Mr. Hicks then announced that it was time for the public to ask questions or comment and asked everyone to please state their name and town.

Heide Pizzo, from Durham, stated that she has seen multiple posts on Facebook made by various board members which has never happened before. The biggest thing she noticed was that if one town votes no, it will not pass and no one mentioned that in their posts. Ms. Pizzo also had the pleasure of going into the Middlefield Town Hall today and speaking with the Town Clerk. The Town Clerk told her that the number of houses being sold and new families coming in will affect the school district. She wondered how that will change this. She felt that the studies go by birth certificates and not current or incoming students.

Mr. Moore agreed that the referendum does have to pass in both towns. Mr. Yamartino stated that the first enrollment projection was done in 2012 and has been refreshed three times, most recently in November, 2019 and is available on the district's website. It includes population trends and shows that there has been a slight decline in overall population in the two communities over the past 10 years, 1.1 percent in Middlefield and 2.8 percent in Durham. It also looks at the number of housing permits issued from 1999 to 2007 which were roughly 60 new housing permits per year. In the last five years of the report, it has been less than 10 with the last two years being six and four respectively. Housing sales finally recovered to pre-recession levels by 2018/2019. The report also shows total number of housing units in both towns have been relatively flat since 2012. Mr. Yamartino felt that the most important thing is the number of students per household. Looking back 10 years or more, there were roughly 50 students in every 100 households. Looking at the last eight to 10 years, it's been flat at 32 students in every 100 households, resulting in 60 percent of the number of students per household. Birth rates back in 2008 were 117 births per year in the two towns. Over the last five years, the average has been 77 births per year.

Mr. Yamartino then reviewed current enrollment this year vs. 2004 and explained that one out of every three students in the district is no longer there. That is why the decline in enrollment is so disconcerting. Since 2012 when the decline began, the board has been very concerned and has had the enrollment projects redone, hoping to get results that say enrollment is leveling out or turning the corner. The projections are pretty accurate, but the actual enrollment is slightly under the midpoint of the projections.

In the 2019-2020 school year, 122 people left the district which was the largest single year decline that has been seen. Looking at the projections, the district is currently at 1,439 students and all cases in the model show a continued decline in enrollment out to the year 2025-2026. In the best case, enrollment would then level out and start coming up, with a projected enrollment in the 2029-2030 school year back to what it is today. The most probable case predicts about 1,300 students and the worst case predicts about 1,200 students with the decline continuing.

Mr. Yamartino added that there is a projected 10.3 percent in the enrollment in preK-2 by the end of the decade. He explained that there are currently 21 classrooms in preK-2 and the average number of students is from 15-17 students. A 10 percent increase would mean 18 students per classroom which is within the guidelines, but one new classroom could be added which would mean 17 students per classroom. Mr. Yamartino encouraged everyone to familiarize themselves with the enrollment projections report and noted that the replenishment of neighborhoods is built into the models.

Dr. Friedrich felt that everyone needs to look at housing starts and housing sales, but needs to look at family sizes. Mr. Yamartino added that birth rates are important as well. Ms. Geraci added that this is a State of Connecticut issue and many towns are reconfiguring grades and closing schools. Mr. Yamartino

noted that people are moving out of the state in general and those trends are built into the model as well. Mr. Roraback added that both towns have a huge amount of protected open space, so he doesn't feel a lot of new houses will be coming in our lifetimes. He felt that the system needs to be streamlined for the sake of the kids and have them all together right from the beginning.

Janina Eddinger, from Middlefield, stated that she has been coming to Board of Ed meetings since 2013. She has six children in the district, two of them at Strong this fall and four that will be at John Lyman. Her oldest was at Brewster for preK-3 and preK-4 and then went to John Lyman as a kindergartner. As a Middlefield resident, she lives within walking distance to John Lyman School which has been a nice benefit. After hearing all of the information over the last nine years, she acknowledged that the Board is very dedicated to all of that information and she appreciates their hard work. Ms. Eddinger's heart sees the closing as something sad, but her brain knows that this is where the district should be going. She noted that there have been multi-grade, student-led assemblies at John Lyman and asked how those will continue if the schools are preK-2 and 3-5. She felt that the example-setting and leadership is important. Ms. Eddinger added that Memorial School does not have the same community feel that John Lyman has. She is not quite sure why, but suggested that maybe it was the communication. She felt that there is over-communication at Memorial and would like the board to think about how Lyman does that when they are modeling for the future.

Mr. Roraback noted that he had been blessed to attend the assemblies at John Lyman every Friday with his children and the best ones were when the children were modeling bad behavior. He too would like to see those continue. Mr. Moore explained that the board will look at where things are going and many of those programs have begun to be implemented at different schools. Dr. Schuch has already invited Ms. Eddinger to be part of the reimagining process and noted that it is very clear to him that the program at John Lyman has been a very positive experience, both educationally and in life. He also discovered that that core has been kind of scaled back to almost a shadow of its former self. Dr. Schuch suggested that there may be a more transformed, learner-centered experience that will tap into that mindset that empowers learners of all ages. He felt that this will better equip learners for when they leave school and he will continue to push for that.

Ms. Geraci added that the points Ms. Eddinger brought up are the reasons why she wants the kids to be together and experience all of the opportunities. Dr. Friedrich thanked Ms. Eddinger for coming to all of the meetings and encouraged her and all parents to continue to provide feedback and participate in the decisions to be made.

Mary Johnson, from Middlefield, stated that she would love to learn more about the new program that Dr. Schuch is bringing in. She commented on how few people are in the audience tonight and felt that it was a disservice to both towns to schedule this meeting in the middle of vacations and that it should have been delayed a few weeks. If John Lyman were to remain open, there are \$2.8 million in immediately-needed repairs and she would like to know why that many repairs are needed. Ms. Johnson also asked how much the improvements at Brewster will cost and asked specifically about the septic system and water. She also foresees property values going down in Middlefield once the elementary school closes and the tax burden will not go down significantly. She also wondered how big a population Brewster School can hold. Ms. Johnson remembers when the district was formed and what a hot topic it was back then. She worries that plans are in flux and the taxpayers have very little control over the budget. She stated that it feels like Durham will control 71 percent of Middlefield's budget.

Mr. Moore explained that the date of tonight's meeting was chosen because they hope to have the question on the referendum on Election Day and that date had to be in to the Town Clerks by September 2<sup>nd</sup>. He added that the board will answer any questions or comments right up until November 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Mrs. Neubig addressed the capital needs at John Lyman and explained that the district has just not saved enough money to take care of those needs. When budget cuts are made, capital is easier to cut than programming and staffing. She added that the \$6.9 million bonding that was done a couple of years ago could have been \$14 million. The district is playing catch-up and the energy project that was recently completed took care of a number of infrastructure needs. In terms of saving money by closing a building, the funds needed to run the building will be saved or can be redirected to a potential addition at Brewster, if needed and approved by referendum. That money could be used to create a dynamic preK-2 school as opposed to maintaining two aging buildings. Mrs. Neubig stated the funds may be better spent.

Mr. Yamartino also explained that, by state statute, a regional school district is not allowed to reserve more than 1 percent of its operating budget for capital improvements. That just recently changed to 2 percent which is about \$600,000. With five buildings and all of the athletic facilities, the district probably needs to reserve somewhere north of \$1 to \$2 million a year to avoid having to go out for bonding. Mr. Yamartino added that he spoke to Mike Quinn, Middlefield's representative, and told him about this issue and asked him to work with Matt Ritter to get it on the agenda.

Ryan Walsh, from Middlefield, felt this is a great opportunity for the board, the new superintendent and all of the parents to get past where the district has come from. He recognizes that there is a lot of emotion associated with moving from two tracks to one track. He personally felt there was a transparency issue with the surveys in that there was only one option for one track and two options for two tracks which watered down the percentages. Mr. Walsh felt that they should try to make the district unique and have a program that everyone can be proud of. He also offered to participate in that. Mr. Walsh explained that we are in the middle of a pandemic, a demographic shift and a housing boom. He questions whether this is the right time to make a one-time decision to close a school. He felt that the data doesn't factor in the pandemic, with a 33 percent year-over-year increase in home sales in Middlesex County. Mr. Walsh felt that the cost needed for expansion or building a new school is substantially greater than the investment needed to keep John Lyman going for another couple of years. He mentioned that Hamden is \$6 million over budget for their middle school expansion. Mr. Walsh does not plan to vote for closing John Lyman and recommended that the district take a year and let the pandemic peter out, let the demographic shift happen, do another look at the data and in parallel, start a committee to figure out how to make the district the best district in the state.

Dr. Schuch explained that the question in front of the voters is for permission for the Board of Education to close John Lyman. There has been no discussion about exactly when that would happen. A vote in the positive does not guarantee that the school will close or when it will close, though all 10 board members unanimously voted to close the school. The timing of the decision is up for discussion.

Mr. Yamartino explained that John Lyman School costs \$5.5 million to operate each year. Should the school close, teachers, materials and supplies will be transferred to other buildings, but roughly \$1.5 million per year will be saved. That \$1.5 million could bond \$30 million in expenses and, with state reimbursement, the total investment could be as much as \$60 million for buildings and/or expansions of buildings. There have been several plans presented, many of which included expanding existing buildings, with the most expensive being roughly the same cost of repairing John Lyman School. Six

classrooms could be added to Brewster at less than half the cost of repairing John Lyman. Eight classrooms and a cafeteria could be added to Brewster at still less than the cost of repairing John Lyman. No decisions have been made as of now. Mr. Yamartino encouraged the public to provide guidance to the Utilization Committee and noted that the board's committees are open for the public to serve on. ThoughtExchange is another great tool for provide feedback. He summarized that additional classroom space can be added as required and still provide cost savings that would allow the lowering of taxes and/or adding additional programming. Mr. Yamartino gave examples of classes that could be offered and hours of school as well that are part of reimagining education in the district.

Kim Johansen, from Durham, stated that people have spent hours and hours trying to figure out the best of both programs in the district and making this a district that everybody would want to come to. The common theme is that the kids need to be together from the start. While people may be moving into town, building costs are increasing and it may cost even more to repair John Lyman. She stressed that the kids need the best education and the best of everything that goes on in the district.

Gwen Hutter thanked everyone for their work on the board. She believes that the combining of the programs has produced the biggest loss of people in the district. She stated that she moved here from Virginia because of John Lyman School. Ms. Hutter has been a teacher for 17 years and wonders if the high school will actually draw people. She noted that many of her neighbors left right after the combined programs were announced. Ms. Hutter asked what the district is going to do to maintain the spirit of strong, motivated learners with unique, individual education. She would be willing to serve on a committee to help figure that out.

Mr. Moore stated that the board wants Regional School District 13 to be the best in the state and to attract people to come to the area. One thing that they did to start that process is to hire Dr. Schuch, who is also from Virginia. Dr. Schuch needs the help of the board and the public to move forward with reimagining education. Mr. Moore can't stand the fact that the district loses 10 to 20 percent of eighth graders to other high schools and hopes that having the kids together from the start will help to curb that.

Dr. Taylor felt that one of the motivating factors that they are pushing for closing John Lyman School is to free up financial resources to be able to do things, like have STEM programs and make the district more attractive. There are a lot of inefficiencies in the system right now which they need to eliminate so that a dynamic district can evolve.

Kelly Aingworth, from Durham, explained that she has three children in the district and also works as the Associate Director of Space Planning at Yale Medicine. She believes her three children are highly benefitting from the ID program at Lyman. She asked that the board consider taking time for a thoughtful transition if the referendum does pass in November. She believes that there are a lot of great ideas, but not really a plan. The John Lyman community still has a lot of fear and it is made scarier without a plan. The learners and teachers have had a rough year and felt that there would be no way to make building modifications by next school year. Ms. Aingworth loves the enthusiasm and the idea of reimagining education, but wants to be sure it's done the right way. She did ask if there could be an option for a "no earlier than" date on the referendum so that the plan could be worked through. She is aware that there is interest in the John Lyman building and there would be a financial incentive to move quickly. She felt that the board would gain her vote and a lot of others with some creative contract language and a "no earlier than" date on the referendum. She does plan to vote no right now with no plan. Ms. Aingworth thanked the board for their service and hoped that they could get this done the right way.

Mr. Moore explained that if they were to change the language of the referendum, they would have to start the whole process over again. The board, however, can commit to a schedule before the referendum. Mr. Yamartino also mentioned that they would love to have Ms. Aingworth on the Utilization Committee and Dr. Schuch would like for her to be part of reimagining. Mr. Moore added that she already serves on the Building Committee.

Heidi Johnson, from Durham, felt that more parents attend those meetings as the years go on, but some of the parents have attended workshops towards this end for years. She felt that this process has not been rushed, but has prevented everyone from talking about other things. The cohort of contemporary parents no longer takes an interest as they felt that the decision to close Korn School did not involve them. She would like to see some discussion around what's going on at Strong School and the high school and why the district isn't retaining students. She would like her kids to go to school here, but finds it frustrating that this discussion still continues. She acknowledged that many people feel this process is being rushed, but this has been contemplated and talked about since her child was entering kindergarten and is now entering eighth grade. The district needs to move toward making a decision with the data, work and time that has already been spent on this.

Cheryl Pizzo, from Middlefield, explained that she is a big proponent of keeping John Lyman School in Middlefield. She felt that the board is stuck. There had been a very definitive vote that people wanted to keep the school and that the input was loud and clear. Ms. Pizzo felt that plan B needs to be how to make it work. She stated that people don't know why they should come and vote if the board will just go back and ask them to vote again. Ms. Pizzo stated that the board is not listening and they need to look for ways to compromise.

Ms. Geraci asked how many people voted in the failed referendum and did not feel it was a particularly large turnout. Dr. Taylor thought it was 20 to 25 percent of the total population of the towns. Ms. Geraci did not feel that that turnout can be the final word and stands behind this vote in November.

Cheryl Pizzo agreed that there may not have been the broadest voter segment, but they still have to abide by the vote. She also thanked the board for all of their hard work.

Amanda Gillooly, from Durham, asked what the plan is for how the students will be placed on Brewster and Memorial if John Lyman is closed. There are currently 10 classrooms and over 200 kids at Lyman. She asked if the staff members will be going to Brewster and Memorial. With the increased enrollment in preK, that number goes up to over 300 students.

Mr. Yamartino explained that a 10 percent increase means an increase of one to two students per class which also includes the students from Lyman. He explained that the entire preK-2 enrollment is housed in 21 classes between Brewster and Lyman, with an average of 16.4 students per classroom. Dr. Taylor stated that the intent has always been to create six new classrooms at Brewster and the other Lyman students would move to Memorial. Ms. Gillooly felt that there wouldn't be time to build six new classrooms to accommodate the students from Lyman and Dr. Taylor agreed that they may have to go somewhere else for one year.

Mr. Moore added that they will need to talk about the grade configuration and how they could accommodate the students. They have received a variety of proposals, including preK back at the high school. Eighth grade has also been proposed at the high school, but that has been strongly opposed.

Dr. Schuch added that they did look at moving all K, 1 and 2 to Brewster without expanding the campus in the next year and it appears that that could not be done if the two preschool classes remain there. If they were to move to another building, all K, 1 and 2 could fit in Brewster. Mr. Yamartino added that they have even looked at whether suitably sized bathrooms for preK were available at the high school. At this point, they are not sure when John Lyman would close and they would probably want to do any construction before it closes. Mr. Yamartino felt that having a schedule is not an unreasonable request.

There were no other questions or comments and Mr. Hicks declared the public hearing has ended and that they adjourn to referendum at a date yet to be determined.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:41 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz

Alwaz First