

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a special work session on Wednesday, February 7, 2024 at 5:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy (by phone), Mr. DeVecchio (arrived late), Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella (arrived late), Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone (arrived late)

Board members absent: Ms. Betty

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mr. Brough, Human Resources Specialist, Mrs. Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education, Mr. Pietrasko, Director of Infrastructure and Security Technology, Mrs. Smith, Operations Manager, Mr. Proia, Supervisor of Facilities and Grounds, Mrs. Quarato, Associate Director of Learning, Innovation and Development and Mrs. Siegel, Associate Director of Learning, Innovation and Accountability

Mrs. Dahlheimer called the special work session to order at 5:06 PM.

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, and Mr. Roraback. Motion carried.

Joint Work Session with Building Committee

A. January 2024 Community Forum Input and Next Steps Discussion

Dr. Schuch reviewed that that the forums took place on January 17th and 18th at Memorial School. Mr. Malik gave an overview of the three options and then the group was split up into smaller groups that were facilitated by either board members or members of the administration. They spent about 20 minutes on each of the three options, looking at the educational impact, financial impact and any other impacts. They then put the chart papers used by each group in the hallways and asked each participant to place dots at statements they agreed with. They also asked participants to drop their name cards in a box denoting their preference on the options.

Dr. Schuch noted that the largest number was in the three-school options, followed by no selection. Dr. Schuch organized the dot distribution into the three options and included positive, negative or comments/questions. There was a total of 292 dots placed, with 171 of them for the three-school option, 48 for the four-school option and 73 for the five-school option. Dr. Schuch felt that it was important to realize that most comments were placed on the three-school option.

Dr. Schuch then reviewed the predominant themes, with 33 dots relating to the overall savings and positive fiscal impact of the three-school option. He felt that there was a drop-off after eight dots on an item. He added that eight dots had been noted on the high cost of the five-school option, which totals 41 dots about the financial impact. Dr. Schuch felt that the top four items (from 22 to 33 dots) really paint a picture of the positive impact of the three-school option. He felt it was pretty clear about what the board's trajectory should be, based on that.

Mr. Mennone felt that the bullet points were items that the public put on the papers, not generated by the board or administration. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that Dr. Schuch's information did encompass the community's feelings and pointed out that 22 people still did not make a choice. She felt that they needed to reach back out to the community, but did feel that most families favor the three-school option.

Mr. Weissberg felt that the three-school option will significantly change the traffic pattern and that concern had been expressed. He felt that a traffic study is necessary in order to mitigate any problems. Mr. Mennone agreed that there are certainly traffic issues at schools. Mr. Cross suggested they reach out to the state about their Safe Schools program to look at surrounding neighborhoods. Dr. Schuch noted that this is typically not done until funding is secured and Mr. Weissberg added that a traffic study is normally done to go to Planning and Zoning for a development project but he felt it should be done here as well. Mr. Malik felt that the majority of times a traffic study is part of developing the concept design and going through Planning and Zoning but rarely done prior to the funding being secured.

Mrs. Neubig noted that approximately 16 buses will go in and out of Memorial every day and Mr. Mennone noted that the buses are not the issue. Mr. Weissberg stated that it was the parent drop-offs and pick-ups that are the issue and parents will go through several tricky intersections. This option will bring a lot more traffic through those intersections. Traffic studies are typically done in March to May or September to November. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that they will look into getting a traffic study done.

Mrs. Dahlheimer wondered how many of the 22 non-selections are over the concern about swing space as she heard some concerns about that. A large amount of families felt that their kids won't benefit from the K-5 school by the time it's complete, yet they will still be affected by the transitions. She added that there may be other options for swing space as well.

Mrs. Caramanello felt that the problem is mostly overcrowding and the duration of the project. She asked if they had looked into putting fifth grade at Strong and Mr. Malik stated that they did an analysis of that and he liked that suggestion. From a transition point of view, the kids would be at Strong on a temporary basis but transition into sixth grade at the same school. Mrs. Neubig explained that while the number of kids would fit into Strong, all of the rooms are currently being used. Mrs. Caramanello felt that it would help K-4 to spread out a little more in the swing spaces. Dr. Schuch felt it would be worth exploring, but he would want to discuss it with the administration.

Mr. Weissberg felt that they need to have a discussion about the type of renovation and felt they need to do a cost benefit on building new vs. renovating. Mr. Malik stated that they need to do that as part of the renovate-as-new application. Dr. Schuch added that another reason to build new would be to help with swing space and he also felt it could help with the on-campus traffic issue as the school would be further back from the road.

Mrs. Dahlheimer suggested having more community forums with less presentations and more discussion of common themes. Dr. Schuch envisioned it being more like a budget hearing in the high school auditorium where people can ask questions. Mrs. Dahlheimer suggested they send the information Dr. Schuch compiled to everyone who attended the forums and ask for feedback. Mr. Mennone felt that a lot of the non-selections were people who had one particular issue bothering them, but he would like to ask them what their issues are. Dr. Darcy felt that this is a timing issue but added that they are disproportionately weighing the opinions of the 22 people. She felt that other avenues need to be created for people to share their thoughts and feelings because the people who can show up at an evening meeting

is a small percentage of the community. Mr. Mennone stated that a significant amount of information has been given out and people have known about what's going on. He felt it was time to start making some decisions. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt they could give a directive for a three-school approach and still have those conversations. Dr. Darcy reiterated that she felt it was exclusionary to do something where not every citizen has the ability to have their voice heard. She gave examples of having QR codes available for people to leave comments and having forums but not just in the evening. She felt that they still do not know what the vast majority of the community think or feel.

Mr. Weissberg noted that anyone who could not attend the meetings could have sent correspondence. Mr. Moore added that most people who came were engaged with the school system in some way. He acknowledged that it wasn't everyone and added that some people only care about the cost. Dr. Darcy felt that there was a very tiny percentage of parents at the forums and Mr. Mennone felt that most participants had students in the district. Dr. Schuch added that there were more employees on the first night and more parents on the second night. Dr. Darcy asked how many students are in the district and Mrs. Neubig stated that there are 1,365. With about 10 percent of the number of students represented at the forums, Dr. Darcy felt that they are wielding a huge amount of influence and everyone else is not. There are a lot of reasons that people could not be at the forums and she reiterated that there needs to be other avenues. Dr. Darcy felt that they aren't doing a whole lot to let people know what is happening.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that they needed to reach out to the seniors as well as boards and commissions of the towns.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the application process takes some time and Mr. Malik stated that the deadline is technically June 30th, but the sooner the better. The state would like to know that the project is coming much earlier than that. He would suggest using June 1st as the deadline and encouraged Mrs. Neubig to reach out to the state. Mr. Malik noted that there are a lot of things that need to happen in order to submit the application. He also reminded everyone that there are dates included in the proposed schedule and any change will impact that schedule. Mr. Cross stated that, if he were the Board of Education looking to submit by June, he would be very worried.

Dr. Schuch added that there were not a lot of fans for the five-school option and most comments were negative. He felt that nobody wants to see the district do nothing. If the board is committed to a three-school option, he would support that while still getting feedback about what is the best three-school option. Dr. Schuch did not feel they need more input from the community about which option, but the forums should be more about concerns and input about the three-school option. Mr. Moore summarized that the forums generally supported a three-school option and the board should move ahead with that. He felt that the basic issue is cost and what is affordable. A major issue is also getting approval to close two schools.

Mr. Roraback felt that the positives of the three-school option need to be communicated, including the educational quality, better community and long-term financial savings. Mrs. Dahlheimer agreed and suggested they need to provide the information about what will happen in the next 10 years if they continue as-is. Mrs. Neubig noted that they will have to continue to save 2 percent for capital, but will also need to add critical systems to the budget which will make the increase very high or do a bonding. Mr. Moore reviewed that some schools don't have sprinklers, that they need new air handlers and the district is spending money on two administrations and two support groups. He felt that they can now say that the majority of the people like the three-school option, but then talk about how they will pay for it.

Mr. Moore noted that the amendment to the Regional Plan will have to be voted on in a different referendum which would be one about feelings rather than dollars and cents. Mrs. Neubig noted that the two referendums can be on the same day.

Mrs. Neubig asked if they need permission to close Lyman if there is an elementary school at Memorial and Mr. Moore noted that the Regional Plan actually names the schools. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that the plan says there needs to be an elementary school in each town. Mr. Mennone felt that they cannot explain any of the numbers without a plan in place. Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if everyone felt comfortable about giving the architects a direction without a formal vote.

Mr. Cross felt it was pretty clear that everyone wants the best building that they can afford which is clearly the three-school option. While making these kinds of decisions is difficult, the district needs to make a decision to move forward or wait another year. He wasn't sure why they wouldn't push forward with the three-school option and get the numbers so that a submission can be ready for June. Dr. Schuch asked what the timeline would be for the board deciding between a new building or a renovate-as-new to get the numbers for a referendum. Mr. Cross felt that it will be quickly clear whether they can do a new build with a building on-site. Mr. Moore added that they will need to look at the environment as well to see if the site can hold another facility.

Mr. Malik stated that there are a lot of issues with building a new school on the site of an existing school and that does extend the duration of the construction. He also reminded everyone about the 10 percent lower reimbursement for a new school. Mr. Mennone added that the cost of building is only going up the longer they wait. Mr. Malik reviewed that they bumped up the 5 percent escalation by 15 percent due to rising labor costs. He also noted that they have not yet fully vetted the space with staff.

Mrs. Neubig added that if the board gave them direction tonight, they are ready to go. Dr. Schuch added that they can also get a date for the referendum. Mrs. Neubig suggested the building project to be separate from the budget vote. Mr. Malik would also like to utilize an independent estimator. Dr. Schuch also cautioned about holding more forums without having specific answers.

Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that they can amend the agenda of the 6:30 meeting to include a vote on this issue. Mrs. Neubig asked Mr. Malik to define a future-ready school and he explained that it's really a facility that can accommodate different types of teaching modalities, including project-based learning, self-directed learning and collaborative learning. Classrooms are different sizes, based on activity. This becomes more difficult with existing buildings, but it can be done. Mrs. Caramanello asked if having a future-ready school impacts reimbursement and Mr. Malik stated that it does not, and is more educational. Mrs. Caramanello wanted to know the price difference between a traditional school and a future-ready school. Mr. Cross felt it would not be a significant cost difference either way, but it can be slightly more expensive. Mrs. Caramanello thought that would be important to relate to the public. Mr. Malik explained that the cost per square foot is the cost per square foot. He felt that the district should be concerned about not making the June date. Mr. Cross noted that they do have to rein in the architectural flares and keep it from getting out of control.

Mr. Roraback felt that the future-ready aspect sounds expensive and they should talk more about savings. Mr. Proia added that nothing in the schools is getting newer and Mr. Mennone noted that there is a cost associated with that that people need to understand.

Public Comment

A. In-person public comment

A member of the public fully supported the idea that the board make a decision and move forward. He felt that the time for input is over and they should decide and present information to defend that decision. He felt that most parents understand the idea of the three-school option and the numbers are clear.

B. Remote public comment

None.

Adjournment

Mr. Mennone made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stone, to adjourn the special work session.

In favor of adjourning the special work session: Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone.

Meeting was adjourned at 6:23 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First