

**Please note: These minutes are pending Board approval.  
Board of Education  
Newtown, Connecticut**

Minutes of the special Board of Education meeting on February 4, 2017 in the Sandy Hook School cafeteria at 9:00 a.m.

K. Alexander, Chair	J. Erardi
M. Ku, Vice Chair	J. Davila
D. Leidlein, Secretary	40 Public
J. Vouros	
R. Harriman-Stites	
A. Clure	
D. Cruson	

The meeting began at 9:05 a.m.

Item 1 – Board of Education Discussion

The meeting discussion involved the following topics:

- Open Conversation with Senior Citizen Community
- Problem of Practice: School Start Time
- How to Best Utilize Open Space in Our Schools
- Areas for Future Board Discussion

Discussion notes are attached.

MOTION: Mrs. Leidlein moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Cruson seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

Item 2 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:50 a.m.

Respectfully submitted:

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Debbie Leidlein  
Secretary

Stephen Rosenblatt - Quoted three statements of belief from the district strategic plan addressing the role of schools in educating students in the democratic process and being good citizens. Mr. Rosenblatt believes that as more of the senior community becomes involved in decision-making, the more democratic the process. We must have courage to change in order to improve the community. He believes that the question on the mind of senior citizens is what the board intends to do about the decline in enrollment versus the budget increases.

Dr. Erardi indicated that information regarding enrollment decline and reduction in staffing report will be sent out to seniors. The report shows a significant decline in staffing but enrollment is not decreasing at the rate predicted. There are several other points to consider. The cost of education has gone up. The district has a document that shows the average per pupil expenditure in every district in CT, and Newtown's is less than the CT average. We have student outcomes that would lead you to believe that Newtown is a destination district in the top 10% in the state. In the state overall there is a decline in the number of students - enrollment is increasing in urban centers - despite this decline, the overall cost in districts around the state rose an average of 3%.

School board on Thursday passed forward a plan. Both sides are unhappy with budget - one side complains that there is not enough improvement, the other complains enrollment is down and how can spending go up. For this school year it is just under a 2% increase with each % at about \$750,000. The budget eliminates 8 teaching positions and includes things internally to reduce spending. Citizens are investing in a high yield system. Conversations need to include how to build a stronger tax base to help improve our community.

K. Alexander - Our goal is to be as fiscally responsible as possible and we do zero based budgeting in order to do so. While we have lost students with entering classes being smaller than graduating classes, we have gained enrollment when students from private schools reenter public schools and when new residents move into our community. Reducing staff is more feasible with declining enrollment than reducing facilities. We could come up with no scenario which would be feasible and would benefit the children.

Skip - Private schools are growing in enrollment - we should draw from those schools. Also, there needs to be effort to draw in community and senior population - for example, to use the technology - to help them gain more understanding of what the buildings are used for. Finally, schools are the center for the morale of the town. We need to attend more events instead of standing by and complaining that the budget is too high. We need to find ways to get more involvement and find solutions instead of complaining.

S. Rosenblatt - Commends the board for more recent budgets, keeping them lower than in the past. The question is do we need to continue to put in the resources as enrollment declines. He is concerned whether we need all the buildings, staffing, custodians, etc. Where will we be in 2021-2022?

Tony Amarotto - The state is in financial distress which affects citizens in the state. He is concerned about recent comments from the Governor regarding pushing responsibility for teacher's pension to the local level. Also, he read about funding each community gets from the state and was not happy that the board seemed surprised they were getting less funding than they thought.

J. Erardi - The changes in cost sharing formula happen at the state level. Our funding formula aligns with New Milford - each community should receive \$10M annually, New Milford receives

\$10M while Newtown receives \$5M. Some communities receive well over 100% while other communities receive less than 50%.

M. Bolinsky - shared that we do not meet, at the state level, the education responsibilities of our children. We are thought of as a well-to-do community and so receive less. Other communities that are in the same level of the wealth index receive much more like Farmington. Money is moved around during budgeting.

There is legislation currently proposed that no town should receive more than 100%. More than 30 do.

Education Committee Co-Chair is proposing 75% cost share - Mitch feels this is a bold move - Some towns are being treated unfairly.

Is there reason to be concerned about State funding in Newtown - Yes, it's going to be a very long fight and we have been successful over the past few years, but the state is having budget issues and the Governor is making the most hurtful cuts to help with this (i.e. teacher's pension)

J. Erardi - Currently, the state is responsible for paying teacher pensions.

The Governor wants to move 1/3 of cost to the local level. This can be complicated, because teachers don't always retire from where they spent the majority of their career.

Comments from community -

Bernie Cohen - hopes that every person on board sends Mr. Bolinsky comments on ECS dollars from the state.

M. Bolinsky challenges everyone else in the room to do the same

Rudy Magnan - Can the town share in state grants or do they all go to education only?

J. Erardi - State grants are specific to either education or municipal spending.

R. Magnan - Turnout today is important to note, and they are concerned about future and the cost per pupil rising to over \$21,000 while they are on a fixed income. Seniors are funding education at a cost that they can't absorb anymore. Many are having to leave the state because it is too expensive for them. The role of creating the budget has direct impact on individuals in this room and their future and should be taken into consideration.

Kurt Symes- Pockets of enrollment decline does not allow for reductions in facilities or busses. The problem of seniors leaving the community because it is expensive has been an issue for a long time. For those who are not seniors, you do not understand all the issues seniors face. Many face a choice between paying taxes and other fixed expenses and paying for medications. People will open up a lot more when people are helping them. Newtown historically has been a great education town. We are in a better place today than we have been 5, 10 or 20 years ago. Seniors don't understand quality education at what cost. First selectman has put out Q&A documents successfully and this is recommended to the Board because the silent majority (6000 seniors) who don't attend meetings, and are socially isolated. They don't have access to transportation to get to meetings. Would like to see highlights of district in a format that they can receive.

Paul Mangiafico - Past board of education member - recognizes the enormous responsibility

1. Board members are appreciated

2. Unacceptable that we have declining enrollment and increase in spending - budget will not pass - believes there will be continuous rejections - we must get to the point that there are no more increases and if fact, there should be a reduction of \$1M/year. Destroying SHS and building a new school was a mistake - we should have closed an elementary school and in the recent years we should have decided to close a school. The board put us into this position.

Dan Wiedemann - asked what the drivers were for the current budget

J. Erardi - Special education and contractual obligations are primary drivers.

Chris Nakas - How long have we been underfunded? And why hasn't Mr. Bolinsky challenged it before now?

M. Bolinsky said that we fight for it every year. He added that senior citizens should be more focused on complaining at state level than local level. We are more effective if we join together than if we argue with each other.

John Boccuzzi wanted to know how we fall in District Reference Group comparisons.

J. Erardi - indicated he would send the information about DRG comparisons to everyone who wants to leave their e-mail.

Board members shared their final comments

### **Discussion around school start times**

J. Vouros: We should start with looking at cost since that will likely be a limiting factor

R. Harriman-Stites: We should start with the common understanding that changing start times is better for the health of students.

D. Cruson: We need to consider sports and feasibility.

D. Leidlein: Different start times would have not changed how her children experienced school.

D. Cruson: If students just stay up later, does it negate the later start time?

J. Vouros: To solve the issue with sports and competing with districts on a different schedule, student athletes could be released from classes earlier.

D. Leidlein: Would not want students missing classes.

J. Vouros: Then that needs to be part of looking at feasibility.

D. Cruson: Matt Memoli needs to be part of the discussion.

J. Erardi: The board needs to recognize that school start time discussion is going to be just as energetic as the one about closing a school. The question is does the board support this study going forward. Every parent thinks it will benefit their child somehow, but that is not the case. The final discussions will likely have a packed house with weigh-back from the community. He has met with ownership of the bus company. He sees a study involving a Board representative, leadership, bus management, community, and student voice.

J. Evans-Davila: The sleep conference that she and J. Vouros will attend is in April.

J. Erardi: Our directive could include a study of feasibility, three scenarios with associated cost, research.

M. Ku: Wants to have feedback from the community regarding feasibility.

D. Cruson: There could be the counter argument. We should know any research that shows negative effects.

K. Holden: There are districts that have done it and changed back (Watertown and maybe Weston). We need to consider that high school students are caring for younger siblings

A. Weidemann: Look at other districts. If you talk to other districts, that might be easier to sell.

What areas do we need to drill down in cost?

Is this the right time

Transportation

All stakeholders need to be part of the conversation

Any counter research

Would we need to change everyone or would school start time swap

Report back would be the impacts

Andy would like us to look at, as a completely separate item, if we could put the MS on the same tier as Reed

Some districts have changed time and then changed back

### **Sharing space conversation**

Revenue yielding programs (i.e. bank, stem academy)

Issues regarding security and safety were brought up around discussions of shared space

We need to look within (i.e. recreation department housed at HS, greenhouse utilization)

Rent space at HS (premium space) and MS (lots of space)

Board of Ed offices

Look at option of partially mothballing a portion of the building

Looking at special needs population and can the space be utilized to better serve those students and bring back costly outplacements

Possibility of space for senior citizens