

Board of Education  
Newtown, Connecticut

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, March 2, 2010 at 7:30 p.m. in the Board Room at 3 Primrose Street.

Present:	L. Bittman, Chair	J. Robinson
	K. Fetchick, Vice Chair	L. Gejda
	D. Leidlein, Secretary	5 Staff
	D. Nanavaty	9 Public
	R. Gaines	1 Press
	W. Hart	
	C. Lagana	

Mrs. Bittman called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Item 1 – Consent Agenda

MOTION: Mr. Gaines moved to approve the consent agenda which included the minutes of February 2, 4 and 9, 2010, the resignation of Brian Micena, teacher at Newtown High School, the resignation for retirement of Joan Brand, teacher at Newtown High School, the donation of \$300 from the Lions Club to the Newtown High School Yearbook Program, and the Newtown High School spring coaches and volunteer coaches. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 2 – Public Participation – none

Item 3 – Reports

Correspondence: Mrs. Leidlein noted the correspondence received by the Board of Education. Ginny Snowden, Pamela Kohn, Elizabeth Alexander, Aaron Blank, Jean Walter, Maura Drabik and Mary Tobin all wrote letters in support of keeping various positions at Reed Intermediate School. Laura Main wrote a letter regarding the Social - Emotional Curriculum at Newtown Middle School. Melinda Reynolds wrote a letter against the cuts to the music programs in the district. Tracy Holman and Donna Ball wrote letters against cutting Educational Assistants at Head O' Meadow. Evelyn Hufzinger wrote a letter against staffing cuts in the district. April Smith wrote a letter against cutting Consumer and Family Science at Newtown Middle School. Cathy Roche wrote a letter against cuts to after school activities. Newtown Middle School PTA wrote a letter against proposed cuts at Newtown Middle School. Nancy Fraczek is in support of keeping the Library Clerk at Newtown Middle School. Theresa Reisert wrote a letter in favor of full day kindergarten. Richard and Christine Jojo and Jennifer Ochs wrote a letter against full day kindergarten. Sonya Stanczyk wrote a letter against budget cuts in the district. Claudia Mitchell wrote a letter against budget cuts in the district. Michelle Hiscavich reported that thirteen Reed students were selected to participate in the Westport Community Youth Band Program. Diane Sherlock reported that the Newtown Middle School literary magazine - Opus Optima- received an award for excellence. Chris Murphy wrote to congratulate Newtown for the St. Valentine's Day letters to the Troops project.

Chair Report: Mrs. Bittman stated that there was a transportation hearing on January 20, 2010 for a parent concern about a bus route. The parent appealed the Board decision to the state. Mr. Lagana will join her on the communications subcommittee. She attended the mid-year high school graduation ceremony and the breakfast welcoming the Chinese

students and administrators from Liaocheng, and one of the Legislative Council education subcommittee meetings. The Town called a joint meeting on electricity and discussed locking into a rate together. We also had an initial meeting with bus drivers to renegotiate their contract.

Superintendent's Report: Dr. Robinson spoke about the delegation from our sister school in Liaocheng, China which included 10 students and 7 administrators, the CMT and CAPT testing that has begun and will be held over the next few weeks, and the Saturday community conversation on underage drinking which was well attended with a follow up meeting set for March 25.

Dr. Robinson noted the tremendous increase in athletics since the 2001-02 school year. This is very important because children involved in school related activities are more likely to be successful.

We were excited to learn that Alyssa Rodriguez, a student at the high school, will have her work of art published in an art textbook and that the Connecticut Music Educators Association has selected the NHS Chamber Choir directed by John Harned, to perform at the CMEA In-Service Conference April 8-10 at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford.

Dr. Robinson referred to an article which stated that there was a huge increase in the birth rate in 2007 which indicates we should see those students in 2011-12. We are having our kindergarten enrollment sessions earlier this year. Right now at Head O'Meadow we have 61 registered students with 44 projected. Hawley has 70 plus students, Sandy Hook has 92 and Middle Gate has 85.

Dr. Robinson referred to the meeting on electricity. Mr. Arum got a quote of 8.8 cents from Constellation and she feels we should lock in. Our current rate is 10 cents. This is for two years just on the generation side. Mrs. Leidlein asked why the town discontinued their contract with Constellation. Dr. Robinson said they had some problems but we have no issues with them.

Reed Intermediate School Report:

Dr. Epple began her presentation by stating that Reed was in safe harbor status this year because of the CMT testing results for our sub group in special education. She spoke about the school results and the effective instructional tools and best practices in writing, reading and math. Dr. Salvatore spoke about the assessment data and various interventions to help students.

Mr. Hart asked what was being offered in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math program for Reed students. Dr. Epple said they asked a number of students if they would be interested in taking an upper level math class. These students were tested using mid-year, end-of-year assessments, OLSATs and the CMTs over the years were looked at before they were recommended to take the class.

Dr. Salvatore said they have been meeting with the middle school staff for placement next year in the integrated math program.

Dr. Gejda said at the middle school we've had Integrated Math II for three years.

Mrs. Fetchick asked if there was a plan to increase the number of hours for language arts since the writing scores have been low.

Dr. Epple said we were looking at scheduling to allow more time. We have a committee working on how to integrate literacy into science and social studies.

Mr. Nanavaty asked how the magnet school students were integrating into sixth grade and if the staff was seeing any differences.

Dr. Epple said the biggest difference is the exposure to Spanish. We have a Spanish club run by a high school student. It would be wonderful to have a foreign language but we would need two full-time teachers. The incoming students are the same place in other subject areas as our students. It's been difficult because the magnet school doesn't have some of the same programs or assessments.

#### Policy Committee:

Mrs. Fetchick said she, Mrs. Bittman and Dr. Robinson met with Vincent Mustaro of CAFE. We will look over the sample policies and send them back to CAFE to update. We are working on bylaws of the Board. Dr. Robinson will address the regulations. It is estimated to take a year and a half to complete the work.

Mr. Hart said the accounting section needs to be addressed. Also the Board decided to not do transfers but the policy book said we must have transfers. He does not support transferring funds.

Mrs. Fetchick said we also have some policies that are in conflict with our town financial regulations.

Mrs. Bittman said if any of the Board thinks the revision of certain policies should be accelerated to please contact Mrs. Fetchick.

#### Facilities Committee Report:

Mr. Hart said that he met with Mrs. Leidlein and Dr. Robinson for a planning session with the objective of this committee to produce a facilities plan for the district and coordinate with the town. We will do a series of walkthroughs of the schools and build an inventory which will also list the condition of the items so we can formulate a plan to address them. We want to have the plan done for the next budget cycle to address our CIP items. We will also look at possibly closing an elementary school. The most important input is to have an enrollment study.

Mr. Gaines said we have discussed an enrollment study but declined because of the lack of funds. Maybe the facilities subcommittee should recommend the type of study needed and set aside some funds in this year's budget to address that.

Mrs. Leidlein asked the difference in cost of an enrollment study and population study.

Dr. Robinson said the town did a population study with Planometrics. The Chung student population in that piece was not a thorough study. She would like to ask Mr. Arum to find money to do that study this year.

Mrs. Bittman said she would talk to Pat Llodra to see if this is a community study or enrollment.

Mrs. Fetchick agreed. Mrs. Bittman said we would have a motion for the next meeting. Mr. Nanavaty said in the past the studies have been fairly accurate. When you get beyond the fourth year you are guessing. He would like to have someone look at the house sales and the trend toward the socio-economic status of the people who are buying and the number of children and the age or grades they are entering the schools. We also might want to look at towns that already have been through the process of closing a school such as in Fairfield and now Monroe that is talking about closing Chalk Hill Middle School.

Mrs. Fetchick suggesting having Chung talk to us. The town paid \$30,000 for the study. Mr. Hart said we should coordinate with the town. \$18,000 is not a big number.

MOTION: Mr. Nanavaty moved to approve the Financial Report dated January 31, 2010. Mr. Gaines seconded.

Mrs. Fetchick asked how much we expect to get from the excess cost grant.

Dr. Robinson said \$1.9 million. The magnet school is a separate grant.

Mrs. Bittman said we need Mr. Arum and Dr. Regan to get the bottom line for special education costs. Vote: 7 ayes

#### Item 4 – Old Business

##### Status of CIP:

Mrs. Bittman wants to see a joint meeting of the Board of Education and Board of Finance before the CIP is formed.

Mr. Nanavaty said this should be done well in advance of the BOF meeting. He is unclear as to what we got when we gave up Hawley to go back two years.

Mr. Gaines asked why it was changed.

Mrs. Bittman said it was the \$11 million for the high school fitting into year two.

Mrs. Fetchick said last year the Board of Finance adopted a policy that they would see the amount of debt they could take on. They take an average of the last five years. We had a decrease in our budget so it affected our debt service.

Mr. Nanavaty said if the Board of Finance and Legislative Council continued to decrease the budget from year to year then we are reducing the amount of money we can spend on CIP projects because of the self-imposed debt cap. Their actions directly affect what we are going to be willing to spend in the future.

Mr. Hart said this process went in the wrong order. Having a joint meeting with the Board of Selectmen would help.

Mr. Gaines asked when they realized this. Mr. Kortze is on the CIP committee and this never came up.

Mr. Nanavaty said he heard the decision wasn't made until January when Bob Tait told them about the loss of revenue.

##### Update on Design Fees for the Middle School Roof:

Dr. Robinson said the RFP went out for the architect to do the schematic design work for the roof and they came back last Thursday or Friday. Mr. Arum and Mr. Faiella have been going through the bids.

High School Expansion Project Update:

Dr. Robinson said two Board members were going to walk through the addition tomorrow and welcomed other members to schedule one. The bid is out for the greenhouse. There is some concern that necessary items for the greenhouse were put in as bid alternates. There is also an issue of moving a door. The phone system work will go through as part of the project.

Mrs. Leidlein asked for the student to computer ratio for the addition.

Budget:

Mrs. Bittman said we spoke about what we wanted in the budget book next year at the Board of Finance meeting.

Mr. Lagana said he will prepare options on changing the budget book next year and how we prepare for the meetings.

Mrs. Fetchick asked if the person from the state checked the air quality in the middle school.

Dr. Robinson said she was from OSHA and walked through Hawley and the middle school with Mr. Faiella and would prepare a report.

Kindergarten Survey Results:

Dr. Robinson said the morning kindergarten lost a number of days of instruction due to delayed openings. The teachers feel the 2.5 hours are very rushed. She favors a full day kindergarten but we will not move forward next year.

Dr. Gejda researched full-day kindergarten. A two-year study done on 1997 in Wisconsin showed that full day kindergarten was very positive. A Meta-Analysis study found a generally favorable response also. Another one in Washington State in 2007 had positive outcomes.

Mrs. Bittman feels the survey should go home with each student next year.

Dr. Robinson said she would like to have a study committee continue the survey information for the following year.

Mrs. Bittman asked for volunteers. Mrs. Leidlein, Mr. Hart and Mrs. Fetchick said they would work on that committee.

Item 5 –New BusinessViability of Closing an Elementary School:

Mrs. Bittman said one Board of Finance member thought we could make this decision sooner than 15 months. She wants the enrollment study first.

Mrs. Leidlein agreed and doesn't want to move too fast. We have to have answers before our next budget season.

Mr. Nanavaty said when a school is no longer used as an educational facility it gets turned over to the town. The building would have to be brought up to code when reopened. You aren't going to be mothballing a building. It will be an expense on the town side but it could be a facility used by other groups such as seniors or parks and rec.

Mr. Hart said some of the numbers regarding savings are overestimated. We would move the teachers to other schools. You only save a small amount of staff and the cost of operating the building.

Dr. Robinson gave an example of what we would deal with if we closed Hawley School. Many Hawley students are on the Sandy Hook side of town. Currently Hawley has 19 classrooms. She would need 17 classrooms for these students. Laying off teachers she would only have 7 empty classrooms. You can't put 17 classrooms into 7. She doesn't feel we are at the point of needing to close a school. This scenario would give Sandy Hook School an enrollment of 690 students. Art and music would have to be on a cart.

Mrs. Fetchick agreed that we aren't ready to do that yet. We have portables and the town and Board of Education need to look at this together.

Mrs. Bittman wants to start with facilities committee and then collaborate with the town.

2009-10 Budget Freeze:

Mrs. Bittman stated that the Board of Finance wants the Board of Education to share the town shortfall.

Mrs. Fetchick agreed and said we have areas to take money to help the town. She asked Dr. Robinson to get the excess cost grant information.

Mrs. Bittman said we always give back to the town and wanted to know what we won't get if we give back.

Mr. Gaines asked if we have done anything in the upcoming budget for the accounts that are frozen this year. Are we deferring the expense to the next budget season?

Mr. Nanavaty said the deficits are offset by what has been frozen in our financial report. He is hesitant to take any action to unfreeze what we have frozen to know if the town is going to have a surplus this year. They are getting \$150,000 more in taxes than they anticipated.

Mrs. Fetchick proposed that Dr. Robinson provide a detailed report of the special education costs and excess cost grant and also that Mrs. Bittman communicate with Mrs. Llodra and the Board of Finance to see if they would anticipate any amount of money left over at the end of the year. This should be on the next agenda.

New CIP Guidelines:

Mrs. Bittman said Jeff Capecci wanted comments on the CIP guidelines.

Mrs. Fetchick said a lot of what is listed is already happening. Our role is to come up with our items. They can come to our meetings and ask questions. It seems like they are trying to force some type of communication. We don't need a rule that we must communicate with them. A lot of this is silly.

Mr. Gaines said the Legislative Council is the legislative body and responsible that this is done properly. Items 4 and 7 indicate two different timeframes. Maybe there should be just one quarterly report. He has no problem having them ask questions. He applauded them for wanting to be more active in the CIP process.

Mr. Nanavaty said a lot of what they have here is what we discussed in our strategic planning CIP group. Probably Public Building and Site would be the agency responding to their quarterly report for the projects. Our projects go through them and they should be involved.

Mr. Hart feels this is a good thing because it specifies the difference between the Legislative Council and Board of Finance.

Legislative Council Ad Hoc Study:

Mrs. Bittman said this report gets into a lot of the collaboration that we are getting into. Mrs. Fetchick said we should be more active members. This went forward without our involvement.

Self-insurance:

Dr. Robinson said the town's agent projected 8.1% if the combined town and Board of Education were self-insured. Our agent met with Mr. Arum and said we are still at 17% and possibly going down to 10%. She spoke to our agent today who said the current estimate to self-insure was 8.1%. We are putting out an RFP for an agent. The commission for an agent is not in the estimate so it will have to be added on. We are starting the steps to become self-insured. Mrs. Llodra wants the change for July 1.

Item 6 – Pubic Participation

Richard Woycik, 36 Grand Place, referred to the Legislative Council Ad Hoc report which identified areas where collaboration could lead to cost savings. It is now up to the town and Board of Education to act on their recommendations. There will not be anymore involvement from the Legislative Council.

MOTION: Mrs. Leidlein moved to go into executive session for negotiations and invited Dr. Robinson. Mr. Gaines seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 7 – Executive Session

Executive session began at 11:10 p.m.

MOTION: Mr. Lagana moved to adjourn. Mr. Nanavaty seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 8 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:00 a.m.

Questions raised: High School student-to-computer ratio  
Report on special education costs and excess cost grant

Respectfully submitted:

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Debbie Leidlein  
Secretary