

**Merrimack School Board Meeting
January 4, 2010
Merrimack High School**

PUBLIC MEETING MINUTES

PRESENT: Chair Vaillancourt, Vice Chair Thornton, Board members Swonger, Robertson-Smith, and Coburn, Superintendent Chiafery, Assistant Superintendent McLaughlin, Business Administrator Shevenell and Student Representative Ortega.

1. Call To Order

Chair Vaillancourt called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Approval of December 15, 2009 and December 21, 2009 Minutes

Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Board member Robertson-Smith) to approve the December 15, 2009 minutes.

Board member Swonger requested the following changes to the December 15, 2009 minutes.

- Page 2 of 8, last paragraph, last sentence "...parking lot has..." should read "...parking lot at RFS has..."
- Page 3 of 8, 5th paragraph from the bottom, "expensed" should read "expended"
- Page 5 of 8, 6th paragraph from the bottom, "rational" should read "rationale"
- Page 6 of 8, 5th paragraph, "conscience" should read "conscious"
- Page 7 of 8, item 4, 2nd paragraph, second sentence should read, "He reported the Planning and Building Committee chairman planned to compose a letter of clarification to the Planning Board."
- Page 7 of 8, item 4, last paragraph should be changed to read "Chairman Vaillancourt stated that the Planning Board believed that by using existing space for the central office and special services offices that it would come at no cost. She stated that it was not an accurate assumption"

Chair Vaillancourt requested the following change to the December 15, 2009 minutes.

- Page 5 of 8, 7th paragraph from the bottom, "...an increase..." should read "...a health insurance rate increase..."
- Page 7 of 8, 3rd paragraph "...Board's version." Should read "...Board's recommendations."
- Page 7 of 8, item 4, 7th paragraph, second sentence, "...one large roof..." should read "one large District-wide roof..."

Vice Chair Thornton requested the following change to the December 15, 2009 minutes.

- Page 3 of 8, 2nd paragraph, "... "grades K-4"." Should read "... "grades 1-4"."
- Page 8 of 8, 5th paragraph, "...within \$1 million below..." should read "...within a \$1 million increase from..."

The motion passed as amended 5-0-0.

Vice Chair Thornton moved (seconded by Board member Coburn) to approve the December 21, 2009 minutes.

Board member Swonger requested the following change to the December 21, 2009 minutes.

- Page 2 of 7, item 5, first paragraph "Tracey Boll" should read "Tracy Bull"
- Page 3 of 7, item 6, second paragraph "...Tousseau for..." should read "...Tousseau, Maintenance Director, for..."
- Page 6 of 7, item 9b, second sentence "responsively" should read "responsibly"

The motion passed as amended 5-0-0.

3. Public Participation

Jim Roy, 97 Belmont Dr, discussed the reduction of staff in the District. He commended the Board for being fiscally cautious but felt that the Board did not consider all impacts of those decisions. He believed that there would be consequences in the math and English programs, loss of electives, and an increase in study halls. He also noted that the staff reductions would impact the coaching staff of four team sports as well as extracurricular activities. He encouraged the Board to do due-diligence and inquire about the impact of their decisions.

Laurie Rothhaus, 14 Kittredge Lane, discussed the teacher cuts. It was important to her that Merrimack maintains its high quality schools and educational system. She felt teachers were the backbone of our schools and our most valuable resource. It was to Merrimack's advantage to keep teacher ratios competitive. She asked the School Board to reconsider the teacher cuts.

Shannon Barnes, 55 Lawrence Road, discussed her concern over an email she received from a School Board member regarding the teacher cuts at the middle school. She also discussed the teacher cuts and felt that the projected ratio of 27:1 was consistent with what other grades were experiencing. She felt it was important to know that these decisions were not made lightly or without discussion with the school administrators.

Dayna Bergin, 1 Holly Lane, discussed her concern with the cuts at the middle school and felt that 28 kids in a class was unacceptable. She asked the Board to revisit this and discuss possible alternatives.

Loren Coburn, 8 Windsor Drive, discussed the teacher cuts and the tax impact of those cuts. He stated that the teacher cuts would save Merrimack residents approximately \$3 per month. He asked the Board to keep his money and increase the quality of the education by keeping the teachers and to fix the roofs that need to be done.

Rebecca Martel, 76 Patten Road, discussed the student to teacher ratios. She noted that she was an educator in another district where the size of the classes were 30:1 and felt that number was too high. She requested that the Board revisit the teacher cuts because they were unacceptable to her.

Vicky Amodio, 157 Baboosic Lake Rd., discussed the crossing guard positions that were cut from the budget. She felt that the crossing guards were very valuable to the bus drivers to help get the busses in and out of traffic. She requested that the Board revisit the late buses as a possible alternative to eliminating the crossing guards.

4. Consent Agenda

- Approval of New Policy
 - Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect

Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Board member Coburn) to approve the Consent Agenda.

The motion passed 5-0-0.

5. Information Regarding Bonding the Proposed Reeds Ferry Elementary School Roof Project

Business Administrator Shevenell discussed the option of bonding the proposed Reeds Ferry Elementary School (RFS) roof project for the Board's consideration. He reported that the amount of the bond would

be \$567,370, the term would five years and the interest would total \$60,207. He reviewed the estimated bond schedule.

Board member Robertson-Smith asked what it would look like going forward as other roofing projects came up because it would seem like building a roofing reserve would help the next project.

Business Administrator Shevenell responded it would depend on how many roofing projects were grouped together. He felt combining more projects would be the route to go if bonding was the decision of the Board. He added that another approach was to build a capital reserve to fund roofing projects and eliminate the ongoing debt.

Board member Robertson-Smith noted that the concept of building a capital reserve fund was a great idea but was not practiced in Merrimack and that concerned her.

Board member Swonger asked how other districts have handled roofing projects in terms of bonding.

Business Administrator Shevenell responded that the Londonderry School District's roofing projects had been done in conjunction with other renovation projects and the entire project was bonded. He added that Londonderry put \$500,000-\$600,000 per year into their capital reserve for roofing.

Vice Chair Thornton noted that she would not support bonding this roof project because it did not make sense to spend an extra \$60,000.

Board member Coburn concurred with Vice Chair Thornton and noted she would not support bonding one roof.

Chair Vaillancourt felt that bonding might be an option if there were no other roofing projects coming up and if the state of economics were better. She added that there were a lot of roofing projects down the road so bonding this roofing project at this time did not make financial or logistical sense to her.

6. Discussion Regarding the 2010-2011 Budget

Board member Coburn noted that she hoped to clarify five issues regarding the 2010-2011 budget.

Board member Coburn discussed student to teacher ratios. She saw that there was a fair balance in the second and fourth grades at the Mastricola Complex. She presented ratios for grades one and three at Mastricola Elementary School (MES). She noted that sometimes a class of 24 students felt like 32 students and sometimes a class of 24 felt like 12. She reviewed the ratios at Reeds Ferry Elementary School (RFS) and Thorntons Ferry Elementary School (TFS) and concluded that the elementary schools were a mixed bag. She felt that if that was what we were using as our projections and we were talking about making drastic cuts at Merrimack Middle School (MMS), we will have to start thinking about adding teachers back as this bubble rises and the students move up. She noted that the grade five ratio will be at 28:1 with no change in personnel this year and was just due to the rising population of students from grade four into grade five. She discussed the ratios at the middle school and noted that there would be 7 more students per classroom, a 27:1 ratio, which they wouldn't have had without the cuts. She felt that a 27:1 ratio for students rising from an upper elementary school into a middle school environment was too many. She was concerned that students would be in more Cluster Academic Instructional Periods (CAIP). She noted that she spoke with Merrimack Middle School Principal, Debbie Woelflein, and asked her what would happen to the World Language and math programs as a result of the cuts. Principal Woelflein responded that they could be creative and that specialists may be considered for CAIP classes. Board member Coburn added that one of her complaints with the cuts was that the District Administration did not look at things like adding literacy support, bringing other people into the

classroom, offering more time for teachers to work with small groups, teaming or looping students, or rearranging clusters. She noted she received the cut list on 3:30 in the afternoon on the day of the December 21st School Board meeting and there was no way to contact administrators to see what alternatives had been considered. She admired Administration's support of the School Board and the community's desire to tighten reins but felt we were short-sighted.

Board member Coburn discussed ratios at Merrimack High School (MHS) in English, social studies, science and mathematics. She did not feel that, as a teacher, she would be able to properly give timely and accurate English instruction with a class size of 32:1. She wondered about science lab equipment and space needs. She felt that the standard ninth grade math class sizes were well above what Principal Johnson and Ms. Smith desired. Past minutes would show that when the Board talked about projections and enrollments for the high school, the District had been moving toward more advanced placement and honors classes but it was clear to her in the numbers that she has received that we were not making any progress in those upper areas.

Board member Coburn discussed the difficulties that projections of student-teacher ratios have through demographic reports. She understood that we were seeing declining enrollments and that we were currently in a downward trend but the real trend comes back up at some point. She noted that the New Hampshire School Boards Association's (NHSBA) enrollment projections were calculated by last year's average, by a five year average, and by a three-year weighted average. She noted that there were five things that were wrong with trying to use these numbers as a predictor: no external or environmental influences were included; true statistics were only through 2006; there was no crystal ball for out-of-state births; the bell curve rises for 2012 for first grade enrollments; only one year of four projected years given was accurate.

Board member Coburn discussed the reality of the additions to personnel that the School Board does each year based on either demographic errors or other external factors. She noted that for four of the last five years we have added positions back to the budget after the Board has cut them and the budget has been approved by the voters. We found there were errors in the demographics; there were influxes for some inexplicable reason; there were external factors that could have contributed to the middle and high school ratios; we have changing needs; and we have added back positions due to new grant funding.

Board member Coburn discussed the tax rate. She reported that the impact of the budget as proposed in the initial round was a \$.24 per \$1,000 valuation increase which equals \$24 on a \$100,000 property or \$72 on a \$300,000 property. After the budget cuts, the tax impact was a \$.12 per \$1,000 valuation increase or \$36 on a \$300,000 property. She concluded that the tax rate was going to go up \$72 but with the cuts, it will be going up \$36 for a savings of \$36, or \$3 per month. The reality was that you have not saved the taxpayers a tremendous amount of money, the taxes were still going up, and it puts kids at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School in a situation where asbestos was still not being removed and was known to be hazardous and we have put ratios over the top not only at the middle school but at the high school as well. She added that she would be loath to hear that any citizen of Merrimack that would actually be in a position to lose their house because of an increase of \$36 in their tax bill.

Board member Coburn gave a historical analysis of warrant articles and noted that over the last few years we have seen no difference between the operating budget as it was proposed to voters versus the default budget that was greater than \$491,000 approved. She pointed out that the budget at its highest, at \$883,939 below default, it was rejected by the voters. She noted that this year we were asking for a budget that was \$1,286,053 below default. She stated that she was not a mathematician but \$1,286,053 was a whole lot more than the \$883,000 that the voters earlier rejected.

Board member Coburn noted that she planned to oppose the budget in its entirety because of the asbestos at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School and because of the ratio changes at the middle school and high school. She added that she felt having over 30 students per classroom was unacceptable. She noted that she was amenable to the will of the Board but would welcome further discussion regarding the position cuts and the asbestos abatement.

Board member Swonger noted that he wanted to dispel the ideas that the changes at the middle school were developed by the administration quickly and without looking at other options. He noted that while not all Board members availed themselves the opportunity after receiving the budget book, he and at least one other board member did spend considerable time talking with the middle school administration and the District Administration regarding how to deal with the declining enrollments and there were many options discussed. There was a lot of discussion to be had if one sought it out. He felt thoroughly satisfied that these were changes that the District Administration and the leadership of the schools were comfortable with. He as a board member felt the need to balance the fiscal realities of the budget with educational realities of what was good, right and proper and what he wanted personally. He reported that while the state average class size for grades five through eight was 20.5:1, local districts had between 22:1 and 27.7:1. It was a question of how low do we want to get before we deal with the declining enrollments. He added that he was comfortable with 27 students in a class and felt Merrimack would be able to deliver a high quality education at the middle school.

Board member Swonger spoke in regards to class sizes at the high school and he questioned where the numbers came from because the number of students enrolled in each course next year was unknown and because changes were always being made to adjust to differences in enrollment and leveling. He felt that it was a bit hysterical to be stating that there would be 34 students in every world history class. He added when it came to demographics, it was true that the projections were not ironclad and were valid for three years at best. When we were talking about the middle school we were not just talking about projections based on births but we were also talking about the known quantities of enrolled student in all lower grades and there was no reason to disbelieve what we see in hard numbers in our own elementary schools.

Board member Swonger discussed Board member Coburn's remarks regarding the tax rate. He understood that incremental increases to the tax rate were always small and may not be that much out of each individual pocket but over time it adds up. He did not look at this budget with a specific number in mind but from the perspective of what was right for the District and just because it was a small individual impact did not mean that it was the right thing to do.

Board member Swonger noted that he felt the hysteria over the asbestos at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School was being overblown. He added that the District's Director of Maintenance had already assured the Board that the asbestos was not an acute problem. He did not believe that any board member asked administration to take the asbestos removal project out of the budget but it was something that they did on their own accord.

Board member Swonger commented on Board member Coburn's discussion regarding the history of the warrant articles. The differences between the default budgets and the proposed budgets were interesting but were arbitrary because default budgets included things that the Board could not control including contractual obligations and the price of oil.

Board member Swonger presented enrollment numbers and budget data from surrounding districts. He saw that there was a widespread recognition that this was time to be frugal and conservative and he felt the same way. He stated that he was not interested in revisiting the decisions made last week. He believed that it was the Board's standard policy, procedure, and part of the Code of Ethics that they do not revisit decisions unless there was new information to be had.

Board member Coburn respectfully clarified a few points to Board member Swonger. In regards to the high school enrollment figures, she noted for the public that the numbers provided were based on the specific cuts made by the School Board and as those teachers were eliminated from the budget, the kids need to go somewhere else and it meant that they were able to project that next year the class sizes would increase. She commented on the point stated that there was no reason to disbelieve numbers. She felt that just because it was printed, did not mean it was true. Thirdly, she commented on the taxes and stated that she never said that \$36 was a small amount but recalled that she stated that taxes were still going up and they were just not going up \$36 more. Fourthly, in regards to her conversation on the default vs. proposed budgets, the reason to look at the default budget was because this district had a history of approving contracts and we owed it to the voters to honor the contract that they have included and that includes healthcare and retirements. She commented on the implication that no one does research and reported that on the Department of Education website you will find state average in per pupil expenditures and that Merrimack came in over only \$100-\$150 more than the average. She noted that Bedford spent \$2,000-\$3,000 over the state average, Londonderry was over the state average and Hudson was just below the state average.

Board member Robertson-Smith reiterated that she was not in favor of these cuts at the last Board meeting. She had great concerns about how they would affect the enrollments in the classes because there was no way to make these kinds of cuts and not affect the quality of education. One of her biggest concerns in eliminating an entire middle school team was that Principal Woelflein initially asked that her teams be kept intact. She noted that she had too much respect for the teachers to raise their class sizes in a time where there were so many expectations of them. She felt it was about the children and the children would not benefit from the decisions the Board has made.

Vice Chair Thornton noted she would have preferred to have Board member Coburn's information to follow along with because it was a lot of information. She did not recall any MHS class sizes higher than 24 or 26 and she asked Board member Coburn for clarification on the class size of 34 that she spoke of.

Board member Coburn responded that the 34:1 ratio would be a result of the teacher cuts.

Vice Chair Thornton felt that if an administrator tells the Board that they can absorb the cuts, she would believe them because they were the experts and they should be giving the Board the information needed in order to make the right decision. She did not feel that a 27:1 ratio at the middle school was outrageous. She had seen bigger class sizes at lower grade levels. She noted that this new information did not change her opinion on the cuts and she had confidence in Administration.

Student Representative Ortega discussed the elimination of the business position at the high school. She noted the teacher being eliminated was the DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) coach and ran the school store. She noted that these activities would cease with the elimination of that teacher.

7. Draft Warrant Articles for the 2010 Warrant

Business Administrator Shevenell presented and read aloud the draft warrant articles.

Chair Vaillancourt requested that the Board move all articles forward except articles 3 and 4 with the expectation that the Board would move those articles forward at the next School Board meeting.

Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Vice Chair Thornton) to move forward Article 2 as written.

The motion passed 5-0-0.

Board member Coburn moved (seconded by Vice Chair Thornton) to consider Article 5 as written only to pertain to the raising and appropriating the project in one year and that the Board did not consider Article 5 as written to bond over five years.

Board member Coburn clarified that her motion was to restrict consideration for bonding the roofing project at Reeds Ferry Elementary School.

The motion passed 5-0-0.

Vice Chair Thornton moved (seconded by Board member Swonger) to move Article 6 as written.

The motion passed 3-2-0 with Board members Robertson-Smith and Coburn in opposition.

8. Merrimack School District Budget Committee Meeting Schedule

Superintendent Chiafery outlined the School District Budget Committee meeting schedule and the agenda items to be discussed.

9. Information Regarding School District-Based H₁N₁ Clinic

Superintendent Chiafery reported that she had been working in collaboration with Fire Chief Currier to host an H₁N₁ Clinic in late January or early February. She noted that a survey was going to be sent out next week to gather data to assist in planning the event.

Business Administrator Shevenell added that Chief Currier would be providing an ambulance and EMT personnel for the clinic. The District would be responsible for additional personnel including four to six school nurses, ten to twelve students, and six to ten adults.

Superintendent Chiafery noted that no Board action needed to be taken on this.

Vice Chair Thornton asked if there would be costs associated with this clinic.

Superintendent Chiafery responded that the only cost would be for hiring the nurses.

Business Administrator Shevenell added that there was the need for a custodian but there would probably be one on site already for some other activity.

10. Other

a) Correspondence

Chair Vaillancourt reported a correspondence from Care Plus Ambulance Service announcing a CPR Certification course on January 9th and 16th at 9:00 a.m. at the Merrimack Fire Station. For more information call Tina Jackson at 424-8910 extension 313.

Chair Vaillancourt reported an email to the entire Board from Pat McGrath, former School Board member, raising his questions and concerns with the proposed cuts at the high school and how they would affect the New Hampshire Scholars program. He was encouraged to speak with Superintendent Chiafery.

Board member Coburn asked that Mr. McGrath's email be read into the record.

Chair Vaillancourt noted that the email would be read into the record at the next Board meeting.

b) Comments

Chair Vaillancourt noted that there would be a workshop on Cyberbullying on Wednesday, January 13, 2010 at 6:30 p.m. at the middle school. This workshop was open to parents of students of all ages.

11. New Business

Superintendent Chiafery requested the pleasure of the Board for the next meeting date.

The Board members discussed their availability and concluded that the next School Board meeting would be held on January 19th.

12. Committee Reports

No committee reports.

13. Public Comments on Agenda Items

There were no public comments on agenda items.

14. Manifest

At 9:35 p.m. Vice Chair Thornton moved (seconded by Board member Swonger) to enter non-public session per RSA 91-A:3, II (a) (b) (c).

The motion passed 5-0-0 by roll call vote.

At 9:48 p.m., Vice Chair Thornton moved (seconded by Board member Swonger), to adjourn the meeting.

The motion passed 5-0-0.