

**Merrimack School Board Meeting
February 15, 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 7:30 p.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Approval of February 1, 2010 Minutes

Board member Coburn moved (seconded by Board member Robertson-Smith) to approve the February 1, 2010 minutes.

Board member Coburn requested the following changes to the February 1, 2010 minutes.

- Page 4 of 11, last paragraph, “acknowledge” should be changed to “acknowledged”
- Page 5 of 11, 2nd paragraph, 1st sentence, “yea” should be changed to “year”

Board member Swonger requested the following changes to the February 1, 2010 minutes.

- Page 7 of 11, 3rd paragraph from the bottom “analysis” should be changed to “analyze”

Board member Robertson-Smith requested the following changes to the February 1, 2010 minutes.

- Page 8 of 11, 3rd last paragraph “please” should be changed to “pleased”

Chair Vaillancourt requested the following changes to the February 1, 2010 minutes.

- All acronyms in the minutes be spelled out
- Page 7 of 11, add Mark Merrifield’s title to the minutes
- Page 9 of 11, 3rd paragraph, check the spelling of “prerogative”

The motion passed as amended 5-0-0.

3. Public Participation

Andy Schneider, 34 Woodward Road, spoke as a citizen regarding the budget cycle. He believed that the venue that people chose to voice their issues was the wrong place. He recommended that the Board pay attention to the voters regarding the staff cuts because he believed that policy driven decisions needed to be made either through this forum or through the voting process. He also encouraged the Board to pay attention to their votes tonight on the operating budget warrant article because it may sway the way that the vote goes through.

Debbie McLaughlin, President of Merrimack Teachers Association (MTA), discussed the reasons she went before the Budget Committee with budget concerns. She noted that the MTA went to the Budget Committee because the School Board had already made their decisions and it was apparent that the majority of the Board members were in favor of 27 students in a classroom and felt that no programs would be affected by the cuts. The MTA felt that many programs would be affected and they wanted to bring it to the attention of the public, the School Board and the Budget Committee.

Pat McGrath, 7 Peter Road, spoke in support of the two petitioned warrant articles and asked the Board for their support. He felt that our students needed to be stronger than they have ever been in science and math because science and math were the focal point in our large competitive economies of China and India. He

saw great value in keeping the educators because the positions impact everything we are trying to do in our school, in our state and country.

4. Acceptance of Gifts and Grants under \$5,000

- IBM Corporation to Merrimack High School for \$1,000

Business Administrator Shevenell presented the gift from IBM Corporation and noted that it would support the biodiesel program.

Board member Coburn moved (seconded by Board member Swonger) to accept the Gifts/Grants under \$5,000.

Chair Vaillancourt thanked IBM for their generosity.

The motion passed 5-0-0.

5. Consent Agenda

- a) Approval of Student Conduct Policy
- b) Approval to name the Butterfly Garden at Reeds Ferry School in honor of Barbara DeVore

Vice Chair Thornton moved (seconded by Board member Robertson-Smith) to approve the Consent Agenda.

The motion passed 5-0-0.

6. Results of NH Youth Risk Behavior Survey

Assistant Superintendent McLaughlin recalled the history of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

Mary Bubnis, Education Consultant from the NH Department of Education (NHDOE), discussed the purpose of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. She noted that it was designed by the Center for Disease Control to see what the prevalence was in health risk behaviors so they could make funding decisions. Local and state agencies also used the survey to understand the risk behaviors and to get data to secure funding for programs to address the issues. She noted that three implementations of the survey were suggested in order to determine trends. She added that most behaviors were preventable. She encouraged the Board to look at the ten-year trend report because almost all of the risk behaviors have improved over time.

Ms. Bubnis reviewed some of the key findings from 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

Assistant Superintendent McLaughlin added that he was anxious for the Drug Advisory Council to look at the results.

Chair Vaillancourt noted that the results were very helpful to the Drug Advisory Committee and that they used the results to drive their logic model. She noted that the results of the survey helped to acquire a grant to fund a school resource officer at the middle school.

Vice Chair Thornton asked how to find the trend report on the New Hampshire Department of Education's website.

Ms. Bubnis responded that the results could be found by going to www.ed.state.nh.us/education, click on "Programs" from the list on the left of the page and select 'H' for "Health".

7. Presentation of Terracotta Warrior from Merrimack Chamber of Commerce to Merrimack School District (to be located at Merrimack High School)

Debbie Courtemanche, Executive Director of the Merrimack Chamber of Commerce (MCC), announced that the MCC would like to present Merrimack High School (MHS) with a gift of a replica warrior statue. The MCC chose to donate the statue to MHS because of its strong partnership with the city of Tanguu in the People's Republic of China. She noted that the MCC received the statue as a gift from Citslink International which coordinates business ambassador trips to China. She noted that the MCC was conducting their first delegation to China in October, 2010 through Citslink. One hundred travelers from Merrimack and surrounding communities would be participating in the trip. She gave a history of the warrior statues.

Principal Johnson added that he felt this was a wonderful gift that symbolized how far the Chinese Cultural Exchange Program had come and it also cemented the partnership that the District has with the MCC. He reported that Priscilla Croteau, Administrative Secretary to Principal Johnson, was recognized by the Nashua Telegraph as the driving force behind the exchange program. He was pleased to accept this wonderful piece of art.

Board member Robertson-Smith noted that she was able to see the warriors while in China and felt the gift would give students and the community additional perception of what it was like to go to the burial pits where hundreds of these statues were exposed. She felt this was a great piece of history and would hopefully encourage students to explore beyond what they were learning about in the classrooms.

Student Representative Ortega added that this would be good for the students in world history classes when learning about the terracotta statues.

Chair Vaillancourt noted that this would be enjoyed by the entire community. She felt it was exciting for the MCC and Merrimack as a whole to have such a huge response to the trip.

Principal Johnson added that enjoyed working with Ms. Courtemanche and he predicted that this program would continue to grow by leaps and bounds in the future.

Ms. Courtemanche added that the MCC hoped to have MHS host an event for the travelers to meet the students and teachers who have participated in the exchange to learn how to be gracious guests in China.

Principal Johnson noted that all of the students and teachers that he has approached responded that they would be happy to speak to the group.

Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Vice Chair Thornton) to accept the gift of a replica terracotta warrior statue from the Merrimack Chamber of Commerce.

The motion passed 5-0-0.

8. Consideration of Petitioned Warrant Articles

Business Administrator Shevenell reported that there were two petitioned warrant articles added to the ballot. He noted that Petitioned Warrant Article 6 related to adding back the math teaching position at Merrimack High School and Petitioned Warrant Article 7 related to reinstating the four teaching positions at Merrimack Middle School.

Business Administrator Shevenell read Petitioned Warrant Article 6 aloud.

Petitioner Robin Calvino, 18 Courtland Drive, spoke to her belief that a math teacher position needed to be reinstated. She felt that the math lab should be continued to be offered every period of the day and that the math lab could not be maintained with the elimination of the position. She felt that the

continuation of the math lab would save the tax payers money in the long run as there would be fewer students repeating math classes and more students would graduate with their own classes. She reported that every student who attended an extra year of high school due to the lack of credits, known as super seniors, cost the taxpayers approximately \$9,000. She noted that there were currently about 18 super seniors at the high school. She was respectfully submitting the petition to reinstate the math teaching position and asked the Board for their support. She added that the person being eliminated was also the track coach and was a true role model for the students.

Board member Coburn moved (seconded by Board member Robertson-Smith) to move Petitioned Warrant Article 6 forward to the ballot as printed.

Board member Coburn spoke to her motion and noted that this was another valid petition being brought forward by the citizens of Merrimack. It showed that the public had the desire and the need to weigh in on this. She noted that she was in favor of Petitioned Warrant Article 6 because it was addressed one of the cuts which she has vehemently spoken against. She believed this was a viable means for the public to weigh in on this position.

Board member Robertson-Smith distributed data to the Board showing what math enrollment numbers would look like with one less teacher. She reviewed the information and felt it was disturbing that class sizes would increase and that the math labs would not be offered. She reminded the Board that, in making cuts in 2007, the Board initially cut an assistant principal position and after a petition article was brought before the Board. The Board then voted 4-0-0 to support the petition warrant article to reinstate the position. She encouraged the Board to consider supporting the Petitioned Warrant Article 6 for reinstatement of the math teacher at Merrimack High School.

Board member Swonger asked for clarification on the math lab offerings as a result of the budget cuts.

Superintendent Chiafery responded that the high school administration would not be able to say definitively until they have preenrollment figures in March. She thought it would be a diminished offering. She noted that another alternative would be for Gateways students to tutor students who sought help, as done in the past.

Board member Swonger asked how many students took advantage of the math lab.

Superintendent Chiafery responded that between eight and ten students per day took advantage of the math by the end of the quarter.

Board member Swonger noted that he came to a different conclusion in looking at this math data. He noticed that college prep classes were getting larger. He expected college prep students to be able to handle 23 students per class, which was well within the guidelines for that level. He felt that class sizes of 20 or 17 were acceptable in high school. He also noted that these numbers used this year's population and reiterated that projections expected 25 fewer students at the high school next year. He did not see anything unreasonable in the data and he very much appreciated the support for the individual involved, but it was not a basis for a decision on the budget. He concluded that based on the educational numbers he could not support Petitioned Warrant Article 6.

Vice Chair Thornton expressed her concerns about the math labs and noted that Principal Johnson stated that it would not be going away but may be reduced in number. Another issue she had was that the numbers were inaccurate because they were based on this year's enrollments projected to next year. She had a problem with distributing information without manipulation by administration because there was no way to tell if these numbers would be accurate or not. She asked if the super seniors were there because of math specifically or for other reasons.

Ms. Calvino responded that super seniors were there because they lacked credits in general.

Board member Robertson-Smith noted that she asked Mr. Johnson the status of the math labs and his response was that the math and English labs would not be offered, not even on a limited basis.

Chair Vaillancourt added that Principal Johnson stated publically at a Budget Committee meeting that while the math labs would not be able to be offered every period of every day the administration was looking into the possibility of offering it on some level.

Chair Vaillancourt thanked Ms. Calvino for coming forward. She reiterated that the numbers were for students enrolled this year and were based on this year's schedule. She added that the goal was to keep the standard class sizes low. She was confident that the standard classes would be at an acceptable level. She added that 23 students in a college prep or honors level class were great numbers. She felt that the numbers that Board member Robertson-Smith brought before the Board tonight supported not adding the position back in. She noted that she was sure that the individual person was very well-respected but felt it was not a basis to make this decision.

Board member Coburn reminded the Board that the motion on the table was to move Petitioned Warrant Article 7 forward as printed and to accept it as written so the voters may weigh in on it.

Board member Swonger responded that the job of the Board was to recommend or not recommend Petitioned Warrant Article 7 and the Board could not change the wording. He added that the Board was voting on whether it supported the Petitioned Warrant Article 7 and not whether it would go to the Warrant. It would go on the warrant regardless.

The motion failed 2-3-0. Board members Swonger, Thornton and Vaillancourt voted in opposition.

Business Administrator Shevenell read aloud Petitioned Warrant Article 7.

Petitioner Dayna Bergin, 1 Holly Lane, noted that Gretchen Beard would be speaking on behalf of the Petitioned Warrant Article 7.

Gretchen Beard, 21 Cabot Road, spoke on behalf of Petitioned Warrant Article 7. She noted that one of the reasons she and her family chose Merrimack as their home was because of the efforts by the District leadership. She had yet to hear a concrete plan on how this reduction would work and still implement the team model that has been so successful at the middle school. She felt the elimination of an entire teaching team would affect the quality of education the students receive. She appreciated the desire of the Board to curb costs in difficult financial times but cuts that unfairly impacted students in one grade to keep a total budget number under an imaginary line was not the answer. She felt that seventh grade was a critical transition year that set the pace for how well they adjust and transition into high school. She asked the voters of Merrimack to consider Petitioned Warrant Article 7 and to look beyond saving a few dollars this year that could conceivably result in higher tax payer costs in the coming years due to the potential for more student class failures and more dismal NECAP scores. She encouraged the Board and administration to reconsider these cuts next year when the enrollment numbers were lower and the cuts would be more equitable and less disruptive to the middle school model.

Board member Robertson-Smith moved (seconded by Board member Swonger) to forward Petitioned Warrant Article 7 to the ballot.

Board member Robertson-Smith spoke to her motion and noted that she felt cuts would need to be made at the middle school in the future but eliminating an entire team was not the responsible response. She felt the Board needed a well-defined plan and needed to look at how to address it at all levels. She felt it would be a better viable option to give administration the time to work out the best possible solution instead of just putting them in a position to make it work.

Board member Swonger noted that keeping the team in place would have been the easiest thing for him to do to as he has a child entering the seventh grade next year but it was not something that he could look at personally. He was confident that administration would come up with a good plan for the middle school. He did not expect any opinions of the Board to change tonight and he has not seen any factual information come forward to make him think that this was not doable. He would not be recommending Petitioned Warrant Article 7.

Board member Coburn spoke in support of Petitioned Warrant Article 7. She noted that she would be recommending this petitioned warrant article because those cuts came in the second round of cuts on December 21st and she was not in support of any of the cuts made that evening. She believed that the voters needed to weigh in on this. She did not believe that scheduling in philosophical changes should come about because of the budget cycle or analysis to save tax dollars that were not straight across the board. She felt Principal Woelflein would do her best to make it work should Petitioned Warrant Article 7 fail. She was not convinced that this was in the best interest of the students and teachers of Merrimack. She believed that the administration needed an additional year for a thoughtful presentation as well as the buy-in from the faculty and staff members at the middle school.

Chair Vaillancourt thanked Ms. Bergin and Ms. Beard for coming forward. She asked for due respect from the audience and noted that the Board had spent months deliberating and talking with the administration. She wanted voices of the public to be heard whether the Board agreed or not, because it was an important part of the process.

Chair Vaillancourt stated that she did not believe this was about a philosophical change and just because you have a schedule done one way for a number of years, does not mean that it cannot be done differently. She reviewed demographic enrollment data for the middle school and noted the decreasing enrollment numbers. She felt that the reduction of staff was a tough decision. She stated that she was trying to balance the needs of the town along with providing the best education possible. She was confident that Principal Woelflein would make it work. She noted that even with the proposed cuts, the budget was still increasing almost one million dollars over last year's budget. She added that since 2004/2005 enrollment had gone down over 500 students and the budget had increased over eleven million dollars.

The motion failed 2-3-0. Board members Swonger, Thornton and Vaillancourt were in opposition.

9. Reconsideration of the District's Operating Budget as Approved by the Budget Committee

Business Administrator Shevenell noted that Warrant Article 8 was amended by the Budget Committee in the amount of \$22,918 to reinstate a half-time business teacher at the high school for an operating budget of \$64,173,352.

Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Vice Chair Thornton) to recommend Warrant Article 8.

Board member Swonger spoke to his motion and noted that he appreciated all of the work of the Budget Committee this year. He felt the discussion regarding the half time business position would be a discussion for the Board after the election. He added that though this wasn't the exact budget the School Board put forth, he felt it was reasonable and was going to support it.

Vice Chair Thornton noted that she would vote to recommend the operating budget. She wanted people to understand that she voted in opposition of the budget at the Budget Committee meeting because she wanted to uphold the budget that the School Board put forth.

Board member Robertson-Smith noted that in the enrollment information requested by Chair Vaillancourt there was no information on the music department.

Chair Vaillancourt explained that she requested information on those programs to show what administration was looking at when they proposed their cuts for that position. She added that she included the tech education and art information because administration had testified that those were two programs that students were turned away from every year.

Board member Robertson-Smith noted that she requested enrollment information for the music program because she felt that when discussing class sizes the Board needed to be reminded of the music department enrollments. She shared the music program enrollment information with the Board and noted that the music course enrollments were below 20 with most below 10 students per class. She felt that if the Board was going to be looking at small class sizes, the Board should look at the numbers for all departments.

Vice Chair Thornton felt this information would have been valuable to have during budget deliberations.

Board member Robertson-Smith explained that she felt a better process was needed because she had a problem that the cuts came forward and the public had no opportunity to give input. This was very different from the 2006/2007 year when the Board brought things forward. She felt that if the Board was going to look at numbers, all the numbers need to be looked at.

Vice Chair Thornton noted that she disagreed that the process was completely different this year. Since she has been on the Board, there have been three different variations of the same process. She noted that the process was always the same but how the Board went about it varied depending on the Chairperson. This year each Board member had an opportunity to weigh in publically at our meeting in the fall to explain to administration what they were looking for. In December the Board received the budget books, had work sessions with administration to ask questions. The Board had an opportunity to make final adjustments before giving the budget to the Budget Committee. This year the final adjustments came, by request of the Board, from the administration. She felt it was important for people to know that the second round of cuts came as a recommendation from the administration. The administration had the information needed to give the Board a recommendation rather than the Board pouring through the budget books and finding what it thought to be appropriate budget cuts. She felt the process worked better this year.

Board member Coburn noted she felt that the information regarding the music tied into physical education. The Board doesn't see the entire spectrum of elective courses. When students have study halls, it means there was nowhere for them to go in some instances. She noted, in regards to the process, the Board got the budget message in the fall and she believed that it was misconstrued. The Board heard that the District was to come in below default yet again and three specific areas: the furniture plan, the technology plan, and the maintenance and building infrastructure were to be adhered to. When the Board came to that junction on December 21st it would have been nice to have this information earlier. She noted that having received everything at 3:30 p.m. was only time enough for her to look back at what the Board had done at this magnitude of cuts. She recalled that back in 2006 all 29 positions to be cut were laid out as of December 4th and that people had ample time to speak to it. It was not rushed over the holiday season and the administration was readily available to the Board as well as to the Budget Committee. The Board didn't discuss music or athletics. Those areas tended to be hot button items in the past. She believed that information provided in the Board's packet was reflective of only a partial representation of the electives which was difficult to absorb at the last minute.

Chair Vaillancourt reiterated that her intent for including the information in the packets was because the Board had heard from administration that those were the programs that students got turned away from. She added that she wanted people to be able to see what the numbers were for the business program so everyone could see where administration was coming from. She added that information included in a Board packet was not last minute.

Board member Coburn responded that the music department information was difficult for her to absorb. The Board did not have physical education data which made the information just a heap of paper.

Board member Swonger spoke to the notion that the cuts were done last minute. He recalled budget discussions from 2007/2008 where cuts were given at the last minute. He did not recall anyone objecting to getting cuts at the last minute. He explained that in 2007 it was the exact same process as this year with the exception being that this year administration was given parameters within which to work. He felt that this was nothing new or out of the ordinary and painting it as such tries to give it some nefarious quality that just doesn't exist.

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

10. Warrant Presentations for Deliberative Session on March 2, 2010

Pat Heinrich, School District Clerk, noted that she would be moderating the Deliberative Session.

The Board discussed the assignments of the warrant presentations.

Mrs. Heinrich noted that the preparations for the deliberative session were under way. She added this was not the first School District meeting that she has moderated.

11. Scheduling the 2010 Graduation Date

Superintendent Chiafery noted that graduation would be held on Saturday, June 12th at 10:00 am.

12. Reconsideration of the Proposed 2010-2011 School Calendar

Superintendent Chiafery discussed nine years of historical attendance data surrounding the Thanksgiving holiday as requested at the last meeting.

Board member Swonger added that it did not seem to matter in terms of instruction whether students had a two-day or three-day week. He felt that when Labor Day was late, it made sense to try to pull in the end date. He stated that next year he did not have a problem with a two-day week.

Superintendent Chiafery responded to a question raised at the last meeting regarding the half-day workshop. She noted that there had only been two half-day workshops and the data was anecdotal and there was not enough of it. She noted that administration had asked for half-day trainings to enable consistent education. Based on the review of this year, most educators say it was productive.

Board member Robertson-Smith requested that the calendar be placed on the March 1st consent agenda.

13. Other

a) Correspondence

Chair Vaillancourt noted

- an email from Rosemary Rung regarding the communication survey
- an email from Maureen Trimper regarding the proposed budget cuts
- an email from Mark Merrifield and Joanne Wegman, NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges) Self-Study Co-Chairs, requesting that the Board set aside March 14th for the committee visit.

There was a brief discussion regarding the entering of emails to other committees into the School Board minutes.

b) Comments

Chair Vaillancourt noted that the filing period for open school district positions was February 24th through March 5th. She reviewed the open positions.

Superintendent Chiafery noted that the Board members would need to sign the Warrant.

Business Administrator Shevenell added that Budget Committee members needed to sign the Warrant.

14. New Business

There was no new business.

15. Committee Reports

Board member Robertson-Smith reported that on Wednesday, February 10th the Healthcare Cost Containment Committee met as well as the District Parent Teacher Group.

Assistant Superintendent McLaughlin reported that he attended the Professional Development Committee meeting. The discussions surrounded a recap of the January professional development workshop day. The general consensus was that it was a productive day. He discussed the NEASC visit and noted that the work was coming to conclusion.

16. Public Comments on Agenda Items

There were no public comments on agenda items.

17. Manifest

At 9:44 p.m. Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Vice Chair Thornton) to adjourn.

The motion passed 5-0-0.