

**Merrimack School Board Meeting
April 5, 2010
Merrimack High School – Cafeteria**

PUBLIC SESSION MINUTES

PRESENT: Chairman Vaillancourt, Vice Chairman Thornton, Board members Robertson-Smith and Swonger. Also present were Superintendent Chiafery, Assistant Superintendent McLaughlin and Business Administrator Shevenell.

Chair Vaillancourt stated that Student Representative Ortega was excused from the meeting due to illness.

1. Pledge of Allegiance

Chairman Vaillancourt led the pledge of allegiance followed by a moment of silence in memory of Maurice Hache, a chemistry teacher at Merrimack High School and Lisa Lawrence, English as a second language teacher at James Masticola Elementary School and James Masticola Upper Elementary School.

2. Approval of March 15, 2010 Minutes

Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Vice Chair Thornton) to approve the March 15, 2010 minutes.

Board member Swonger requested the following changes to the March 15, 2010 minutes.

- Page 2 of 5, spell out the acronym “SRO” to read “Student Resource Officer”
- Page 5 of 5, spell out the acronym “DINI” to read “District-In-Need-of-Improvement”
- Page 5 of 5, spell out the acronym “SINI” to read “School-In-Need-of-Improvement”
- Page 5 of 5, last line of Item 9, change “in March” to read “on April 9th”

Chair Thornton requested the following changes to the March 15, 2010 minutes.

- Page 2 of 2, Item 6, third line, change the word “decision” to “decisions”
- Page 5 of 5, Item 12, second line, change the word “parents” to “residents”

The motion passed 2-0-2 with Board member Robertson-Smith and Chair Vaillancourt abstaining.

3. Public Participation (15 Minutes)

Molly Sillich, 7 Stonedged Way, stated that her two children attended the upper elementary school and that she works for the Nashua School District. She noted that New Hampshire residents have benefited, appreciated, and valued a February vacation week separate from the rest of New England. She asked the Board to consider changing the February 2011 vacation week from the week of February 21, 2011 to the week of February 28, 2011.

Carolyn Morin, 12 Brenda Lane, spoke against the February 21-15, 2011 vacation week. She explained that mid-week ski prices have traditionally been lower during the week following Presidents’ Day, which was important to her family of four who enjoy skiing.

David Mulligan, 16 Cramer Hill Road, spoke against the February 21-15, 2011 vacation week. He explained that his family of four has been vacationing in North Conway for twelve years with as many as 30 Merrimack residents. He noted that ski resorts offer discounts during the New Hampshire vacation week (the week after the Massachusetts February vacation week). He stated that currently his family would not be able to go on their annual ski vacation in 2011. He asked the Board to consider changing the February 2011 vacation week to the week of February 28, 2011.

4. Merrimack School District Home-School Communication Survey Results

Mark Merrifield summarized the home-school communication survey results. He reported a total of 812 responses had been received. A vast majority of the responses indicated families have high speed internet access at home. Approximately 3% of the responses may not have any internet access at home. Mr. Merrifield stated that parents with internet access most likely have bandwidth that would allow them to view large documents, photos, and videos if posted on district and school web sites.

Mr. Merrifield reported that parents prefer email followed by newsletters and flyers for general communication. Parents prefer a phone call, followed by email or parent-teacher conferences for specific information regarding their child. Parents value the parent-teacher conferences.

Mr. Merrifield reported many parents with PowerSchool accounts log on to PowerSchool at least once a week. He noted lesser numbers of parents have an email account in PowerSchool. He suggested that many parents may not be aware of the PowerSchool email feature.

Mr. Merrifield reported that many parents indicated that they receive information about upcoming school events from their parent-teacher organization.

Mr. Merrifield reported that most parents are able to find the information they need on the district web site, a considerable number of parents never visit the district or school site, and many parents confuse the district web site with the individual school web site.

Mr. Merrifield reported that the 786 separate responses to the four open response questions were valuable, very wide spread and hard to calculate into percentages. The following themes did emerge.

- Liked AlertNow
- Liked PowerSchool
- Pleased with the current home-school communication at the elementary school level
- Would like the school activity calendars updated on a regular basis
- Would like the last day of school posted on the web
- Would like the lunch balances available online
- Would like the district to use email for general communication
- Would like more classroom activities and assignments to be more available through teacher websites or PowerSchool.
- Would like the web sites to be updated more often and be more consistent between school web sites
- Would like consistent communication

Mr. Merrifield explained that the home-school communication survey had been his pay for performance project. His next step might be to survey other schools districts regarding their home-school communication.

Superintendent Chiafery added that Mr. Merrifield and the Leadership Team would continue to work together.

Board member Swonger noted that he noticed areas that could be improved immediately as well as areas that would require future work. He asked how many families participated in the survey.

Mark Merrifield responded that it was difficult to determine the number of families that completed the survey. He explained that the number of PowerSchool accounts reflected the number of students with an associated parent account.

Board member Robertson-Smith felt the district benefited from the home-school communication survey. She thanked Mr. Merrifield for his effort.

Chair Vaillancourt thanked Mr. Merrifield for initiating the home-school communication survey project. She expressed interest in updates to Mr. Merrifield's home-school communication project.

5. Discussion About 2011 February Vacation

Chair Vaillancourt reported that the Board members had received many emails from parents who were in opposition to the February 21-25, 2011 vacation week. Comments from some parents indicated that they were caught off guard with the fact that the February 2011 vacation week was the same week as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York.

Chair Vaillancourt asked Superintendent Chiafery to explain her school calendar recommendation process.

Superintendent Chiafery reported that the school calendar is taken very seriously. She explained that during the winter months the Superintendents from Bedford, Hudson, Litchfield, Londonderry, Manchester, Merrimack and Nashua had agreed to plan similar vacations, especially the February vacation week. The priority at the time was that all districts agree on the same week which happened to be the week of February 21, 2011. She explained that it was especially important for Merrimack to align vacation schedules with Hudson and Nashua due to the participation in the high school vocational programs. The inclusion of the Presidents' Day holiday as part of a vacation week was another consideration. The Massachusetts vacation week was never discussed.

Superintendent Chiafery stated that it wasn't until a reporter called her, the day after the Nashua School Board had changed its February vacation from the week of February 21, 2011 to the week of February 28, 2011, that she realized the difficulty. She apologized to parents thinking that the calendar wasn't fully vetted. She stated that she thought the calendar was covered in the same way as she had done in the past.

Superintendent Chiafery reported that as of today the Hudson, Litchfield, Londonderry, Bedford, and Manchester School Districts did not have plans to change the February vacation week from the week of February 21, 2011; however that could change.

Board member Robertson-Smith stated that Nashua's decision to change its February 2011 vacation week resulted in Merrimack's vocational students to be at a disadvantage regardless of when the

February 2011 vacation week was held. She also acknowledged New Hampshire ski week opportunities. She stated that her preference would be to wait for another meeting before changing the February 2011 vacation week. She felt that additional time could provide an opportunity to monitor whether or not the other districts change their February vacation.

Chair Vaillancourt clarified that the Nashua School Superintendent was originally in agreement with the February 21, 2011 vacation week until the public feedback was received.

Board member Swonger stated that he and the other board members did not realize that the February 21, 2011 vacation week was the same as Massachusetts. The topic never was discussed. He stated that he understood the reasons for waiting to see what other districts do; but also feels it is important to have a solid calendar for planning purposes.

Board member Swonger stated that his preference would be to move the February 2011 vacation to the traditional week, the week of February 28, 2011. He stated that a change to the calendar this evening might cause other districts to follow.

Vice Chair Thornton asked for clarification on whether or not other school districts would be revisiting the calendar.

Superintendent Chiafery stated that the other South Central Superintendents told her that a calendar revisit had not been scheduled as a board agenda at this time. She stated that the next South Central Superintendents meeting would be held on April 16, 2011.

Vice Chair Thornton asked if Nashua was the only school district that changed their vacation week.

Superintendent Chiafery responded that she was not aware that the Nashua School District was going to consider a change to the February 2011 vacation until Michael Brindley, a reporter for the Nashua Telegraph, called her the day after Nashua School Board meeting.

Vice Chair Thornton asked Superintendent Chiafery to recall the February vacation week preference of the Merrimack Teachers' Association.

Superintendent Chiafery responded that the Merrimack Teachers' Association membership preferred that February occur when Massachusetts was not on vacation.

Vice Chair Thornton stated that she received an email from someone who indicated that Hollis and Brookline changed their February vacation week.

Superintendent Chiafery explained that she only placed calls to the superintendents in the south central region. Hollis, Brookline and Amherst were considered part of the south west region.

Vice Chair Thornton asked if the high school vocational program was evenly split between Hudson and Nashua.

Superintendent Chiafery responded that attendance at the vocational programs was different every year. Merrimack's first vocational program partnership is with Hudson then Nashua.

Vice Chair Thornton stated that the coordination of the high school vocational programs was an important consideration in her decision. She noted that either vacation week would have an educational impact for the vocational program students. She also acknowledged the importance of family vacation time.

Vice Chair Thornton stated that she was hoping to get more information tonight should a motion be made to change the February vacation week.

Chair Vaillancourt stated the Presidents' Day holiday during a vacation week was very attractive to her. She noted that she was also a skier and was aware of the ski discounts. Vacation consistency within the south central region was important to her. She would have appreciated it if the Nashua Superintendent had called when it was known that the calendar was going to be revisited. She stated that people have secured vacation plans for the week of February 21, 2011.

Board member Robertson-Smith stated that there would be vacation conflicts for the Merrimack parents that teach in Hudson, Litchfield, Londonderry, Bedford, and Manchester should the vacation week be changed. She suggested lobbying the ski industry.

Board member Swonger stated that he would be against simply waiting. The board may or may not know what correspondence other school boards are receiving now and whether a calendar revisit will come up on agenda. He stated people will be inconvenienced either week. His personal preference was to have the February vacation on a week when Massachusetts was not on vacation. He stated that Presidents' Day has not always been a school holiday. He stated that he would prefer to survey the other south central region school districts plus Amherst, Hollis and Brookline in preparation for making an informed decision.

Chair Vaillancourt stated that originally she was leaning towards not changing the February vacation; however, two pieces of information caused her to reconsider her position. The first piece of information was the fact that the other south central school districts do not currently have plans to revisit the February vacation week. She questioned if parents in those communities were not aware that the February vacation week was the same as Massachusetts. The second piece of information was the fact that the volume of public correspondence was the highest that the board has received on an issue in a long time.

Chair Vaillancourt stated that she would weigh with the sentiment of the constituents and what they have asked the Board to do. She asked for forgiveness of anyone who may be inconvenienced by a decision the board might make tonight if the February 2011 week were to change. Maybe other districts would decide to reconsider their February 2011 vacation week.

Board member Swonger moved (seconded by Chair Vaillancourt) to change the February 2011 vacation week from a start date of February 21, 2011 to a start date of February 28, 2011.

The motion failed 2-2-0 with Board member Robertson-Smith and Vice Chair Thornton voting in opposition.

6. March 9th Professional Development Day Outcomes

Assistant Superintendent McLaughlin provided a summary of the events that took place on the March 9th professional development day. Merrimack High School was engaged in the final preparations for the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) site visit. The

other schools engaged in an analysis of district and site NECAP data. The paraeducators participated in a health and wellness workshop. The nurses participated in events pertaining to issues in their practice.

7. Actual Health Insurance Rate for 2010-2011

Business Administrator Shevenell reported that the Local Government Center confirmed that the actual health insurance rate for 2010-2011 would be 19.8%.

8. Review of Projected Kindergarten Enrollments for 2010-2011

Superintendent Chiafery distributed the projected enrollments page taken from the 2010-2011 budget book dated December 2009. She explained that the kindergarten registration process began in late January 2010. She reported that as of April 1, 2010 the number of kindergarten registrations at James Masticola Elementary School and Reeds Ferry School were close to the projected amounts. The number of kindergarten registrations at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School was 37 less than the projected amount.

2010-2011 Kindergarten Enrollments

	Projected in December 2009	Registrations as of April 2010
James Masticola Elementary	67	62
Reeds Ferry Elementary	78	75
Thorntons Ferry Elementary	85	48

Superintendent Chiafery stated that Thorntons Ferry Elementary School has always had the largest kindergarten population. She suggested that the half day kindergarten program, the recession and that maybe more families with children reside in the center and northern part of town.

Superintendent Chiafery informed the Board that she reduced the number of kindergarten teaching positions in the 2010-2011 budget at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School from three to two.

Board member Swonger stated that Thorntons Ferry Elementary School could receive up to eight additional kindergarten registrations and still be within the desired class sizes.

Superintendent Chiafery added that this was the first time a kindergarten class consisted of less than 200 students. She stated that she would continue to update the Board on the kindergarten registration throughout the summer months.

9. Other

a) Correspondence

Chair Vaillancourt reported that the School Board received an email from Pat Cunningham, the high school band director inviting all to attend the Cavalcade of Bands on April 6 at the high school gym at 6:30 p.m.

Chair Vaillancourt reported that the School Board received an email from Counsior Brian McCarthy with questions and concerns regarding AlertNow. She added that his concerns have been noted and shared with the Superintendent.

Chair Vaillancourt reported that the School Board received an email from Pat Heinrich, the School District Clerk asking for help on election night after the polls close.

Chair Vaillancourt reported that the School Board received emails from several residents regarding the February 2011 vacation week.

Board member Swonger highlighted an email from the Destination ImagiNation teams.

b) Comments

Chair Vaillancourt thanked Board members Coburn and Robertson-Smith for their six years of service as School Board members. She announced that this would be their last meeting.

Chair Vaillancourt thanked Debbie Leo for her dedication as school board secretary. She announced that Mrs. Leo had accepted another employment opportunity.

Board member Robertson-Smith thanked the citizens of the Town of Merrimack for the opportunity to represent them for the past eight years, two years as a Budget Committee member and six years as a School Board member.

Board member Swonger stated that he had the pleasure of interviewing sixth grade students for Exchange City. He also thanked the Chamber of Commerce for its partnership in the program.

13. New Business

There was no new business to report.

14. Committee Reports

Chair Vaillancourt reported that she attended a Drug Advisory Council Coalition meeting on March 25. She noted the possibility of having Teen Institute participants come before the Board in the future. She explained that the Teen Institute was a successful summer program that provides leadership training. She announced a new social marketing tool, drinkstory.com used as a modern way for adults to communicate with teens.

Assistant Superintendent McLaughlin added that the social networks are the means by which students get information about each other, culture, lives, and experiences. Drinkstory.com encourages communication between adults and students on responsible lifestyles with regards to alcohol and drug use.

15. Public Comments on Agenda Items (15 Minutes)

Fran White, 12 Surrey Lane thanked Emily Coburn and Rose Robertson-Smith for their many years of service to the community, especially as School Board members.

Cathy Lynch, 20 Cramer Hill Road stated that she was disappointed not to get the support of the School Board regarding the February 2011 vacation decision. She expressed disappointment over the fact that the Board had not taken the Massachusetts February 2011 vacation week into consideration.

Molly Sillich, 7 Stonedge Way stated that she works at Nashua High School. The Nashua vocational programs attended by Merrimack students include cosmetology, auto shop, culinary arts, graphic design and small engine repair. She stated that the decision has impacted families in this community.

Dave Mulligan, 16 Cramer Hill Road appreciated the fact the Board took the time to reconsider the February vacation week. He stated that it was his understanding from the conversation tonight, the vacation week decision was made in error and the opportunity to fix the error was neglected.

Steve Turkington, 7 Springfield Circle stated that the Board had the option to wait for two weeks, get more information, find out whether or not surrounding districts would change the vacation week after their constituents and residents learned of the overlap in vacation weeks with Massachusetts and New York. He asked if the Board would revisit the February 2011 vacation week again if the Board received more emails.

Chair Vaillancourt responded that she was not planning to revisit the February 2011 vacation at this point.

Vice Chair Thornton responded that she voted against the motion because she did not feel she had enough information. If the Board wanted to revisit the February 2011 vacation week, she would be the only board member that would be able to request that the failed motion be reconsidered. She acknowledged that families have made February 2011 vacation plans based on the calendar that was approved by the Board on March 15, 2010. She also acknowledged the impact that the current vacation week will have on families.

Dayna Bergin, 1 Holly Lane asked for clarification on the process for revisiting the February vacation week motion.

Chair Vaillancourt responded when the Board takes a vote, the only way a vote can be brought back up for reconsideration before the board is when a board member who voted in opposition to the motion requests that the motion be reconsidered.

Dayna Bergin, 1 Holly Lane noted that the next South Central Superintendents meeting would occur before the board's next meeting. She stated that she considered herself to be an informed parent and that she did not realize the calendar had been approved until she began to receive emails about the February vacation.

Molly Sillich, 7 Stonedge Way noted that parents in other school districts are probably not aware of the impact of the current February vacation week.

Dave Mulligan, 16 Cramer Hill Road asked what other information was needed. He asked the Board to consider the impact on the parents and teachers.

Chair Vaillancourt stated that public participation was an opportunity for the Board to listen to comments from members of the public. It was not a time for questions and answers. She noted that the Board has indulged the public this evening.

Board member Thornton stated that in her position as school board member the education of Merrimack students was her first priority. Therefore, the school calendar alignment with the vocational program school districts was a huge consideration in her decision.

Chair Vaillancourt expressed her appreciation to the public.

16. Manifest

The Board signed the manifest.

At 9:02 p.m. Board member Robertson-Smith moved (seconded by Vice Chair Thornton) to recess to non-public session per RSA 91-A:3, II (a),(b),(c).

The motion passed 4-0-0 on a roll call vote.

At 9:21 p.m. Board member Robertson-Smith moved (seconded by Board member Swonger) to adjourn the meeting.

The motion passed 4-0-0.