

Ad Hoc School Facilities Meeting Minutes
October 12, 2011
Reed Intermediate School
7:30 pm

Present: Bill Hart (BOE), Keith Alexander (BOE), Bob Merola (LC), Kathy Fetchick (LC), Debbie Leidlein (BOE), Fran Pennarola (moderator).

Absent: Richard Gaines, William Furrier.

Also present were Superintendent Janet Robinson; MS Principal, Diane Sherlock; RIS Principal, Sharon Epple; Gino Fao, School Facilities Director; Assistant Superintendent Linda Gedja, and two members of the Press.

The Meeting was called to order at 7:40 p.m.

The Minutes of the June 27, 2011, were approved.

There was no Public Participation

New Business:

The Committee then turned to a presentation by the District Staff, of the details of a potential conversion of the Reed Intermediate School to a middle school.

After brief introductory remarks, Superintendent Robinson called upon Reed Intermediate School principal, Dr. Sharon Epple, and Newtown Middle School Principal, Diane Sherlock, to begin the discussion of the potential conversion of RIS to a middle school.

Dr. Epple gave a background of the Reed Intermediate School, discussing its role as a bridge from elementary school to middle school. The teaching staff is K - 6 Certified and functions in two teacher clusters. There are a number of different learning opportunities at the RIS, including music, art, the DARE Program, Project Adventure, health and technology, providing the children with a wide variety of educational opportunities. She believes the school works well for the children academically and for social and emotional development. Cathy Fetchick questioned as to what would be lost to a conversion of RIS to a 6-8 school and return of the fifth grades to the elementary schools. Dr. Epple believed that there would be a loss in some programs. Dr. Robinson indicated that to support some of the specials for the fifth graders in the elementary schools would require teachers to be split among two or more schools.

Diane Sherlock then spoke about the Middle School and the unique circumstances of seventh and eighth graders. She characterized sixth graders as on the fringe of adolescent chaos. She discussed the history in Newtown and other places of isolating sixth graders from seventh and eighth graders in a middle school environment. She discussed the developmental differences

between the two populations and the different cluster models for sixth versus seventh and eighth grades. She noted that fifth and sixth graders have different social and academic needs than seventh and eighth graders. She believes that the goals which led to the establishment of the RIS/Middle School Model: meeting the different social and academic needs of the two populations, improving test scores and increasing disciplinary problems have been met.

A general discussion ensued concerning the RIS and Middle School curricula and how they would be impacted by a possible move of the fifth grades to the elementary schools and a combined sixth, seventh and eighth at the RIS. Issues concerning the transitions were discussed and debated along with the future course of education.

Janet Robinson distributed a schematic of the Reed Intermediate School and an explanation of modifications and additions that would be needed. It appears that conversion of the RIS to the Middle School would involve the addition of in excess of 40,000 square feet of space, along with an additional full size gym. Given that if construction of this nature were to occur, it would be in the range of five years in the future, no one was prepared to speculate as to the cost except to muse that it could easily be in the ten to twenty million dollar range. This proved to be a somewhat sobering revelation.

Bob Merola urged that all options be considered including the possibility of moving the eighth grade to the high school. The different educational models of eighth grade and high school were discussed. Diane Sherlock indicated that there would likely be strong parental resistance to moving the eighth grade to the high school. Principal Sherlock made the point that the model is working and that we shouldn't fix a system that isn't broken. Keith Alexander remarked that what we are engaging in is a cost benefit analysis.

The discussion then turned to actual enrollment and the Chung Projections. Bob Merola indicated that he had been tracking the actual numbers at the high school for the past five to six years, which he noted showed actual populations running below the mid level of the Chung Projections. It was noted that while the high school has been built for a population of 2,200, it will likely never exceed 1,800, so that there is going to be excess space there. The possibility of moving different programs to the high school was discussed.

Kathy Fetchick questioned the need for a second gym if we only moved the seventh and eighth grades to RIS and had elementary schools, K - 6. She discussed her own experience with the classroom spaces at Sandy Hook and wondered why we couldn't fit an equal number of students into the same classrooms as we used to. She noted that where there were once two Special Ed classrooms; there are now four.

The use of portables at RIS was discussed. Gino indicated that he did not view it as a viable option given the impact on the outdoor space at RIS.

Project Adventure was discussed and the benefits of physical activity in the fifth through eighth grade populations. The Middle School is one of five rotations and, were you to do away with it, you would need to put something in its place.

Where do we go from here?

The Committee decided that it needed to look at the possibility of converting RIS to a middle school and moving the fifth and sixth grades to the elementary schools. Looking at Bill Hart's model, with full day kindergarten, there appeared to be classroom space at the elementary schools in 2018, with half day kindergarten, in 2016. A general discussion ensued. The Committee came to a consensus that it really needed to consider the viability of moving the fifth and sixth grades to the elementary schools and configuring the RIS as a middle school. Superintendent Robinson indicated that she would communicate with the elementary school principals concerning the present and projected space needs and would look at the impact on music, art and other specials. Given the Committee's desire to reach some conclusions and make some recommendation to the Board of Education, the Superintendent was urged to get information to Committee members prior to the next meeting, which has been scheduled for Wednesday, November 2, at 5:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Francis G. Pennarola