

**Board of Education
Newtown, Connecticut**

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, December 1, 2009 at 7:30 p.m. in the library at Reed Intermediate School.

Present:	L. Bittman, Vice Chair	J. Robinson
	K. Fetchick, Secretary	L. Gejda
	D. Nanavaty	D. Raymo
	R. Gaines	12 Public
	W. Hart	9 Staff
	C. Lagana	2 Press
	D. Leidlein	

Mrs. Bittman called the meeting to order at 7:34 p.m.

Item 2 – American Freedom Essay Winner

Dr. Robinson introduced Valeria Pagano-Hepburn, sixth grade teacher at Reed Intermediate School, whose student, Hunter James, won the National Freedom Essay contest. She assigned the essay to her students because they had been studying the constitution. Hunter read her essay and gave copies to the Board. The prize is a Constitution Walking Tour in Philadelphia for Hunter and the students in her cluster which is scheduled for April 9, 2010.

Item 1 – Election of Officers

Mrs. Fetchick asked for an explanation of the voting procedure. Mrs. Bittman said nominations would be taken for each of the three positions and a quorum of four votes was needed to be elected.

Mr. Hart nominated Mrs. Bittman for the Chair position. The vote was 3 in favor and 4 against. Mrs. Leidlein nominated Mrs. Fetchick for the Chair position. The vote was 3 in favor and 4 against.

Mrs. Bittman asked for any discussion.

Mrs. Leidlein spoke in support of Mrs. Fetchick and said that she is dedicated to our schools and to working with other town boards. She would be effective in the position of Chair, especially during these tough budget times.

Mr. Hart spoke in support of Mrs. Bittman whom he has known for 15 years. She is very active in our schools and has shown to be a good diplomat and mediator. She can act as Chair in a balanced way and provide good leadership for the board.

Mr. Gaines said he has enjoyed being on the Board and that our decisions also need to be supported by the community. He said he could not support Mrs. Fetchick because late in October we had a discussion and Board decision about a topic and she interfered with an election activity that fit exactly the Board of Education guidelines. Someone who aspires to be Chair should not exhibit that behavior.

Mrs. Fetchick said we have the opportunity to change the face of the board. If you look at the elections the voters have spoken and asked us to be more conservative, financially accountable, and that we operate in an open manner. Other boards and commissions in town have become more conservative than they have in the past. We need someone who can communicate with these groups. She is proud of the work in strategic planning. The Chair has to be open and honest, listen to everyone's opinion and represent the board and not their own opinion. She believes she is the best person for the board.

Mrs. Bittman said she feels strongly that this community has had a lot of breakdown in communication. She has tried to figure out why we have been having so much trouble. She tried to make our website more effective. She feels strongly about strategic planning. Getting the high school project passed was a big accomplishment. Our planning process has to be more open. She truly believes that we need open communication with other boards but the Chair also has to have a relationship with the parents and community.

A second vote was taken with the same outcome.

Mr. Hart asked if the meeting could continue with the Vice Chair presiding and have the election at the end. Mr. Nanavaty said we had to have officers first.

The Board recessed for caucus from 7:50 p.m. to 8:08 p.m.

A third vote was taken for Mrs. Bittman as Chair. The results were 4 votes in favor and 3 against with Mrs. Bittman being elected Chair.

Mr. Gaines nominated Mr. Nanavaty for Vice Chair. Mrs. Leidlein nominated Mrs. Fetchick for Vice Chair.

Mr. Gaines said that Mr. Nanavaty is very structured in his thinking and has valuable insight into our policies. He is also an effective liaison with other boards in town. A legal mind sees things we might not and he appreciates what Mr. Nanavaty brings to the Board.

Mrs. Leidlein said that Mrs. Fetchick has worked tirelessly and opened up communication between other boards and works with PTAs to get information out. She has shown dedication to the schools.

The vote for Mr. Nanavaty as Vice Chair was 3 in favor and 4 against. The vote for Mrs. Fetchick was 4 in favor and 3 against. Mrs. Fetchick was elected Vice Chair.

Mr. Lagana nominated Mrs. Leidlein as Secretary which was the only nomination. The vote was 7 in favor. Mrs. Leidlein was elected Secretary.

Item 3 - Consent Agenda

MOTION: Mr. Nanavaty moved to approve the items in the consent agenda which included the minutes of November 17, 2009, the resignation for retirement of

Corinne Cox, teacher at Newtown Middle School, effective January 1, 2010 and the resignation of Cheryl Gilman, speech pathologist at Sandy Hook School, effective immediately. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 4 – Public Participation - none

Item 5 – Reports

Newtown High School Report:

Mr. Dumais, principal of Newtown High School, stated that he and his administrators are here to support the teachers at the high school and that his team works hard to do that. He spoke about the challenges at the high school and the things they do that make it work. The entire staff goes well beyond expectations to get the job done. He said the high school needs more time for professional development for the teachers and more time to work collaboratively. He presented a video including data on Newtown High School operations.

Pictures were shown of the high school construction project. A-wing is enclosed with plastic to install the stairwell. We are also working on furniture, fixtures and equipment but only buying furniture for 8 to 10 classrooms because we will use the furniture that is currently in the portables. The classrooms were designed for 24 seats so we are considering removing teacher desks to allow for more room.

Mr. Lagana asked if we were providing electricity for the construction workers. Dr. Robinson said they are only using our electricity for some lighting but mostly using their own generators.

Superintendent's Report:

Dr. Robinson said she has been meeting with the principals and have asked them to come in with a flat budget. There will be some increases such in transportation for bus contracts. We are looking at what areas can be changed with our declining enrollment.

There have been discussions regarding the third grade CMTs. Principals always ask when we can have full day kindergarten. We have some declining enrollment in elementary level which is opening up classrooms. She has to consider if there is space for full day kindergarten and how we could pay for it. Our midday run for kindergarten costs \$255,877. If we eliminated that run that amount would cover 3.9 teacher salaries. We would need 5 teachers district-wide to have full day kindergarten. This is currently a feasibility study only.

Mr. Hart asked if we took into account the private school kindergarten students. Dr. Robinson said we have not determined where they would end up yet.

Mr. Hart asked how we compared with other districts with full day kindergartens. Dr. Robinson said that will be part of our research. The state has been pushing for full day kindergarten.

Mr. Nanavaty said we have to take into account that a lot of people are putting their

children in private schools because they have full day kindergarten programs. If we change to full day we will see an influx of students coming back to our schools which would call for an increase in classes resulting in a tax increase.

Dr. Robinson feels we may have enough classrooms.

Mrs. Fetchick said full day kindergarten is great for the students and most can handle it at that age. Her concern is what happens when the enrollment swings back up. If we are going to make a decision we need to know what is projected. She would be interested in having some type of study done. We also have the high school addition to fund.

Mr. Gaines asked if there was a correlation between full day kindergarten and CMT scores.

Dr. Robinson said it correlates to the hours of instruction.

Mrs. Leidlein asked what the maximum class size we strive for in kindergarten and can we stay at that with a full day kindergarten.

Dr. Robinson said for grades K-2 we like to have 20 to 22 students per class. We try not to go over 25 in third and fourth grades. A full day kindergarten program would be 20 students per class.

Mrs. Bittman asked if it would be an option for parents. She would also like to see how parents feel about changing to a full day.

The CIP committee met today. The Board of Finance has asked the Legislative Council to put off the due date of the CIP until January. That gives us time to make changes which will be estimates. We will be bringing the Board a revision of the CIP that was approved.

Mr. Hart said we should bring it to the next meeting for discussion and then vote in January.

Dr. Robinson said a question was raised at the last meeting regarding our instructional hours compared to towns in our DRG. This was from the 2007-2008 school year. Newtown ranks third from the lowest at the elementary level, sixth from the lowest at the middle school level, and fifth from the lowest at the high school level. We hope to add five more minutes next year.

Dr. Gejda said when the schedule was modified for conference days we lost time. The high school has exam days which also impact their hours.

Mrs. Bittman asked if with the new high school addition if the time between classes could be reduced from 10 to 5 minutes. Dr. Robinson said she would check into that.

Dr. Robinson stated that the property at 27 Church Hill Road was sold.

CABE/CAPSS Convention:

Dr. Robinson said she along with Bill Hart and Chris Lagana attended the CABE Convention November 20 and 21.

Mr. Lagana said he attended the Friday session which was very instructional. It was interesting to meet the various superintendents and principals. It was a good experience.

Mr. Hart said he attended the session on FERPA and felt it was worth having a presentation for the Board.

Dr. Robinson said FERPA is mainly for student information. It would be good for the Board and principals. Everyone would benefit from the FOI presentation. We could also invite Tom Hennick from the FOI Commission to attend one of our meetings.

Dr. Robinson said most sessions were very good. She enjoyed the speaker Friday night regarding the uses of emerging technology.

Item 6 – Old Business**2008-2009 Strategic School Profiles:**

Mr. Lagana asked about our gifted and talented program. Dr. Robinson said we were developing a new gifted and talented program and have done some compacting at the fourth grade level. We are having it integrated into the school day.

Dr. Gejda said at the fourth grade level we've clustered the gifted students which allows the teachers to do different activities with them. Nancy Bradley is the teacher at Reed Intermediate School and also works with a cluster of students in a reading program and middle school students in individualized programs. Guidance also works with them. When they get to high school they select areas of interest.

Dr. Robinson said at the middle school we have started students doing personal success plans.

Mrs. Fetchick hoped that we would try to go across the schools to see what the best practices are in each elementary school. Mrs. Bittman agreed.

Mr. Lagana asked about the middle school instruction time compared to the high school.

Dr. Robinson said the middle school students are in teams and don't have passing time like in the high school. The high school also has mid-terms and finals. The middle school is able to have more hours of instruction.

Mrs. Leidlein asked if we had any programs to increase the scores in writing on the CMT and CAPT test.

Dr. Robinson said we are trying to move from a “system of schools” to a “school system.” Dr. Gejda has been working on having more professional development.

Dr. Gejda said the district is working with a consultant to bring in a more unified way of teaching grammar and more dialog on practices between the schools.

Revised 2010-2011 School Calendar:

MOTION: Mrs. Leidlein moved to approve the revised 2010-2011 school calendar.
Mr. Gaines seconded.

Mr. Nanavaty asked why there wasn't consideration of decreasing the days in June instead of moving the start date for teachers back two days in August. We could leave the start date of August 26 for the teachers, bring the students in earlier and then be able to get out earlier in June.

Dr. Robinson said we did not make any changes in the academic year.
Mrs. Bittman said we are also ending on a Monday.
Mrs. Leidlein said it is worth revisiting.

MOTION: Mr. Nanavaty moved to table the motion. Mrs. Fetchick seconded.
Vote: 7 ayes

AIS Tuition Increase:

Mrs. Bittman said Danbury was hit with a revenue decrease so they are asking the districts for an additional tuition cost per student.

Mr. Nanavaty corrected the cost per student amount to \$11,360. He asked if anyone has looked into seeing if the Danbury school system can do this. They should get funds from the State of Connecticut.

Dr. Robinson said we have but after the magnet school legislation passed even if you are not a member district, if a parent chooses to send their child to a magnet school the district has to pay. We have no choice but to pay.

Mrs. Fetchick said they are passing on the decrease in state funding to the participating schools. They should deal with this problem with the dollars they have.

Mrs. Bittman said Danbury is 60% and the other towns are 40%. We have to decide our level of commitment.

MOTION: Mr. Nanavaty moved that the Board of Education approve the additional cost of \$284 per student to attend the AIS magnet school for the 2010-2011 school year at a cost not to exceed \$11,360. Even if we chose not to pay, we are obligated to do so.
Mr. Hart seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Mrs. Leidlein asked the difference between a partner and non-partner district.

Dr. Robinson said that before they developed the magnet school each district agreed to the number of seats they wanted. Schools that chose not to be partners initially could not send students there but that has changed so they can send their students. The obligation to the school system is the same. We sit on the advisory Board as a partner district so we have some say in the operation of the school. Non-partners have no say.

Vote: 5 ayes, 2 nays (Mrs. Fetchick, Mrs. Leidlein)

Mr. Hart asked for data on the number of snow days over the past few years.

Item 7 – New Business – none

Item 8 – Public Participation

Sarah Beier, 7 Yogananda, congratulated the new members and officers. She has seen a difference in the gifted and talented program since it has been moved into the classrooms and thanked the administration for that change. She mentioned an article that Jeanetta Miller had written regarding writing which was published.

Douglas Brennan, 8 Antler Pine Road, asked if the Board could consider that once the AP students complete their AP test that they will not be required to continue attending high school. They spend time in the summer and weekends on their studies and by the time they complete the course they have nothing left to do in school. He was surprised that we were considering a full day kindergarten program under the current circumstances. He feels there is no correlation between full day kindergarten and CMT results. Regarding gifted and talented, when you have the program conducted on a grade basis you may have children who are not developmentally the same. You should use age, not grade, as an identifier. You should also take a look at compacted versus identifiable programs. The enrollment is down by 170 students.

Mrs. Bittman said it was down by 106 students.

Mr. Brennan said as enrollment rose we never increased our cost per student. What is our current budget target with 106 less students.

Jody Bialek, 5 Briarwood Lane, has a busing issue that has not been resolved and she presented a letter to the Board. She was in favor of having a full day kindergarten program especially with many mothers having to work.

Audrey Greenwood, 7 Susan Lane, said two of her children attended a full day kindergarten program and did fine. Her child in the half day program had difficulty because there are many activities trying to be done in a short period of time.

MOTION: Mr. Gaines moved to adjourn. Mrs. Fetchick seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 9 Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:02 p.m.

Questions raised:

- Comparison of districts with full day kindergarten
- Parent opinions on full day kindergarten
- Possibility of reducing the time between high school classes from 10 to 5 minutes
- Data regarding the number of snow days over the past few years

Respectfully submitted:

Debbie Leidlein
Secretary