

**Board of Education
Newtown, Connecticut**

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, October 4, 2011 in the board room at 3 Primrose Street.

W. Hart, Chair	J. Robinson
D. Leidlein, Vice Chair	L. Gejda
A. Buzzi, Secretary (7:45 p.m.)	25 Staff
D. Nanavaty (absent)	20 Public
L. Bittman	2 Press
R. Gaines	
K. Alexander	

Mr. Hart called the meeting to order at 7:38 p.m.
Mr. Nanavaty was ill and Mr. Buzzi was expected later.

Item 1 – Consent Agenda

MOTION: Mrs. Bittman moved to approve the consent agenda which included the minutes of September 6 and 20, 2011, the donation of a vehicle for the Newtown High School automotive repair classes, three volunteer coaches for Newtown High School Boys soccer, and the resignation of Kristina Tartaglia, teacher at Reed Intermediate School. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. Mr. Gaines asked to remove the Junior State Club field trip for further information. Vote: 5 ayes

Mr. Hart stated that at the next meeting will begin to have two public participations as in the past.

Item 2 – Public Participation

A parent spoke about his four-year-old child with autism who is in the program at Head O'Meadow School. He spoke highly of the special education program and is amazed by the progress his child has made and attributed it to the staff.

Barb Sibly, 5 Homer Park Lane, praised the special education department. Her son is in the autism spectrum. The smartest decision was to put him in the care of the special education department. The Sandy Hook School team is totally supportive.

Susan McGuinness, 31 Little Brook Lane, gave permission to share her legal bills.

Annette Barbour, 11 School House Hill Road, said her daughter has been part of the special education system for 15 years and they have done a wonderful job with her. The biggest worry is when she exits the program to be able to duplicate what they have done.

Karen Pierce, 10 Chestnut Hill Road, said the special education teachers are wonderful. Sometimes the path to get help is hard until the fit is made. She thanked the teachers especially at the high school. The staff is incredible.

Jim Allyn, Main Street, spoke in favor of the owner/operators and said it was a cost savings to keep that system.

Dylan Cortese, 127 Brushy Hill Road and a student, spoke in favor of his bus driver. It's a bad idea to change.

Oscar Berendsohn, 34 Appleblossom Lane, read a letter to the Governor which included information regarding the Teachers Retirement Board and their pensions. He also referred to section 1 of the 14th Amendment.

Karen Visca, 30 Mile Hill South Rd., thanked the special education team for what they have done for her daughter. The survey on line is to keep the owner/operators.

Bridget Seaman, Hanover Road, asked if the transportation contract was signed. Mr. Hart said the bid was awarded but the contract was on the agenda to be signed tonight.

Ms. Seaman said the Board is going against the town's wishes and wants to see an audit of the entire bid process. Only one member needs to change their vote. All Star came in low balling the bid.

Mr. Hart stated the vote was 5 to 1. No one can change their vote.

Jay Burton, Buttonshop Road, was happy with the way the special education system works. In the last three years the budget rose about 10% while the enrollment dropped. There has been reckless spending. He spoke in favor of the owner/operators and the Board should reconsider their vote.

Jodie Enriquez, Hanover Road, asked the liability if we sign a contract and then have to break it.

Item 3 – Reports

Special Education Report:

Dr. Regan acknowledged the number of special education staff at the meeting. He was hired July 1, 2003 and the Board of Education directed him to reduce the number of out-of-district placements. His goals were to provide appropriate instruction for students at risk and refine the diagnostic assessment practices to identify students with disabilities. He presented statistics on test results. This year his staff includes 37 fulltime teachers for 431 students, 72.6 EAs in special education, 17.59 educational trainers who are behavior therapists, 3.4 occupational therapists, 1.6 physical therapists, 10 speech & language pathologists, 2 fulltime social workers, 8 school psychologists, and 2 fulltime behavior analysts on our staff. We held 1,243 PPTs in the 2010-11 school year. In summary he stated his department has achieved positive educational outcomes for students, expanded services, increased staffing, and are on the forefront of Best practices.

Mrs. Leidlein asked for a copy of the presentation and what Reed was doing about not meeting AYP in reading.

Dr. Regan said they met as a team at Reed and sorted out which students needed what type of help. The staff is working on it now.

Mrs. Leidlein asked for a progress report. Dr. Regan said there would be one from him or Dr. Epple as principal. The staff is stepping up. The targets for the CMTs have risen so we have challenges ahead.

Mr. Gaines asked what the challenges were.

Dr. Regan said our biggest challenge is the rising targets for AYP. He would like to see 100% of our special education students meet goal.

Mr. Buzzi spoke about what the teachers deal with each day and how well Dr. Regan and his staff have handled these issues. We hired Dr. Regan to deliver a program in a cost effective manner. We have a stellar program in this district.

Mrs. Leidlein said we've heard from parents and teachers about difficulties with the system. Is anything being done to make it more user-friendly?

Dr. Regan said special education can be emotionally charged. The Board has a sub-committee to work on some of those issues. Dr. Robinson is putting together a task force to look at special education. Feedback is very important.

Mrs. Leidlein asked if he set any personal goals.

Dr. Regan said his goals are to assist Dr. Robinson with the task force and sub-committee. He wants to know of any issues as soon as they arise and he has encouraged parents to call him.

Mr. Hart said regarding AYP at Reed and the middle school students should be monitored more in the younger grades.

Dr. Regan stated we start with third grade when the CMTs begin.

Mr. Hart said we should augment their results with ours and also have outside evaluations.

Dr. Regan said outside evaluations are used when we need outside expertise and are usually part of the PPT.

Summer School Report:

Elissa Gellis, Director of Adult Education, spoke about the summer program. There were 480 students enrolled with a decrease of approximately 100 from last year.

Mrs. Bittman would like to see Accelerated Reader offered in the summer for students to access while on vacation. Mrs. Gellis will get more information.

Item 4 – Old Business

Substance Abuse Survey:

Judy Blanchard spoke about results of the student survey. Newtown Prevention Council will analyze the results. The focus now is on the middle school. 55% of middle school students find alcohol education in school an effective deterrent. Home tends to be the main source of alcohol. We also surveyed parents. They are underestimating their children's use. There is also a strong correlation between parent and student use.

Mrs. Bittman asked if at Reed we discussed what negative things alcohol could do to the body. Mrs. Blanchard said it was discussed at the middle school level. Mrs. Bittman suggested having it at Reed also.

Mrs. Leidlein asked what we are not doing that we could do to decrease the statistics.

Mrs. Blanchard said we have not engaged families as much as we need to in understanding the consequences for underage drinking and prescription drug use.

Dr. Gejda recognized Mrs. Blanchard's work with this survey. She is also co-chair with Chief Mike Kehoe on the Prevention Council. This survey has allowed us to reclaim a grant to the district and community to fund a number of programs.

Mr. Hart said it would be good to look at the effect of post-high school graduates on siblings and the family.

Mrs. Blanchard stated we haven't looked there specifically but there has been a concern on those in their 20s regarding the harder drugs.

Item 5 – New Business

Approve Nature's Classroom Field Trip for Newtown Middle School:

Kristin Coughlin, Brianne Panzarella, and Kathleen Dye, middle school teachers, spoke about the proposed field trip to Nature's Classroom in Wakefield, Rhode Island May 21 to May 23, 2011. There will be 89 students and 10 chaperones. The families are paying for the trip.

Mrs. Leidlein asked what happens if parents are unable to pay.

Mrs. Boettner said we have a fund available to help. We polled our parents and 90% were in favor of the trip.

Dr. Robinson spoke in favor of this trip also. Her children benefited from going there in 7th grade. It's a good learning experience.

Mrs. Bittman suggested having an option on the form if a parent would want to pay for another student.

Dr. Gejda said a previous district she was in had students attend. She was very impressed with the staff. Our own educators received feedback from them. It's very well run.

Mr. Gaines asked for feedback before we approve this for future years.

MOTION: Mrs. Bittman moved that the Board of Education approve the field trip to Nature's Classroom for Newtown Middle School 7th grade students in cluster purple.

Mr. Buzzi seconded. Vote: 6 ayes

Item 1 – Reports

Mr. Buzzi asked to include in the September 6, 2011 minutes the contents of the document he read at the meeting to which all agreed.

Correspondence:

Mr. Buzzi said correspondence received were two from Susan McGuinness Getzinger and one from Lauren Miller.

Chair report:

Mr. Hart received a letter from John Kortze this afternoon. There are two short information sessions after the new Board members begin. At 6:30 p.m. prior to the start of the December 20 meeting Nick Caruso and Kelly Moyer from CAFE will speak about FERPA and Board member roles in hearings. At 6:30 p.m. on January 10 Tom Hennick of the Freedom of Information Commission will speak on FOI.

Superintendent's Report:

Dr. Robinson said the last two years there have been CAPSS meetings on the transformation of education into a system designed to ensure that all students achieve at high levels and what will happen in Connecticut to move education forward. CAPSS believes the entire system of learning should be accountable for eliminating the achievement gap and raising achievement levels of all students.

Professional learning communities starts this Friday. The Board will be kept posted with a mid-year and end-of-year report.

School rounds will be conducted this year and the schools will also be doing rounds internally. The Connecticut Center for School Change visited Newtown High School in 2008. Dr. Robinson selected Sandy Hook School for a visitation from them on December 7.

Dr. Robinson provided the breakdown on the reduction of EA hours and the number of special education EAs.

Mrs. Leidlein asked what the original hours were at each school and how have those gaps have been filled. She is concerned about instructional gaps.

Mrs. Bittman said Dr. Robinson mentioned a long-term goal was to not replace them but how we taught differentiation to our teaching staff.

Dr. Robinson said the gaps have a greater impact on the schools with the higher class sizes. We laid off 59 positions in the last 3 years. The expectations on teachers today are much greater.

Dr. Robinson spoke about the global music curriculum and Chinese music for 5th and 6th grade with each 6th grader taking the class focusing on Chinese music during the year.

Mrs. Leidlein asked if there was any thought to a foreign language rotation.

Dr. Robinson said that was the first choice but there is no money for that.

Mrs. Leidlein said we wouldn't need a full time teacher if it filled the rotation spot and started with 6th grade.

Mrs. Bittman said she would like input from a foreign language teacher regarding offering it to 6th grade students.

Mr. Alexander said if we offered both French and Spanish it would help them decide which they preferred.

Dr. Robinson provided a list of legal bills. We normally wouldn't discuss these because they lead to the identity of the students which would be a violation of FERPA. However, she received an email from the parent giving permission for full disclosure of all bills.

Mr. Buzzi asked if there was a signature. Dr. Robinson stated our attorney said that it was okay and there was a scanned signature.

Dr. Robinson said these legal fees were in reaction to various complaints by Mrs. Getzinger to which we had to respond. The transportation hearing and 504 hearing were held and went through the process in the district and state level. At every level her petitions were dismissed. She was seeking a change in the bus stop. The final issue was a complaint to the bar association regarding the attorney and one of the hearing officers which has also been dismissed. These costs were incurred because of taking it to the various levels.

Mr. Hart said this doesn't include the staff time involved along with the hearing officer.

Dr. Robinson said there have been enormous amount of FOI requests.

Mrs. Leidlein said at \$42,000 it is an unfortunate use of taxpayer money. Can we find a resolution to this case so this can end?

Mr. Hart asked at what point a different decision could have been made. He asked the distance to the bus stop.

Dr. Robinson said it was 1/10 of a mile.

He asked if Dr. Robinson could have overridden the Board and State decisions to which she said she could not. He referred to the 504 hearing. Could the accommodations have required special transportation?

Dr. Robinson stated we sent a bus for an unspecified medical condition for three days and it was refused by the parent. We had an internal review of the case by impartial people from our district who have 504 training to see if there was another resolution. Mr. Buzzi said the decision has been made and confirmed at every level.

Mrs. Bittman said regarding the transportation hearing Mrs. McGuinness Getzinger wanted a full size bus to go down a cul-de-sac, which we don't do. We also spoke to the fairness of all other Newtown residents who live on cul-de-sacs. The decision was to be fair and equitable.

Mr. Hart said we couldn't afford the transportation costs to go down every cul-de-sac and stop at each house.

Mr. Alexander asked for the total number of legal and special education cases and the total cost. He also asked about the student from St. Rose who was left on the bus. Dr. Robinson provided telephone information to St. Rose so they've taken care of it. Mrs. Leidlein felt it would be a good practice to send this out through all of the schools. Dr. Robinson indicated most people call the schools because there is staff there until the last child is dropped off. She will send it out again.

Mrs. Leidlein asked to discuss the transportation contract publicly.

Mr. Hart said this is a draft contract and should be discussed in executive session.

MOTION: Mr. Gaines moved to go into executive session to discuss the draft transportation contract and invited Dr. Robinson and Mr. Bienkowski. Mr. Buzzi seconded. Vote: 5 ayes, 1 nay (Mrs. Leidlein)

Item 6 – Executive Session

Executive session began at 10:45 p.m. The Board discussed the transportation contract.

Item 7 – Public Session for the Vote

Public session began at 11:14 p.m.

MOTION: Mr. Buzzi moved that the Board of Education approve the home-to-school transportation contract with All Star Transportation for the period of July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2017 encompassing their bid of June 23, 2011. Mr. Gaines seconded.

Vote: 5 ayes, 1 nay (Mrs. Leidlein)

Item 8 - Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Andrew Buzzi, Jr.
Secretary