

**Board of Education
Newtown, Connecticut**

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, April 13, 2010 at 7:30 p.m. in the Reed Intermediate School library.

Present:	L. Bittman, Chair	J. Robinson
	K. Fetchick, Vice Chair	L. Gejda
	D. Leidlein, Secretary	30 Staff
	D. Nanavaty	5 Public
	R. Gaines	3 Press
	W. Hart	
	C. Lagana	

Mrs. Bittman called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Item 1 – Consent Agenda

Mrs. Bittman requested that the approval of the minutes of April 6, 2010 be moved to the next meeting.

MOTION: Mr. Hart moved to approve the additional consent agenda item which was the resignation of Nicole Leone, teacher at Newtown High School, effective June 30, 2010.

Mr. Nanavaty seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 2 – Public Participation

Jill Bontatabus-Beaudry, 36 Queen Street, read a letter from the Reed teachers. The proposed cuts will drastically affect their school and eliminate programs, reduce access to support staff and resources and compromise their ability to provide the transition between elementary and middle school. Last year a proposal to increase class size was voted down by the Board. Please support us in educating and nurturing Newtown's children. Speaking for herself she said the teachers do more for the students such as getting involved in community service.

Kevin Fitzgerald, 24 Old Farm Hill Road, read a letter to the Board as a concerned citizen. What the Board was dealt by the Legislative Council of which he is a member was terrible and he apologized to Dr. Robinson for a town unwilling to support education. Thousands of residents want the funds restored. Many want to vote "no" at every budget referendum because the amount cut is excessive. The Legislative Council always has the option to restore funds to education. The choices are to cut education or cut education further. If cutting afterschool activities and special programs happen they will never be restored. A revolution is brewing to put the quality of education above all else. He asked the Board to support an Option C to remove every available dollar that does not support education. Options A and B represented a balanced way to make cuts.

Item 3 – Reports

H. C. Planning Consultants Report: Dr. Robinson said she met with Pat Llodra and Dr. Chung before the meeting and he was here to speak to the Board.

Dr. Chung spoke to the Board on how he does his enrollment report. A major factor influencing public school enrollment is the economy. The trend analysis is looked at by grades as far back as 20 and 30 years. We use a statistical regression analysis which

shows how the unemployment rate or housing sales will affect the birth rate. Higher unemployment rates mean lower births. With school enrollment many variables that took place in the past will impact the future. We establish assumptions and then look at enrollment by grade.

Mr. Nanavaty asked if he was going to address empty nest homeowners who sell to young families.

Dr. Chung said that would be addressed. He has taken surveys of other towns regarding that issue.

Mrs. Fetchick asked if he has looked at trends as far as how many parents enroll their four-year-old children rather than waiting until they are five.

Dr. Chung said the easiest method is to take the historical ratio between births to kindergarten age over the last 10 years. First we project the statewide enrollment by grade. Then we take Newtown's enrollment by grade which allows us to compare our growth and the statewide growth.

Mr. Hart asked for some samples of projections he's done.

Mrs. Fetchick said the Planometrics report is on the Town website.

Mrs. Bittman asked if he was going to look for the potential for additional homes being built.

Dr. Chung said he was going to revisit his previous projections. The past trend does not take into account the demographic structure change or the impact of the economy.

Dr. Robinson said the next item was for a discussion with the First Selectman but she could not join us tonight.

Correspondence: Mrs. Leidlein said the Board received correspondence from Angela Silver regarding concern with the middle school cuts, Karen Pierce suggested cuts, and Laura Main requested the dollar amount for special education legal fees for the district.

Chair Report: Mrs. Bittman spoke about the Legislative Council meeting. Gary Davis wanted to decrease the reduction by \$750,000 with certain caveats and to work with the Education subcommittee to look for additional savings before the referendum with the money saved going back to the general fund. He asked her to bring it to the Board but the motion failed. She feels there would be no harm including the Education subcommittee in discussing our budget. We don't meet jointly enough. She also met with several groups of taxpayers who were considering a "no" vote. She has been encouraging people to not make a "no" vote with the hope there would be money restored. She and Mr. Nanavaty have continued meeting with the bus drivers. The district had their first underage drinking forum this year. Tonight she met with Reed PTA and tomorrow she, Mrs. Fetchick and Dr. Robinson will be fielding question from the *Bee*.

Mrs. Fetchick thanked Sarah Beier because she worked to have this underage drinking program.

Superintendent's Report:

Dr. Robinson said last Saturday was the follow-up session of community conversations on underage drinking. Students, parents and community members attended. Last night was the ninth grade forum. She commended Mrs. Beier for her work on this program. Newtown used to belong to the Tri-state Consortium which comprised New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Only high achieving districts are invited to be members and we are fortunate to be joining them again. This is an opportunity for us to continue improving our work during a time of little money for professional development.

So far we have 79 applications for the two principal positions. She has met with the Middle Gate and Sandy Hook faculty and asked them to think about the principalship and what they would like to see in their new principal.

We continue to monitor the kindergarten enrollment for September. Right now there are 64 students for Hawley, 67 for Head O'Meadow, 90 for Middle gate, and 92 for Sandy Hook.

The high school delegation of 26 will be leaving for China on April 16 returning on April 25. All are paying their own way and will be working in the schools while there.

Policy Committee: Mrs. Fetchick stated they are meeting this Thursday.

Facilities Committee: Mr. Hart had nothing to report.

MOTION: Mr. Nanavaty moved to approve the financial report for the month ending March 31, 2010. Mr. Gaines seconded.

Financial Report: Mrs. Fetchick referred to page 7 of the financial report under employee benefits appears to include things like early retirement, medical and dental insurance and other offsets. Does the anticipated deficit include that we are expecting more employee contributions throughout the year until June?

Dr. Robinson said that was correct. The number in the report is the collapsed number which includes everything.

Mrs. Fetchick asked to extend item 212 medical and dental insurance items.

Mrs. Bittman asked to have that emailed to the Board.

Mr. Hart said it jumped up this month and asked why.

Mrs. Fetchick wanted to get more information before the report was approved.

Mr. Nanavaty said on page 2 under employee benefits it is stated that it will fluctuate. He questioned that with her understanding aside, how would it change the report.

Mrs. Fetchick said the information didn't match what the Board received last week.

Mr. Nanavaty withdraw his motion. Mr. Gaines withdrew his second.

The vote was tabled until the next meeting.

Item 4 – Old Business

High School Expansion Project Update: Dr. Robinson said we had one setback this week. The chiller being transported by truck from Ohio while turning onto Oakview had

to make a quick turn to avoid a speeding car and lost the chiller. We aren't sure how long it will take to be replaced.

Approve Ed Specs for the Middle School Roof: Dr. Robinson said the ed spec for the roof need to be approved before going to the State. They can turn it around in a day.

MOTION: Mr. Hart moved to approve that the Board of Education approve the educational specifications for the roof replacement project at Newtown Middle School. Mrs. Fetchick seconded.

Mr. Nanavaty asked if we had received them at the last meeting.

Dr. Robinson said the Board received them last week and the description was in the packet tonight. This gives us a 20-year warranty with considerably better material.

Vote: 7 ayes

Budget Update: Dr. Robinson said we are in limbo until the referendum regarding the \$2.5M. She spoke about the self-funded medical plan with a 7.89% increase. Mr. Gaines was going to be part of the team to review the health consultant applications. We are still awaiting a MOU from the Town so the Board can sign with the Town for the reserve fund to pay the premiums.

Mr. Nanavaty shared his concern with the reserve fund because of what happened in the past. We left the self-insured program because of that. He hopes the MOU will be signed by the chair of Legislative Council and chair of the Board of Finance. He still feels it is a proposal and he is not very comfortable until we have a MOU to even consider this \$569,909 as a savings. He has questions as to whether we should see if there could be any additional reductions on the Town side where they are paying 7% cost share which might benefit the whole town. Maybe we could even move the Board of Education employees to a different insurance plan to save money. The BOE plan is basically a POE. We are finding our experience rate on the PPO is better than the POE.

Dr. Robinson said there are other things to consider because we are going to be paying our consultant separate for administration.

Mrs. Fetchick said we had been banking administration fees for the Town and Board of Education. It appears we are paying two fees.

Dr. Robinson said it is a theoretical fee. We are estimating \$75,000. As soon as the committee reviews them we will get the figures.

Mr. Hart said that regarding the MOU, the account will build up a healthy balance fairly quickly. What happens if we run out of money?

Dr. Robinson said it has to be made up. You have to build up a reserve but three months with a multitude of claims does not give you a big balance. It is usually after a couple of years that you have a good balance.

Mr. Nanavaty said there has to be some discussion because it may work to our disadvantage to have the Board of Education and the Town have different health plans.

Also, we had discussed purchasing an umbrella from Anthem to cover any extraordinary claims. If we are self-funded we would have to purchase it.

Mr. Hart asked if it would make sense to have an expert come in regarding this because we really need to study the details.

Mrs. Bittman said our subcommittee would do that. She also asked for comments on the motion from the Legislative Council suggesting a meeting with the Education subcommittee and the Board of Education.

Mrs. Leidlein said she is always in favor of collaboration with other boards.

Mr. Gaines said it would be a non-binding discussion with them and we will not try to cut deeper.

Mrs. Bittman read the following motion from the Legislative Council.

MOTION: To restore \$760,000 to fund education services in the proposed Town budget with the following conditions:

- 1. Immediately following passage of the 2010-2011 Town budget at a public referendum, the Board of Education will voluntarily enter into discussions with the Legislative Council's Education Committee to discuss ways to reduce costs within the 2010-2011 school district budget. The goal of these discussions will be to continue to find savings for the 2010-2011 budget year while maintaining the sanctity of Board of Education policies on class size and quality of academic education. These discussions should be completed prior to the Board of Education voting on its final 2010-2011 budget, which must be done before July 1, 2010.*
- 2. The Board of Education agrees that any cost savings that can be achieved as a result of these discussions will be voluntarily provided to the General Fund to reduce taxes.*

This motion recognizes that by state statute the Board of Education is not required to undertake these steps. Any concurrence with these conditions by the conditions by the Board of Education would be totally voluntary.

This motion failed at the Legislative Council meeting. She would like to have a more ongoing relationship with the Education subcommittee.

Mr. Hart agreed but the wording in the motion worries him regarding returning funds at the end. He would welcome conversations after.

Mr. Gaines said discussion is a good thing. All of the money is turned back to the Town at the end of the year.

Mrs. Fetchick said it is good to get involved with them but ultimately it is our decision. Ideas should be at the table when we discuss it.

Mrs. Bittman asked if the Board wanted to invite them.

Mr. Nanavaty said that Mr. Davis' motion made a lot sense but it failed. The only way we can add money is if the referendum goes down and Gary Davis asks the Legislative Council to put money back. He is not in support of what the Legislative Council did
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which was horrendous. He does not support that budget and he hopes the populous votes “no” and shows up at the Board of Finance and Legislative Council meetings to tell them why they voted “no” which is to add money back to the Board of Education. This is the second time he advocated voting “no” for the referendum. Money did get put back by the Legislative Council the last time. This budget doesn’t achieve the educational objectives we were elected to uphold.

Mrs. Bittman said she doesn’t support the cut were given. To vote the referendum down four times and think money will be put back in makes her afraid in the long run that we will end up with additional cuts. She is encouraging people to vote and then get on with things. Voting yes doesn’t mean you agree.

Mr. Nanavaty said the Legislative Council meets tomorrow to decide on advisory questions on the ballot. Given the draconian reduction of the Board of Education this is the first year, in his opinion, that this is a reduction we cannot make. If there is a united front and if they see a substantial number of “no” votes it will send a message. If they don’t get it a number of times and don’t have a budget by August they will have to look at bonding.

Mrs. Fetchick said she has spent the last five years collecting voting data. She found consistently that there are 2,000 to 2,500 “no” voters for each election. When the vote didn’t pass it was by a small margin. She encouraged people to vote “yes.” To get the number of voters to put money back you would have to exceed the 2,000 to 2,500 voters who vote “no.” We would not exceed that and we would get cut more. Just looking at the math we could not overcome the number who vote “no.” Taking on more cuts would be too much for the district.

Mr. Gaines said the presumption is that giving a “no” vote means that the school budget will be cut. We have been cut 10 times more than the Town budget with layoffs on our side. He does not support the budget put forth. The cut is too much. We’re going to have to state our priorities for education which is teachers. He is concerned about cutting afterschool activities and high school sports. He is not in favor of the budget imposed by the Legislative Council and advocates a “no” vote.

Mr. Hart said if we cut all activities that still isn’t enough. All the little costs add up to nothing. If you vote “no” you run the risk of more cuts. At some point we have to say enough is enough. He doesn’t know what he is going to do personally. It depends on what will be on the ballot. It is difficult saying “yes” to the reduction.

Mrs. Leidlein said if we get to the point where we have the option of reducing the budget by more they can look at the Town side and not ours.

Mrs. Bittman there was no consensus by the Board on how to advise the public on how to vote. If it fails she would like the Town side looked at. She wished we could have presented to the full Legislative Council.

Mrs. Leidlein said that there are some areas with contracted increases. With layoffs would any of the contracted increases be reduced? Can some of the other increases be given?

Dr. Robinson said there has been only one vote by the Board in terms of cuts. When those personnel are removed the contracted costs will go down.

Mrs. Leidlein asked to see the effect of those as a result of the contract increases.

Dr. Robinson said those are determined by the Board.

Mr. Hart said a couple of meetings ago we had a list of sports at the high school for \$520,000. He asked if the Board could get a detail of non-sporting activities. He also wants to look at how many sports have freshmen sections. What would happen if we eliminated everything but salaries from the sport activities budget? We could set up parent corporations. Why is there no other expense for ice hockey than salaries?

Mrs. Bittman asked if students, for example, in the debate activity were paying for their own buses. What non-sporting activities are completely funded by parents?

Mr. Hart said we pay \$417 per student for activities at the high school. If we increase pay for play fees it doesn't help. The cheapest sport is indoor track and the most expensive is the girls and boys basketball. Why is the boys the most expensive?

Mrs. Fetchick asked if we look at options now or wait until after the vote.

Dr. Robinson said we are past the point of trying to be creative. We are trying to find ways of funding things that have to continue. We want to do anything to preserve teaching and learning. We invest so much in our teachers and upgrade instruction. Forty-four teachers received notices. All things are critical.

Mr. Nanavaty said that regarding interscholastic sports we have to keep in mind that just as the Legislative Council and Board of Finance are concerned about families in this economic time we have to cover families who cannot afford to pay for their children to participate. Our teaching staff has taken a lot of hits from these two other boards. The way the teachers have been treated by them over the past two years is not fair. Comments by them have been inappropriate.

Mrs. Bittman asked if she had the consensus of the Board to ask to meet with the Education subcommittee. The Board agreed

Item 5 – New Business

Approve Summer Reading Book: Dr. Gejda said this book was for summer reading for students leaving fourth grade and would be followed up by the teachers at Reed.

Mr. Lagana said after reading the book he was concerned about the premise of online anonymity and no repercussions from the teacher. He found it a little troubling that there were no consequences for actions.

Dr. Gejda said it deals with bullying and appropriate ways to handle a situation with a bully. The teacher in the book also said he should have listened to the student. Regarding the online piece we do have students who are active online now.

Mrs. Fetchick said she was disturbed about the anonymity and being online. We have to be sure the students know that this is not okay.

Mr. Gaines asked about the issue of texting.

Dr. Gejda said we will have an AUP acceptable use policy with guidelines with contracts the students will sign.

Dr. Robinson said we have another program in the middle school called I-Roc with a man who worked with 7th and 8th graders and did a parent evening program. He has a credible message to the students and talks about permanence and making good decisions online.

MOTION: Mrs. Leidlein moved that the Board of Education approve the following book for summer reading: Shredderman: Secret Identity, Wendelin Van Draanen, Yearling, 2006. Mrs. Fetchick seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 6 – Public Participation

Carla Kron, 4 Clapboard Ridge Road, suggested parents transporting students to the afterschool programs. These activities are as important as what happens in the classroom. You should not just look at those to be cut.

Eric Paradis, 85 Riverside Road, said there is a lack of understanding by the Legislative Council and Board of Finance. There should be more communication and cooperative meetings.

MOTION: Mrs. Leidlein moved to go into executive session for negotiations and personnel and invited Dr. Robinson. Mr. Gaines seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 7 – Executive Session

Executive session began at 10:05 p.m.

Item 8 – Possible Vote – none

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

Item 9 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:23 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Debbie Leidlein
Secretary