

Board of Education  
Newtown, Connecticut

Minutes of the Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, April 6, 2010 at 7:30 p.m. in the board room at 3 Primrose Street.

Present:	L. Bittman, Chair	J. Robinson
	K. Fetchick, Vice Chair	L. Gejda
	D. Leidlein, Secretary	13 Staff
	D. Nanavaty	12 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

MOTION: Mrs. Fetchick moved to approve the consent agenda which included the minutes of March 16, 2010, the donations to Newtown High School of technology equipment to the Tech Club and \$1,000 to the Impact Concussion Program, the donation of a Katsura tree to Sandy Hook School, the Newtown High School field trip to Philadelphia, the resignation of Mary Tobin, teacher at Reed School, the resignation of Michael Palin, teacher at Reed School, the resignation for retirement of Carole MacInnes, teacher at Sandy Hook School, the resignation of Gail Avery-Closs, teacher at Newtown High School, the resignation for retirement of Carol Wolfson, teacher at Newtown High School, and the resignation for retirement of Geraldine Waterbury, guidance counselor at Newtown High School. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. 7 ayes

Item 2 – Public Participation - none

Item 3 – Reports

Correspondence: Mrs. Leidlein said the Board received correspondence as listed. Those in favor of reinstating the \$2.5M to the budget were Donna Randle, Karen Pierce, A. P. Roznicki, Elizabeth Alexander, Dory Bertsche, Marabeth Pereira, and Lisa and Stephen Chaloux. Those in support of money being added back into the budget were Louarna Kalten, Sharon Saunders and Patty Cheh. Jo-Ann Maude asked not to cut the GATES program. Linda Watson and Karen Alexander asked to not cut after school activities. Chuck and Judy Dubois asked to not cut academic programs. Christine Welsh supported the computer integration course at the middle school. Those asking to not cut the nurse at St. Rose were Karen Palmieri, Theresa Ludanyi, Susan Dorazio, Michele Chipman, Kristen Renzi, Mark and Shari Pavlicek, Jennifer Foss, and Lucy Adamcheck. Kinga Walsh and Maggie Conway were looking for answers to budget questions. Rep. Chris Lyddy asked the Board to establish a special education section on our website to assist parents more easily in navigating the documents and information regarding special education.

Chair Report: Mrs. Bittman said the only thing to report was that she has been fielding questions from groups in town and from the public on the budget.

Superintendent's Report: Dr. Robinson said the CAPSS Superintendent's Award winners have been selected. They include Kirsten Liniger and Sam Svensson from the middle school and Stephanie Jarvis and Zachary Bokuniewicz from the high school. The ceremony will be held on May 10 at WesConn. Her blog is on our website where the public can contact her with any questions or comments. Regarding the search for two new elementary principals, we have received over 50 applicants and will begin our screening process soon. She has been working with Bill Hart to find ways to adjust the bus schedule for efficiency. The middle school roof replacement estimate is a cost of \$3,922,000. High school graduation is set for June 17, 2010 and the middle school moving up ceremony will be held June 14, 2010, both at WesConn. She asked for a Board member to serve on a joint committee to screen the bids for our health consultant.

Dr. Robinson said the project reimbursement rates go down after this year. If the middle school roof project, which includes both roofs, is approved before July 1 the reimbursement will be 32.50% which would be \$1,372,150. If not, it will be 31.79% for a total of \$1,342,174. The committee to screen the health consultant bids would be a joint committee with the town. Mr. Gaines asked to be notified of the time commitment.

Mrs. Fetchick asked for a list of resignations with the grade level.

Policy Committee: Mrs. Fetchick said the committee is three-quarters of the way through reviewing the bylaws.

Facilities Committee: Mr. Hart said the committee met this week and finished the tours of the schools and has started posting the data and photos on the website. The next meeting is May 6. They will get some expertise from the town on any school closing activities.

Sandy Hook School Report: Donna Pagé, Principal of Sandy Hook School, Barbara Gasparine, Assistant Principal, Kris Feda, math/science specialist and Becky Virgalla, reading specialist, presented a report on Sandy Hook School. She said there were five strengths at Sandy Hook School which included climate, home school partnership, consistency of practice, data based decision making and distributed leadership.

Mrs. Virgalla spoke about the climate in the school and praised the staff and PTA that provided a weekly newsletter for parents. At the community level they have events such as a Veteran's Day breakfast in November, conduct a food drive each year and organize readers who help in the classrooms.

Mrs. Feda said the home school partnership begins with the PTA who organizes many events and also landscape the school grounds. Many fund raisers pay for cultural arts programs. \$20,000 was raised for playground refurbishment. There are many parent volunteers who also help with kindergarten registration. There is open communication between home and school.

Mrs. Gasparine said one of our greatest strengths is consistency of practice. They have extended the grade level planning times along with having curriculum committees and professional learning communities. Data based decision making involves progress monitoring and compelling conversations. Once data is examined decisions are made.

Compelling conversations take place through the year to help make informed decisions about teaching and learning.

Mrs. Pagé said her leadership team meets weekly. The leadership council is made up of administrators, specialists and grade level teachers. She is very proud of our building efforts such as block scheduling. All teachers are provided 90 minutes of common planning per week. The responsive classroom began at Sandy Hook School and now is in each elementary school. Both she and Dr. Regan were on the State task force on SRBI. Sandy Hook received the Vanguard Award in 2006 which included receiving Smartboards.

Mrs. Feda said the Vanguard recognition required qualitative information on testing. We were partnered with the Barnum School in Bridgeport.

Mrs. Virgalla said we have had other school districts visit us to observe SRBI and our kindergarten program. She served on the State CMT committee to revise the tests. We share our good practices.

Mrs. Pagé spoke adjusting the grade levels in the elementary schools. Having multiple transitions for the students would be very counterproductive. She asked the Board to invite principals when they have that conversation.

#### Item 4 – Old Business

Newtown High School Expansion Project Update: Dr. Robinson said we will be a little behind in the next weeks as things are starting to take a little longer to complete. The cafetorium looks fabulous. There have been some problems with the block but there have been no additional change orders.

Mrs. Bittman asked if we were under budget. Dr. Robinson said it looks like the project will be under budget. Any money would be returned to the town.

Mr. Lagana asked about the greenhouse. Dr. Robinson said it went out for bid but questions were raised so the cost has not been determined. There is a credit of what it would have cost to move the old one.

Mr. Nanavaty said he went to the Public Building and Site Commission meeting. Regarding the blocks, the company that makes them will send their mason out for repairs. They discussed the contingency fund and some electrical costs and they indicated that they would talk to Bob Tait to utilize funds to mesh the communication system between the buildings. The money for that would come from a separate account. They are keeping a close watch on how the money is being spent. They don't foresee any issues. Bob Mitchell gets a monthly report from Morganti. They are putting together the bid specs for the FF&E.

Dr. Robinson spoke about the OSHA reports on Hawley and the middle school. They are basically air quality studies. The studies were done by Savita Trivedi who is a Newtown resident. There was a lot of improvement in air quality in the middle school. When the windows were open there was no problem. She found some non-working ventilation in the middle school which Mr. Faiella has fixed. Hawley has higher numbers than the current numbers in the middle school. They need to get air into the rooms.

Mr. Faiella set up a maintenance procedure of changing filters regularly and fixing anything that needs attention.

Mr. Hart suggested asking Mr. Faiella to watch the power consumptions in those schools for possible increases next year.

Mrs. Bittman asked that Mr. Faiella look at the electricity comparisons in those schools.

Dr. Robinson said he is working on getting the Hawley roof repaired and in the process of getting bids.

Mrs. Fetchick asked if OSHA was coming back after the ventilation work is done.

Dr. Robinson said they would come back in the fall. We plan to retrain the teams in Tools for Schools.

Mrs. Bittman said there have been many rumors on the budget. She was going to address the comments and questions from Mary Ann Jacob. One comment made by Ms. Jacob in the press was that we refused to consider the idea of changing the school structure across the district. Ms. Bittman said that was untrue as the Board of Education had not seen or discussed the redistricting idea she was referring to. We have been working on many of her other questions. In addition, some items we put back in the budget may not stay there because of additional money cut.

Mrs. Leidlein suggested looking into a different way to redistribute our resources in the schools. Rearranging the students in the schools might help reach the goals in our strategic plan. You could adjust the districts and pair schools for kindergarten to grade 2 and grades 3 to 4 levels. One PTA would cover both schools.

Mr. Nanavaty asked if she looked at the regional school systems that were paired this way. Washington tried to create this but the individual towns voted it down.

Mrs. Leidlein said she did not look at the regional districts. She wanted to see if the Board wanted to pursue this.

Mrs. Fetchick said we would have to pull in principals, look at busing and do some research with possibly one or two Board members being involved. They would have to look at the pros and cons and bring that to the Board.

Mr. Nanavaty thought it was a little early to do this. It would not be for this coming budget year. This talks about drastically changing the way our children go to school and will require a lot of investigation. We are information seeking but this will take at least a year. It is important to look at neighboring towns and regional school districts. This is not going to resolve our current budget issue. We may find by doing this we could have additional transportation costs.

Mr. Gaines said there should be no voting on options. There should just be dialog at this point.

Mrs. Fetchick said she wanted the Board to talk about which options we should pursue to get data on. We will have the same problem next year being \$1.4M in the hole.

Mrs. Leidlein spoke about her scenarios for adjusting the elementary levels in the schools. She feels providing empty classrooms might allow for a full day kindergarten program. She doesn't want to close a school but just redistribute the student population.

Mr. Gaines said he appreciated the time and effort she put in to developing these scenarios.

Mr. Hart said the idea to get information from other districts is important to learn from their experiences.

Mr. Nanavaty said if we are decreasing the size of the schools we haven't discussed the impact on the administration. We have an assistant principal at Sandy Hook and two lead teachers. What do we do with the administration?

Mrs. Leidlein said we would keep them in place to guide the process.

Mr. Nanavaty said it is hard to justify keeping an assistant principal at Sandy Hook School. The big unknown is the cost for transportation. We may have to go to a 4-tier system with additional costs. Any cost savings might have to go to transportation.

Mrs. Leidlein said we could possibly not need to use the MTM buses for St. Rose and just use the owner/operators.

Mrs. Bittman asked Mrs. Leidlein if she had discussed her restructuring idea with any or all of the school principals. Mrs. Leidlein said it was not discussed with them.

Mr. Hart spoke about the transportation tiers. He prepared a plan if we went with Mrs. Leidlein's suggestion. We may be able to run this with three tiers.

Mrs. Bittman asked the Board if we were looking at this for the coming year or the following year.

Mrs. Fetchick said it would be for the next budget year. Transportation should look at our current bus runs for reworking of some of the current routes.

The Board agreed.

Dr. Robinson said this takes a deep feasibility study. She is very nervous with the idea of changing the arrangement of schools that are working well. We have to look at the educational benefits and coherence vertically. She has parents complaining about changes now. Another transition for young children is a concern. The study is beyond money. It is about what it does to our neighborhood concept and our educational process. Why do we want to destroy what is working.

Mr. Nanavaty said Mrs. Pagé made the point of the home school approach and having older students mentor younger students. We would lose that. We have to seriously get the pros and cons before we dismantle something that works. We have to consider what we would be doing to our school system to justify costs.

Mrs. Leidlein said the cost savings would be to implement programs to reach our goals. The savings would continue. This is just a way to relook at the resources in our community.

Mrs. Bittman said after the budget we would form a task force of staff and move forward with additional research. Referring back to the proposed cuts list presented by Mary Ann Jacob at the Legislative Council Education Subcommittee meeting, Mrs. Bittman said she was more concerned about the viability of considering a 1.4% salary reduction, especially in light of the teachers' new contract this summer that gave the district a 0 percent increase in the 2010-2011 year.

Dr. Robinson said the teachers have the largest union. To achieve that cost savings it would be with the teachers. We just signed a new contract which is zero increase the first year. We bargained that in good faith. We can't renegotiate as it would be an unfair labor practice.

Mr. Nanavaty said there are two issues. One is the 1.4% salary reduction and second is adding back the three furlough days. We cannot go back and remove those. Mrs. Bittman said we would look for reductions for transportation and remove the three days for educational assistants.

Mrs. Fetchick asked why it was okay to go back to one group and renegotiate their contract but we aren't willing to go back to the largest group. Mr. Nanavaty said one group is a certified union and one is not.

Mrs. Fetchick said if it comes to increasing class size at Reed and the middle school it might be worthwhile going back to the union. Mr. Nanavaty said in negotiating with the owner/operators there is a proposed benefit for them. To go back to the teachers there is no incentive for them to renegotiate. They will want more money. Their contract agreement went through the Board of Finance and was passed by the Legislative Council.

Mrs. Bittman wanted to discuss the transportation issue. Mr. Nanavaty said the transportation issue came out of the \$1.2M. There is discussion about the decrease in the excess cost grant. A Board of Finance member called the state and went over the heads of the people who know what is going on to get information that we won't know is correct. The next transportation meeting is at 5 pm tomorrow.

Mrs. Bittman said another large item Mrs. Jacob had on her list was the Reed computers. We made a decision to keep them in the budget because they will be replacing seven-year-old computers. We can't delay it. Some things we put back in the budget might come back out. She would like the Reed computers to stay there.

Mr. Nanavaty said if it comes down to teachers or Reed computers, the computers will have to be delayed. We have to maintain class size as low as we can. Get the funds another way. Mrs. Fetchick agreed that a classroom teacher is more important.

Mrs. Bittman suggested taking back the three days and would like to know the cost savings. We could reduce plant operation, district furniture, the high school bleachers, the moving up ceremony and the handbook.

Mr. Nanavaty said the morale of the moving up ceremony is incredible. For the small cost it is one thing he would like to keep in the budget.

Dr. Robinson said the actual cost is \$3,800 but other costs bring it up to \$7,000.

WesConn is the only facility to accommodate 2,000 people. It is sort of a rite of passage for the students.

Mrs. Bittman said we should research solutions to keep the afterschool activities. The Newtown High School Marching Band Parent Corporation is a model the district could consider.

Mrs. Fetchick said we need information on what is legal per the contract. We should also look into reducing the amount of money given to the high school as well as Reed and the middle school for afterschool activities.

Mrs. Bittman said she and Dr. Robinson would work on that.

Mr. Nanavaty asked if athletics should be included.

Mrs. Bittman said to add interscholastic sports. We need to look at an alternative funding source.

Mrs. Fetchick suggested looking at any overhead costs we can combine with the Town such as operations and maintenance.

Dr. Robinson said that has been studied in depth. We did some research and looked in our electricity. There is a great deal of collaboration that is not formalized such as help with plumbing and fixing the curbs at Head O'Meadow School. We have an ongoing working relationship with the town. Parks and Rec help also. We belong to a large consortium for buying. We decided that we could do a work order system and software program for facilities. None will be huge cost savings.

Mr. Nanavaty said this is an operational issue not necessarily something that the Board of Education has to address. It's already being done. Collaboration is there.

Mr. Gaines said that how we define a day could change. There are advantages of a longer school day. If we add an hour to every day we could reduce the number of days reducing the education costs and transportation costs. It is a state decision to require 180 days.

Mrs. Fetchick said the state requires 900 hours of instruction. She suggested a task force with principals to see if they have any ideas.

Dr. Robinson said the principals are very forthcoming. She supports having a meeting but they run the most efficient organizations because they have not had much money. The high school is noted as one of the most efficient high schools in the state.

Mr. Hart said he has heard some comments that we are top heavy with administrators but he feels we are very lean in that area.

Dr. Robinson said she visited a school district where each school had a principal and assistant principal. They have non-instructional teachers who work with the teachers and are in the classrooms. That district is one of the highest performing in the state.

They have people and expertise. She wishes we could have non-instructional content teachers. We are so used to running with so little teachers they don't know what they don't have. We are fortunate to have such a high morale. Our teachers and principals try to make up for what we don't have.

Status of the Hawley Boiler: Dr. Robinson said this boiler had a hole in the side but we have a backup. Gino is doing a bid for this. The cost will be out of this year's budget. Mr. Lagana asked the cost.

Mr. Hart is guessing between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Hawley HVAC design will have one pair of boilers run the system. It is expensive to switch to hot water.

Mrs. Bittman wanted to discuss funds that could be freed up.

Dr. Robinson spoke about financial information Mrs. Fetchick requested. In October we decided to hold off on any expenditure we could. We held off on discretionary spending. It was never a true freeze and the Board never took action on it. We have received 84% of the excess cost grant but our special education costs are more. We got 75% of the 84% threshold. We have a deficit of \$103,000 in special ed. She referred to the financial report for the month ending March 31, 2010.

Mrs. Fetchick noted that not only was this information missing from her Board packet but also this was not the same information given to her by Ed Arum.

Mrs. Leidlein asked if there were emergency repair funds with enough to replace the Hawley boiler.

Dr. Robinson said there was but we can also do transfers closer to the end of the year. Mrs. Leidlein asked if there is money left in that fund if we could use it for other things.

Dr. Robinson said there are other lines already in the deficit. The money in the fund would go back to the town. We have an encumbrance line which is money we know we are going to spend. We encumber the amount for the item but the actual expenditure may come in at a lesser amount. Now we start contacting the schools and close out our purchase orders where we will find money not spent. We start closing out purchase orders earlier to determine the amounts.

Mrs. Fetchick said anticipated obligations are a concern and asked what the specific items were for such as library supplies, classroom supplies and sports equipment. Are we buying for this year or next year?

Dr. Robinson said our sports seasons run in thirds. That goes into anticipated obligations until encumbered. Paper purchases are with a consortium. We do not buy ahead. She would bring large items to the Board.

Mr. Nanavaty said Mrs. Raymo created this new financial report but he is hearing it is causing more problems than solutions. Projected balance and anticipated obligations were never in our financial report. There comes a point in time to rely on the experts in central office to spend the money. If we were given a certain amount of money we should be able to spend it. We are spending exactly what the voters gave us. We have to rely on the administration doing their job. We shouldn't be second guessing their

spending. We can't be micromanaging our central office. They are the experts and we need to rely on the people who are working for us.

Mr. Hart said he finds the last two columns useful. All he wants to know is why things have changed.

Mr. Gaines said we had requested that the previous month's total will be listed on the financial report.

Mrs. Fetchick said she wasn't trying to micromanage. She wanted to understand where we stand and be sure we spend it in the most effective way. It would be helpful to show the major areas.

Mr. Hart said there is a feeling by some in town that the Board of Education isn't spending money wisely. We need to communicate effectively.

Mr. Nanavaty said this is the first year we haven't had a financial director at our meetings. The last two columns are good but we need to have someone to answer questions.

MOTION: Mr. Hart moved to direct the Superintendent of Schools for the balance of the 2009-2010 fiscal year to limit spending on discretionary items only to those that are absolutely necessary. Secondly, after the final Special Education Excess Cost Grant payments are received, the Board further directs the Superintendent to identify any nonperishable essential items, such as paper or fuel, that can be purchased this year for next year at a lower price than next year, thus saving the Board and the Town money, and bring these recommended purchases to the Board for case by case approval. Mrs. Fetchick seconded.

Mrs. Fetchick said if we were able to realize a savings this year and turn it over to the Town it would lower the tax rate for next year.

Mr. Gaines thought the mil rate was set and any money to the Town wouldn't lower it.

Mr. Hart said it would go into the general fund.

Mrs. Bittman said the spirit of the motion is to direct Dr. Robinson to be as conservative as possible with the Board making a decision on spending any surplus.

Mr. Gaines moved the question. Vote: 7 ayes

#### Item 5 – New Business

PowerSchool Parent Portal Agreement: Dr. Robinson said this gives the parents the ability to access grades. Parents will have to come in to get their password. The high school is ready and then it will go to the middle school and Reed.

Mr. Gaines said the draft should be reviewed for grammatical correctness.

Dr. Gejda asked the Board to review the information they received regarding approving a reading book at the April 13 meeting.

#### Item 6 – Public Participation

Carla Kron, 4 Clapboard Ridge Road, said that class size is not always the end game. She spent time in the high school this year and the teachers don't feel they are supported by the Town of Newtown. She can't imagine what a 1.4% salary reduction would do to them. We need to keep the quality of teachers we have. For after school

activities at Reed and the middle school maybe the Newtown Youth Academy could pick up some of the intramural type activities. She is hesitant on parent boards to run activities. Activities should not be cut. Work with the Town on bidding for commodities. The administration at the high school is not top heavy. They have one crisis after another. She disagreed about the middle school moving up ceremony because most prefer that it not be held. It takes away for the high school graduation.

Kinga Walsh, 21 Horseshoe Ridge Road, referred to Mary Ann Jacob's document and said that one thing not discussed was the possible change in rotation at the middle school. She asked how the consolidation of the elementary schools would affect special education students.

MOTION: Mr. Hart moved to go into executive session to discuss negotiations, personnel and the Board self-evaluation and invited Dr. Robinson. Mrs. Leidlein seconded. Vote: 7 ayes

Item 7 – Executive Session

Executive session began at 11:22 p.m.

Item 8 – Possible Vote(s) from Executive Session – none

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

Item 9 – Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:42 a.m.

Questions raised: List of resignations with grade level  
Electricity comparisons for Hawley and Middle School

Respectfully submitted:

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Debbie Leidlein  
Secretary

Addendum approved at November 15, 2011 Board of Education meeting:

Mr. Nanavaty moved that the Board of Education amend the minutes of the April 6, 2010 Board of Education meeting to include the following under executive session:

Discussion centered on Board members speaking to the press before being vested by the entire Board. The practice had been for the Board to speak publicly as a single voice through the chair. No motions were made or votes taken.

Mr. Gaines seconded. Vote: 7 ayes