

**Special Meeting Minutes
Fairfield BoE; October 24, 2016**

Call to order of the Special Meeting of the Board of Education and Roll Call

Chairman Philip Dwyer called the Special meeting to order at 7:34PM. Present were members Eileen Liu-McCormack, Marc Patten, Donna Karnal, Jessica Gerber, Philip Dwyer, Anthony Calabrese, Trisha Pytko, Jennifer Maxon-Kennelly and John Llewellyn. Others present were approximately 25 members of the public.

Mr. Dwyer thanked the public for attending and gave a brief background as to the history of the town hall meetings, which came out of the Communications subcommittee. He welcomed former BoE Chair and current BoF member John Mitola, who would act as moderator of the meeting, allowing Mr. Dwyer to participate more freely.

John Mitola thanked the Board and members of the public. He explained the parameters of the meeting as to how the public would comment and how Board members would respond.

Frank Sahagian, 20 Chelsea Street, and teacher at FWMS. Was interested in the previous Board meeting regarding the discussion on racial imbalance at McKinley. Is concerned about decline in population at the elementary school level and how it will impact school utilization in elementary school as well as middle school and its team format. Is there any plan about this? Is there a threshold for how many children should be in a school? His children were impacted by schools opening and closing. Middle schools will not have the ability to maintain team system, which is problematic for students and teachers. As this relates to racial imbalance, will this decline in enrollment impact the problem and perhaps require the district to take different actions?

Mrs. Liu-McCormack agreed with his insights and has grappled with similar questions. There is an apparent decreasing trend. The consultants' analysis may show growth with no apparent necessary reasons. In finance she used to do this all the time, and wondered how could that be? In reality it doesn't happen all the time, She questions expanding schools with declining enrollment. Would prefer board to look forward and not be so aggressive in expanding schools. Not sure what McKinley numbers are for next year. Agrees that team system in MS would be impacted. Thinks importing kids from another town should be a town discussion, it's a bigger social issue. Our mandate is to use funds for the benefit of Fairfield residents. If we have all this excess capacity do we extend to other communities or do we close schools. This requires future deliberation.

Mr. Patten said that closing schools has proven to not be in Fairfield's favor; it's one of the reasons we built Burr. Most people don't want to touch redistricting. In the short term if there is a contraction, the staff does review these things and things can be altered if need be in terms of changing ed specs for future projects. Hope that teachers would not be impacted by any contractions. There shouldn't be any massive layoffs. In this town, when we close schools over time trends change. Economy is improving.

Mr. Sahagian said that this is not a temporary situation and other towns are experiencing this as well. There are problems in the state. That's his concern. Has concerns about fiscal responsibility.

Mr. Patten said that in the past most districts declined but not Fairfield. Fairfield is a lot more affordable than other towns but at the same time our school district is strong.

Ms. Karnal said thanks for looking up the stats, she's not sure the board reviews them often enough. Not sure if building all these schools to 504 is a good idea and not sure it will help with racial imbalance. We are trending down. Keep putting out those numbers.

Mrs. Gerber it's important to remember that trends go up and down. We're still dealing with too many schools being closed in the 80s. While it's true enrollment has gone down, there is residential building in town and enrollment will go back up. Only Holland Hill and Mill Hill will be expanded to 504 schools. Holland Hill is centrally located. New developments are being built in Mill Hill area. Both projects are getting rid of portables. Closing a school could harm the district long-term.

Ms. Karnal wanted to clarify that six schools are 504, two more will be built to that, making it 8 out of 11 schools.

Mr. Dwyer said that many people recognize that they chose Fairfield because of the schools and because of the prices of houses. Our enrollment will go down and will go back up. People see this as a valuable town. Neighborhood schools are part of the stability of this town. Should the board move away from this concept and entertain closing a school? It's not just moving boundaries; it's moving families and children. Not wise to make a decision on just a 3-4 year trend. Board as a whole had not wanted to redistrict to solve racial imbalance.

Mr. Sahagian asked if enrollment changes for McKinley for next year were available and would they show that racial imbalance won't be an issue.

Mr. Dwyer state creates official numbers, which won't be known until spring. Looking at the trend, he doesn't think the enrollment numbers will impact the imbalance.

Mrs. Gerber said that because McKinley has a lot of renters in the district it is often hard to predict numbers there.

Mr. Calabrese said that consultants are looking at the numbers. Thinks it's a state issue, talked about upcoming proposed developments that will impact schools. Trusts that consultants are doing their best. Thinks that all Board members want to do what is right for the kids.

Ms. Pytko said that she lives in McKinley district, thinks that things will change because of new developments, making it hard to determine enrollment. We need to keep revisiting this.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that we have six schools at 504. Many Board members have been doing analysis of this issue. Majority of the Board believes building schools where children are, to avoid busing children. We may have to look at numbers if some schools get too small. Understands trends but warned that they can fluctuate. Trusts in administrative staff that team concept will stay in place. If town doesn't accept HUD money we would not be as beholden to 830-G regulations, but there would be other implications that would have their costs. We need to be flexible and adjust accordingly.

Mr. Sahagian said that MS numbers are easier to determine because students are in the system

Mr. Llewellyn said that the observations presented are good. Said that some Board members questioned the need to expand Holland Hill and Mill Hill as 504s. Holland Hill doesn't go above 438 in projections. He does question overbuilding schools. Questioned Mr. Dwyer stating that we should be bringing 170 students into our town. We shouldn't grow schools for capacity for folks from out of town. Doesn't think costs are net neutral. We are responsible to all Fairfielders. Should hunker in and spend money on actually educating kids. Hopes the Board take this into consideration.

Mr. Dwyer said that when building a 504 school it is considered good planning to consider staying at 90% functional capacity. Looking at that, Holland Hill built to 504 would be within functional capacity. Neighborhoods with dense populations warrant 504 schools.

Mr. Llewellyn said that there's a trend in two of our schools toward increasing diversity. We might need to redistrict parts of neighborhoods. While Mr. Dwyer says that's pocket redistricting that's actually not true. Redistricting committee set boundaries that were impossible to meet. We've asked for raw data on demographics but haven't gotten anything so we can't do analysis.

Bill Dunn 205 Tuckahoe Lane. Questioned process of school building projects. Wanted to know Board ideas on feedback, improvements, changes, and what impact would new Superintendent have. Concerned about communication. Should there be a point person on the building committee to work with town bodies?

Mr. Patten said that some changes have been made to process of getting a building project done. Town charter dictates who is responsible for what, so that aspect probably won't change. Not sure how to speed things up. First Selectman's office and other town bodies work together. Mentioned waterfall chart and its place in the process.

Mr. Dunn said that sometimes priorities that BoE thinks are important don't seem as important to other town bodies. Some schools will need to be fixed, not necessarily space issues, but things will need to be addressed. Sometime projects are going to be multi-layered.

Mrs. Gerber said that there have been lapses in communication that have created problems. BoF is working on having a rep to all building projects, perhaps RTM should have more than one liaison. FairTV could record building committee meetings to supplement minutes, as many times complex issues are discussed that are hard to convey through minutes. Try to communicate better, engage school communities. People are busy but we still need to figure out ways to get them more involved. Maybe quarterly or annual update meetings would help.

Mr. Dwyer said that Board responsibility is ed specs. Process is responsibility of First Selectman's office. RTM approves building committee but then the committee reports to the First Selectman. Building committees sometimes go in different directions. Thinks that staff should be more involved in guiding the volunteers on a building committee. Perhaps town or district should create a position that will do that – a construction manager.

Mr. Dunn said that when EPA and Dept of Health gets involved that can complicate matters on a project.

Mr. Dwyer said that no one should think that a construction project should be simple – there are always complications that arise that add to the costs and extend the time of the project.

Mr. Calabrese said that committee gets charge from ed specs and then determine how things should be. That can be a problem. Changes will start with the First Selectman's office. Our buildings need to be maintained better. Need to stick to waterfall plan.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly asked Mr. Dunn if his question had been answered.

Mr. Dunn said he just wanted to get into the process, and addressed the problems that arise when a building committee has to ask for more money, which can get very controversial. We can work together better.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that the building process needs to be improved but there are parameters that don't really allow for flexibility. Process has been changing and evolving. There are aspects that can be improved, other town bodies have acknowledged this.

Mr. Llewellyn said that most households don't underbudget and overspend the way school projects do. Board should do more than approve ed specs. Should put rules in regarding budget. We can choose to put in more detail. Things don't need the best that it can be. There have been issues with schools being built and then having problems. Need to accept more accountability. It's a pass the buck with too many hands in the pot. There's no ownership.

Mrs. Liu-McCormack said that to the extent that the Board should review the processes more she would be supportive of that. It requires the will of multiple Boards to effect change.

Mr. Mitola confirmed that the Board of Finance is studying the issue

Erica Taylor 15 Brookfield Avenue, parent at McKinley. Concerned about racial imbalance. Agreed that construction projects often have flaws. Is concerned about redistricting. McKinley is a wonderful school. Lots of communities have had underserved people come in and the benefits go both ways. Diversity brings life and perspective. If Fairfield was to allow students to come in from elsewhere would that help with racial imbalance?

Ms. Karnal said that she moved to Fairfield 21 years ago and saw how homogenous the town was. There are lots of differences of opinion on the Board. She doesn't have enough information to make a decision.

Mrs. Gerber said that we do have the Open Choice program that brings students in to Fairfield. One idea in the racial imbalance plan is to increase Open Choice students, which would increase diversity in other Fairfield schools. It could slightly change racial imbalance. The Board needs more information about potential costs of additional open choice students.

Mr. Dwyer said that the reality is that McKinley is the most in-balance school we have in our town. According to the state we are off by 2 ½ percentage points. More Open Choice students and moving pre-k from Dwight to Stratfield could help. Opt in option hasn't helped. Many parents value the diversity at McKinley.

Ms. Pytko said her daughter will be going to McKinley next year. She referenced Sheff vs. O'Neill and its impact on racial imbalance. Hopefully statute will be revisited. Hope is that state reps and state senators will look at the statute. She is passionate about this topic. Statute is taking away the positive diversity that we have.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that if the district had to redistrict it would have to be blind to the demographic makeup of the students.

Ms. Taylor said that you're trying to solve the demographic challenge by moving attendance lines, but you are moving people who contribute to the positive diversity. Educational impact of diversity at McKinley cannot be denied.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said we need to take a close look at the budget issue of Open Choice. Questions were asked that staff couldn't answer on the spot. She anticipates the board will get additional information. We pay taxes to state as well so when underserved citizens receive a positive education that is an investment that comes back to Fairfield citizens. However, if it's cost-prohibitive she doesn't think it's viable.

Ms. Taylor said that if she has 14 students in a class or 18 students in a class there is still only one teacher.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that she saw that some class sections would be able to take more students without increasing the number of sections

Mr. Llewellyn said there's been plenty of time to get information he had asked more than once, and he doesn't think the Board will see it. Teachers in K-5 are different than college professors. Thinks that state should fund town more than it does. Doesn't think we should take guidance from the state since they don't have their financial house in order. We spend more per pupil than Bridgeport. Bridgeport gets 70% of their funding from the state. Open Choice can impact number of teachers. We can help with diversity in schools by moving students within Fairfield. We need to focus our spend. We are spending more than \$3000 per pupil from Open Choice but we probably won't see those numbers.

Mr. Patten recalled middle school redistricting, was a member of the redistricting committee on the BoE last year. Some redistricting may take place once Holland Hill and Mill Hill are complete, according to consultants. Hopefully it won't be too chaotic. Is in favor of Open Choice. Fairfield is a district with one of the lowest percentages of Open Choice students. Fairfield is a different place from many of our neighboring towns.

Mrs. Gerber said that the 2022 hypothetical plan done by Milone & MacBroom entailed moving small pockets of students from almost every elementary school, it would not be a pocket redistricting, although it should be noted that in some cases only small groups would be moved.

Mrs. Liu-McCormack said that we are talking about 23 students. Over the next five years that number could become 40. The issue is such a small problem in relation to 10,000 students. What will meet the needs of the state and be the least disruptive to people in Fairfield. Is bringing in lots of Open Choice students more or less disruptive than redistricting? Do we move up all other 10 elementary schools to get close to McKinley? It would be great to get 1000s of parents across

CT and get the statute overturned.

Veronica Monahan: real estate agent, lives on Galloping Hill Road. Open Choice is a new idea being floated in the community and people are concerned by it. People are concerned about taxes primarily going to education. Our numbers are declining, Every client with kids she takes out asks what HS the house is in and they all say no to Warde. Everyone wants to buy in Ludlowe. There is a divide in town with the children. Test scores are declining. Houses over \$1 million are hard to sell. Westport has lower taxes and a higher educational standard. There's a perception that drives our values. Her taxes have gone up 50%, why is her money going to any more people outside this town. Need to focus on education. Talking about 24 kids is a waste of time. There's a huge issue in town. Need to look at socioeconomic and demographic issues in town. People need to know how many people rent in town. We shouldn't overbuild. Need to think of people who pay taxes. What happens to Open Choice students in HS and how does that impact test scores. When she bought into Fairfield she didn't buy because it was the most ethnically diverse, she bought because it was an attractive place to live. She could bring 50 realtors for a sit down to discuss issues.

Mrs. Gerber – Open Choice is not new concept, and it is a concept that many feel is beneficial to Fairfield in many ways. Respectfully disagrees regarding perception of divide in HS. She actually had and has children attending FLHS and they have many friends in both high schools. A perception existed in the past that Andrew Warde was inferior, which was not true, but that perception remains. It is not helpful when people perpetuate these perceptions, but that is a more townwide issue than a Board issue.

Mr. Dwyer said when you look at school rankings sometimes Ludlowe is ahead, sometimes Warde. Differences are marginal. Disagrees with Mrs. Monahan's assumption. Regarding costs – adding one student to an open chair does not add \$15,000 to a district budget, the same way subtracting a student doesn't take away \$15,000. We have to look at a marginal cost perspective not just the average cost of the student.

Mr. Llewellyn said marginal concept works well for an individual student, but when you move from 62 to 170 students...

Mr. Dwyer said that Mr. Llewellyn should not put words in his mouth.

Mr. Llewellyn said we could look at the tape, Mr. Dwyer had said his goal would be 170 students. If we are looking at doubling the program it will be more than de minimis costs.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly clarified that the recommendation from the staff was to increase the number of Open Choice students by 18 the first year and again by 18 the second year, to get to around 100 students, not looking at 170 students. To start becoming obsessed about test scores would be anathema. She is a teacher and disagrees with the notion that everything should be driven by test scores. To get test scores up many districts do test prep, constantly; we do not. We are focused on all of our students at all of our schools. She knows of three new people who purposely chose Stratfield and North Stratfield neighborhoods.

Mrs. Monahan asked how do you quantify or qualify how well students are doing. What data are you using?

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that education is not designed to be competitive which is something that business people cannot understand. Working collaboratively with peers is essential in education. DIP involves development of the whole person, a lot goes into it. Finding non-test score measures is a constant challenge. It is easy to point to test scores and say that one district is better than another because of them but the Board must reject that.

Ms. Pytko said that the state tried to address socioeconomic segregation through magnet schools, but that wasn't the answer. Open Choice became another option. We have fewer students than many other towns. Look to state reps and senators.

Mrs. Monahan said that many people fear that town is building all these massive schools to take in students from out of town, that's the word on the street

Ms. Pytko said that the town made a choice to answer to the state. We as a town have to answer to the state. She would never pit the two high schools against each other

Mrs. Monahan said that for Ms. Pytko to say there's not a problem is naïve. You could poll people, she's out of touch with reality.

Mrs. Liu-McCormack wanted to say that Mrs. Monahan's opinion is as worthwhile as anybody else's. Oftentimes it's brave. It is respected and acknowledged, she herself has heard about this disparity between high schools through many sources. Everyone loves this town, when you hear this it kills you. How to fix the perception? It is a very real thing that she hopes we do address. Majority of the board needs to want to address it and face it. The points are very valid. Taxes have gone up, we've heard this from many many people. There are concerns with Open Choice. Nothing is free in life. Exact number is harder to quantify. From a social point, how much are we willing to spend? Whose choice is this to spend money on non-Fairfield residents? It should be discussed, probably powers beyond us. She believes our mandate is Fairfield residents. There will be a dilution of resource allocation. Each marginal kid is a further dilution. Diversity is a wonderful thing, but we do have diversity in town -- why not leverage diversity within our town? She wishes the Board would want to engage. The more brave people are to raise these issues and be vocal about them, the sooner something will be done.

Mr. Patten is looking for a house in Fairfield and has talked to five realtors in different parts of town. Would like to see data to back up the claims of the 50 realtors mentioned, not sure if claims are correct. FLHS and FWHS are very similar in test scores and rankings.

Mrs. Gerber said we are not building huge schools, we are getting rid of portables, we are adding core spaces, and are netting 11 classrooms across 11 schools.

Mr. Dwyer said we are not building for students outside the town, we look at demographic projections for neighborhoods surrounding each school. He also said that, in defense of renters -- when you rent you do pay taxes for your property.

Ms. Karnal said there seems to be a disagreement over building 504 schools. Looking at the sheet from the district, we have five 504s and are building two more but it appears there's only one school that's over 450 students.

Mr. Llewellyn said there is disagreement regarding building out schools to 504. There are 86 empty seats at Riverfield. Perception is both ways. We are slated to come up to 100 Open Choice, Mr. Dwyer has said he would like to go up to 170 students for Open Choice. Numbers this year went up by 12 students instead of two, as was previously stated. There is some concern about where the real numbers are. There will be additional costs adding 100+ students.

Mrs. Liu-McCormack said that in addition from going to 100 to 170 one Board member suggested taking in Open Choice students indefinitely. The groundwork has been laid, people have varying opinions on this it's not clear cut that this is a one time deal. We have to be open and realistic to the possibility that depending on who is in charge that view and vision is what will happen in the coming years. We have to be realistic in planning and budgeting. We can all be there with our eyes wide open and say we know what could happen, what do we want to happen.

Suzanne Miska, 123 Ryegate Road

Said it was a shame that FairTV is not present to record the meeting. Asked that the Board rethink public comment when the new superintendent comes on this year. If it must stay with only agenda items at least allow there to be public comment at the end of meetings so members of the public can address topics discussed in the meeting. In regards to the hot button item, why has it taken so long to act on racial imbalance? We only do redistricting when it's convenient to us. The Board at the time of the middle school redistricting was in love with the redistricting program. Recently the district paid \$60k for a consultant who did a lovely redistricting presentation with pretty colors. She thought redistricting was on

the table in five years. Is the Board looking at redistricting as an opportunity? This discussion got a lot of time last year through the redistricting subcommittee. Perception given to the public is that the interim superintendent with the past superintendent presented a new idea with only four weeks to digest. Presentation last week had no data in it. Please tell her what Board is going to do in regards to redistricting.

Mr. Dwyer a district wide redistricting plan is still an option down the road. It is hard to have a conversation today about something taking place six years from now. The state always expects us to present options.

Mrs. Miska asked that if redistricting is still on the table for 2022 why is a magnet program also being presented to the state. Trying to understand what the options are.

Mr. Dwyer said that the Board is keeping all its options open. For immediate response to the state, Open Choice and moving pre-K to Stratfield might help for the time being. Voluntary-based decisions rather than forced decisions until such time that both Holland Hill and Mill Hill are renovated and then perhaps we could look at redistricting. Magnet program could be another possibility to help with racial imbalance. It is a concept but there are no specific plans.

Mr. Patten every year the Board looks at bylaw changes. Personally he has no problem looking at public comment, 10-15 minutes at beginning and 10-15 minutes at the end perhaps. Can revisit. As for racial imbalance, there wasn't zero data presented. More info has been requested and he anticipates the Board will get it in time before the meeting. Wouldn't vote on something without all the proper information.

Mrs. Miska This is a new idea with little discussion. BoE is always under a four-minute fire drill. This came from the state in May of 2015. Why is the Board always down to the four-week time period. She is disheartened as a parent and taxpayer. Please revisit public comment, people ran on it last year.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that regarding the public comment issue – the Board votes on their bylaws, not the superintendent. Having a new superintendent does not impact the Board's stance on public comment.

Mrs. Miska said that Dr. Clark had different public comment than Dr. Title.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly clarified that Dr. Clark and Dr. Title did not have impact on public comment. In regards to the issue of redistricting – most people know it will probably have to happen but now is not the time. We do not want to move students more than once. It's not "just moving 23 students." It's just wrong to continually move small groups of students. Fairfield Woods had significant space added, which was why redistricting took place then. Peeling off a few streets here and there ignores the fact that we may very well have to move things again. That is looking at short-term gain and not long term one. She wants to see a plan that truly solves things.

Mrs. Miska said there was a perception that redistricting has been locked in a box. Holland Hill and Mill Hill may very well have issues. It may be time to move students. Frustrated with the committee that was formed last year and was disheartened at what was said. We need to look at all of the options

Mr. Llewellyn said that the comment on public comment is well taken. Hardly anyone makes public comment anymore. It should be added and parents should talk about any concerns in the district. Re: redistricting -- there will be no choices offered to the Board. The plan needs to be approved, needs to be at the state three days after the vote. Board could have been having a good open debate but it didn't. The Board is hamstrung and tied up again so we don't have a lot of options here.

Karen Secrist FWHS PTA President. Lived in Fairfield, moved away for four years and came back. Moved specifically to Stratfield and Warde. Loved the community, proud to be a Fairfield Warde parent. Her children went through Warde, one just started; they all have friends at Ludlowe. They have an inclusive community. Thanked Board for thinking of students equally.

DRAFT

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly thanked her for serving as PTA President

Mr. Dwyer said you hear differences of viewpoints but we do all take seriously that there is equity in our schools.

Mr. Dwyer thanked the public and Mr. Mitola.

Adjournment

Mrs. Gerber moved/Ms. Karnal seconded the recommended motion “that this Special Meeting of the Board of Education adjourn.” Motion passed 9-0. Meeting adjourned at 10:22PM