

**Special Meeting Minutes  
Fairfield BoE; December 14, 2017**

**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 7:31PM. Present were members Jennifer Leeper, Christine Vitale, Jessica Gerber, Philip Dwyer, Jennifer Jacobsen, Nick Aysseh (arrived 7:50PM), Jennifer Maxon-Kennelly and Jeff Peterson. Trisha Pytko was absent. Others present were RTM member Pamela Iacono and approximately 15 members of the public.

Mr. Dwyer thanked the public for attending and gave a brief synopsis of what topics the town hall meetings would cover. He welcomed former BoE Chair and current RTM member Pamela Iacono, who would act as moderator of the meeting, allowing Mr. Dwyer to participate more freely.

Ms. Iacono thanked the Board and members of the public. She asked members of the public to indicate how many people were planning on speaking.

Tina Brown 35 Quaker Lane, FLHS teacher. First question is regarding math levels in the HS. There used to be more levels. She had told the previous math curriculum leader that the new/current setup left some students in a difficult position and asked if there could be consideration to creating a new class that would teach Algebra 1 every day. It would help students with their self-esteem and their achievement and understanding of the material. Ms. Leeper said that she heard what she was saying. She asked Ms. Brown's thoughts regarding middle school preparation. Ms. Brown said that students' cognitive development varies, and opportunities to repeat pre-Algebra do not exist, and the Algebra 1 summer program is abbreviated. Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that this would be an internal decision regarding staff allocation. She does think it's an interesting idea, an easy thing to prove a need for. She supports the notion. Mr. Dwyer said that the concept is supporting students' individual needs. Said that the idea of levels is one that has been discussed and that he defers to staff to present new ideas to the Board. It is not an easy process to add new/additional staff. Ms. Brown said that having a full year Algebra 1 course might not result in additional staff. Mr. Peterson asked if Ms. Brown was talking about full 85-minute classes every day; Ms. Brown confirmed this and said that another district did this already; it is not a new idea. Ms. Brown also remarked on the Milone & McBroom presentation and questioned how Fairfield had fewer/smaller buildings in the 70s when there were more children than now – how does that make sense. Mrs. Vitale

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said that she imagined that class sizes played a role in this. Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that she thought class sizes were a factor, and perhaps also the additional spaces now needed in elementary school for additional services that the district now provides. She doesn't believe that space issues exist in MS and HS. Mr. Dwyer said he agrees with Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly, and said that he also believes that the subject opportunities for students today is much wider than it was in the 70s.

**Bob Smoler**, teacher in Fairfield. Question is regarding the operational effectiveness committee's disbandment. There will be hard decisions that need to be made. We will either need to raise revenues or cut services on the town or school side. Is curious as to how prioritization will take place. Will there be guiding principles? Mrs. Gerber said that there is talk of setting up a finance and/or facilities standing committee. They will work and gather feedback from the public before presenting to the full Board. She supports the bylaw change necessary to create a committee. Mr. Smoler asked about the priorities or charge of the committee. Mrs. Gerber said that the wording of the bylaw could address that, or the committee itself could come up with them at their first meeting. Mr. Aysseh said that bringing back the finance committee would involve that group working directly with the Superintendent. He thinks that the committee would look at the topics covered in the discussions regarding operational effectiveness. School space and facilities issues might need to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis. Standing finance committee can do reconnaissance to then bring to the board. Mr. Smoler said that the frustration that people who work in the district feel is that there aren't ideas presented for people to bounce things off. Said that he doesn't believe anyone moves to Fairfield because we have 11 elementary schools, 3 middle schools and 2 high schools; he thinks they come here because of the overall quality of the district and its programs. Wonders if we have a truly long range plan taking us out 30-50 years. What do we want the district to look like? Some of our buildings are getting very old. We need a longer range plan.

**Lauren Bove**, 25 Quaker Lane. Agrees about helping out students who fall behind in middle school math. It's very important and she hopes it can be addressed. From a parent's perspective it's a real thing

**John Whaley**, 45 Hackley Street, Bridgeport. Read a prepared speech. He is an English teacher. He spoke to the problem of grades and how that's what students focus on, not the deeper meanings of education. Students are defined by a number. It's antithetical to the mission of FPS. Grades need to go and we need more authentic learning. Private schools and some colleges have gotten rid of grades. We need to refocus how we

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evaluate students. Students who struggle in English and math may excel in other subjects. Authenticity is crucial to understanding. We shouldn't value product over process. Grades hinder even our brightest students from risk taking. Children are not data; we are a community of unique learners. Even our highest achievers are at a disadvantage due to the stress they feel. GPAs allow academic tracking. Begs the BoE to advocate for change. Mr. Dwyer asked Mr. Whaley to send his speech to the Superintendent's office to send to the Board. He believes that we live in a world that is obsessed with grades and numbers. If we were to go to an ungraded system we would be outliers and many people would object. This isn't the first time this topic has come up, but he believes that it will take some time for buy-in. He doubts that many Board members in CT would lead the charge. Mr. Whaley believes that we as a system should want to lead the way. Perhaps our scores would go up, not down. Mrs. Jacobsen said that she hears what he is saying but she has read many things that disagree with his perspective. This is not the world today that we exist in. Colleges want standardized test scores. Fairfield cannot afford to be a lab, it is a huge risk. She suggests we first change federal and state law. Mr. Peterson agrees with Mrs. Jacobsen that this is a big ask. Many peoples' abilities are not reflected in report cards. This plays into the notion of a long-range plan for the direction of our district. Mrs. Vitale says she doesn't think it has to be an either/or. We could try to reduce some testing but not do away with it completely. Maybe we could start small. Mrs. Gerber said that she imagined that the members of the other town bodies who approve the school budget would have an issue with doing away with grades. Such a major sea change could have very negative ramifications and she is unwilling to risk that. Mr. Whaley said he knows that major changes can't happen but wants to plant the seed of an idea. Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that her own daughter has spoken to being burned out with the college process. There are small ways to change things. There's a lot of work to be done. She recently went to a presentation on quality schools where mastery is stressed, and students get an A, a B or an incomplete. It was an interesting concept. Appreciated Mr. Whaley's speech.

**Frank Sahagian** 20 Chelsea Street, Fairfield. Spoke to teacher assessment process. Used to be in private sector work, has taught for 8 years. In his old job he did a lot of performance evaluation. He understands metrics and data. Regarding a presentation at a BoE meeting a few weeks ago – teachers have issues with data analysis. He understands the need for data but you can't easily measure some things that teachers do. The state has put forward parameters and he understands that, but he hopes there's some way to advocate for change. Assessments that were created to assess teachers are worth 45% of teachers' grades. Parent feedback is

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insulting to him as a teacher, since it is rarely positive. He would prefer "parent communication". "Whole school indicators at 5% is a waste. Students know that the test scores don't count towards their grades, and yet this is how teachers are assessed. This is insanity. ProTrax is cumbersome and takes so much time. We have so many administrators because we have so many assessments. Teachers' goals center too much on growth. We should focus on anecdotal feedback. Ask teachers if the process is improving their work and helping students. Performance evaluations that discourage the people being evaluated are bad. If we continue to focus on data it won't help. His performance evaluation was 12 pages long and was meaningless to him. He asks that the Board look into making some sort of changes to the evaluation process. Can it be simplified? Mr. Dwyer said that the Board cannot tell the state of CT that we can't do this. Can we adjust it? We have very little latitude. All we could do is tell all of the administrators to fake the reports, which is not in the least bit a valid plan. We need to advocate on the state level, with the state reps and state senators. Mrs. Jacobsen said that it is an unfunded mandate. Perhaps with other Boards in the state we can advocate together and present new ideas to policy makers. Mr. Dwyer said he wanted to address the idea that we have administrators solely to do evaluations. Since the evaluation plan has been instituted we haven't added a single administrator. Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that a group of teachers have been involved in the Board's approval process of the plan parameters. She asked if the teacher committee could initiate any possible changes or adjustments to the plan. If that's possible she suggested that the teacher committee work on suggested changes. Re: anecdotal information – what has Mr. Sahagian heard or experienced in the district that has helped with his work as a teacher. Mr. Sahagian mentioned professional development where teachers teach teachers. This has been very valuable over the last two years, and it doesn't cost anything. Surveys aren't good ways to get information. Teaching is an art, not a science, which is why anecdotal info is helpful. Teachers don't have the time they need. 90% of faculty meetings are a waste of time. SPED is a big challenge – teachers are leaving in droves, their work is almost impossible. Perhaps Tuesday faculty meetings should instead be teachers working with SPED teachers. Teachers don't waste time because they don't have any time to spare.

Lynn Levesque SPED teacher started teaching in Fairfield in 1985. Understands that parents move to Fairfield because of the quality of our SPED program. McKinley School's caseloads have grown but resources have not. This year has been very challenging. Teachers are struggling to meet their educational obligations. They are an experienced hardworking team who love teaching but are working constantly with no breaks.

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Administrators have heard their requests for help but say that there's no way to increase funding. How can we adhere to a static budgeting process when changes occur throughout the school year. Mr. Dwyer said that these concerns were mentioned during recent negotiating sessions and there is a firm commitment to working on this issue in the foreseeable future. The Board has shown a commitment to meet the needs of the SPED community. He looks forward to seeing the work of Dr. Jones and the new SPED Director. Ms. said that she is happy that long range plans may be in place but wants to know what can be done this year. Mr. Aysseh thanked the SPED team for their work and said that this is something worth looking at and discussing with the Superintendent. Mr. Dwyer said that the Board approves a budget in January for expenses that won't begin until 6-18 months in the future. The only time we can find extra money is when we shave costs from another need, but that is just a short-term fix and not ideal. Mrs. Vitale asked about students opting in, and it was explained that students come to McKinley but the resources didn't follow them. Mr. Dwyer said that the opt-in program doesn't help with the racial imbalance situation but it does help improve individual students' needs. Mrs. Vitale said that students' resources should follow them to a new school; maybe there's an issue there that we can learn more about. Ms said that the teachers at McKinley are particularly experienced, which makes it a more attractive to some parents. Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that it should be pointed out that students' IEPs must be adhered to. She did clarify that the Board does not make the decisions of reallocating funds during the course of the school year; that is administrative.

**Sally Connolly** 682 Tunxis Hill Road, asked about adding or shifting SPED resources once the school year began. Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that paras are assigned by IEPs, assumes there are different issues at different buildings. Thought there was a contract component to class loads. Mr. Dwyer said that there isn't a contract component to class sizes or class loads for SPED. There are ongoing discussions on this, to look for developing guidelines. Mrs. Connolly mentioned a post on Moms of Fairfield Facebook page regarding the Whitsons food service survey. People were unhappy with the way the survey was structured. There was some discontent regarding Whitsons handling of allergies. There was an expectation of a healthier food focus. She thinks it would be beneficial to get feedback from parents whose children don't get hot lunch for a reason, She asked when the contract with Whitsons ends. Hopes there are ways to address allergy community and general community, especially those who don't have children using it. Mr. Aysseh asked if she likes the idea of a survey if it's done properly. Mrs. Connolly said that she was encouraged to reach out to Whitsons and she did but didn't get a response.

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**Closing Remarks**

**Mr. Dwyer** – said that many topics of educational interest were brought up tonight. Thanked the public for attending. Thanked Mrs. lacono for moderating.

**Adjournment**

Mrs. Gerber moved/Ms. Maxon-Kennelly seconded the recommended motion “that this Special Meeting of the Board of Education adjourn.” Motion passed 8-0. Meeting adjourned at 9:10PM