

**MOHAWK TRAIL REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
BEST (STRATEGIC PLANNING) COMMITTEE
May 19, 2016
DRAFT MINUTES**

The Massachusetts Open Meeting Law requires minutes for all school committee and subcommittee meetings. The recorded minutes are open to the public for inspection within 10 days of the meeting. Minutes recorded provide a brief overview that reflects the subject matter discussed and any decisions made. If any motions are made clearly state the motion and indicate who made the motion and who seconded the motion. Record who was in favor, opposed, or abstained. The names of any person(s) appearing before the committee are to be indicated.

Date: Thursday, May 19, 2016 **Time:** 7:00 p.m. **Place:** Hawlemont Elementary School Cafeteria

Committee Members in Attendance: Kate Barrows [Colrain]; Karen Blom [Buckland]; Willow Cohen [Mohawk SC – Shelburne]; Sue Mitchell [MDEA]; John Payne [Shelburne]; Erwin Reynolds [Hawlemont]; Sarah Reynolds [Charlemont]; Leslie Rule [Plainfield]; Martha Thurber [Mohawk SC – Buckland]; and Lark Thwing [Mohawk SC – Hawley]

Committee Members Not in Attendance: Mick Comstock [Heath]; David Newall [Ashfield]; Kim Orzechowski [Hawley]

School Committee Members in Attendance: Julia Aron [Charlemont]; Glenn Cardinal [Buckland]; Budge Litchfield [Heath]; Evelyn Locke [Charlemont]; Ken Rocke [Heath]

School Administration: Superintendent Michael Buoniconti

Others in Attendance: Gloria Fisher [Heath Finance Committee/Heath Education Task Force]; Mary Sumner [Heath]; Marguerite Rancourt [Hawlemont School Committee]; Brian DeVriese [Heath Select Board/Heath Education Task Force]; Deborah Porter [Heath Education Task Force]; Carula Rice [Charlemont]; Beth Bandy [Charlemont Select Board]; Brenda Sandstron [Charlemont]; Eric Dean [Charlemont]; John Sears [Hawley Select Board]; Sarah Sookey [Charlemont]; Charles Ricko [Charlemont]; Marguerite Willis [Charlemont]; Lynn Kelsey [Buckland]

Documents:

May 19, 2016, Agenda

May 10, 2016 MTRSD Mohawk's BEST Committee Draft Minutes

Call to Order: Martha Thurber called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Review and Accept the Minutes of the May 10, 2016 Meeting:

On a motion by Lark Thwing, seconded by Willow Cohen, the Committee voted to approve the minutes from the May 10, 2016 meeting. John Payne and Leslie Rule abstained.

Review of Progress to date and Next Steps:

Martha Thurber opened the meeting with a review of progress to date, noting that BEST's goal is to have one or more proposals ready for public review by Nov.-Dec. 2016. BEST has focused first on the short-term objective of attracting and retaining students so as to reduce charter/choice expenditures. Among the progress noted:

- Completion of marketing flyers for each of the five District Schools;
- Climate survey for parents, students and staff currently underway;
- Principals have been asked to document their procedures for and findings from exit interviews of students/parents leaving their schools to help in forming retention strategies;
- In-depth review of existing curriculum is currently underway by District Leadership Team/BEST Education Subcommittee in an effort to understand and respond to student/parent feedback on course offerings and methods of instruction;

- Facilities and Finance Subcommittee has developed a number of potential structuring options that will be reviewed both in terms of educational impact and financial savings;
- Meeting with MSBA officials who expressed willingness to be flexible on clawback provisions of existing school-related debt;
- Transportation Subcommittee is looking at potential ways to save money within the current bus contract as well as ideas to propose to DESE that may reduce longer-term transportation costs, e.g., waiving the “within 1 mile” requirements so as to allow the District to require parents to bring students to the nearest main road (Rts 2, 122, 116).

Progress on longer-term lobbying goals includes:

- Superintendent Buoniconti’s Rural School Assn. has held two meetings with strong participation
- School Committee members and Mohawk students attended MASC Day on the Hill to lobby legislators on sparsity aid, charter school reform, transportation reimbursement and SPED costs.

Next steps include taking a more in-depth look at several operational scenarios and solicit feedback from the community.

Discussion of Hawlemont, Mohawk, regionalization and sustainability:

Superintendent Buoniconti then reviewed several operating scenarios being explored. He emphasized that the analysis done so far looked only at personnel savings and did not include any operational savings, expenses associated with potential re-use of schools, pupil-by-pupil analysis of school assignments or other items. Given that personnel costs are the largest expense of the District, the goal was simply to compare scenarios based on these savings, then dig deeper if the initial analysis seemed to warrant.

Hawlemont Joins the District

Under this scenario, all pre-K students would remain in their local schools; all Grade K-5 children would attend Hawlemont, BSE or Sanderson, with assignments based principally on geography rather than town boundary lines (as currently); and Grade 6 would be rolled into the existing Middle School at Mohawk. Estimated year 1 (FY18 assumed) savings were approximately \$748,000, and cumulative estimated 5-year savings (through FY22) were \$4.6 million (both assuming a 3% overall annual increase in the Mohawk District budget).

The discussion that followed covered a number of points, including:

- How would the issue of which teachers stayed/left be handled – Superintendent Buoniconti said this would be a matter of negotiation; others argues that the most senior teachers would automatically stay while more junior teachers would be let go.
- Has BEST looked at sending Heath students to Hawlemont? Heath students would be assigned to the nearest school, thus most would be assigned to Hawlemont. Some felt no town will want to split up its students. Hawlemont School Committee is meeting on June 21 to discuss with the Heath Educational Task Force the feasibility of sending Heath students to Hawlemont.
- Would Hawlemont be closed? No, there is noting in this scenario that would envision closing Hawlemont, On the contrary, Hawlemont would gain students as one of 3 District elementary schools.
- What would be done with unused space in existing schools? Towns and the District need to work together to develop ideas and address funding/re-use issues.
- Have we asked DESE about transportation vouchers that parents can use to provide transportation rather than rely on busing? The transportation subcommittee is looking at a variety of potential options.
- Need to analyze the potential lose of students to charter/choice if students are forced to change schools.

BSE as the Primary Elementary School; no change to Hawlemont District

Under this scenario, all Mohawk District pre-K through Grade 2 students would remain in their local school. All Grade 3-5 students would attend BSE. Grade 6 would be rolled into the existing Middle School at Mohawk. Estimated year 1 (FY18 assumed) savings were approximately \$543,000, and estimated 5-year savings (through FY22) were \$3.4 million (both assuming a 3% overall annual increase in the Mohawk District budget).

The discussion that followed covered a number of points, including:

- How was the break between Grade 2 (local school) and Grade 3 (BSE) determined? This was a recommendation from the District Leadership Team that includes all Principals and key Administrative staff.
- Could BSE handle this number of students? Yes. Class sizes would be approximately 19 students.

Build a New Central Elementary School on the Existing Mohawk Campus (no change to Hawlemont District)

All pre-K, K and Grade 1-5 students would be taught in a newly constructed elementary school. Grade 6 would be rolled into the existing Middle School at Mohawk.

- Estimated construction cost (based on cost of a new, similarly sized school in Athol-Royalston) is \$32.7 million. The District's portion, assuming MSBA would fund its usual 69%, would be \$10.1 million, to be financed at an assumed rate of 4.5% for 20 years.
- Can all elementary students fit into the existing Mohawk buildings? No.
- Would the remainder of existing MSBA loans be forgiven? No, we would have to pay those off as well, but would need MSBA to forgo its "clawback."
- Wouldn't transportation costs eat into any savings? The analysis to date does not include transportation, but costs to continue transportation as we do it today would be higher than current costs as more students would be transported further.
- Pre-K should stay local, even if not in the "old" school buildings but in other local buildings.
- What happens if population increases and the new elementary school becomes overcrowded? Difficult to predict population trends, but there's nothing in sight that would indicate a boom for this area. Forecasted population growth that did not materialize is one reason we built new schools that now have significant under-utilized space.

Following these discussions, Martha Thurber emphasized that under all scenarios, approval from all District towns would be necessary before any changes could be made. All scenarios would require changes to the existing Mohawk Regional Agreement; further, if Hawlemont were to join the District, towns in the Hawlemont District would need to approve the disbanding of Hawlemont and the joining of Mohawk. There will be much more analysis and much more discussion to follow.

Other: None

Citizen Comment: Citizen comments were encouraged throughout the meeting.

Schedule June Meetings:

The next BEST full committee meeting will be May 25 at 7 p.m. at Mohawk, followed by a meeting on June 1 at 7:00 p.m. at Mohawk.

Adjournment: On a motion by Lark Thwing, seconded by Willow Cohen, the Committee voted to adjourn the meeting at 8:30 p.m.

Submitted By: Martha Thurber