

WHITMAN-HANSON REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING

Minutes of September 18, 2019

Held at the Whitman-Hanson Regional High School
600 Franklin Street, Whitman MA

Meeting convened: 7:00 p.m.

Meeting adjourned: 9:04 p.m.

Members present: Robert Hayes, Christopher Scriven, Frederick Small, Daniel Cullity, Christopher Howard, Michael Jones, Steve Bois, Robert O'Brien, Jr., Alexandria Taylor and Dawn Byers

Members absent: None

Administrators present: Jeffrey Szymaniak, Superintendent of Schools
George M. Ferro, Jr., Assistant Superintendent of Schools

Chair Hayes brought the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. and announced the meeting was being recorded and broadcast live.

Moment of Silence

Pledge of Allegiance

Approval of School Committee Meeting Minutes

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Bois seconded; voted to amend the School Committee meeting minutes of August 28, 2019 to reflect a meeting date of October 10, 2019 for the next Pilgrim Area Collaborative Board meeting. The motion carried unanimously.

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Bois seconded; voted to approve the School Committee meeting minutes of August 28, 2019, as amended. The motion carried unanimously.

Superintendent's Report

Introduction of Garry Pelletier, Indian Head Elementary School Interim Principal

Mr. Szymaniak introduced Mr. Garry Pelletier, Interim Principal at the Indian Head Elementary School hired to replace Jill Cotreau's resignation. Mr. Szymaniak provided a brief history of Mr. Pelletier's background. Mr. Pelletier retired from the Weymouth Public School District, where he held positions as an elementary principal and Assistant Superintendent. He recently worked for the Massachusetts School Administrators Association and also recently served as interim principal at Jenkins's Elementary in Scituate. Mr. Pelletier commented briefly on the opening of school at Indian Head Elementary.

Whitman Budget Override Evaluation Committee Report

Mr. Szymaniak reported he was unable to attend the Whitman Budget Override Evaluation Committee on September 16. He reported that Mr. LaMattina, Chair of the Override Committee, briefed him on the meeting. The hired needs assessment consultant, Mr. John Madden, is finishing his financial report for the town. Mr. Szymaniak reported he submitted Whitman Financial Reports prepared by the MARS Consulting Group for the meeting on September 16. The next meeting is scheduled for September 30. Mr. Randy LaMattina, Chair of the Override Committee, also reported on the meeting held on September 16 and added

he passed over discussion of the MARS reports at the meeting to enable Mr. Szymaniak to discuss them at the next meeting he attends.

Public Hearing – Regional Agreement Assessment Method

VOTE: Mr. Bois motioned; Mr. Small seconded; roll call voted to open the public hearing on the regional agreement assessment method at 7:14 p.m. Robert Hayes - Yes, Christopher Scriven - Yes, Frederick Small – Yes, Daniel Cullity - Yes, Christopher Howard - Yes, Michael Jones - Yes, Steve Bois, Robert O'Brien, Jr. - Yes, Alexandria Taylor – Yes and Dawn Byers – Yes. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair Hayes began with a brief explanation of the purpose the initiative to amend the regional agreement in 2017. He stated he and former Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Ruth Gilbert-Whitner, found the document to be antiquated, as it referred to closed schools (Park Ave School in Whitman) and other outdated district information. Upon determining the need to bring the document current, the Regional Agreement Amendment Committee (RAAC) was formed. Chair Hayes said that is how the work to update the Regional Agreement began and how the RAA Committee was formed.

Superintendent Szymaniak reported that over the last two months, Central Administration has been encompassed in all things regarding the regional agreement. He and Assistant Superintendent, George Ferro, have been entrenched in seeking clarity regarding language in the 1991 Regional Agreement, the 2018 Amended Agreement and determining local assessment methodologies. Mr. Szymaniak stated he has learned there are two methods used in local assessments. He reported he has conferred with Christine Lynch, Director of the Office of Regional Governance at the Department of Elementary And Secondary Education, and the school district's own legal counsel. He found there was no malice and no illegalities as far as how the method assessments were processed and that all assessments have been legal and binding. Mr. Szymaniak stated that once a member district votes to approve the budget, the method of assessment is approved. Mr. Szymaniak reported that up until FY2020, the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District has been using the 'agreement' method. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is currently in the process of changing the language from 'agreement' method to 'alternative' method on the End of Year (EOY) reporting documents.

Through this process of lucidness, the Administration is also examining the responsibilities of advising the Regional Agreement Amendment Committee, the School Committees (past and present) and other stakeholders of the two assessment methodologies. Through conversation with past and present school committee members, it appears stakeholders were never afforded the ability or knowledge of the two different methods from Central Office Administration. Mr. Szymaniak was not sure if the town finance committees or selectmen were aware there are two different methods. The Superintendent hopes that members of the public, town officials, school officials do not place blame because he believes they were not afforded the information at the time. Mr. Szymaniak stated he holds the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) consultants who worked with the RAAC slightly accountable in not distinguishing the differences in the methods of assessment, adding that, in reading the RAAC meeting minutes and reviewing a PowerPoint presentation prepared for the RAAC, there were no distinct descriptions or discussions in the different assessment methodologies, and that it only describes a statutory method. He noted the statutory method is implied in the 2018 Amended Regional Agreement, which was voted approved by the School committee in 2018, voted approved in the town of Hanson in 2018 and passed over in the town of Whitman in 2019 at town meetings. Mr. Szymaniak noted that Steve Hemman, one of the MARS consultants who assisted in writing the 2018 Amended Regional Agreement, confirmed the new agreement indicated use of the statutory method of assessment. Mr. Szymaniak stated that he does not believe that the School Committee, the selectmen, or the finance committees in either town, understood there would be a financial impact to one town or the other, in the new agreement.

Mr. Szymaniak summarized the two procedures statutory and agreement assessment methods the district may use.

The statutory method begins with the minimum local contribution, a figure determined by the state, made up of six factors: minimum per pupil expenditure released in January of each year; inflation; enrollment; wage adjustment; income property value; and municipal revenue growth. Anything in excess of local minimum contribution abides by the regional agreement. The statutory method must be approved by two-thirds of the member towns.

The agreement method is strictly based on per pupil enrollment and both member towns must unanimously vote to approve a budget.

If both member towns vote to approve the budget, it is binding. Mr. Szymaniak noted that if one town does not vote to approve the budget forward, the budget goes back to the school committee who must convene district-wide or "super town" meeting for a re-vote. If there is no consensus on the budget at the district-wide meeting, the only method of assessment that may be used is the statutory method. At that point, if there is no consensus on the method/budget by July 1, the Superintendent must notify the Department of Education Commissioner, who then implements a 1/12 budget. The 1/12 budget uses the previous fiscal year budget figures to develop a monthly budget (level-funded).

Mr. Szymaniak provided a copy of the DESE Statement Guidance for Regional School Districts released 2/2007 and the DESE Regional School District Budget Process dated 8/27/2010 for the Committee. He read page three of the Regional Budget Process; "In the case of a two-member regional school district, if the appropriating authority of either member votes not to appropriate the amount so reapportioned and recertified to it, the regional district school committee shall convene a district-wide meeting at which the revised budget and assessments shall be placed before all voters eligible to vote. A district-wide meeting shall only consider budgets based on the statutory assessment method."

Mr. Szymaniak stated that it is critical, for the public hearing piece and, critical to understand, that the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District has used the agreement method since 2007. The Superintendent provided illustrations of the FY2019 and FY2020 budget assessments utilizing both the alternative and statutory methods and noted the \$1,047,682 increase (impact) to the town of Hanson when using the statutory method.

Mr. Szymaniak reported he learned that the town of Hanson may place an article on their October 7, 2019 Special Town meeting warrant to revoke the vote to approve the WHRSD 2018 Amended Regional Agreement. He understands there is a lot of emotion and discussion in the community regarding the assessment method and fears not having a budget or being placed on a 1/12 budget by the state and being level-funded next year. He cited other regional school districts experiencing similar issues with the two assessment methodologies, in particular Dighton-Rehoboth and Dennis-Yarmouth that are in like situations. The Superintendent noted that the regional district still receives a decent amount of state funding (through Chapter 70). The Superintendent anticipates having a calm, educationally-based conversation that will allow the towns to move forward and determine a resolution to the current assessment method issue.

Mr. Szymaniak announced Mr. Kevin Bresnahan, legal counsel for the school district, who was present to field questions. Attorney Bresnahan opined the current regional agreement (1991) is the binding agreement and spells out the alternative method, adding that there is some suggestion that it may not be binding and does the statute for the statutory assessment method, in fact, supersede a regional agreement. Attorney Bresnahan explained DESE regulations implement the statute. The regional agreement between the towns is pursuant to both law and DESE regulations. He concurred the existing regional agreement does reflect an appropriate and allowable method of assessment and in any given year, a vote to approve a budget

constitutes the approval of the method itself. Attorney Bresnahan supported the Superintendent's statements that DESE regulations provide a process should a budget fail at a district-wide meeting and that the statutory method will be used in the end. He added the original agreements did not name the assessment method but did define the process. He cited the alternative method can be found in MGL Chapter 71, Section 16b.

Mr. Small referred to DESE regulations CMR 41.05 which require a school committee to annually vote the method along with the budget and was unsure if the school committee vote to approve a budget includes the method, but agrees that factors of the budget are identified annually. He questioned that under the current agreement, a vote cannot be taken to use the statutory method unless conferred with DESE. Mrs. Byers indicated that she found the two towns use the statutory method when approving the South Shore Vocational Regional Technical High School budget. Mrs. Taylor stated the current regional agreement defines an alternative method, which she suggested the Committee follow. Mr. Scriven commented on the lack of follow through on reporting to DESE correctly.

Attorney Bresnahan confirmed the school district has been compliant with regulations and reporting and confirmed there is no penalty for checking the wrong box on the DESE End of Year reports. Attorney Bresnahan clarified 'unanimous approval of member towns' in a two member district means both towns need to vote to approve. The attorney discussed the purpose of a regional agreement is not just the assessment method but how the towns will divide up all costs and may amend those agreements from time to time. Attorney Bresnahan opined the Committee cannot put forward a statutory method in the existing regional agreement but that it can be changed. In addition, if a budget is not voted approved in the two towns, the DESE regulations kick in and the statutory method must be presented.

The discussion continued to focus on the assessment method to be used and consequences of not approving a budget by July 1. Several community members spoke. Chris George of Whitman read an expert from the MA Finance Committee Handbook outlining the manner of assessment when Ed Reform went through in 1993 stating he felt it superseded any regional agreement. Bruce Young of Hanson spoke to MGL Chapter 70 Section 16b and DESE Regulations. Rosemary Connolly sided with information in the Finance Committee Handbook that the assumption is to use the statutory method as it considers the wealth of the towns in the calculation.

Mr. Szymaniak reported that in meetings with Finance Committees, he was never informed of a statutory method. The Superintendent confirmed in recent years, the school district had been checking the wrong box on DESE year end reporting but that the agreement method has always been used. He stated the challenge is not being given the opportunity to learn there were to different assessment methods. He recommended unifying as a regional district, the importance of needing each other for the students and children and, for fiscal reasons, to resolve this issue intelligently. In the end, the assessment methodology needs to be determined. Mr. Howard opined the Committee is not spending any time how to fix the problem but that it needs to be done. He added if there needs to be a change to the regional agreement, due to socioeconomic issues and making costs equitable, we need to move forward and work it out. Mr. Scriven stated the statutory method is designed for equity, Mr. Howard stated there is an agreement in place between the two towns. Mr. Small suggested convening a new committee to review the regional agreement because an increase to one town of \$1 million in one year would be difficult to absorb. Mr. Small added he sees that administration is consumed by the current issue but understands the need to refocus on education. Mr. Small suggested a resolution before the issue ends up at a district-wide meeting and ends up becoming statutory anyway. He urged the community to work together on a fair plan to move forward. Whitman resident, Shawn Kain, agreed with Mr. Small and suggested an alternative, multi-year agreement be established. David Cordero, from Whitman agreed a discussion is needed but felt the 1991 agreement and alternative method should be utilized.

Attorney Bresnahan confirmed the 1991 Regional Agreement defines an alternative method and DESE has confirmed same. He added the regional school district needs to have a budget, and again, both towns must vote it. If it does not pass in either town, a district-wide meeting must be held. Ultimately, there are steps to attaining an approved budget. Attorney Bresnahan briefed the Committee on the steps and time frame to amending a regional agreement with the towns and School Committee in consultation with DESE.

Mr. Szymaniak again re-iterated the consequences of the towns not agreeing on a presented budget and believes there is an opportunity to build a new amended agreement. Chair Hayes suggested waiting until after the Hanson Special Town Meeting on October 7 to form a new regional agreement amendment committee.

Betty O'Sullivan, Hanson resident and former school committee member, stated she was involved in every meeting when the two towns initially regionalized and it was very important then, to look at the per pupil cost when appropriations were determined. Hanson Board of Selectmen Chairperson, Laura Kemmett, understands the basic foundation of the regional agreement is based on per pupil (enrollment) and confirmed there is an article on the Special Town Meeting warrant to rescind the vote to approve the 2018 Amended Regional Agreement because the town did not fully understand the financial impact of the new agreement. She suggested uniting and focusing on how to improve education for the children and opined the statutory method is the default unless you have another agreement in place. Mr. Small noted that the town of Whitman is currently funding more than \$3 million over the state minimum local contribution. Mr. Shawn Kain offered examples of what other regional districts have developed in alternative methods and asked the Committee to consider doing the same in order to help one town absorb a \$1 million increase in their local assessment.

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mrs. Taylor seconded; voted to impanel a new regional agreement amendment committee. The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Howard asked what is the appetite of the Hanson Board of Selectmen to re-form a regional agreement committee (BOS) and Hanson BOS Chairperson Laura Kemmett responded she would not speak to it.

Mr. Cullity added that, in any case, the 1991 Regional Agreement still requires updating in many different areas and appointed new regional agreement amendment committee members would need to commit the time to carry out the work.

Chair Hayes recommended the new Regional Agreement Committee be comprised of a Board of Selectmen member from each town, a Finance Committee member from each town, Town Administrators, three School Committee members and two citizens as voting members. Non-voting members would include the school district administration, representatives from Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) and a consultant from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Chair Hayes suggested interested citizens write to the Superintendent of Schools with their interest on becoming a member of a new regional agreement committee.

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Bois seconded; roll call voted to close the public hearing on the regional agreement assessment method at 8:41 p.m. Robert Hayes - Yes, Christopher Scriven - Yes, Frederick Small – Yes, Daniel Cullity - Yes, Christopher Howard - Yes, Michael Jones - Yes, Steve Bois, Robert O'Brien, Jr. - Yes, Alexandria Taylor – Yes and Dawn Byers – Yes. The motion passed unanimously.

MARS Consulting Group – Member Town Financial Reports

Superintendent Szymaniak noted the Member Town Financial Reports developed by MARS consulting group were provided to the Committee and may be discussed at the next School Committee meeting.

Unfinished Business

Whitman Water/Sewer Invoice Update

Mr. Szymaniak reported the issue with the water/sewer invoice for the high school remains unresolved. The Town of Whitman Department of Public Works (DPW) issued an invoice of \$307,000 to the school district in under billing, resulting from years of incorrect meter readings of the water/sewer meter at the high school by a DPW employee since 2005. The District filed abatement with the Town of Whitman Department of Public Works and Assessors Office and is awaiting a response.

School start times

Mr. Szymaniak reported the cost to implement adjusted school start times would be approximately \$400,000. The suggestion to adjust the school start times was studied in an effort to align all elementary schools report times and to move the high school report time to a later time to 7:45 a.m. Middle Schools would remain at their current times. The Superintendent reported that research-based information indicates secondary aged school children (grades 6-12) perform better in school with later school start times. In addition, many schools in our athletic leagues have moved to later start times. Also, the report time for high school students is the earliest in the state at 7:05 a.m. Mr. Ferro added that student dismissal time at 1:40 p.m. is comparably very early to other districts and may place unengaged students at risk. Also, elementary level district-wide professional development and collaboration can only be held for an hour and a half based on the current, staggered elementary school hours. Chair Hayes added that any adjustments to school start and end times will impact collective bargaining.

Dawn Byers stated the proposal to adjust the start times evolved for several reasons including helping students get the required sleep they need as a healthy part of learning and to let the towns know the kind of district we want to be. It will cost \$54,000 to help achieve Strategic Plan Pillar 1; Healthy Minds and Bodies that address social/emotional needs, at risk behavior and getting enough rest. Mrs. Taylor agreed but indicated there is no revenue source to fund a start-up cost of \$400,000. Mr. Cullity was concerned with the budget impact of a \$400,000 cost to adjust school start times and other budget considerations, including the startup cost of \$600,000 to implement tuition-free full day kindergarten and no real revenue sources to fund any of the program initiatives. Mr. Cullity spoke to continually eliminating district programs and the obligation to prioritize essential needs in the decision-making process. Mr. Small endorsed the administration determining its priorities (for example, if adjusting start times is a higher priority than re-instituting the middle school foreign language program). Consequently, there is the risk that the will state reduce transportation reimbursement, which is currently at 82% and could possibly be reduced in the future. Also discussed was the consideration of the students well-being, at risk behavior with vaping and opioid crises should start times remain as they are now. Dawn Byers stated the previous start time was at 7:45 a.m. and opined that it is district item that needs to be restored. Mr. Kavka, WHEA President, confirmed anything related to hours, wages, and conditions will be subject to collective bargaining negotiations.

New Business

Field Trips

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Cullity seconded; voted to waive the nurse requirement and approve the out-of-state high school AP Language field trip to Trinity Theatre in Rhode Island on December 5, 2019, as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Cullity seconded; voted to waive the nurse requirement and approve the out-of-state, overnight high school Volleyball Team field trip to New York September 28-29, 2019, as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Bois seconded; voted to approve the out-of-state, overnight high school trip to Australia February 13-22, 2020, as presented. The motion passed unanimously.
The Committee confirmed the trip to Australia is a self-funded.

Subcommittee Reports

Insurance Subcommittee

There was nothing new to report.

Warrant Subcommittee

Approval of Warrant Subcommittee meeting minutes 9/12/2019

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Cullity seconded; voted to approve the Warrant Subcommittee minutes of September 12, 2019, as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

Warrants signed at the meeting

#091819AP \$89,169.96

#091819FS \$34,227.01

Policy Subcommittee

There was nothing new to report.

Facilities Subcommittee

There was nothing new to report.

Legislative Update

Mr. Small reported he believes the school district will see very little to zero funding from the 41.9 million state budget surplus.

Pilgrim Area Collaborative

Mr. Bois reported the next meeting is scheduled for October 10, 2019. Updates from the Executive Director were received by the Board. It was noted the elementary school purchase will not be pursued.

Mr. Szymaniak reported the Hanson Police and Fire Departments were conducting tactical drills at the former Maquan Elementary School this week which he was able to see firsthand.

Dates to Remember were announced by the Chair.

- Monday, October 14, 2019 No School – Columbus Day Observed
- Friday, October 18, 2019 – PK-12 Early Release Day for Staff Professional Development
- Hanson PTO is sponsoring a Parent-Student Paint Night on Friday, October 4, 2019 from 5:30-7:30 p.m. at the Hanson Middle School

Meeting Adjournment

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Cullity seconded: voted to adjourn the meeting at 9:04 p.m. The motion carried unanimously.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Michelle Lindberg

Signature of School Committee Secretary

Meeting Handouts:

- Meeting agenda for September 18, 2019
- Meeting Minutes of August 28, 2019 – (Forthcoming under separate e-mail on Monday 9/16)
- Original Regional Agreement 1991
- Proposed Amended Regional Agreement 2018
- High School Field Trip Request: Travel to Australia February 13 – 22, 2020
- Warrant Subcommittee meeting minutes 9/12/2019
- Donation thank you letter to Austin Insurance Company
- MASC Report on Resolutions page related to the MASC/MASS Joint Conference in November
- August 28, 2019 School Committee meeting minutes
- Foundation Enrollment /Foundation Budget/Minimum Local Contribution Summary FY15-FY20
- 1991 Existing Regional Agreement
- 2018 Proposed Amended Regional Agreement
- DESE Statements from Christine Lynch, Director, Office of Regional Governance
- DESE Regional School District Budget Process dated 8/27/2010
- DESE Education Laws 603 CMR 41.00; Regional School Districts
- DESE Statement Guidance for Regional School Districts released 2/2007
- Assessment Formula PowerPoint prepared by MARS for RAAC meeting on 2/26/2018
- Illustrations of FY2019 and FY2020 budget utilizing statutory and assessment methods
- September 12, 2019 Warrant Subcommittee meeting minutes
- Additional Field Trip Requests
 - high school volleyball team overnight, out of state (NY) 9/28-9/29/2019
 - high school AP Language trip out of state (RI)12/5/2019