



WHITMAN-HANSON REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of September 15, 2020 Joint Meeting with Town Select Boards
Held Remotely via video conferencing Zoom platform

Meeting convened: 6:10 p.m.

Meeting adjourned: 7:02 p.m.

Members present: Robert Hayes, Christopher Scriven, Frederick Small, Michael Jones, Daniel Cullity, Christopher Howard, Steve Bois, Dawn Byers, Hillary Kniffen and David Forth

Members absent: None

Administrators present: Jeffrey Szymaniak, Superintendent of Schools
George M. Ferro, Jr., Assistant Superintendent of Schools
John Tuffy, Director of Business and Finance

Town Officials: Whitman Town Administrator Frank Lynam, Hanson Town Administrator John Stanbrook, and members of each town's (Town of Hanson) and (Town of Whitman) Boards of Selectmen

The Town of Whitman Chair of the Board of Selectmen, Carl Kowalski, invited the Whitman-Hanson Regional School Committee along with the Town of Hanson Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator to participate in a webinar meeting on September 15, 2020 at 6:00 p.m. to discuss the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District assessment method.

Technical difficulties resulted in a delay of the meeting start time. The meeting convened at 6:10 p.m.

Pledge of Allegiance

Moment of Silence

Carl Kowalski announced the meeting was being recorded and broadcast live.

Before going to live broadcast, the Chairman of each municipality board took their respective member attendance. Frank Lynam suggested appointing a Chair to oversee the joint meeting. Kenny Mitchell nominated Carl Kowalski to chair the meeting. Bob Hayes seconded the nomination.

VOTE: Kenny Mitchell motioned: Bob Hayes seconded; voted to appoint Carl Kowalski as chair of the September 15, 2020 joint meeting. The motion passed unanimously (Ayes).

Mr. Kowalski reported the purpose of the meeting is to insure all parties to the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District agreement understand the issues regarding past assessments from WHRSD to the Towns of Hanson and Whitman and how we can insure that future assessments are properly calculated and presented to member towns in accordance with DESE guidelines and our regional agreement. In addition, the object is to ensure systems are in place to avoid future occurrences and seek clarity. Mr. Kowalski also recommended committing to completing a review and update to the regional agreement as initiated by the School Committee. Mr. Kowalski informed the group that Randy LaMattina will provide historical information in the form of a timeline.

Mr. LaMattina reported he developed a historical review of the agreement methodology used by the school district when calculating the local assessments and discovered reasonable discrepancies. He offered a timeline which he

stated was established through meeting minutes, public record and email correspondence as evidence. Mr. LaMattina stated for clarity purposes, the assessment issue goes back to 1993 under the Education Reform Act which defined a foundation budget to fund public education. In his research, Mr. LaMattina's noted the statutory methodology of assessment was never addressed in the WHRSD Regional Agreement and, not utilized by the school district in calculating the local assessments. Rather, a "per pupil method" as stated in the Regional Agreement was utilized as an alternative method, and should follow the statute to be approved and voted by member towns. Mr. LaMattina noted the alternative method is not an illegal method.

Subsequently, in 2007, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) issued a regulations memo regarding the statutory method of assessment. It was unclear if/when the school administration received the DESE memo. Mr. LaMattina reported he researched the End of Year Financial Reports submitted by the school district to DESE from 2012 to the present. Mr. LaMattina noted that in May of 2016, Whitman resident, Christopher George, emailed the then Superintendent, Ruth Whitner, with a link to the 2007 DESE memo regarding the statutory methodology and inquired about the assessment methodology calculation used by the district. The next year in 2017, the Superintendent sought to update the Regional Agreement (RA) as it was an antiquated document, referred to schools that had closed and contained other outdated information. Mr. LaMattina also referred to the September 25, 2017 Regional Agreement Amendment Committee meeting, in which Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) representatives offered three reasons to update the RA; Education Reform of 1993 – not addressed in current Agreement, legal & practical issues, and opportunity to update the Agreement with all amendments into one new document. Mr. LaMattina noted MARS representative mentioned an issue with the statutory/alternative assessment methodologies.

In subsequent conversations with MARS consultants, Mr. LaMattina stated he learned that MARS informed then Superintendent Whitner and Director of Business Services, Christine Suckow, that the calculations of the assessment were being developed using a hybrid of both statutory and alternative method but did not begin with the minimum local contribution (MLC) figure. Mr. LaMattina claimed that in the spring of 2018, the former administration were aware the assessment calculations were processed without using the MLC figure as a starting point but failed to correct it for two additional budget cycles. Mr. LaMattina added that at a Board of Selectmen's meeting in March of 2019, it was publicly announced the district uses the statutory method (Mr. Small had corrected Mr. LaMattina's original statement later in the meeting) as "the response from Ms. Suckow was the District uses the statutory method" which Mr. Small shared at the Selectmen's meeting in March 2019.

In June of 2019, the current administration was made aware of the calculation discrepancy and began an investigation. Mr. LaMattina added that, in his research of the district's End of Year Financial DESE Reports, he discovered the checkbox indicating whether the district calculated assessments based on statutory or alternative methodology was mis-checked year to year as statutory in 2016, 2017 and 2018 and different in previous years. Mr. LaMattina stated that, although DESE representative Christine Lynch and Attorney Breshahan attended School Committee meetings in fall of 2019, to discuss the legality of the assessment and budget vote, the calculation steps were being done incorrectly. Chair Hayes indicated the current business manager is following the calculation correctly.

There was a brief discussion of the McDuffy decision of 1993 and responsibility of both the school district leadership and town officials' to be knowledgeable of the local assessment calculations. Mr. Forth asked to add a timeline of information, which included the McDuffy case which actually began in 1978 under different names and amended several times up until Ed Reform whereas Whitman and Hanson students were part of the cases. Mr. Forth discussed current town officials that were part of the signed Regional Agreement in 1991 and noted the RA should be reviewed every five years. Mr. Forth challenged the timeline presented by Mr. LaMattina stating the former Superintendent Whitner was aware of the McDuffy case and Ed Reform prior to 2016 and cited there is also a WHRSD policy referencing the minimum local contribution. Mr. Forth opined it was not solely the former administration was at fault in misunderstanding the statutory method of assessment and that the information was available prior to 2016. Mr. Forth added the statutory method language should have been added to the RA in

1993. The DESE WHRSD District Review Report of January 2014 was referred to and will be sent to the Committee and town administrators.

Superintendent Szymaniak stated once he was made aware of assessment calculation issues, he took action. Also, moving forward, the Superintendent agreed the RA should be reviewed every five years. Financial regulations received by the school district will be shared with both towns select boards and finance committees to build the district's continued commitment to accountability and transparency. The Superintendent will also plan joint meetings with the town finance committees to establish a budget review cycle.

Dawn Byers asked to go on record that she contacted Attorney Allen J. Rom, who represented the co-plaintiffs in the McDuffy case, and requested and received the names of the all fourteen towns to corroborate Mr. Forth's information.

There was additional conversation that the assessment issue goes further back than 2017. The group discussed ensuring better communication between all three municipalities in order to move forward in a positive manner. The development of a clear action plan that includes a comprehensive audit was suggested by Mr. Small.

Chris Scriven announced it is the intent of the School Committee to reconvene a regional agreement amendment committee to initiate further amendments to the Regional Agreement.

Adjournment

**VOTE: Dan Cullity motioned; Steve Bois seconded; voted to adjourn the meeting at 7:02 p.m.
The motion passed unanimously.**

Minutes respectfully submitted by Michelle Lindberg

Signature of School Committee Secretary