

Minutes

Rowe School Committee

February 14th, 2012 at 6:00 P.M.

Rowe Elementary School

Present: Chair Bill Loomis, Lisa Danek Burke, Lisa Miller
Other Attendees: Joanne Blier, Business Administrator; Michael Buoniconti, Superintendent; Bill Knittle, Rowe Principal; Paul McLatchy III, Minutes Taker
Audience of Citizens: Noel Abbott, Earl Carlow, Myra Carlow, Cindy Laffond, Leonard Laffond, David Newell, Claudine Poplawski, Patricia Tierney

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order by Chair Loomis at 6:10 P.M.

Audience of Citizens: Chair Loomis announced that the primary purpose of this meeting was to cover budget issues. He then turned to the audience to see if anybody had any questions or comments for the Committee. Leonard Laffond stood up and said that he feels that the School Committee needs to begin to work together. He does not feel that any one person is the cause of this, but strongly feels that an attitude of unity should be pursued.

Minutes: The following minutes were addressed:

October 11, 2011: Everyone will get a copy of a transcription of the conversation addressed in the October 11th minutes. These were tabled.

November 8, 2011: After review, Chair Loomis made a motion to approve the minutes, and was seconded by Ms. Miller. The vote was 3-0 in favor.

January 10, 2012: These minutes were tabled for review.

January 19, 2012: These minutes were tabled for review.

David Newell Presentation: David Newell, who is a consultant for the Board of Selectmen, was in attendance to give a presentation on the history of the relations between the Mohawk District and Rowe. Chair Loomis had asked him to do this.

Mr. Newell began by explaining that he used to be the Business Manager for 15 years, serving from 1977 to 1993, and that he was the longest serving central office administrator in Mohawk history.

He stated that in the early days of Massachusetts, the General Court mandated that towns provide education. They gave control over education to towns through their Boards of Selectmen, and then through School Committees. In the late 1940s the State began a series of serious reforms to the system.

They established a mechanism of allowing schools to work together to form regional school districts. This could involve any and all towns interested, provided it made sense. The towns would then create an inter-municipal agreement, approved by the voters, and would cover budgets, voting rights, etc... In 1953, Hawlemont was the second or third regional district in the state. Or most districts, the state offered more aid. In 1965, seven towns agreed to form a regional high school (Heath, Hawley, Shelburne, Buckland, Rowe, Colrain, and Charlemont), with Ashfield and Plainfield joining several years later.

In 1981 Proposition 2 ½ was enacted, and according to Mr. Newell, looked "grim". The Mohawk District began looking at whether it would be a good idea to have Rowe withdraw, as at the time, aid was given based on the wealth of the towns, and although Rowe only had 3% of the students, they had almost half the wealth, which lowered the amount of aid from the state. A committee was formed and chaired by

Rowe's Jack Williams, and found that if Rowe could be assured of the same rights and protections that member towns did, and similar tuition, they would be in favor of withdrawing.

This was done via a formal agreement, which was the 6th amendment to the regional agreement. This provided additional funding to the District. Some in town were concerned that they didn't want to withdraw, and that a future amendment might strip Rowe of its rights. In June 1982, a second agreement, known as the Corollary Agreement, was formed. This was an agreement between the Mohawk board and Rowe that says future amendments to the Mohawk Agreement that affect Rowe can only be proposed with consent of the town. This was approved in late summer of 1982.

Later, Mohawk tried to expand to a K-12 district. Hawlemont and Rowe did not join. This expansion was validated by the Legislature, which provided for a K-12 District for the other six towns, but allowed Rowe and Hawlemont to keep their own K-6 District. In the Acts of 1993, all rights of the member towns were included. There are various disputes between the School Committees about this.

Mr. Newell said that there has been a disagreement about the validity of the Corollary Agreement. He had met with the Chairs of the Mohawk and Rowe School Committees well before being appointed as a consultant to the Selectboard. He said one issue that keeps surfacing is the transportation costs. After study, he feels that the Mohawk District is imposing a transportation cost that is three times larger (per student) than other towns. He had spoken with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to see if these costs were reimbursable by the State and was informed it was not, though they would be willing to reconsider/re-examine that position if proper documentation and evidence were submitted.

Mr. Newell continued to talk with various people during this time. However, he had to end it as any further involvement would have cut into his business. He was then approached by the Board of Selectmen to see if he would be willing to be paid for his services, and although he felt uncomfortable doing so, he wanted to see the issue resolved.

Many people in the surrounding towns feel that it's unfair Rowe pays a lower tuition than any other town. Mr. Newell explained that a direct comparison of costs is misleading. Each town raises approximately \$9,400 for each student it sends to Mohawk. Rowe has to pay over \$11,000. In his judgment, Rowe is paying their fair share. Some people from other towns say that Rowe should take into account things like capital costs, but even so, Rowe pays more.

In his opinion, Mr. Newell thinks that the tuition algorithm should be updated and amended, but this need to be done through mutual cooperation and finding a compromise. At the Mohawk Municipal Advisory Committee (MMAC), they passed a motion for Rowe and Mohawk to get together to work it out. He believes that a new amendment is needed for the Regional Agreement that addresses transportation costs and tuition, and that Rowe should be part of the capital costs.

Mr. Laffond asked Mr. Newell who would be involved with this, be it the towns, central office, etc... Mr. Newell said that everyone needs to play a part in it. Ms. Carlow asked what the date was that he had discussed when he would start getting paid, and he replied that it was in early January.

Ms. Danek Burke asked for clarification as to whether or not Rowe would: be required to pay for capital costs, lose their discount, and get reimbursed for transportation, *if* they were a part of the district. Mr. Newell confirmed this as correct. Ms. Danek Burke said that the reasons for Rowe leaving the district are no longer there, and that discussion with Mohawk about joining the Mohawk District should at least take place.

A question was raised as to whether or not Mohawk had the right to impose a cost to Rowe for transportation when DESE declared it non-reimbursable. Mr. Newell said this in his opinion, and opinions of attorneys, the answer is no.

Mr. Abbott thanked Mr. Newell for his clarity on the subject. He said that right now, everything is on the table. The Town is dealing with very immediate issues with time frames, and that looking at joining will take much longer (he estimated 2-3 years).

Mr. Newell thanked the School Committee for the opportunity to meet, then departed.

Chair's Report: Chair Loomis said this could be postponed until the next meeting.

School of Choice: Superintendent asked that the School Committee declare school of choice (SOC) seats, as the season for parents to select their child's school is coming up. Right now, there are two applications for preschool, and the sooner a school accepts a student, the better.

Ms. Danek Burke asked if the school declares seats for preschool. Superintendent Buoniconti said no, but that they can declare *empty* seats.

Principal Knittle spoke with teachers and has a recommendation for the Committee. He said the right now there are five kids in Kindergarten, eight in the first grade, and six in the second grade. The lowest number is in the Kindergarten, and seems to be the logical place for seats. He said there may also be room in the fifth grade for additional seats.

Ms. Danek Burke said that in the past, the seats tended to be declared to prevent a "bubble", where a large number of students end up in one grade, much like the current third-grade class. She also said that the Committee is reluctant to declare seats after the 4th grade.

Roberta Baker (Preschool Teacher) told Principal Knittle that she is comfortable with ten students, and there are five right now, leaving five seats open. Superintendent Buoniconti recommended that the School Committee not necessarily choose the maximum number, as numbers could be added at a later date.

Ms. Danek Burke made a motion to declare four (4) empty seats in the preschool, two (2) SOC seats in Kindergarten, and one (1) in the second grade. Ms. Miller seconded the motion, and the vote was 3-0 in favor.

FY13 Budget: Ms. Miller noted that several meetings ago, she had requested a budget vs. actual for FY12, to see what is actually being spent in the current fiscal year to help plan the FY13 budget. She has not received one yet. Ms. Blier said that a column with that information could be added, but would make it more confusing. With transfers occurring on a regular basis, it would be difficult to keep such a sheet updated, as the information has a very limited useful "life".

Gym: Ms. Miller expressed her concern about the Physical Education program for the upcoming year. Roberta Baker, who is currently doing the job, will not be doing it next year. Ms. Miller felt that another person may not be interested in applying for a job that is for two half-days per week, and that perhaps the Committee should budget for two whole days to make sure they can get someone in to do the work.

Ms. Danek Burke said that it didn't seem to make sense to have a PE teacher at the school all day, since they were not using the whole day for classes. She felt that budgeting two full days to make sure that the school has someone may not be the best idea. Ms. Blier said that this plan would require budgeting someone to work for fourteen hours and might only end up needing five or so. Ms. Miller was also of the mind that more should be budgeted now to avoid the need to go back to town meeting to ask for additional funds.

Ms. Miller also said that perhaps one of the classes (which encompasses Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2) should be split, as there is a wide range of skills in such a group. Superintendent Buoniconti asked Ms. Tierney how it was going so far this year. Ms. Tierney said that the advantage of combining the grades is that there are more activities and team sports that couldn't be done with a smaller group. However, it is nevertheless a large group, and age differences can be an issue. Principal Knittle will research this issue.

Field Trips: There will be an increase in fees this upcoming year for students. Ms. Miller does not oppose an increase in fees per se, but wants to make sure that the "single mom" can still send her kids on the trip, so she would like to make sure that there is financial assistance.

Ms. Danek Burke preferred that the School Committee have oversight of the assistance, as she doesn't feel it should be up to the principal. She feels that the Committee has the obligation to make sure that the town's funds are spent properly, and not by one person without any criteria.

Ms. Blier said that in other districts, there is often a financial aid form that takes income into consideration.

Ms. Miller believes that the Principal should be the person to decide the issue to prevent families from having "one more barrier".

Supplies: Ms. Danek Burke said that it seemed like the school had a lot of supplies, and that perhaps this could be lowered, possibly by \$1,500 if feasible. Chair Loomis said that the budget will be worked on up until March, and Principal Knittle will look into this.

Custodian Sub: Ms. Danek Burke suggested that perhaps this be lowered, as the full amount may not be needed.

Furniture: At this point in time, there is no line item for replacing school furniture, except for a large-scale replacement. This is for buying the occasional desk or chair if needed. Someone suggested that there was furniture at the Fire Station, and Ms. Danek Burke said she'd like to see what was available. Fire Chief McLatchy is currently looking for people to take things *out* of the Fire Station, so perhaps this could be a win-win situation.

Chair Loomis' Questions: Chair Loomis had a list of questions to discuss on the budgeting process, which he said he had sent to the Central Office and had never received any answers. The following subjects were highlights of that list (attached):

General Salaries: Chair Loomis was curious about whether or not the increase in the line items for salaries would cover the contracted increases. The amounts were confirmed to be correct and will cover the increases.

Grants: There was some confusion over how grant funds were worked into the overall budget, but this was cleared up after some discussion. The voters see how much is taken out in the budget from School of Choice funds, but not the grants. Ms. Blier said that the grant funding is a public document and is not being hidden, but simply not being shown to the voters during the Annual Town Meeting.

Head Teacher's Salary: Ms. Danek Burke said that ultimately, the authority lies with the principal to decide on the salary, but she would like to see it budgeted for \$1,000. She would like to see small increases over the years, not one large increase. The primary responsibility of the Head Teacher is to act as principal when the principal is not there. The contract currently has a range of \$900-\$1,200.

Special Education Salary: This number seemed high to Chair Loomis, but didn't include the \$12,722 from School of Choice funds.

SPED PT and OT Salary Increases: The 4% increase in PT salaries is actually a 2% increase in FY12 and a 2% increase in FY13. There is less need for OT at the school, so it was decreased to what is actually used.

Medicaid Filing Fees: In order to get the Medicaid funding, the school hires an outside service to do all necessary filing at a cost of \$1,500. Superintendent Buoniconti said that this is cheaper than having someone in-house do it.

Secretary Salary: Laurie Laffond is looking to reduce her hours. If the number of days is decreased, she could still be classified as 1.0 FTE, but if her hours are decreased, this will need to be reflected in her FTE.

Supplies: This year, the Elementary School is getting their paper for free through the town. Chair Loomis asked why this wasn't reflected in the budgeted number. Ms. Blier said that there was no guarantee that the paper would be available for free again. Mr. McLatchy said that the paper is paid for out of money the town gets from recycling, and this has been happening for several years, and is expected to continue, so it is fairly safe to assume that the school could get their paper through this process.

Food Services: Ms. Miller expressed concerns that the Food Manager is not being paid enough, and that she is currently on an hourly pay. She would like to see this changed to a salaried position, but Ms. Blier said that unless the employee supervises other staff, they are paid hourly. This is the case with the custodian as well.

Ms. Miller asked if there's a base rate in Mohawk for this position, and Ms. Blier said that in the Mohawk District, there is a range of \$13-\$19 per hour. This is managed by a 21-step program. (On a side note, she also noted that there is a range of \$11-\$19 per hour for custodians). Chair Loomis suggested Ms. Miller take this on as a personal project.

Shared Expenses: Chair Loomis addressed a number of items under the Shared Expenses section that had an increase of over 9.5%. (9.5% will be Rowe's increased cost using the current agreement's formula). They were answered to his satisfaction (most involved simple pay increases and increases in expenses).

Joint Meeting: The School Committee will meet with the Board of Selectmen next week to review the School Committee's proposed budget.

Tech School: Normally, the school asks students interested in going to Tech via an advertisement in the Goal Post. Ms. Danek Burke suggested that perhaps this year, the students should just be spoken to directly rather than putting a notice in the Goal Post. Ms. Carlow suggested a letter to be mailed to the parents. It was decided that the students will be spoken to to see if they are interested in attending Tech next year.

Adjourn: Chair Loomis made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Ms. Miller. The vote was 3-0 in favor, and the meeting was closed at 10:10 P.M.

Adjourn: Chair Loomis motioned to adjourn, and was seconded by Ms. Miller. The vote was 3-0 in favor. The meeting was closed at 9:39 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Paul McLatchy III

Approved on: _____

Bill Loomis, Chair

Lisa Miller, Vice-Chair

Lisa Danek Burke-Burke, Secretary

Attached Documents:

- Agenda
- October 11th, 2011 Draft Minutes
- November 8th, 2011 Draft Minutes
- Superintendent's Report
- Curriculum Writing Project Presentation
- Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation
- Coordinated Program Review Procedures, Civil Rights and Other General Education Requirements
- Coordinated Program Review Procedures, Special Education
- FY13 Budget Summary
- FY13 Proposed Budget
- January 25, 2012- E-mail, Bill Loomis to Lisa Miller, Michael Buoniconti, Lisa Danek-Burke, Joanne Blier, Bill Knittle re: "FY 13 Budget Questions", plus attachment
- January 12, 2012- E-mail, Lisa Miller to Bill Knittle, "Budget follow up"
- January 12, 2012- E-mail, Bill Knittle to Lisa Miller, "Budget follow up"
- Principal's Report
- Absence Letter
- Lexington Elementary School e-Reader Acceptable Use Policy & Agreement
- January 4, 2012- E-mail, Lisa Danek Burke to Bill Loomis, "Re: Proposed 1/10/12 Rowe School Committee meeting agenda"
- January 13, 2012- E-mail, Lisa Danek Burke to Judy Willis, "Re: Meeting Posting"
- December 2011 Rowe Goal Post, School Committee- Chair's Report
- January 2012 Rowe Goal Post, School Committee- Chair's Report
- February 2012 Rowe Goal Post, School Committee- Chair's Report
- "Why We Urge You To Approve An Appropriation For Independent School Counsel and Consulting Services"
- November 15, 2011- E-mail, Judy Willis to Bill Loomis, "Letter from Jonathan Diamond"
- Letter from Jonathan Diamond to Judy Willis
- Mohawk Municipal Advisory Committee, Meeting Posting for February 1, 2012 at 6:30 P.M.
- February 2, 2012- E-mail, Russell Dupere to Bill Loomis, "Crocker and proposed budget process changes School Committee/Superintendent conflict"
- January 12, 2012- E-mail, Bill Loomis to Judy Willis, "Misc. Issues"
- January 18, 2012- E-mail, Judy Willis to Bill Loomis, "Re: Misc. Issues"
- January 27, 2012- E-mail, Judy Willis to Russell Dupere, "Rowe Budget Timeline Question"
- February 3, 2012- E-mail, Judy Willis to Bill Loomis, "Fwd: Rowe Budget Timeline Question"
- Rowe School District Proposed Budget, February 14, 2012
- Rowe School Proposed FY13 Field Trips
- Rowe School Capital Plan Request
- Rowe School Capital Plan
- Bill Loomis, List of Budget Questions