

ONTEORA CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

BOARD OF EDUCATION
BOICEVILLE, NEW YORK 12412

SPECIAL MEETING

6:00 p.m.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2012

Middle School/High School

Minutes

1. Opening Items

1.01 Call to Order 7:00

1.02 Tobacco Policy Statement

1.03 Pledge of Allegiance

1.04 Roll Call:

Present: Trustee McGillicuddy, Trustee Fletcher, Trustee Osmond, Trustee Spencer, Trustee Hickey, Trustee Kurnit, Trustee McKeon

Chorus Teacher Krista Cayea introduced Onteora senior Katie Martucci who sang "For All We Know"

Trustee McGillicuddy read a statement about the proceedings tonight.

7:10

The Onteora Board of Education was originally set to vote on Feb 21. This Special meeting of the Board was called specifically for a Vote on a Resolution, and so that Board members could digest the discussion of February 21. There is the need to decide on a Model so that the Superintendent and her staff can begin planning and the budget can be formulated and adopted by the Board in April, as is our Process.

Typically there is not a public be heard at a Special Meeting of the Board of Education. The next regular meeting of the Board is in one week. The Public is always and at all times welcome to contact the board via e-mail or to send a letter by mail.

I am not anticipating discussion this evening, though each board member has the right to ask for discussion or clarification as per our regular Board process when the Board votes on a resolution.

I, again, acknowledge that every Model the Board has been discussing involves some challenge for our elementary community. Everyone is impacted in some way by every model, and again on behalf of the Board, I thank the community for speaking to us at Public Be Heard, and sharing their viewpoints & suggestions by writing letters to the Board, responding to PTA surveys, and talking to us in person and on the telephone. As well, I want to thank my fellow Board members for putting in the extra time these last few months, since our discussion began back in September.

Tonight the Board of Education is voting for the long-term educational improvement of the district, while dealing with difficult budgetary issues, such as the state imposed tax levy cap, a cumulative loss of \$5M of State Aid over the last 4 years, and enrollment decline. The Board is committed to ensuring that whichever model is chosen, that it works. To this end, the Board acknowledges that there remain many details in each Model to be finalized. There is room for flexibility and improvement in the Details. This will take place at the Administrative level, as is the procedure in a School District.

We trust that our parents, our PTAs, our students, all of our staff, and our community in general will rally together to ensure the best possible future for the Onteora Central School District and we ask that everyone leave this evening with that in mind.

To be clear - there will be no statement after the vote on the resolution. I will ask the Board to adjourn the meeting after the Vote.

Superintendent Phyllis McGill read a statement:

It has been a tough journey to get to the place where a decision will be made tonight. I want to thank the Board of Education for its due diligence by taking a very serious and thoughtful approach to making a very hard decision. You have made full use of all of the tools in my toolbox and every resource we have in the district and beyond to be well informed of the issues and the implications of any and all decisions.

I want to thank every parent, every staff member, and every community member for meeting with the BOE and me, speaking at BOE meetings and writing to us. I want to reassure everyone that each letter was read and considered and each comment was too.

The decision to down-size, right-size or just simply correct or address the financial course of the District is not easy. There are many factors impacting the need for change and the way change can be achieved: finances; student performance and enrollment.

I encourage you to look around at other Districts. School districts in New York State are hurting. Costs continue to rise and the State and the Federal governments continue to cut our aid. Some districts are cutting all elementary art and music, some Districts are considering half-day kindergarten...some all kindergarten, and some districts are headed to being financially insolvent.

Over the past three years alone, our District has lost over 5 million dollars in aid. These cuts, along with the limits of the tax levy cap, do not allow us to recover money lost by cuts and money needed to maintain the district's current configuration.

There are three ways for Onteora to be fiscally solvent; as a simple rollover of our budget would increase the budget by approximately 7%.

The first is to dramatically increase our tax levy and get a 60% voter approval on the proposed budget. Our District has a history of not overwhelmingly passing budgets. Over the past three budget votes, our budget passed by: 55% for a 1.04% increase for the 2011-12 budget; 56% for a 0.31% for the 2010-11 budget; and 60% for a 3.31% increase for the 2009-10 budget. People in our community have told the BOE and me that they cannot afford more taxes. And, In fact our poverty rate in our district continues to grow and now hovers around 33%.

The second way is to cut our expenses by approximately 4-5% so that we can absorb the budget rollover (with some adjustments), amounting to approximately \$2-2.5 million dollars. Please know that most of our costs in the district cannot be controlled through cuts. Our largest percentage of the budget is staff who account for approximately 70% of the budget. These contractual costs are expected to rise more than 2%, along with other expenses, such as health insurance and retirement. Cutting staff without reconfiguration would negatively impact all of our schools and most programs. In addition, there are other costs that will certainly rise above 2% , including fuel and heating. Also, in order to cut the budget by 4-5%, we would need to devastate almost every other aspect of the budget; with many of these areas unable to sustain this level of cuts (e.g., transportation, professional development, instructional materials, after school activities, sports, clubs, etc.).

And so we are left with the third way... reconfiguration. While reconfiguration is a difficult choice, it addresses the fiscal realities of our district and the decreasing enrollment of our district, while concomitantly allowing for us to strengthen our educational program for our students. As Superintendent, I have been promoting the need to improve our schools. While we are a fine school for many of our students, we need to do better for all of our students.

Over the past four plus months, the Board of Education and I have been meeting with different district communities and groups to explore various models for reconfiguration. While I educationally have a preference and have expressed this openly, as Superintendent it is my job to carry out whichever model the Board selects. Please know that this will be done responsibly and with integrity. I promise that in the weeks to come I will appropriately involve others in decisions and share back as decisions are made.

2. Reconfiguration

2.01 Discussion and roll call on a preferred Model

7:20

Definitions:

Model 1 – the closing of the Phoenicia Elementary School and the re-configuration of the Bennett and Woodstock Elementary Schools into K-6 grade schools.

Model 2 – the closing of the Phoenicia Elementary School and the reconfiguration of the Woodstock Elementary School as a K-2 grade school and the Bennett Elementary School as a 3-6 grade school.

Model 3 – the reconfiguration of Phoenicia Elementary School and Woodstock Elementary School as K-3 grade schools and the Bennett Elementary School as a 4-6 grade school;

Roll call on a preferred Model:

Trustee McGillicuddy – Model 3

Trustee Fletcher – Model 3

Trustee Osmond – Model 3

Trustee Spencer – Model 2

Trustee Hickey – Model 3

Trustee Kurnit – Model 3

Trustee McKeon – Model 3

2.02 The Board will vote to implement the Model chosen by previous roll call

RESOLUTION WHEREAS, the Onteora Central School District has experienced a decline in enrollment in its elementary schools; and WHEREAS, the Onteora Central School District now confronts significant financial pressures as a result of the imposition of the New York State Property Tax Levy Cap and a significant cumulative reduction in State aid; and WHEREAS, the Onteora Central School District desires to improve the quality of its educational program within the framework of these financial pressures; and WHEREAS, in recognition of these constraints, the Board of Education has given serious and careful consideration to historical, current, and projected enrollment and financial data, and historical, current, and trend student performance data presented by the Superintendent of Schools; and WHEREAS, the Board of Education has given serious consideration to the following three options to reconfigure the elementary schools: (1) closing the Phoenicia Elementary School and re-configuring the Woodstock and Bennett Elementary Schools as attendance zone K-6 schools; (2) closing the Phoenicia Elementary School and re-configuring Woodstock Elementary School as a K-2 grade level school and Bennett Elementary School as a 3-6 grade level school; and (3) reconfiguring Phoenicia and Woodstock Elementary Schools as K-3 grade level schools and Bennett Elementary School as a 4-6 grade level school; and WHEREAS, the Board of Education has given serious consideration to the financial and other impacts these closure and/or re-configuration options would have on the District's academic program, capital facilities including transportation, and administrative, instructional and support personnel; and WHEREAS, the Board of Education has provided several public forums to solicit community input on these options and potential impacts; and WHEREAS, the decision to close a school building is determined to be a Type II Action under the State Environmental Quality Review Act ("SEQRA"), and the regulations implementing SEQRA at 6 NYCRR §617.5; NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED,

that the Board of Education of the Onteora Central School District approves the following reconfiguration of its elementary school grades for the 2012-13 school year:

Model 3 – the reconfiguration of Phoenicia Elementary School and Woodstock Elementary School as K-3 grade schools and the Bennett Elementary School as a 4-6 grade school.

Motioned By Trustee Spencer
Second By: Trustee Kurnit

Trustee Kurnit's Statement:

- Thank you for all of your comments, attention and input.
- The 2012 configuration decision has been precipitated by NYS 2% property tax cap and lack of mandate relief.
- Governor Cuomo has set up a Mandate Relief Council, which was in New Paltz yesterday. I attended this session and listened to county and school Administrators trying to explain to the Council the extent of the problems with mandate relief. The Governor has pledged that the Council's recommendations will be acted upon, but this is too late for any benefit in this year's budget.
- Statewide educational decisions have not been made clear - consolidation, regionalization, or what? It is my belief that there is no prediction that this is black and white at this time in public education in NYS.
- All districts in NYS are contending with the same issues, and are struggling with major educational decisions.
- West Hurley has made me mindful of closing any school without having a long term plan.
- I am counting on the Superintendent and her Administrative team to analyze and address publically many of the planning issues. Then the Board and the community will have the opportunity to be informed and comment for further input, before starting the fall 2012 school year.
- I believe this plan will put in place the ability to address many of the issues of our early literacy programs, so that our children will benefit and thrive. It is my hope the community will come to look at this choice as an opportunity for success and positive growth in this area.

Trustee Osmond's Statement:

Speaking as a mother, I want nothing more than to be able to give my daughter her 6th grade year as she's been anticipating it since Kindergarten.

We've received many impassioned letters from many parents, each wanting to see their child's circumstances change as little as possible, and I completely understand that.

The means of funding our public schools is a broken system. I believe that our schools should be funded with an equal distribution of income tax revenue and with greater support from our federal government. I also believe that the current fiscal crisis is being forced by our governor's political aspirations. But so be it. We cannot put our heads in the sand and refuse to deal with the current reality.

There are many in the community who've asked why we can't just leave things as they are, but the realities don't allow for that. Yes, it would be great to band together as a community and vow to cut the budget by 5%, but to do that, we would have needed the various employee bargaining units to step up and say "here's a voluntary pay cut, or even a salary freeze" to make it possible, but that has not happened.

As the financial screws are being turned, we're also confronted with data that tells us that while our educational offerings are good, they're not good enough.

There is no perfect solution to this situation, and there is no solution that will make everyone happy. We must look at a solution that in our hearts we believe accomplishes the greatest good, and the best educational experiences for our children.

As a trustee, I cannot support a plan that places our district in greater socio-economic jeopardy, as case after case shows is the result of school closure. I also see the value of all our community schools to our communities, and wish to preserve that.

I am also very concerned about the impact of the longest commutes on our youngest children, considering our district's geography.

I truly believe the best solution is one infuses new life into our community schools as early literacy centers, focuses on richer kind of learning for our 4th through 6th graders, and at the same time keeps all our towns vibrant.

I am genuinely excited about the possibilities afforded by a focus on early childhood learning for our youngest students, and an opportunity for project-based, enriched days for our students about to face the challenges of middle and high school.

I have the utmost faith in our superintendent, who I know comes from a learned and a caring place.

This is a process, a work in progress, and it is my sincere hope that each one of us look to our best selves and pull together, for the sake of our children and our community.

The Board reached consensus for all the Board's statement to go in the minutes, as well as, the Superintendent's and Board President's opening statements.

Trustee Fletcher's Statement:

Every School Board Trustee recognizes that he or she may one day be forced to vote on a difficult decision. When that moment arrives, the Trustee truly understands the immense responsibility with which he or she has been entrusted by the community. To that end, this Trustee wishes to acknowledge everyone who has contributed to the reconfiguration discussion: Administration, staff and community, whether at board meetings, by mail or e-mail, individual or group conversation. The opinions have been enormously varied; it seems as if there are almost as many different concerns and suggestions for solutions as there are parents in the District.

For this Trustee, for the reasons stated by the Superintendent and the Board President, a change in the District's structure is now fiscally and educationally inevitable. It is rewarding to see the Superintendent determined to seize in this crisis an opportunity for, quote, "improving the student experience and improving student learning with reduced financial resources." While there are various merits to all three Models – and as there would be to *any* number of additional Models– this Trustee is casting his vote for Model 3, for the following reasons:

Fiscally, by reducing three early grade schools into two, and by reducing three intermediate grade schools into one, it is transparently evident that the districts saves vast sums of money, and while every single cut in staffing is highly regrettable, staffing is 75% of the budget and therefore where most savings are realized.

Educationally, at the K-3 level, maintaining two early elementary schools allows the District to retain nurturing environments for its younger students and maintain parental involvement. The creation of Early Literacy Centers is a positive. The recommended smaller class sizes for early grades can be kept, and they can be evened out from the current inequities. The introduction of parental workshops is to be actively welcomed. The implementation of Response to Intervention or RTI, while mandatory regardless of configuration, can take place on a manageable level.

Educationally with regard to Grades 4-6, the creation of an Intermediate Grade school in the middle Elementary offers enormous potential for educational enhancement. The introduction of Project Based Learning, which can best occur in a facility where all teachers of a single grade are working together, is genuinely exciting and should go a long way towards the Board's stated goal of improving the student experience. Integration of the arts into the core curriculum is to be welcomed. Intervention services for those falling behind on reading and math can be improved by having multiple classes in one location. The opportunities for teacher collaboration, professional development and vertical grade planning, especially with regard to transitioning into the Middle and High School and, again, the imperative even-ing out of disparate class sizes, should all be of long-term benefit for students. Their actual education itself has the opportunity to be more progressive; rote homework will hopefully become a thing of the past; the slow but insidious exit of some of our brightest students across our three elementary schools, which typically occurs in these intermediate grades because of a lack of true educational challenge and excitement will hopefully be stemmed. There will also be inherent cost-savings from the consolidation of physical resources and programs within these intermediate grades.

Culturally, the Onteora District will surely be enhanced by the earlier development of District-wide friendships among students; similarly, the culture amongst parents, which has presented a significant challenge during this Reconfiguration Discussion, can only be improved by earlier intermingling. The entirely voluntary and free after-school enrichment opportunities are tremendous; regardless of the placement of the music ensembles, the opportunity for free sport, computer lab, homework help and library, to name but the initial offerings, could be a boon to families and children alike who crave such activities and frequently have to pay for them.

Grade Clustering, while the chosen method for one in five New York State school districts, does not come without significant challenges in Onteora. Some of these are: the early start for intermediate grades in the Grade Clustering Models; the culture in the hamlets surrounding the three elementary schools, where parents have grown familiar with walking or driving their children a short distance to school through Grade Six; concerns about bussing younger children with older children; longer journeys to and from school; the separation of siblings at a younger age. This Trustee acknowledges and recognizes those challenges; they are not to be ignored or downplayed. To this end, the Administration's decision to put back the start time by 15 minutes; the assurance that no student in any grade, including Middle and High School, will be on a bus before 7am; a commitment to "grandfather" in the third grade at the middle elementary building for one additional year to avoid two transitions in two years under Model 3; and the assurance of clearly delineated positive behaviour programs on the buses under Model 2 or 3 is all a part of a positive, pro-active approach to the challenges.

Finally, this trustee is proud to support a Model that keeps the three remaining Elementary Schools open and thriving. The Onteora District serves a geographical area unparalleled south of the Adirondacks. The western end of the District has seen multiple positive demographic changes in recent years, as evidenced by the fact that enrollment at the western elementary has held absolutely steady since the District last closed an elementary school, and this at a time of significant decline in enrollment at the other elementary schools. Model three successfully right-sizes the District while maintaining space for future growth that would be severely compromised in either of the other Models. This growth will be here soon with the completion of a well-documented housing development on the eastern end of the District. Model three additionally preserves the important relationship with the pre-school Head Start program. Model three maximizes the use of the central elementary school, which has received renovations and an extension in the last decade. In short, Model three finds the District doing so much more with so much less. This Model is therefore, in the carefully considered view of this Trustee, the one that comes *closest* to satisfying the School Board's responsibility to the education of all of its students across the entire District, and to the tax base of the entire District. It enables the District to move not just onwards but upwards.

The short-term challenges may seem immense, but they are surmountable. This Trustee believes in the greatness of the Onteora Central School District, both as an entity and as a

collection of individuals, and is committed to working diligently and faithfully on behalf of the entire District, should this Model be implemented, for as long as he is a Trustee.

Trustee McKeon's Statement:

I wanted to thank everyone in the room and outside for their conversations, their thoughts, their communications to the Board and emails to us as well as to myself, individually.

My decision is based upon my own analysis of the issues, it's my best thinking on the matter. It is the least convenient of all the choices for my own family personally, but I think it is best for the district, and that's why I'm voting that way. I think it addresses the educational deficiencies that have been identified by our professionals, who I trust, and who I trust to advise us and make sure that whichever model, and it looks like it'll be model 3, is implemented and implemented well. I'm not sure if I agree with the idea that our district is deficient. I believe we can do better and I think this model allows us to take a step in that direction.

My parents are life-long educators, I have been an educator, I've seen the results of this district and I'm truly impressed, as are my parents, and many others that we've talked to about people that have either come from here or what we've seen with our own children and etc. So I think that this is a step in the right direction toward doing better, but I don't necessarily think we're not doing well already. I think we are and I think Ms. Martucci's performance is clear evidence of that and I think that that was worth the price of admission for all of this, however contentious our discussions have been it's because we all care, and we all really want to make sure we get this right for the futures of our sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters.

I think that this decision for me has the least potential for harm and the greatest potential for good. I see it as addressing those deficiencies like I said, and I think it also allows us to potentially refocus and no longer think of the school as K-6 but the school as Pre-K-3, 4-12 and really in some ways we may have stumbled, buy hook or by crook, into a possibility of having a focus on early childhood development, on learning how to learn for all students, allowing them the best potential to start in life and then making one transition to a central campus where they then go on to learn math and science and reading and music and all the other subjects and programs that we want to have the them learn to leave here and go out in the world with. So I think that maybe we are just shifting things a little, I may be naïve, but I think that if we can agree to disagree, agree to hold each other's hands and walk down the road together, that we can refocus how we are looking at education and focus on the those early years and then the on the program for the later years. That's my hope and that's my hope that we're able to do something and maybe we found something special that maybe others will want to model themselves after down the road, but that's my hope for this decision.

Trustee Spencer:

I, too, want to thank everybody who has participated in this process, It's been a long road and my decisions are based on some other data that I picked up on. I respectfully disagree with the direction that we're going, but I think what's important is I've always felt that all 3 plans represented a change for the good, they all represent plans that could work. We have a very talented group and strong administration and great teachers, and above all great kids, so it's important for me to state that I believe in majority decisions, I believe in supporting the path that we are taking. My goal, from this point forward is the success of us as a group and as a district and that's probably the most important point I can share.

Trustee McGillicuddy

I appreciate all of my Trustees' statements and opinions, though I may not agree with all of them. I believe as a school board that we must maintain local control and keep our schools open and thriving with the goal of improving learning in the classroom for all students and we have to continue to fight for change on the legislative level. This is where the real change can happen for our public schools. We need the people to stand up and vocalize as well. The school boards have been lobbying for years, but the people must become involved now and demand change. I invite all in our district to become involved, so please contact the District Clerk to help on the Legislative Action Committee.

Results: Unanimous
Roll call Vote:
Trustee McGillicuddy – Yea
Trustee Fletcher – Yea
Trustee Osmond – Yea
Trustee Hickey – Yea
Trustee Kurnit – Yea
Trustee McKeon – Yea
Trustee Spencer - Nay

3. Adjournment

3.01 Adjourn Meeting. Next meeting is Tuesday, March 6, 2012 at the Phoenicia Elementary School

Motioned By: Trustee Fletcher

Second By: Trustee Spencer

Results: Unanimous

Yea: Trustee McGillicuddy, Trustee Fletcher, Trustee Osmond, Trustee Spencer, Trustee Hickey, Trustee Kurnit, Trustee McKeon

Minutes Recorded By:
Fern Amster, District Clerk



Board of Education: Ann McGillicuddy, Tony Fletcher, Laurie Osmond, Dan Spencer, Tom Hickey, Rob Kurnit, Michael McKeon