

STONINGTON BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL VIRTUAL MEETING January 28, 2021 - Page | 1

Frank Todisco, Board Chair called the special virtual meeting to order at 7:05p.m. Members present were Craig Esposito, Farouk Rajab, Gordon Lord and Jack Morehouse. Also present were Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent of Schools, Mary Anne Butler, Assistant Superintendent, and Gary Shettle, Director of Finance.

Late arrival: 7:07p.m. - Heidi Simmons, Board Secretary

Board members absent: Alisa Morrison

Comments from Citizens Relative to the Budget

Sheila Adams (emailed comment) – “We are writing to impress upon the board the importance of having a four-person team for fourth grade at West Vine Street School. There are many reasons why we feel that having four teachers is critical to the instructional success of our students. This year we have operated as a three-person team. The logistics of this model have been extremely difficult to navigate. In keeping with the departmentalization model in 3rd - 5th grades, we began the year with each teacher assigned to one of the following subjects: Math, ELA, or Science - Social Studies - Interdisciplinary Writing. It quickly became evident that there was not an adequate number of instructional minutes per day to teach the ELA and Math. In fact, the amount of instructional minutes was actually cut by 40% compared to Grade 4 at Deans Mill. By that time, in mid-October, the COVID-19 Hybrid Model actually helped with the Math as Mr. Burns had to begin teaching remotely and a substitute teacher, Mrs. Delgado, was brought in to teach in person while Mr. Burns taught from home. As a team of two teachers, they were able to mediate the lack of instructional minutes by having smaller groups of students to work with. On the ELA side, it was not as easily remedied. Mrs. Adams had to stop teaching the Science - Social Studies - Interdisciplinary Writing, and begin sharing the ELA curriculum with Mrs. Major. This new configuration has worked to some extent to increase the number of instructional minutes students have for Math and ELA, however it has come at the expense of high interest subjects like Social Studies and Science. Mrs. Adams now assigns those topics on Distance Learning days, which will hopefully be a thing of the past during the next school year. The three-teacher model has also resulted in a lack of equity among the teachers. In the beginning, we didn't have any planning teams as no two teachers were teaching the same content. After the adjustments mentioned above, we had more team planning in that Mrs. Major and Mrs. Adams would plan together. Mr. Burns and Mrs. Delgado would plan together, but without that 4th team member (Mrs. Delgado), Mr. Burns would not have had a team partner. That collaboration and partnership is vital in successfully planning and executing lessons. To continue with the departmentalization model, which has been so successful for our students, a 4th team member is essential. In addition to instructional minutes, team planning equity, and consistency across the grade levels and the district, we've also found that having three teachers is a hardship for our young students. Switching between three teachers is developmentally beyond the reach of a typical 4th grader. The organization and attention required to navigate three different classrooms, online or in person, makes this model tremendously difficult for a 9 or 10 year old. Not to mention the crucial aspect of relationship building that takes place between students of this age and their teachers. The relationships become somewhat watered-down the more we spread them across several adults in their day-to-day routine. One last thought to keep in mind is that after this year of distance learning and hybrid classrooms, we anticipate that our students are going to be academically behind that of a typical student at each grade level next year. When students return to school in the fall, they will need more small-group and one-on-one instruction. A three teacher team will afford them less time for that small group instruction while at the same time increasing the size of their class making those small groups difficult to schedule into our limited class times. One-on-one time will be especially difficult to include in our day, as well. Students in 4th grade at West Vine Street School will be at a disadvantage compared to their peers in the district. In closing, we implore you to consider the impact on our children of continuing with a three-teacher team in 4th grade at West Vine Street School next year. We feel very strongly that it is not in the best interest of our students to continue with this model of instruction. We appreciate your time and consideration of this matter.”

2021-2022 Budget Discussion and Direction - Dr. Riley went through his budget report and again thanked his Administrative Cabinet team, Ana de Oliveira, Mary Anne Butler, Gary Shettle, Peter Anderson, Chris Williston, and Allison Van Etten for working on this document. A lot of time and effort has been put into this to provide the Board with accurate information. He noted the items that were removed or modified from the previous budget report of last week. He spoke on the elimination of the CARES Act 2 items, the OPEB, \$125,000, reduced the health benefit line by \$629,000 and reduced the special ed tuition line by \$89,100 at the direction of the Board. The Board discussed eliminating two bus routes but due to the ride for students increasing by 55 minutes for most students we did not make that change. Dr. Riley noted the items that were removed for the CARES Act 2 funds were the summer school for 2021 and 2022, new programs and staffing line, custodial part-time staff and the PPE for next year. There were two items left in the general operating budget which includes one West Vine Street School 4th grade teacher and elementary stipends for clubs and activities. With those reductions the current budget proposal is 4.74% it is a three year average of 1.13%. Dr. Riley added that the CARES Act 2 funds will be a separate budget. He and the elementary principals also recommended hiring a new teacher at each elementary school for the rest of this year to help with the K, 1 and 2 students that really need the language arts, reading and math skills and that would come out of the CARES Act 2 money and would not affect this year's budget. He noted that the Board submitted questions prior to the meeting and he addressed each of those questions. He addressed a question from Farouk Rajab regarding what are the line item projected ending balances. Dr. Riley answered he will have a better idea around June 1st and will share with the Board at that time. Jack Morehouse asked for the line item balances plus or minus for the last three years. Gary Shettle provided that information. At the Board's request, Dr. Riley shared a list of staffing comparisons for the last five years. Gordon Lord asked about contractual obligations versus new positions. Dr. Riley explained the fluctuation in the salary budget line and what staffing changes affected the increase. Jack Morehouse asked for a list of high school sports with number of coaches, sports and a list was shared with this information. Dr. Riley reviewed the information on the five year staffing comparison and will share a report on declining enrollment and the impact on staffing and programs for students at the next meeting. He

discussed the issue of looking at bringing students back for in-person learning for four days mid-year and what impacts that would have on staffing in order to meet CDC guidelines. Dr. Riley suggested looking towards the end of the school year and beginning of summer on how to bring all our students back within the safety guidelines that we have to follow. Dr. Riley spoke on the number of absences and those that were not able to be filled. He shared correspondence on recommendations from both from Ledge Light Health District and the District's medical advisor, Dr. Blefeld regarding their push to stay in a hybrid model. Dr. Riley reviewed each handout shared with the Board; the three year budget summary showing the 4.74% increase, and five year staffing comparisons, in which he thanked Ana de Oliveira for her work on this item. He noted this information is not readily available it is on a number of different locations. So that the Board will have this information, we are implementing starting October 1st when the student count is done we will now also do a staff count on that particular day and in the future that will be part of the budget that is proposed to the Board in January as of the previous October 1st. He explained the reductions in administrative positions in the past years and classified staff reductions. He noted we have reduced 24 staff in the last five years. He shared a list from Bryan Morrone of all coaches from the last ten years. Dr. Riley also gave the Board a document entitled "The New Three R's of Education" that Mary Anne Butler, Tim Smith and others helped put together that speaks about what the district has done in the past few years. Gary Shettle also shared a document regarding the OPEB and health insurance.

Jack Morehouse thanked Ana de Oliveira for putting the five year staffing comparison together and complemented Dr. Riley and Mary Anne Butler for being able to maintain the quality of education and able to do this with a staff reduction along the way, which is pretty incredible. He also commented on "The New Three R's of Education" document noting it is very telling and positive and mentions a lot of good things we are doing. He asked if it will be shared with the Board of Finance and Board of Selectmen. Dr. Riley noted we plan to post it on our website and share it with both Boards. Craig Esposito asked where we stood on the refund/rescission that the Board of Finance said they might give us. Do we know if that is coming and could that possibly be used to offset the costs for next year. Dr. Riley noted he shares with the Board at every meeting where we stand with those funds. This year we were trying to keep spending at the ending balance of last June which is around \$575,000. He added we hope to get that and have the documentation to show that is what we need. Additional funds would come from the CARES Act 2 funding. The Board had a dialogue regarding the ending balance funds that the town put in an account to offset expenditures. Mr. Esposito asked do we expect that amount will be released from the town to us and if it is where is it going to be allocated. Chairman Todisco answered yes it will be released. Dr. Riley stated those funds will be allocated to all the accounts we have over spent which comes to over a million dollars. We have used some state and federal funds to offset some of those expenses but need those funds to get through June 30th. He explained we have been spending on COVID-19 issues with the understanding we would need to go back to the Board of Finance for at least the \$500,000. Farouk Rajab asked did we get funded at level from the state for this year, did the state give us the money they were supposed to give us. Gary Shettle explained those state funds go to the town not the school district but from what he can see the funding is pretty close to level. Farouk Rajab echoed Mr. Morehouse's comments with appreciation for everyone who spent hours on putting together the list of teachers and noted it is a great document that can be used for future debates and conversations.

Dr. Riley explained we typically bring the budget back for Board approval at the February 11th meeting and then it would go to the Board of Finance. If there are any other changes the Board would like to make or have other things they want to consider we need to know that right away.

Chairman Frank Todisco asked to hear from the Board where they stood with the budget at a 4.74% increase. He asked if there is anything that needs to be reduced or added. Heidi Simmons noted she has combed through the budget to see where we could reduce. We are at a 4.74% and the Board of Finance wants us at a 2%. She would like the administrators to suggest where to bring this down and what are they going to do if the Board of Finance says this cannot be passed. She added she did not want to reduce teacher salaries or programs and asked where next do we look, and maybe Dr. Riley could address that. Chairman Todisco shared his thoughts as it relates to the Board's responsibility as Board members. He noted the Board's responsibility is to make sure we are providing a high quality educational experience for the students of our district, while being mindful of the burden on the taxpayer. He continued by saying that might not be the mission of the Board of Finance. He also added he did not feel the Board should reduce the budget in a way that it will impact that high level of educational experience that we all want. He noted that two things are driving the increase from his view which are teacher salaries and health care increase. Jack Morehouse voiced his main reason for being on the Board is to support kids, but is also a taxpayer and mindful of what an increase in taxes would mean. He added he would like to see some of the athletic and extracurricular reductions made earlier in the year be added back in. If you added the coaches for about \$25,000 I could support the budget if we put those items back in. He added yes it is an increase but not an increase in reduction to programming for students. That increase would be less than 0.1%. He suggested having a motion to add those items back in and would be very supportive of the budget and would appreciate the opportunity to step in front of the Board of Finance and push this budget through. He added we have new buildings, a lot is going on in our school system and feels the Board of Finance needs to support it. He noted we have not had an increase in a couple of years. Mr. Morehouse commented we want to have a top notch school and we are heading in that direction. Mary Anne Butler is doing good things with curriculum, test scores are coming up, there is a lot of good things happening and that comes with a cost. Farouk Rajab also supported Mr. Morehouse's asks to put those items back into the budget. Mr. Rajab said the budget is appropriate to the student, teacher and administration needs. The asks are balanced and advocated to add money for coaches to support kids in other areas not just always the classroom. He also noted that Mr. Esposito brought up a good point about the state money, it needs to be brought into conversations and if that \$500,000 goes towards this budget it could also balance the asks. Mr. Rajab voiced it is the budget he can support if those two tweaks are done.

Craig Esposito also supports the budget presented as well as Mr. Morehouse's option. He added if you look over the trajectory of the last couple of years we have come in with basically no increase two years in a row. He feels it is not excessive for this year, since we have been dealing with COVID-19 and is very much in favor of supporting the budget as presented. Gordon Lord thanked all for the work on the documents and appreciated getting it early. He spoke if you take out the two big contributors that Mr. Todisco mentioned the budget comes down to a net 1.87% increase when you take out the contractual obligations and the health care allocation. He added that is about \$700,000 and also fully supports Mr. Morehouse with the \$25,000 and probably need to factor in buses so might be a bit higher. He would like to see the Board look at the \$775,000 incremental ask which is outside the contractual obligations. He voiced that for the taxpayers and the Board to really quantify the experience we are providing for the students with this budget and what are we getting for that amount. We should provide that to the Board of Finance and the town. As it stands right now not knowing that he could not make a call either way on supporting the budget. Heidi Simons voiced Mr. Lord's point is there and is ambivalent about voting for a budget that she already knows the Board of Finance will knock down. She would like to be in control of the things that are going to be removed, particularly protecting teachers and the programs that have been proposed. She also likes the idea of the extracurricular. She commented do we look at administration salaries, and are they comparable to other administration salaries of similar population. She does not think we should not touch anything that the teachers and curriculum have worked hard on, it is very impressive. She spoke on what we having going should keep going with no cuts and West Vine should have their new teacher. She feels those are the things we need to keep and not cut back on. Farouk Rajab commented the Board is always in control of what goes in and out of the budget not the Board of Finance. He does not feel it is their responsibility what comes out or stays in the budget. Ms. Simmons added we as the Board would be able to make the decision and not have the administrators make it.

Chairman Frank Todisco recapped the direction the Board will take, there is a consensus to move this number forward, and there are still some questions that need to be addressed. Mr. Lord has some additional information that he is looking for regarding the \$775,000 number that he needs more clarification on. Mr. Lord feels it will improve our success in pushing the budget through and have a better understanding of the number. He noted he is looking at what is in the best interest of our children. Chairman Todisco noted there is a consensus to add the request to add back the extracurricular reduction back into this budget. Heidi Simmons spoke for quality of education absolutely if we can find the money and not get push back from the Board of Finance. How do we keep quality and make it a fair proposal for the budget for the school. Jack Morehouse commented people are willing to accept the tax increase if it is going to a good cause. He added some of the Board of Finance members are not aware as well as other people in the town of all the good things we are doing and they need to know we are heading in the right direction and we have a lot to be proud of. When people are looking to move they look at the school system. If you could put this in terms of what it would actually cost the average taxpayer for this increase. It would be nice to calculate that and see what it would cost. Mr. Morehouse voiced he feels we need to promote the school district better and would be happy to address the Board of Finance. They need to hear the good things that are going on, and suggested maybe start with "The New Three R's for Education" report.

Chairman Frank Todisco summarized the three points from a consensus from the majority of the Board discussion. Chairman Todisco asked Dr. Riley if he was clear and understood the Board's decision. The Board would like to put back the athletic coaches, more detail on the increases and the need for each on the spreadsheet. Chairman Todisco noted the third item is, we need to do a much better job of telling the story and present our budget and the need behind what we are asking for and have more supporting documentation. He also commented this Board wants everyone to be aware of what is happening in the district and all of the positive things that are happening. Dr. Riley recognized that we are proud of what we do and will come up with a supporting document with more detail and will have it ready for the meeting on February 11th. Gordon Lord said to carve it out of the spreadsheet, simplify it and believes this will help. Craig Esposito also commented in addition to a summary he would expand the comment section in the spreadsheet, so that any Board of Finance member or member of the public can see what exactly affected the line. He added that anything that adds clarity or explanation would be helpful. Gordon Lord voiced he supports everything of the hybrid model and where we are but wondered if it would be possible to have an update of surrounding districts because he is getting questions on why the district continues to follow CDC. He would like an update of surrounding districts so we can show the town that we are in line with other superintendents and health officials. Dr. Riley agrees he will give an update from other districts and share what they are doing regarding sports, and the push for more days in school. Dr. Riley commented, he has been in contact with other superintendents sharing their views on this issue. We have staff that live in other surrounding areas which also has an effect on the district depending on what happens in those other districts where they live. He feels that is information is important and will put a note out to the community.

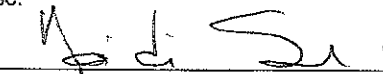
Jack Morehouse spoke about community comments through emails and who will respond to them. Chairman Todisco noted he has replied receipt of the email. He spoke to other Board chairs and spoke to John and will have a recommendation as to how we handle this moving forward and will share that at the next Board meeting. Mr. Morehouse spoke for some teachers that some prefer to have their students back for the four days because hybrid is challenging for teachers. He voiced it is frustrating for teachers because they want to do a good job and they are dealing with many moving parts. He suggested maybe at some time doing some kind of survey to find out how staff is doing.

Adjournment

The following motion was made by Farouk Rajab and seconded by Jack Morehouse.

Motion 1: To adjourn at 8:14p.m.

All: Aye


Heidi Simmons, Board Secretary