

Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District Committee

April 23, 2012

Minutes

CALL TO ORDER A. McCloughan called the School Committee meeting to order at 5:35 p.m. at the Buker Multipurpose Room.

PRESENT: Sean Condon, Bill Dery, Kym Donnellan, Roger Kuebel, Alexa McCloughan, Ann Minois, Jack O'Keefe, Dacia Rubel, and Larry Swartz

ABSENT: Peter Gray, Acting Superintendent

ALSO PRESENT: Julia Phelps, candidate for position of Superintendent of Schools

INTERVIEW: The purpose of this meeting was to interview Julia Phelps, one of 4 finalists for the position of Superintendent of Schools. Committee members asked her questions, many of which had been prepared in advance. These minutes briefly state the topic of each question, and summarize her answer; for the full text of prepared questions see the numbered questions in a document appended to these minutes, which correspond to the number/letter in parentheses after each brief question summary below.

A. McCloughan asked J. Phelps to reflect on her day so far (1a) and what people she met noticed about her (1b). J. Phelps said the people she encountered in the schools earlier on the day of this interview consistently expressed optimism and hope for the district, and mentioned the importance of making the right decision about who to hire as superintendent. She said people would have noticed she is optimistic, energetic, "did her homework" about the district, and has a good sense of humor.

A. McCloughan asked why she is interested in working in this district (1c). She spoke about the first and second wave of educational reform and expressed interest in implementing in this district policies she has had a hand in creating, in her current job with the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

A McCloughan asked for specifics about how she would spend her first day and week on the job (1e). J. Phelps said she would meet with Committee members and principals and at the end of the week send the Committee an entry plan for her first 100 days on the job.

A. McCloughan asked what kind of support she would need (1e); she mentioned technological tools, central office staff, and the assistant superintendents for budget and finance, and curriculum.

J. O'Keefe asked J. Phelps how she motivates people (1f). She detailed her work with a committee to create a strategic plan for the Amesbury school district when she worked there and emphasized the importance of that plan for decision-making in the years that followed.

B. Dery asked how she would communicate with constituent groups (2a). She said she would e-mail the Committee weekly; e-mail teachers weekly in cooperation with principals and other district leadership; improve the district website; and consider holding monthly or quarterly "town hall meetings" to give parents, teachers and community members an additional forum to express what is on their minds. She said she would communicate with parents via existing structures such as parent teacher groups and school councils, if invited.

D. Rubel asked about her management style, her strengths, and about what needs improvement and steps she is taking to make those improvements (3a). J. Phelps said her management style is collaborative; her strengths are her passion for education and her experience as a consensus builder; and an area she needs to improve is to get the best out of staff rather than hold them to standards that may be unrealistically high.

D. Rubel asked about her past relationships with boards (3b). J. Phelps related frustration with the Amesbury School Committee's frequent reorientation of tasks and priorities but said creation of a strategic plan resolved that to some extent.

D. Rubel asked about her experience in negotiations and relationships with teachers' unions (3c). J. Phelps said she prefers a collaborative "how to get to yes" negotiating process. She spoke about listening to discern the true issue when employee grievances arise.

K. Donnellan asked J. Phelps to tell about the strongest team she has built and what made it strong (3d). J. Phelps detailed the process of creating and working with a building leadership team when she was a middle school principal.

K. Donnellan requested specifics about J. Phelps' experience in leadership searches (3f); J. Phelps said she has participated in searches for principals, department chairs and curriculum directors.

S. Condon asked why faculty and staff should support her candidacy (4a). J. Phelps said they should do so because she cares about student learning, and has background, skills and knowledge in areas including curriculum development, professional development, and student assessment.

S. Condon asked how she would assess curriculum (4b). She spoke about building consensus, and emphasized the assessment of student knowledge and skills.

He asked how she would evaluate the effectiveness of teachers and administrators (4c). She said a system would need to be negotiated in light of new state guidelines for staff evaluation. She said if students consistently under perform in certain areas or classrooms she would respond with remediation plans and assistance to help teachers improve, but if no improvement resulted, would have a process in place to make sure those teachers were not teaching at that level, or involved in the profession, per the new state regulations.

S. Condon asked her opinion about the difference between a good and an excellent teacher (4d). J. Phelps said great teachers are passionate, inspire students' enthusiasm, and bring out students' knowledge and skills.

A. Minois asked about employee accountability (4e); J. Phelps mentioned setting clear expectations, letting employees know what the ramifications would be if expectations are not met and communicating promptly and clearly if that occurs.

A. Minois asked J. Phelps about new concepts in education (4f). She indicated that before adopting a new idea she would research the experience of other districts that already implemented it, and how similarities or differences between this district and those already using it might influence whether this district would be likely to have the same experience. She mentioned that some people always "jump on the latest bandwagon" and said it is important to listen also to those who resist a particular new proposal.

A. Minois asked what makes school districts successful and effective (4g). J. Phelps answered that the most important component is for faculty and staff to feel supported, respected and valued.

R. Kuebel asked J. Phelps her opinion of the key elements required to bring these communities together regarding the budget, and how she would galvanize support (5c). She said she would ask questions about the assumptions and process involved in building the budget; educate the community by offering documents, communication, and a rationale at open meetings; and build communication with both communities.

R. Kuebel said in this district, members of the community provide a lot of input about the budget; he asked how she would manage that. J. Phelps replied that a strategic plan agreed to by both communities would provide a litmus test for what should remain in the budget and what could be cut.

L. Swartz inquired about technology in the schools, and J. Phelps' personal technological aptitude (5d). She emphasized integration of technology into the regular school day, and said she uses e-mail and Microsoft Office Suite programs fluently and has a Facebook page.

L. Swartz asked how she would use data in decisions about district programs (5e). She spoke of analyzing student performance data and evaluating whether it indicates congruence with the district's priorities as expressed in its strategic plan.

L. Swartz asked her about regional districts (5f). She said she worked in a regional district in Maine; she said weighted voting by that district's school committee sometimes escalated issues. She noted that the special circumstances of regional districts include multiple town administrators, boards, and Town Meetings.

J. O'Keefe asked J. Phelps to discuss a school crisis she addressed in the past (5g). She spoke of the death of a student in Amesbury due to a food allergy, her role in communicating with staff at the immediate time of the incident and in formulating a district "no peanut" policy, and the range of opinions among parents and the community. She expressed her opinion that the no peanut policy was appropriate and that the district did not do a good job of keeping this student safe, given that the family informed the district of his allergy when he entered the district.

ADJOURNMENT:

A. McCloughan recessed the meeting at 6:42 p.m. The meeting reconvened at 6:50 p.m. at the Wenham Tea House; the Committee and candidate continued informal conversation over dinner. The meeting adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

DOCUMENTS AND EXHIBITS

USED AT THIS MEETING:

Interview Questions — School Committee Interview (7 pages)
Supplemental interview form for superintendent search 2012 (3 pages)

Respectfully submitted,

Ann Sierks Smith, School Committee recording secretary