GROTON BOARD OF EDUCATION
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
SEPTEMBER 9, 2024 @ 7:00 P.M.
CENTRAL OFFICE, ROOM 11

MEMBERS PRESENT: Jay Weitlauf – Chairperson, Andrea Ackerman, Dean Antipas, Adrian Johnson, Matthew Shulman, Ian Thomas, Jennifer White, Michael Whitney

MEMBERS ABSENT: Beverly Washington – Vice Chairperson

ALSO PRESENT: Susan Austin, Ray Engle (remote)

I. CALL TO ORDER – Mr. Jay Weitlauf, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 7:45 p.m.

II. DISCUSS AND POSSIBLE ACTION RE: AN OPERATIONAL REVIEW

Mr. Weitlauf made a statement of his view regarding the Operational Review. Mr. Weitlauf noted that he wanted to go on record that he wants to collaborate with the Town Council and with the total understanding that other people may disagree. Also, he would like this review to analyze the permanent staffing needs of the business office, provide temporary staffing support during the review, and that the review begin in January after the new Business Manager has had time to acclimate themselves to the office.

Mr. Shulman read a statement regarding his thoughts on an operational review (Attachment #1). He feels that an operational review on GPS's budgeting, of the board's role in the budgeting process, and in the board's role in the oversight of taxpayer and grantee funds would be beneficial.

Mr. Johnson stated that he feels the best way to ensure an operational review is done in the best interest of the students is for the Board of Education to conduct the review.

MOTION: Johnson, Thomas: Moved for the Groton Board to fund and contract for an operational review of the finances of the Groton Board of Education for the fiscal years of 2023 and 2024, with additional scope of review of the business office staffing. The review will include, but not be limited to, coordination with the Town Manager to review procedures as they relate Town Department of Finances, the Board of Education's financial reports and practices relating to health insurance, review of payroll funds and related items, special education cost, systems utilization relating to budgeting software and practices, reviewing policies and procedures of current controls over general ledger maintenance, bussing contract costs, and excess property costs. The operational review will be funded by re-classifying funds reserved for budgeting software in fiscal year 2025 to operational review.
MOTION WITHDRAWN

For informational purposes, Mr. Weitlauf shared with the Board his recommendation for a motion regarding an operational review. He stated that in the spirit of continuous improvement and cognizant of our responsibility to the taxpayers of Groton, I hereby move that the Groton Board of Education collaborates with the Groton Town Council to facilitate an impartial operational review of financial policies, procedures, and best practices governing the district business office including the way

II. DISCUSS AND POSSIBLE ACTION RE: AN OPERATIONAL REVIEW- cont.

in which it interacts with the town finance department. Additionally, the board requests that this review include analyzing the permanent staffing needs of the business office, that temporary staffing support be provided during the review, and that the review begin after January 1, 2025 to allow the new district business manager time to acclimate to the office.

Mr. Thomas shared that he agrees with the idea of an operational review and feels it's the Board's responsibility to do it. As an amendment to either Mr. Johnson's or Mr. Weitlauf's motions, Mr. Thomas offered adding "to authorize the Board of Education to enter into discussion with the Town Council, mayor, manager regarding jointly agreed upon parameters for an organizational review with the goal of negotiating, establishing a Memorandum of Agreement with the town that will set the scope of services and other essential aspects and parameters of such a cooperative venture."

Dr. Whitney stated that he believed there is no recommendation from the auditors for an operational review, but that he would like to see the Board of Education and the town participate as equal partners in a review process. He shared his concern with the burden that an operational review will place on the school staff and, depending on the scope of the review, will it take away from the Board's core mission to educate the students. Mr. Weitlauf responded that there was a recommendation from the auditors for an operational review.

Mr. Antipas agrees that there should be an operational review and is in favor of collaborating with the town, but feels the review should be done under the Board of Education's terms.

MOTION: Whitney, Thomas: Moved that the Groton Board of Education and Town Council work collaboratively in joint meetings to set the scope and process of an impartial operational review and a related Memorandum of Agreement as informed by the collective insights of the Superintendent, Town Manager, and staff to be voted on by both the Board of Education and Town Council.

MOTION: Thomas, Johnson: To make a friendly amendment Dr. Whitney's motion to read "Moved that the Groton Board of Education invites the Town Council to work collaboratively in joint meetings to set the scope and process of an impartial operational review and a related Memorandum of Agreement as informed by the collective insights of the Superintendent, Town Manager, and staff to be voted on by both the Board of Education and Town Council." PASSED UNANIMOUSLY

II. DISCUSS AND POSSIBLE ACTION RE: AN OPERATIONAL REVIEW- cont.

MOTION: Antipas, Johnson: To amend Mr. Thomas' friendly amendment to read "Moved that the Groton Board of Education invites the Town Council to work collaboratively in joint meetings to set the scope and process of an impartial operational review commensurate with the management letter for the FYE 2023 audit and a related Memorandum of Agreement as informed by the collective insights of the Superintendent, Town Manager, and staff to be voted on by both the Board of Education and Town Council."
YES – Antipas
NO – Weitlauf, Ackerman, Johnson, Shulman, Thomas, White, Whitney
MOTION FAILED

For clarification, the final motion was re-read and voted on as follows:

MOTION: Whitney, Thomas: Moved that the Groton Board of Education invites the Town Council to work collaboratively in joint meetings to set the scope and process of an impartial operational review and a related Memorandum of Agreement as informed by the collective insights of the Superintendent, Town Manager, and staff to be voted on by both the Board of Education and Town Council.
YES – Weitlauf, Ackerman, Johnson, Shulman, Thomas, White, Whitney
NO – Antipas
MOTION PASSED

III. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: Ackerman, Shulman: To adjourn at 9:33 p.m.
PASSED UNANIMOUSLY

Statement for the 9/9/2024 Groton BOE Special Meeting on an "Operational Review"

Board of Ed colleagues, Council members, Groton parents and residents,

Please note that my remarks represent my personal assessment of issues and solutions concerning Town Council's call for an "Operational Review" and should in no way be construed as reflecting the position of Groton's Board of Education.

This Board has lived through a painful 5-6 months during which needed discussions about curricula, children's academic and developmental progress, staff recruitment and retention, professional staff development, etc. have been largely displaced by endless budget-related meetings. It is clear to me that an "Operational Review" of GPS' budgeting, of the Board's role in the budgeting process, and in the Board's role in the oversight of taxpayer and grantee funds will be beneficial.

This "Operational Review" will help us respond to the same financial stresses faced by public education around the country **as well as** to some challenges that are specific to Groton.

The major external national stresses to public education, at least in my opinion, are (1) coping with the lingering effects of COVID on our students' social development and academic performance, (2) elimination of ~**125 positions** funded by now-expired COVID-19 relief funds, and (3) inflation (seen in huge increases in transportation, health insurance, fuel and utility costs).

Groton-specific challenges include (A) the loss of our assistant superintendent and of several business managers, (B) a change in the budget roll-out process designed in light of the arrival of 4 new members join the 9-person Board at the start of the budget season, and (C) the need to upgrade our current spreadsheet account reporting to a state-of-the-art system that should be fully compatible with Town accounting.

All of these factors intersected to produce a "clunky" audit review and new budget formulation that was clearly not optimal to a "best practices" budget process – things that both the Board of Ed and Town Council noted and are responding to.

However, in spite of some public comments to the contrary, the auditors came to the same conclusion concerning their audits of both the Town and Groton Public Schools' finances. Both the Town's and GPS's audits were CLEAN, but both audit reports contained recommendations to strengthen future accounting performance.

As the Town moves forward with its audit sponsorship, the "best practice" in defining the audit's "Scope of Work" lies in Council's inviting active BOE participation. True collaboration between Groton's elected bodies requires that both acknowledge that neither knows enough about the other's functions to devise a scope of work on its own.

[One example, among several in Mr. Burt's draft "Scope of Service," is its proposed intention to "determine how (BOE) employees are hired, budgeted and what benefits are offered." This is a function attributed by the Legislature to the duly elected Board of Education.]

Again, I fully support the concept of an "Operational Review," but not if it is structured along the lines of the latest Council draft "Scope of Work." For, however noble Council's intentions may be, their

draft functionally transfers authority for the education of our community's young people to the Town Council from its legally-designated and electorally-chosen Board of Education.

Only with ***true*** collaboration between Town Council and the Board of Education will we be able to define and implement best management practices leading to the optimal education of our children on a fiscally-sound basis.

I respectfully request that this communication be inserted in its entirety in the minutes of this Sept. 9, 2024 BOE Special Meeting.

Matthew Shulman, Member