

Orange Southwest School District (OSSD)
Regular Board Meeting on Wednesday January 8, 2025
Randolph Elementary School
6pm

MINUTES

[Click Here](#) for a video recording of the Meeting.

I. Opening (6:00 - 6:05)

- Board Chair Hannah Arias announces they will give a few additional moments to allow for latecomers due to inclement weather. Meeting is called to order by chair at 6:03 pm
- Board Attendance: *Ensuring a quorum*
Board: Hannah Arias, Anne Kaplan, Ryan Anderson, Aimil Parmelee, Sam Hooper, Sarah Haupt, Rachel Gaidys and Rachel Fish. Administration: Michael Clark, Heather Lawler, Robin Pembroke with Kyle Southworth and ORCA Media. Guests present: Frank Landry, Stephanie Leonard, Harper, Melinda Robinson, Summer, Kendal, Jen Martin, Rachel Drury, Norie Belanger, Brad Paisker, Jenny Engel, Azalea, Shane Keady, Meghan Westbrook, Lisa Wright, Seth McCay, Julie-Marie Bristol, Kyle Obenauer, Patricia Lafayette, Melissa Lafayette.
- Meeting Purpose: Budget, Committee Reports
Hannah Arias would like to add an item to the Closing Incidentals portion of the agenda and discuss an email received from the Paine Mountain School Board
- Review and Accept Agenda

VOTE: Hannah Arias motioned to accept agenda with the addition requested, Sarah Haupt seconds. Motion passed unanimously.

II. Ownership Linkage (6:05 - 6:25)

- Public Comment for items not listed on agenda: Board welcomes comment but is not able to take any action. Comments limited to 3 minutes per speaker. Hannah Arias states there will be a second public comment session following the budget discussion, with each speaker limited to 2 minutes.
 - *Frank Landry comments that PreK and student-facing roles need to be maintained, any closure of the Brookfield School should have no staff loss, points there are areas of savings to be explored such as software and parents picking up and dropping off students instead of bussing. Thinks any cuts should start at the top and move down. Suggests schools explore ways to increase revenue.*
 - *Kyle Obenauer reminds that the feasibility study currently has momentum and would like to see more community involvement as early as possible. Believes there should be more outreach to inform community of agenda and board conversations..*
- Randolph Elementary School Presentation from Principal Melinda Robinson
Principal Robinson welcomes the Board and guests and introduces student leaders from the Kindness Committee who will present. Students Nicole, Dara, Beau, Azalea, Summer, Ella, Liam, Erin, Kendal, Remi and Charlee speak to the board, in turn, about how the students have to apply for leadership positions and there are many position choices. These positions are open to third through sixth graders until mid-year when they open up to second graders. Announcements are made and are posted around the school advising what positions are open, and application deadlines. Applications must have both parent and teacher approval, accepted students must attend meetings to continue in the position. This process teaches kids to take responsibility and leadership, and allows them to act as role models. A new job is cleanup crew on the playground. This shows the 5th and 6th graders modeling the "Wizard Way." The Kindness Committee raises school spirit, brainstorms ideas for teacher appreciation, helps where they can and models good citizenship for the younger students. Principal Robinson comments that there are currently 70 leadership positions being filled by students.
- Ownership Linkage: 1st read of community letter/Annual Report
Discussion around the timeline of linkage committee communications, especially during budget season and what tone the communications should strike for annual meeting. Decision to hold a Special Board Meeting next

Wednesday, Jan. 15, 2025 for review of Annual Warning and vote as the state still hasn't provided their final figures. Conversation about the letter in general was favorable, especially around including a link to the feasibility study video. Hannah Arias will be meeting with Ben Merrill to craft the school board letter to go in the Annual Meeting booklet. No vote was taken regarding the work of the linkage committee at this time.

- Open Board Seats

Discussion around the three school board seats expiring in March 2025. There will be two Randolph seats, and one in Braintree. Anyone who would like to run for school board should contact their town clerk soon and get the necessary forms, petition and deadline information. Information can be found on town websites, or the Secretary of State website has the forms and information as well.

IV. Board Process (6:25 – 7:05)

- Budget Discussion

- Annual meeting Warning

The Superintendent's Report recaps last month's meeting. Quick review of how the board requested to see additional budget levels, one in line with what Governor Scott suggests as well as a level-funded budget. While reallocation of buildings was discussed last month, the board is not ready to consider that at this point. The weighted average wasn't yet accurate last month and Michael Clark explains how the process was affected during Covid with free and reduced lunch and Medicaid available to a greater number of families. Student membership is based on those figures, but as things return to normal, fewer students are eligible for the services but the actual number of students in the school system remain the same. Student membership was inflated during and following Covid and affected the budget since those inflated numbers increased Federal funding. Now the district's ADMs (average daily membership) match, free and reduced lunch eligibility figures match and our district count is accurate. Michael Clark clarified that ADM is the number of actual students, while the weighted number is dependent upon poverty and other socio/economic factors. The OSSD has signed off on the ADM figures with the state, but final numbers will not be issued until all districts have completed the ADM process, and approved their numbers.

Discussion about the excess spending threshold encouraging school districts to think carefully about how much is spent on each equalized pupil. Ryan Anderson asks what the consequences are if the district spends over the threshold, Michael Clark says the easy answer is that every dollar over the threshold is double taxed once the penalty is considered. The level service budget presented is over the threshold, and that 10.5% increase could result in (estimated) tax increases as follows – Brookfield, 39.54 cents (\$395.40 for each \$100,000), Braintree, 52.25 cents (\$522.50 for each \$100,000) and Randolph 32.11 cents (\$321.10 for each \$100,000) Michael Clark points out the 'yield' and 'tax rate' are estimated based on available information, but the 'budget' is more spot on. Ryan Anderson comments that he looked up median house prices in Orange County and clarified that such a budget could create an increase of \$65/month.

Michael Clark states the level service budget is over the threshold by \$794.72 per pupil and a cut of 1.1 million dollars would be needed to get under that threshold. Rachel Gaidys and Sam Hooper ask if the numbers above reflect the penalty as well, Michael Clark confirms that penalty is included.

Discussion turns to the presented reduction plan and PreK, which historically has been about 60 3 & 4 year old students across three schools. Under education quality standards, PreK should be no more than 20 students per class with one adult for every 10 children. This model would allow 4 PreK classes to be reduced to three. Michael Clark proposes modifying the enrollment process, with each program taking students as space is available, any students above that capacity would be able to be enrolled in another district school that has space. Michael Clark calls upon Principal Cara Houston to contribute detail to the conversation. The board asks how many PreK students are currently enrolled in each school – Braintree has 13, Brookfield has 14 and RES has two classes, one with 14 and one with 15. It is clarified that this PreK proposal does not eliminate PreK for 3 year olds, and that the stated reductions and change to PreK would result in 1 million dollar savings. Michael Clark touches on unexpected savings such as keeping PreK to 4 days instead of expanding the program to 5 days per week and keeping tuition at RTCC level.

Michael Clark moves to the \$0 penalty scenario – this could result in (estimated) tax increases as follows – Brookfield, 23.50 cents (\$235.00 for each \$100,000), Braintree, 32.7 cents (\$327.00 for each \$100,000) and Randolph 19 cents (\$190.00 for each \$100,000). Anne Kaplan and Ryan Anderson ask for a review of what is being cut out, Hannah Arias reminds that the board is approving a budget number to be presented to the voters, not line items. Rachel Gaidys feels it would be irresponsible not to share input they've received from the community that the district is top heavy, feels it's important to share what they are hearing.

Michael Clark suggests if anyone would like a review of detail and commentary from last month's meeting, they should review the video.

Hannah Arias prepares to open the floor to public comment, reminding that comments need to be limited to 2 minutes each, and that at 7:30 pm they will pause comments and take a board vote if they will continue.

- Gabby Pozzani states out that vacant para positions shouldn't be considered unnecessary, they are an extreme need and that paras are not compensated adequately.
- Norie Belanger says they hold one of the PreK positions that would be eliminated, says that a ration of 10:1 is not adequate, there aren't enough paras available and the district should be looking at smaller class sizes.
- Emma Janicki agrees with Gabby Pozzani, eliminating positions doesn't eliminate need. Braintree relies on subs to fill para positions now and students aren't getting needed services. Would like to see all the levels of budget cuts that the administration prepared and states they think the district is top heavy.
- Seth McCay asks if the safety of children is impacted with larger classes and fewer paras? Belives safety would also be impacted if the nursing staff were to be reduced.
- Sean Kramer cautions against any budget increase, cites increase in administrative costs and suggests asking for volunteers to make necessary renovations and repairs to buildings. They don't want to see any staff job cuts, but advocates for top level reductions.
- Kyle Obenhauer addresses administration costs. Says it's tough to reconcile small cuts in art and field trips when the Central Office budget has increased 24% in salaries and benefits since last year.
- Michelle Evelund says pulling any funding from students is a problem. Students benefit from para support and suggests looking at legality of denying local services to 3 and 4 year olds.
- Brad Paisker finds increased property taxes and decreased enrollments are challenging. If Brookfield is closed, will bus routes be increased to transport students to school? Says people move to the area to be close to the school.
- Abby McFadyen feels classes should be no more than 15 kids, it takes more than 1 adult and 2 helpers, more students and fewer paras is a recipe for disaster. Notes 3 year olds have higher needs.
- Julie-Marie Bristol says budget discussions are difficult. She works with the neediest students and has some without support. The district needs to provide more space for these students, hire more paras, there are too many teachers having to help other teachers and paras, we can't just think in financial terms. Notes that children without challenges are being impacted as well.
- Ezra Steinfeld questions excess spending levels and wonders to what degree the cabinet will listen to the public regarding budget cuts. Can they be trusted to cut their own positions? The late bus provides access to afterschool programs, tutoring, a variety of other programs that should be available equitably.
- Ryan Anderson clarifies that excess spending levels are set by the state, not by the board or the administration.
- Frank Landry asks if all levels of cuts will be made available?

VOTE: Rachel Gaidys moved to continue hearing public comment. Seconded by: motion to continue passed unanimously.

- Tammy White would like clarification of the \$202,270 savings on the RES PreK line item? (This question will be addressed following public comment)
- Lisa Wright points out that PreK needs an extra helper, especially if kids are in diapers. 20 kids would need 2 teachers and a para, as a building para she subs and the district needs more paras, those positions can't be cut.
- Calley Hastings notes that they are observing tension between administrators and educators and wonders how empowered staff is to work on the budget? Is there an opportunity for people on the ground to have a voice? It's important to get everyone on the same page, this process needs creativity and innovation.
- Rachel Drury questions the PreK savings of \$202,270. (This question will be addressed following public comment)
- Anne Pomerlee wants to know if PreK will be 5 days a week next year, or still stay at 4? Says budget cuts should be from top down, the district could save money by not contracting work. Para cuts affect all, and impact classrooms as a whole.
- Lisa Becker asks about nursing cuts and says not having a nurse available 2 ½ days a week leaves the administrative assistant responsible, and they are not qualified. Comments they like the volunteer idea and are willing to pitch in and help where needed.

- Amy Ferris says they are well aware of increased taxes, but students need to come first. Where the cuts are being made should be considered, the high school and central office should both be reduced.

Hannah Arias closes public comment at 7:42 pm.

Michael Clark responds to the questions regarding the PreK and nursing. The \$202,270 savings comes from reducing the program by 1 classroom which would cut 1 teacher and 3 paras. PreK will be staying at 4 days a week with 4 year olds attending 4 full days, and 3 year olds attending 4 half-days. Nursing staff would be reduced in Brookfield, Braintree, and at RUMHS.

Hannah Arias states the board will now discuss. Sarah Haupt asks if it can be a requirement that a child must be potty trained to attend PreK. Cara Houston responds that licensing regulations have no toilet training regulation so OSSD takes all kids regardless of training. Aimil Parmelee asks if the PreK utilizes OT or other programs to support students outside of the district? Cara Houston answers that the school contracts with both Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy providers but does not currently utilize Incontinence Therapy.

Ryan Anderson asks to clarify if Brookfield and Braintree would go back to a half-time nurse like in '23-24 or a one part-time individual. Michael Clark says that decision would be resolved by the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

Hannah Arias asks about comments heard regarding rise in administrative costs and the number of administrators. Michael Clark responds to Ezra Steinfeld's comment assuring there are people in the cabinet who will advocate cutting an administrative position. Discussion turns to principals, the assistant superintendent and assistant special education director positions. The assistant superintendent position is revenue-generating and the assistant SPED director not only replaces previously contracted services to handle especially challenging SPED cases but is only 50% funded by the district budget, the balance is funded through IDEA-B funds. An "assistant special education director" position allows access to these federal funds, and provides families with stable services, unlike contracted services that rotate every 30 to 60 days. Hannah Arias asks if the position could be reduced to just that portion that is grant funded?

Michael Clark explains the position works as a consultant and works to support the District at a state level to respond to issues with students who may not be receiving services. If the position were reduced, excess administrative work with SPED would fall on the shoulders of the principals. This position allows the principals to be more front-facing.

Heather Lawler explains that the creation of the Dean of Students position at RUMHS took responsibilities from other roles and assigned them to DoS position. The role was reconfigured from that of an existing employee. Moving a guidance expense to an administrative expense allows the Dean of Students to complete work such as suspensions and better support students and staff.

RES has added a principal position, and RTCC has added a technical director – but the RTCC budget is not part of this budget. Michael Clark discusses how promoting a vice principal to principal cost the district \$10,000 in additional salary but allows the work load to be shifted across both sets of shoulders. Rachel Fish asks if the additional principal works across all three schools, there is discussion about part-time principals and how in '21-22 there were only three elementary principals. Michael Clark points out that RES is 3x larger than either Brookfield or Braintree with more work load. Rachel Fish asks about parity issues across the district. Michael Clark mentions the time needed for Title IV investigations, Aimil Parmelee comments that as a result of increased administrative burdens and state regulations, the number of administrators must increase with the increased work load. They say they know principals are really busy and are certainly front-facing positions.

Michael Clark provides information that the state requires 1 registered nurse for every 500 students and the OSSD has 5 nurses for 800 students. They also note that the state considers that a PreK student is only .46 of a student, even though everyone agrees they are more than one full-time student worth of work. Michael Clark restates that any cuts will have a negative impact on kids, and the job of the board is to decide what budget gets proposed to the voters. And it's important to understand what pieces are impacted.

Hannah Arias asks board members what conversations they've had that should be shared or represented. Anne Kaplan comments that they've spoken with several older folks on fixed incomes who are supportive of education but not supportive of this level of tax increase. Concern that younger people, already shouldering childcare and other increased costs, may not be able to stay with increased taxes.

Sam Hooper says his constituency seems to be divided, with many willing to fully fund the budget without increased concerns. He spoke to some folks who were interested in drastic and transformative change and many that were frustrated that any increased cost wasn't going to increase level of service. Discussion that transformation needs to be at the state level, that legislature needs to take that on. Closure of Brookfield within the next 6 months is too aggressive unless assurance can be made that it is the only reasonable option to allow

all students in the district to access quality education. The discussion needs to be had with the community and agrees with Kyle Obenhauer that outreach needs to happen once more information is available.

Ryan Anderson says there's nothing in the budget that closes a school, but if costs keep rising, that will have to be considered. Residents have said they will move if the tax rate increases, others say they will move if the school closes. Although many voters Ryan Anderson spoke with were supportive of a full budget, that feels irresponsible. A budget with no PreK cuts but a "re-distribution" of students seems more responsible. Reminds that this administration created 10 budgets when the board requested three.

Hannah Arias asks who else has had conversations, notes that this board needs to do the hard things and being double taxed on excess spending doesn't seem to be on the table. Rachel Gaidys agrees and says there's no way to make this painless.

Aimil Parmelee spoke of hearing a wide range of opinions as well as comments regarding the already high cost of living in Vermont, and that increased taxes would make it harder.

Sarah Haupt echoes the comments of other board members, Rachel Fish states we need to support our schools and discussed how concern has been expressed for tax dollars going to other things, not just the school budget. Perhaps look at how schools are funded?

Hannah Arias says the board will need more information, and Michael Clark asks what information is needed?

Ryan Anderson asks if any new information (from the state) will change the budget, and Michael Clark responds "No". Administrative teams did a good job of getting the count accurate, but any change would have (virtually) no impact on the tax rate or budget. January fifteenth is the end of the runway and Rachel Gaidys asks if the decision is 10.5% or 6.5% increase. It seems that no one wants to make cuts but can't really support a 10.5% increase either.

Michael Clark says the board will have to approve the warning which includes new language in Article 10.

VOTE: Ryan Anderson moved to approve presenting the excess threshold budget to the voters. Seconded by Rachel Gaidys. Motion passed unanimously.

- Report out from sub-committees: ENDS, Ownership Linkage, Negotiations
 - ENDS: 2nd read of revised ENDS Policy --
No vote at this time, subject will be revisited at next regular meeting
 - Negotiations: Announcement of 1st scheduled meetings—
A meeting has been scheduled for January 27th with OSEA, the superintendents and board members to set ground rules and negotiation schedule.

IV. Board Education (7:05 – 7:10)

- Excelerator Module 3 (PG Training)—
Aimil Parmelee suggests moving this to the next meeting as well as suggesting that perhaps the board shouldn't plan to do training in the midst of budget season next year.

V. Monitoring the Organization (7:10 – 7:15)

- Review, Discuss, and possible Vote to Approve Executive Limitation 2.6 (3.4) – 2nd read –
Discussion that since the change to the Executive Limitation was actually a change in statute and not a change in policy, a board vote wasn't required. Anna Kaplan suggests spelling and grammar corrections before the document is uploaded to the website.

VOTE: Sarah Haupt moved to approve EL 2.6 with corrections as noted, seconded by Ryan Anderson. Motion passed unanimously.

VI. Policy Decisions for District Governance (7:15 – 7:20)

- B5 – Employment Harassment 2nd read

VOTE: Aimil Parmelee moved to accept the Employment Harassment Policy as presented, seconded by Sarah Haupt, motion passed unanimously.

VII. Monitoring the Board (7:20 – 7:30)

- Board Self-Evaluation: GP 4.6 (enclosed)
Board discusses

VIII. Consent Agenda (7:30 – 7:45)

- Approve minutes from December 11 board meeting
- Approve minutes from sub-committee meetings – no meetings, no minutes
- Approve RTCC Budget
- Approval of AOE Financial Mgmt Questionnaire
- Approve Announced Tuition Range

VOTE: Aimil Parmelee moved to accept the consent agenda as presented, seconded by Rachel Fish. Motion passed unanimously.

IX. Closing/Incidental Information (7:45 – 8:00)

- Superintendent's Report
- School Newsletters/Principal Reports
- Response from Paine Mountain –
Hannah Arias reads response from Paine Mountain school board to letter

VOTE: Anne Kaplan moved to have Hannah Arias and Michael Clark sit down with Paine Mountain and discover how to have a conversation, seconded by Sam Hooper. Motion passed unanimously.

- Action Item Recap –
Hannah Arias will speak with Ben Merrill about the board's letter for the Annual Report
Rachel Fish requests that pages in board packet be numbered

Board chair Hannah Arias thanks all board members for their hard work, and attending public for their participation in this difficult work. Meeting is adjourned by chair at 9:24 p.m.

X. Executive Session *If needed*

Future Meetings

- Special Board Meeting: Wednesday, January 15, 2025, 6pm at RUMHS Murray Auditorium
- Agenda Planning Meeting: Monday February 3, 2025 @ remote, 6pm
- Regular Board Meeting: Wednesday February 12, 2025, 6pm @ RUHS (RTTC mtg at 5pm)

Respectfully submitted:

Kyle M. Southworth

1/13/2025