

Washington Central Unified Union School District

WCUUSD exists to nurture and inspire in all students the passion, creativity and power to contribute to their local and global communities.

1130 Gallison Hill Road
Montpelier, VT 05602
Phone (802) 229-0553
Fax (802) 229-2761



Washington Central Unified Union Community forum Special Meeting 4.30.25 6:00-8:00 PM Doty Elementary School

Present: Elizabeth Brown, Daniel Keeney, Ursula Stanley, Chris McVeigh, Patrick Whelley, Mckalyn Leclerc, Julia Hewitt, Flor Diaz Smith, Superintendent Steven Dellinger-Pate, Alicia Lyford, Gillian Fuqua, Jarrod Weiss, Bekah Mandell, Michael Duane, Alden Bird, Allison Novak, Allison, Amanda, April Davis, Barrett Long, Beth Stern, Carla Occaso, Carly Humke, David Delcore, David Hershey, Ellen Knoedler, Honi Bean Barrett, Jill Campbell, Joanne, Katherine McCauley, Laura LaRose, Lindsay Mae, Shelley Vermilya, Tara, Catherine Coteus, Allen Gilbert, Lila Richardson, Noah Weinstein, Turtle Island Director

(Dozens of other attendees in person)

- 1. Call to Order: Flor Diaz Smith called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m.** She read a statement on behalf of the board, indicating that many members are here tonight primarily to listen to the community feedback. She explained the role of the board and stressed that the role of the board is not to manage day-to-day decision making which is in the hands of the expertise of the superintendent and administrators. She introduced Superintendent Steven Dellinger-Pate.

Superintendent Dellinger-Pate introduced Doty Principal Gillian Fuqua. He noted that an FAQ document has been shared and that the hope tonight is to answer questions from the community. Any questions that cannot be answered tonight will be answered as quickly as possible.

Principal Gillian Fuqua provided a slide deck to begin the forum and she reminded those present that though the discussion will likely be emotional, the same expectations for children will be in place tonight, and that is respectful dialogue - that all feelings are ok but “what we do with those feelings” is important. She shared projected kindergarten enrollment through 2029-30, noting that the enrollment numbers are very low. She stated that we need to think creatively and innovatively. She stated that Doty is in a delicate predicament, unless we do something

different. If we do not do something innovative, she does not see how Doty can survive. She stated that this opportunity, which came about quickly, could help to sustain Doty's future. Gillian Fuqua shared the FAQ document. Superintendent Dellinger-Pate reviewed: The board makes the decision on the lease and the superintendent makes the decision on configuration within the building. He noted that legal counsel is reviewing the lease agreement. He spoke about insurance that is required - this question had arisen - both the district and Turtle Island will continue to carry their own insurance. At 6:52, Gillian Fuqua invited the community to ask questions or make comments. She asked that people ask one question or make one comment at a time to allow everyone's voice to be heard.

2. Community Q&A:

2.1. Partnership Opportunity with Turtle Island: Chani Waterhouse noted that babysitting is offered in the library.

Doty students, 3, 4 grade made a statement. They shared some statements or worries from students.

Lila Richardson stated that it would be helpful if Superintendent Dellinger-Pate would give details of the lease parameters, including timing.

Superintendent Dellinger-Pate: The lease identifies the space and use of the building itself (maintenance, utilities, etc., who is responsible for what); attorneys are currently working on this; he stated that it will be a detailed document. Looking at a two-year lease to begin. He noted that he is encouraged that Turtle Island is looking to expand its program to multiple locations; their intention is not just a one or two-year "fix." In addition, an MOU: memo of understanding, to cover things such as food service, and other details in day-to-day operations.

Turtle Island Director Jocelyn York: The hope is to begin moving items in mid-August, with student attendance later.

Superintendent Dellinger-Pate stated that as soon as the lease is available, it would be made public for others to see.

Someone in the community asked about water use and utilities use. Superintendent Dellinger-Pate stated that we would use current use of utilities in the part of the building and would plan around that. These factors will be built into the lease.

Community member: With fifth and sixth grade leaving (and funding following), has the school board and select board had an opportunity to see what the ramifications will be and how this will affect Worcester in the future? How will the tax burden be determined? Superintendent Dellinger-Pate stated that the tax burden is determined by WCUUSD as a whole. He stated that the budgeting process has been built around "per pupil" so the funds would be allocated according to "per pupil" as per usual. He stated that there is no intention to close Doty School. This is a way to preserve Doty as an early learning center. He reiterated student enrollment projections.

Community member expressed concern - what happens in two years, should Turtle Island leave the school building? He spoke about this solution not being very “green,” as far as commuting this distance.

Jocelyn York spoke about the advantage of having a model where children attend childcare from infancy and continue through, e.g., grade four, in the same building. Some discussion followed around this possible model.

Naomi: Would leadership consider a lease that would allow fifth and sixth-graders to stay here? Could we say our highest priority is to keep our fifth and sixth graders here - maybe make this work better for all of us?

Doty student: Is there a way we could have 5% join the younger wing; is there any extra space that we could arrange to have 5% stay here?

Principal Fuqua stated that she had looked at the Historical Society building, which is not up to code for an educational setting. She stated that she would like to give thought to the question posed around the fifth grade. What would remain a question for her would be opportunities for sixth graders next year, under this proposal.

Bekah Mandell: birth through pre-K at Doty (Turtle Island?) Would the lease money be funneled back into the district, or would that money be for Doty? She stated that she is intrigued by the idea of having birth through pre-K in each of the elementary schools. What would it look like to have this at all of the school buildings and not all housed at Doty School?

Superintendent Dellinger-Pate stated that, with a 300 waiting list at Turtle Island, there is an opportunity to provide space, collaborate with other providers as well as Turtle Island; this is something that he has considered since he was a principal at U-32. We need to dig deeper into the childcare needs for children younger than pre-K. Superintendent Dellinger-Pate stated that it is up to the school board to decide where the funds are allocated.

Noah Weinstein, Worcester, read an email exchange from the Treasurer of Turtle Island. He noted that there is a community letter signed by over a hundred Worcester community members, indicating that they are not in favor. What would make this a viable proposal would be to consider how to create more childcare without jeopardizing the Doty School community. He spoke about the loss of per pupil dollars for the fifth and sixth grade students who would move from Doty under the proposal. He stated that the way this is being forced upon the Doty community does not bode well for a working relationship with Turtle Island.

Principal Gillian Fuqua stated that the dollar amount that is being circulated is a misconception. She stated that “veiled threats” are not respectful. She had heard that this will affect Worcester’s ability to work with Turtle Island and this comes across as a veiled threat. She reiterated that change is always difficult.

Noah Weinstein restated that the relationship would be more positive if the Worcester community were included in the decision making process.

Another community member stated that there are many ideas; please invite us to the table; please do not come back to us with a decision that has already been made. This is Deja vu from another previous meeting last school year. There is so much uncertainty. He stated that he does not believe this decision can be made so quickly; Superintendent Dellinger-Pate had indicated that the lease might be ready for the board to consider next week.

A Worcester community member stated that recently, Doty School does not feel like our school. We are back into the zone of “lack of control” - it feels “weird” to partner, public with private. He stated that decisions should not be made quickly about things that are going to affect many people.

A community member expressed concerns around turning free and equitable education over to private entities.

An employee at Doty stated that the current plan takes from Doty students and the community. If we could find a way to keep 5% here this year, and work out a slower plan with opportunities for more community input along the way. Very excited to have childcare in our community, but also wants to make sure that the Doty students are ok. There is a lot of fear right now.

A Worcester resident expressed disappointment, as she had come to the meeting hoping to hear some opportunities to bring nature-based learning opportunities to childcare via Turtle Island. She stated that a student had asked whether there is a way to keep 5% grade students at the school, and there was no answer; this is disappointing to her.

A Worcester resident spoke about the waiting list at Turtle Island. Would Worcester residents be moved to the start of the waiting list? Would there be some discount for Worcester residents?

Superintendent Dellinger-Pate stated that the lease agreement and MOU are still underway; the MOU could address these questions.

Katelyn expressed that this decision being made behind closed doors erodes trust. She stated that this arrangement prioritizes families that can pay; this is not equitable. She stated that the Worcester community are not adversaries with Turtle Island; it is just that they have been fighting over the past year to save this school only to have it turned around and offered up again. Collaboration, not secrecy, is a path forward.

Doty parent: while she agrees with some of the sentiments that are shared, this is an opportunity for us as a community to try something and possibly make something great happen. She asked that the community be involved in the development of the MOU.

A Worcester community member stated that he does not like the “scarcity mindset” -the idea of “cutting off an arm and stitching on a leg” - he would like to come from a place of not running scared, if we are looking to be a leader/ pilot program. He suggested the idea of building an addition, of appealing to the state. He stated that if the arrangement brings funds to Doty (via lease), the funds should stay with Doty.

Worcester resident and former preschool teacher: The reason change needs to happen at Doty - a small school is great and adorable, but not sustainable and not in children’s best interest. She, a parent of 5% graders, knows that her children will have a broader peer group next year, going from Doty to Rumney.

A Worcester resident stated that she is not hearing about the benefits of the partnership.

A Worcester resident asked questions.

Sounds like things are still up in the air regarding the lease? In addition, Turtle Island, while we all like it, is a private entity, and this is a public school. How are these two going to mesh?

Superintendent Dellinger-Pate spoke about Act 166 funds. The resident thanked the administration for offering this opportunity, as this had felt like the wool was being pulled over our eyes. Transparency and discourse are important.

Another question about whether Worcester community members would have some opportunity to get to the top of the waiting list for Turtle Island?

Jocelyn stated that Worcester preschool students would have a priority. She stated that 10 hours per week are provided at no cost for families, as per Act 166. She also noted that there are subsidies available to parents, given Act 76.

Jocelyn stated that, regarding providing guarantees to Worcester students beyond the 10 hours of pre-K, we have not worked this out with the lease/ our board, etc.

Leigh Garrity, Worcester resident, spoke about Doty being a special place. She reiterated the positives of moving fifth/ sixth grade students to Rumney. She stated that sometimes you need to “strike while the iron is hot.” She stated that the district, in two weeks, has had two meetings here - considering how quickly this came up, she believes that is an attempt to bring in the community. She stated that she is afraid that if we do not do this, Turtle Island will go elsewhere, and what will happen next year? This gives us opportunity to move forward in the future, in the best interest of the older kids, while keeping our younger kids close to home.

Sarah Davis: Please include Worcester community members in the development of the MOU. Residents have expressed some reasonable questions and concerns. She stated that people are feeling frustrated with being left in the dark, and this being a very “top-down”

decision. Worcester will be giving up a lot and it is unclear what Worcester will be getting. There should be someone who is advocating directly for Worcester in the process.

A Worcester community member indicated that if the board intends to take action next week, there does not seem to be time for the community to have input in this process.

Flor Diaz Smith stated that we have not yet seen the lease; its development is underway. The reason we have this meeting tonight is to get community feedback, as the lease and MOU development are underway.

She stated that every board member believes in public education. She stated that it is possible that the board will not take action at the next meeting re: the lease, but at the meeting later in May.

Allen Gilbert, Worcester resident and former School Board Chair, expressed hope that we can do a better job of dealing with each other as we go through changes. He stated that there has not been enough effort to really explain this plan; this school needs to continue to be a school for the children of Worcester.

Worcester community member asked for more time, more specifics (e.g. how it benefits 5th graders to move to Rumney), the information is “too soft” and too hypothetical. Would like to see more tangible information about some of the suggestions that were made tonight (e.g., keeping 5th here; giving priority for early Ed/ early care to Worcester families).

Worcester community member: is the board voting on the lease? Is the board voting on the MOU? At the same time? Later? Superintendent Dellinger-Pate stated that the MOU will not require board action but will be reviewed by the board. Some discussion around shared space in the building, e.g., Turtle Island using the library, the gymnasium/ cafeteria space. She stated that prioritizing keeping fifth and sixth graders here is very important. She encouraged the board to look for ways to work with Turtle Island and keep fifth/ sixth graders here at Doty.

Dell Waterhouse, Worcester resident and former Doty teacher, spoke about all of the caring people in this community, in this room tonight.

A Worcester community member spoke about the loss of 5% of students serving community lunch to the needy and elderly. Will Rumney/ Doty grades 5th come down the hill for this going forward? The ability to walk, ride, and roll to school will be lost. Loss of ECO - can we bring ECO to all five schools? She spoke about the loss of social opportunities for 5th grade students. She asked, what is the need for this today? We went through something similar last year. What she heard on the Turtle Island call last night was that they were offered an opportunity to “save Doty School.” There is afoot in the government re: education - why are we steamrolling forward? Also heard that Turtle Island’s current lease will be extended why the hurry, then? She stated that the way students, families, parents were set up to receive this news (crying); she stated that students are saying “Rumney sucks” because of the tone that has been set in the delivery of this news.

Worcester community member stated that she does not believe this will work. Students will not be able to use the playground during the summer. She expressed concern about traffic to the building and in town.

Worcester community member expressed concern with this discussion - we have a configuration committee that is proceeding; this is being debated in Montpelier; he stated that there is no support in the legislature for small schools. He does not see how having Turtle Island here at Doty factors in one way or the other. He stated that the legislature is saying that many, many small schools will have to close. If we are going to do something with grades five/ six, we should consider this district wide and have a thoughtful conversation.

Steven Dellinger-Pate stated that the lease would be brought to the board as soon as possible; the MOU requires more contributors and will take some time; he has heard the desire to consider how to keep 5% grade at Doty.

Mckalyn Leclerc stated that it is important, in closing, to say that the children are really looking to the adults as to how to process this information - a reminder to the adults that our children are looking to us and that this is a very hard decision.

3. Adjourn: Ursula Stanley moved to adjourn at 9:01 p.m. Seconded by Chris McVeigh, this motion carried and the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Grace, Board Recording Secretary