

Board of Education Minutes
Special Meeting
January 31, 2011

A special meeting of the North Stonington Board of Education was held on Monday, January 31, 2011 at 7:00 p.m. in the Wheeler Gymnasium Music Room. Present were Dr. Robert, Mrs. Ricker, Mrs. Banker, Mr. Hundt, Mr. Testa, and Mrs. Dame. Also present were Dr. Pukas, Mr. McCarthy, Mrs. Costa, Mrs. Wilkison, and Mr. Sandford. Absent were Mr. Scarchilli and Mr. McCord. Dr. Robert called the meeting to order at 7:07 p.m.

Dr. Robert explained the purpose of the meeting was to determine what should be included in a feasibility study. He elaborated. He spoke to the public and asked for their comments to be brief. Board members had questions that Drs. Robert and Pukas answered.

2. RFP for Feasibility Study – Mrs. Banker suggested checking with the other schools first to see if they could absorb our students before we studied that school. Mr. Testa asked if we heard from anyone willing to take our students. Dr. Pukas said an unofficial response was received from NFA and Mr. Mullane said Ledyard contacted him and showed interest.

3. Public Comment - Bernard Bartick, citizen, spoke of his research on the advantages of a small school. He read a list of what happens when a school closes. He spoke of the negligible cost savings. He elaborated further and said we need to keep our students here. Dr. Robert clarified Mr. Bartick's points. Board members asked for clarification and Dr. Robert responded.

Bob Beattie, citizen, said that our schools are one of the draws of bringing people to town. He suggested saving the \$10,000 for the study and keeping our students here. He had further comment.

Cres Secchiaroli, parent, commented that there needs to be better communication with the students. He suggested items to include in the study. He elaborated. Dr. Robert had comment and said there are no plans to close Wheeler and he elaborated.

Joe Gross, citizen, told the Board he felt it was still his responsibility to pay for the education of future students. He was against the school of choice option and he elaborated. He also spoke of the study done in 2006 and the need to maintain our buildings and had further comment.

Amy Kimball, parent, had concerns for children with special needs and asked about transporting them. Dr. Robert had comment and Mrs. Kimball had further comment.

Mrs. Haines, parent, said she was at the meeting on behalf of her daughter, Ciara, who could not attend. She said her daughter never feels like a number and was concerned about class sizes and wondered what percentage of kids are involved in sports and extra-curricular activities.

Anita Ames, citizen, said both she and Mrs. Banker can attest to the fact that they were transported to Stonington to graduate from Stonington and never felt like part of the school. She talked about the positives of a small school and the school community, the colleges that our graduates are accepted to, and if the school closes it closes a lot for the young people in town. She elaborated. Dr. Robert clarified her concerns.

Patrick Murphy, citizen, commented that his son had a great academic start at Wheeler but now goes to NFA. He spoke of no ethnic diversity.

Mr. Testa had comment to try to streamline the conversation. He elaborated on what the outcome of the process may be. He had further comment. There was comment from the audience.

Lisa Mazzella, parent, told the Board the bottom line should be the core values of what we offer our children. She elaborated. She spoke of students getting lost in a larger school. She elaborated and said there is a lot to be said for a smaller school. She said we are in effect a school of choice because they can go to the VoAg school or a technical school.

Walt Mathwich, parent, had suggestions for items to be included in the study.

Jeff Frenette, citizen, had the same suggestions as Mr. Mathwich. He commented on larger systems.

Bob Beattie, citizen, had further comment about people not wanting to send their kids someplace else.

Dr. Robert had comment. He spoke of the Ad Hoc Committee and their work for an option to move forward. They were told there was no way that would move forward without giving the people all the answers they are looking for. He elaborated. He spoke of our high rate of test scores and other items. There was discussion. Mr. Hundt commented that he moved here for the schools. He told those present that no decisions have been made. He had further comment and explained what a feasibility study does. He commented on getting the best education for our children and elaborated. There was discussion of not spending the \$10,000.

Jana Sullivan, parent, was concerned about transportation time.

Lou Steinbrecher, parent, was concerned about the added cost to parents and he gave examples.

Bob Carlson, parent and chair of the Ad Hoc Committee, explained the background of the Ad Hoc Committee and why they asked the Board to do this. He was in total favor of a school building program and commented that it scared him to have a building plan go to vote and having it voted down. Until all the questions are answered no plan would be passed. He elaborated. He spoke of some of the NEASC items and had further explanation. He said they came up with a plan that was fiscally responsible. Mr. Carlson commented that until we get this question answered once and for all we'll never get a building plan discussed. He closed by saying that an intelligent plan needs to be made.

Mr. Carroll, parent, was concerned about transportation time. He spoke of the need for a broad range of analysis. He had suggestions to include in the study and commented on the price of the study. Dr. Robert had comment. There was comment from the audience.

Jeff Frenette, citizen, spoke in support of spending the money to get all the questions answered. He elaborated and said this is a huge decision and an emotional decision.

Mr. Hundt said when the data comes in it is sterile and had further comment. He elaborated and said it will truly be up to the voters in this town and he spoke of the voting history of the last five years. He had further comment and said if we don't have this information there will always be the naysayer. There was discussion.

Nick Mullane, First Selectman, asked the Board if they considered a university or masters program doing this possibly for free. Dr. Pukas answered that UCONN told her it would probably start at \$5,000 and she had further explanation.

Kelly Patton, parent, asked for a comparative analysis of students with IEP plans and whether they were meeting their goals in other districts.

Joe Gross, citizen, commented that these are the same concerns he has heard over many years. He spoke of ad hoc committees. He had further comment.

Bernard Bartick, citizen, spoke of distance learning. He spoke of supporting this to get the reports out. He had further comment on the need for timelines. He closed by saying this is larger than the school system—it is community. Dr. Robert had comment.

Marietta Anderson, parent, introduced her daughter, Grace. Grace told the Board she had a petition to save Wheeler High School and that some of her friends and some teachers signed it.

Anita Ames, citizen, spoke of the need to have an outside group do the study so people will not think it is biased.

Mrs. Tanucci, parent, commented on growing up here and returning to raise her kids. She spoke of the community here and elaborated. She introduced her daughter who had made some posters. She read some of them to the Board. Dr. Robert had comment and explanation of where the \$10,000 would come from.

A citizen commented on whether any more people would listen to this.

Terry Farinha, parent, had questions on accreditation that Dr. Robert answered. Mr. Sandford explained the time line of NEASC events. Dr. Pukas said they were looking at the entire school pre-k-12. She elaborated. She spoke of academics and opportunities and said we were on warning because of our facilities. She said we were commended on our academics.

Merry Bliss, parent, spoke of students having other students leave because of sports facilities. She had suggestions for items to be included in the study. Board members had comment. Mr. Testa spoke of funding and the impact of the Town's commitment to fund education. He elaborated. He commented on an efficiency study.

David Nowkowski, parent, commented on his children being able to have other opportunities if they so choose. He spoke of a comparison school and had further comment. He also commented on schools that may have room for Wheeler students.

Lou Steinbrecher, parent, spoke on not being able to put value on the extra help and attention you get from the staff. He didn't know how that would be quantified. He commented on vouchers and high school credit for 8th graders. He elaborated and had further comment.

Jana Sullivan, parent, had concerns about schools taking the students for all their high school years.

A citizen spoke of the cost-effectiveness of education and defined education. He elaborated.

Jane Robert, parent, commented that this began with the NEASC accreditation which led to the Ad Hoc study which led to a building project. She had further comment about children's education and funding and that the Board has no control over the funding. Dr. Robert had comment.

Mrs. Anderson, parent, had questions about tuition at other schools. Mrs. Ricker told her we would have no control over that and elaborated. She said we lose a lot of control. Dr. Robert and Mrs. Anderson had further comment.

Bob Beattie, citizen, commented on needing to fix the buildings no matter what is done with the kids. Dr. Robert and Mr. Beattie had further comment. Dr. Robert spoke of a phased plan and some of the steps needed to be taken. He spoke of state funding. He spoke of the boiler project and flashing project. Dr. Robert said we are trying to catch up. There was further comment and discussion.

Jeff Frenette, citizen, asked if the Board would have a seat at the table in that town and he was told no.

Mr. McGowan, parent, asked about measuring the success of a student that goes to a bigger school. He had further comment.

Joe Gross, citizen, had further comment and asked about it being mandatory that any school is accredited before our students go to any other school or college. He had further comment.

Linda Costanza, citizen, had comment. She asked about what opportunities do we have that we can offer our children and what do we have here that can be made better. She spoke of the Vo-Ag study done a number of years ago. She spoke of putting things in perspective. She closed with what makes a good education, what makes us able to compete and what makes us feel connected.

A parent spoke of graduating from an unaccredited school. She chose here for the schools. She had further comment including spending time and money to get here and then to find out her children will have to go to a different town. She said she would have moved to that town. She elaborated.

Amy Kimball, parent, had further comment in support of ad hoc committees.

Mrs. Banker commented on the Ad Hoc Committee and commended them.

Joe Gross, citizen, clarified his position on ad hoc committees.

Nick Mullane, First Selectman, gave the history of the Ad Hoc Committee. He said the committee was given a charge and a committee was formed. He spoke of the previous study. He said there are needs in the school system. Mr. Mullane said we now have a different approach on what needs to be done. He had further comment. He commented on the \$75,000 dollar line item. He commented on the boiler system. He suggested not looking at the committees but the task in front of us, sift through it, and get results out and something in front of the people. He commented that the Committees in the Town of North Stonington do an outstanding job. He told those present that we are going through due process and please accept that.

Mr. Hundt had comment and commended the suggestions made. He had further comment.

Mr. Testa spoke of ad hoc committees. He said a lot of time and effort was put in to this. He explained that many times a lot of time and effort goes into something and it goes no where. He had further comment.

Mrs. Dame asked about other towns closing schools and what was the socioeconomic impact.

A question was asked about the Tripartite meeting.

Bernard Bartick, citizen, asked if other towns have reopened schools that have closed.

Lou Steinbrecher, parent, spoke of the misconception about the study the Board wants to do. He elaborated. Board members had comments. Mr. Steinbrecher said what is being portrayed is that we are closing our schools.

Jamie Bruce, parent, asked if the kids that go to other schools were asked why they left. He had further comment. He commented on larger schools and the support of booster clubs. He had further comment. There was audience discussion.

The Board took a recess at 9:17 p.m. The meeting resumed at 9:27 p.m.

Robert Miner, parent, commented on what a successful graduating senior was supposed to have. He elaborated.

Mr. Sandford said he has been working with the guidance counselor to find out why the eighth graders are leaving. He said they have 4 grade 8 students this year that have applied to go elsewhere. He elaborated on the process. There were questions asked and answered.

Mr. Hundt had comment about a building project being on the backs of the taxpayers. He spoke of keeping the community informed. He elaborated.

Bill Turner, parent, wanted to make sure Ledyard High School was considered a school of choice. He explained the difference between the VoAg program and the regular high school. He commented on the newspaper articles.

Robert Nee, parent, spoke of moving to town for the schools and how he would like to see that continue. He commented on maintaining the education of our students. He spoke of having no say in the education of our students if they went elsewhere. He spoke of virtual high school and what that would mean for our students. He had further comment.

Joe Gross, citizen, spoke of the Per Pupil Expenditure and not relying on the media. He elaborated.

Mike Anderson, citizen, said he went to NFA. He spoke to those present about not fearing if the study shows we should send our students there. He told the Board he moved to Town because of the education. He thinks the feasibility study should be done and urged the committee to go ahead with that. He elaborated and said we need this information for the voters. He elaborated further and said many people just vote with the pocketbooks but if they have the information and facts it would be better.

4. Action on RFP for Feasibility Study – Mr. Hundt told the Board based on what they got from audience he is all set. Mr. Testa had a number of items he would like to be looked at in the study. Mrs. Ricker and Mrs. Banker had nothing further. Mrs. Dame raised other items. There was comment. Dr. Robert said he felt the people covered everything. He mentioned a number of other items he would like to include in the study. Dr. Robert recommended that the Superintendent give a sample feasibility study with what we have heard. There was comment. Dr. Pukas asked for a timeline. She will give a report on the 9th as to where she is on it. On a motion by Mr. Testa, seconded by Mr. Hundt, the Board voted unanimously to table this item.

5. Selection of Negotiator for AFSCME Contract –There was discussion. The Board took a short recess. The Board returned to session. On a motion by Mr. Hundt, seconded by Mr. Testa, the Board voted unanimously to go over the 10:00 p.m. meeting time. Dr. Robert highlighted each of the potential negotiators. There was discussion and questions were asked and answered. There was comment. Mr. Hundt made a motion that was seconded by Mrs. Ricker to contract with Mr. Frank Connolly to negotiate the AFSCME contract. There was discussion. The motion passed with five voting in favor and one opposed. Dr. Robert was opposed.

6. Public Comment – Mr. Frenette commented on the meeting’s discussion. He spoke of communication and elaborated. Dr. Pukas had comment. There was further comment and discussion.

On a motion by Mr. Hundt, seconded by Mrs. Dame, the Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 10:22 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Roberta T. McCarthy, Secretary to
The Board of Education