

3-28-11 Education Committee

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Education Subcommittee of the Legislative Council
Held in Conference Room #3 in the Newtown Municipal Center,
3 Primrose Street, Newtown, Connecticut
Monday, March 28th, 2011**

* These are draft minutes and as such are subject to correction by the Legislative Council Education Committee at the next regular meeting. All corrections will be determined in minutes of the meeting at which they were corrected.

Council Chairman Kathy Fetchick called the meeting to order at 7:36 pm.

PRESENT: George Ferguson, Kathy Fetchick, Kevin Fitzgerald, Jeff Capeci

ALSO PRESENT: Bill Hart, Janet Robinson, Ron Bienkowski., Dr. Linda Gejda, LC members Rich Wojcik and Bob Merola, BOE member Debbie Leidlein, two members of the public and two members of the press.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:

Kinga Walsh of 21 Horseshoe Ridge Road commented that at last week's meeting many of the questions asked by this Committee were not related to the budget but were micro-managing. She asked what the role of the Education Committee is supposed to be. She said there is no Mission Statement that she could find and she thinks the committee's role should be to focus on budgeting. She added that she supports the current proposed budget.

Rich Wojcik of 36 Grand Place asked about the 5.5 teachers added and what the financial impact in this year's budget will be. Kathy responded that the cost is about \$222,000. Bill Hart added that the impact is zero because had the tenured teachers not left we would still have had their salaries, but these teachers replaced those salaries and so it is a net reduction.

ACCEPTANCE OF THE MINUTES: The committee agreed to table the minutes of the previous meeting (03/21/11) until the members have a chance to review them.

COMMUNICATIONS: None

NEW BUSINESS:

Discussion and possible action on Board of Education 2011-12 Budget recommendation.

Bill Hart, Chairman of the Board of Education, Janet Robinson, Newtown District Schools Superintendent and Ron Bienkowski, Finance Director for Newtown District Schools addressed the budget-related questions of the remaining questions from the list provided to them by the Committee prior to the 03/21/11. Answers were also provided in hard copy and those have been posted with the previous meeting's minutes.

Committee members along with Mr. Wojcik discussed the China and Japan programs and costs with Janet Robertson and Bill Hart.

George Ferguson expressed concern that we continue to add things and costs to the overall education program and that we need to become more focused on changing our logical view. We need to change *how* we do things rather than keep adding costs. He pointed out however that he did learn that a progressive thinktank on education based in Washington DC found that Newtown's school district is considered pretty efficient.

Mr. Ferguson added that he does not support passing the budget as is but has decided he would not make a motion to reduce it because he did not want to put a damper on the collaboration, transparency and positive tone that has been in place with the current budget process.

Kevin Fitzgerald made a motion to pass the education budget to the full Council as is, Kathy Fetchick seconded for discussion.

Mr. Fitzgerald explained that even though there may be areas in any process to trim a little here and there, he is more concerned that there are some major areas or valuable programs where costs have been reduced or not considered at all, such as restoring Project Adventure to the Reed School or considering the benefit of a Communications Director. Therefore, as long as the Superintendent the BOE are confident they can deliver a quality program, he would like to see the current education budget as recommended by the BOF go to the voters intact.

Jeff Capeci explained that he thinks there's not a lot of places to take huge numbers out without impacting quality and while he thinks there may be opportunities to do something, he thinks the collaboration is starting to grow and it could bear fruit in the next few years so he would support the motion as it stands.

Kathy Fetchick commented that Bill Hart and the whole Board of Education have done a great job and it's the first time I have looked at the budget and found it to be extremely reasonable. She likes the collaboration and even though it's been a little rocky at the start, it will continue to be a good decision made by all. Ms. Fetchick went on to point out some areas of opportunity for the future including the RFQ for a consultant to find efficiencies because we owe it to the taxpayers to continuously improve. She added that the Superintendent should continue to ensure that overhead costs remain as lean as possible provided it doesn't affect the classroom directly; that taxpayers not hear about staff being hired before a business case is shared with others; that we not borrow from Peter to pay Paul. She is hearing a lot of unhappiness on the elementary schools side because everything is being ripped out from under them. She stressed the need to address the issues at Reed because it has been a problem since September and it's like having a visiting relative who never leaves the house.

Ms. Fetchick recommended a friendly amendment to Mr. Fitzgerald's motion of a resolution asking that the Assistant Principal position at the High School be revisited by the Superintendent.

Mr. Ferguson seconded Ms. Fetchick's amendment for discussion.

Mr. Fitzgerald said he did not think the Committee can or should require that of the Superintendent as part of the budget recommendation process.

Mr. Capeci said a resolution is a resolution and therefore it was possible.

Mr. Fitzgerald then reminded the Committee that the role of the Assistant Principal at the High School was discussed at length at last week's meeting while Chip Dumais, the Principal was present to explain it to us. Mr. Fitzgerald explained that the Superintendent and the BOE Chair made it clear that the High School was deficient in this area before the role was added and that he did not believe it was within this Committee's purview to ask the BOE to revisit specific items in its budget.

Ms. Fetchick said that everyone she knows thinks the AP position is unnecessary and a distraction.

Mr. Fitzgerald explained that he could not agree to the friendly amendment because he has no reason to doubt the Superintendent and the BOE Chairman.

Mr. Ferguson then removed his second to Ms. Fetchick's friendly amendment.

Jeff Capeci then called for a vote on the motion as it stands. The motion to pass the BOF recommended Education Budget to the full Council as it is passed 3-1 with Ms. Fetchick, Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Capeci approving and with Mr. Ferguson dissenting.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: Mr. Wojcik of 36 Grand Place commented that Newtown's Education program should focus more on Math and Science and not necessarily put additional emphasis on foreign languages. He challenged the Superintendent to find a way to improve student performance in these areas. He also commented on teacher evaluations and tenure stating that there are studies out there that the single most important impact on the quality of education is the quality of the teacher. Until they address the tenure issue, it will be difficult to have an impact on the quality.

Kinga Walsh of 21 Horseshoe Ridge Road said she agreed with the reference to Math and Science but that she wishes there was more focus on reading at the elementary level. She also stressed that the problems at the Reed School have been there since the inception of the school.

ADJOURNMENT: Having no further business, George Ferguson moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:05 pm. Kevin Fitzgerald seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Kevin Fitzgerald