

ACTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Cafetorium
Gates School

November 16, 2006
7:30 p.m.

Members Present: John Ryder, Marie Altieri, Jonathan Chinitz,
Michael Coppolino, Terry Lindgren (until 9 pm),
Sharon Smith McManus

Also Present: William Ryan, George Frost, Susan Horn,
Elizabeth Huber, Sharon Summers, citizens and press

The meeting was called to order at 7:30 p.m. by the Chairperson.

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

Superintendent Bill Ryan thanked the Acton Rotary for presenting dictionaries to all Acton third graders.

STATEMENT OF WARRANT

Warrant #2007-10 in the amount of \$162,720.61 was signed by the chairperson and circulated to the rest of the Committee for signatures.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of October 19, 2006, were approved as written.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Ashton Enrollment Projections

Peter Ashton gave a presentation on the student enrollment projections, based on the October 1, 2006 enrollments. He reviewed the changes in enrollment, K-12, grade by grade, relative to last year. Although the total K-12 projection was right on target, changes within the grades were noted. Kindergarten enrollment was much lower than projected, and there was an increased number of 8th graders. High school enrollment increased 1 percent over last year. Peter explained that he uses the Cohort Survival Method to make his projections, including population changes, birth rates, in and out migration, retention rates, private school attendance, average household size, number of new homes, economic conditions. These projections predict that elementary enrollment will begin to drop significantly in 2008, the junior high will begin to decrease gradually by 2010, and the high school will continue to increase until about 2010, after which the numbers will decline. The Committee thanked Peter for his expert analysis and report, which will be on the schools' website.

SC questions: Marie Altieri asked if the small Kindergarten numbers this year was just an anomaly. Peter responded that it was largely due to a lower birth rate. Terry Lindgren was interested in how the Kindergarten number was projected. Bill Ryan asked if Peter would be surprised if next year's Kindergarten numbers are lower than projected. Peter answered that he tries to be conservative and would be somewhat surprised if numbers were lower. He also said that the declining enrollment in schools is not a national trend, but depends entirely on local demographics.

2. APS Enrollment Planning Scenarios

Bill Ryan recommended doing preliminary planning due to these projections, anticipating that we will have fewer elementary students in the future. He reported that he had met today with the principals and discussed various scenarios. Class sizes can be reduced, and we can look at space needs, such as dedicated art or music rooms, ELL program space, technology needs, SPED needs. We could also have fewer sections at Conant, Douglas and Gates. Regarding modulars, he said that we need to plan to

eliminate sections and modulars, which are temporary structures. The Superintendent will come back to the Committee in January and run some of these scenarios for the Committee to discuss. In March, we will have an idea of incoming Kindergarten numbers.

- Terry Lindgren was interested in a multiyear plan, and asked the administration to have a plan that relates to the projections. Bill Ryan said that we are looking at it from a system perspective, and are going to begin the discussion about various scenarios with the Committee and the community. Douglas parents spoke about their concerns - that the modulars are in bad shape, there are continuing mold problems, and we need to replace them. Space needs at Douglas are paramount. There was concern that Douglas would be viewed as a school that would be downsized, and therefore not attractive to incoming students.

- Michael Coppolino commented that the Committee is not recommending closing a school. Instead it is an opportunity to gain space which is badly needed in the school. He assured the parents that we will see how the numbers play out over time, and there will be no knee-jerk reaction.

Chris Whitbeck, Douglas principal, spoke about various ways to address the space issue, which has come up because of a recurrence of mold in the modulars. We need to begin to address the modular issue.

- John Ryder noted that the administration has acted immediately to deal with the mold issues when they occurred, and recognized how disruptive the remediation has caused the students and staff. He asked the administration for a memo about the history of what has been done.

- George Frost noted that we have one free room in the entire APS system. And in six years, we will have some empty classrooms. That possibility deserves a plan. We need to address class size, art rooms, music rooms, etc. The plan will not focus on any one school - we hope to create space at each school. We will make plans that make sense educationally. He was also concerned about disruption caused by the modulars at Douglas, and will work toward a solutions.

- Ann Kress, art teacher, spoke about the difficulties with art on a cart. It disrupts the art program and the school in general.

- Chris Whitbeck said that the modulars are safe environments. We need to have something in the modular that can be moved, if more mold occurs.

- Alex Horovitz, Douglas parent, said he wants new modulars, and wants a commitment from the Committee.

- Phoebe Conant, parent, said some kids have allergies, respiratory issues that make them sensitive to mold. Mods are not suitable for long-term use.

- Marie Altieri noted that there are two separate processes - 1) modulars and mold 2) enrollment. Over next year, we will discuss the best way to go from 15 to 14 sections, as a district.

- Terry Lindgren said Douglas needs a short-term plan. They need to know there will be no more mold. Lack of space is a serious problem.

- John Ryder said that the capital plan will be discussed at the State of the Town meeting, and there are plans to fix heating, roofs at Douglas. He asked the administration to give the Committee a quote on new modulars. We need to follow a process and look at the budget. We hope to have a plan for the January meeting.

EDUCATION REPORT - Gates School

Walter McGrail, principal, reported that Gates has a new updated math program. He told the Committee about the SmartBoard presentation by Nancy May, grade 4. Gates has two, funded by a grant, and they are very excited to have them. They anticipate getting another \$10K grant to purchase two more. Walter reported that they raised \$12K for the new playground, and they applied for and received CPA funds to complete the project.

Tom Kamataris-P.E. teacher, Jane Zimmerman-Speech and Language teacher, and Amy Ancona-Guidance Counselor, reviewed the Gates School's mission, current school population, changing demographics (family structure, fiscal considerations, society issues), and challenges (no ELL, parental involvement, communication, differing cultural values).

Mr. Biscotti, parent, talked about the multicultural program he has started at Gates. It is a 2-3 week program incorporating different cultural traditions into all aspects of Gates - phys ed. games, art, music, food, lectures, costumes, etc. At the end is a big festival. The committee thanked Biscotti for initiating this program.

Marie Altieri thanked all parents for setting up the playground, which was a monumental project!

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

1. ALG REPORT

- No report - next meeting November 21st.

2. FY'08 Budget

- Bill Ryan noted that we might want to add a recommendation re: Douglas School modulars. We may need an additional budget meeting in January. As to classroom sections, we will lose a section in '08, going to 107 sections. He referred to the draft 5% and 4% budget spread sheets.
- Marie asked that we go into the Kindergarten presentation without being firm on number of sections.
- Jonathan Chinitz asked for a third spread sheet, which caps the total increase at 5.5%.

3. Health Insurance Trust Report

- Marie reported that the Trust meets next week. The Task Force is meeting informally to explore options. She will keep the Committee informed about the municipal health plan.

4. Conant Principal Search Update

George Frost reported that the ad has just been published. A few applications have been received.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Recommendation to Approve Acton Public Schools' Tuition Rate, 2006-07

It was moved (Coppolino), seconded (Altieri) and unanimously

VOTED: To approve the administration's recommendation to set the Acton Public Schools' 2006-07 tuition rate for nonresident students, at \$8,516.

2. Recommendation to Accept Gift from Douglas School

It was moved (McManus), seconded (Chinitz) and unanimously

VOTED: To accept, with gratitude, the generous gift of \$1,600 from the Douglas School PTO.

The gift will be used for additional librarian hours.

3. Draft of School Calendar, 2007-08

- Bill Ryan suggested that the Committee vote the calendar at the December School Committee meeting. We may hold Professional Day on election day in November instead of March.
- Jonathan Chinitz said that election day should be a no-school day, if all town voting districts continue to vote at the Junior High School. He added that we should always observe Veterans Day as a holiday. Bill Ryan noted that next year, since Veterans Day falls on a Sunday, we are required by law to observe it on the following Monday.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

- The Superintendent referred to several items.
- George Frost referred to the Kindergarten registration schedule for next year.

ISSUES FOR THE COMMITTEE

- John Ryder and Michael Coppolino will make brief presentations at the State of the Town meeting, Nov. 20.
- John Ryder discussed potential sewer issues at the Douglas and Gates schools. If the current systems fail, we will need to either install a package plant or go onto a town sewer system. The School Committee will need to make a decision. He asked the administration to get cost estimates of a package plant vs. tying into town sewers. Bill Ryan expressed some concern about the cost and scope of the analysis. He will report back to the Committee at the next meeting.
- Michael Coppolino asked if the Committee was open to paying Bart Wendell for his services as facilitator of the ALG meetings. The Committee agreed that this was acceptable.
- Marie Altieri suggested reviewing the Committee goals at the December meeting.

NEXT MEETING: December 21, 2006, 7:30 pm, R.J. Grey Junior High School

The meeting was adjourned at 10:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Sarah T. Lawton, Secretary