

**Lexington Public Schools
School Committee Meeting – February 7, 2005
LHS Library Media Center**

Members present were Helen Cohen, Scott Burson, Tom Diaz, Olga Guttag, Interim Superintendent William Hurley, Student Representative Janette Ekanem, and Tom Griffiths via phone conference.

Helen Cohen called the meeting to order at 7:35 p.m.

A motion was made to include Tom Griffiths' participation by telephone conference call for any meetings scheduled this week. (Burson – Diaz; 4-0)

Public Comment

Jessie Steigerwald and her husband, Matt Shaw, presented a letter from their daughter regarding programs being cut. They will present this issue during budget discussion.

Superintendent's Report

Mr. Hurley met with the process group to discuss suggestions for closing the gap in the budget. He was asked at that meeting by the process group to try and find the revenue sources that would reduce the budget \$1.8 million. Town administrators have been working with staff in trying to prioritize and reduce this budget for less of an impact and trying to generate additional revenues.

Susan Bottan discussed the efforts of the school and municipal staff to close the budget gap. She gave a handout listing a three-tier revenue enhancement/reduction list to coincide with the \$70,127,468 budget voted on by the School Committee at the January 18th meeting. There are two items on the list that will bring in revenues. One item is increasing athletics fee and the other is charging a fee for instrumental music at the elementary school level. The decision to charge a fee for instrumental music was based on last year's calculation, which was a fee-based year. If we charge a fee next year, we would need to charge \$190 per participant. This fee would cover waivers and possible scholarships.

Tom Diaz asked if Mr. Ryan is comfortable with the cost associated with the Avalon Bay permit fees. Mr. Hurley said to his knowledge he is.

Olga Guttag asked how much the school side gave up and how much the town side gave up in total. Susan Bottan will get her the information.

Tom Griffiths asked how the Avalon Bay fees are being booked and if they are considered shared revenues with the town and school. Ms. Bottan said she did not consider Avalon Bay as part of the school department.

The second item Mr. Hurley reported on is also a Discussion Item. Andre Ravenelle has been meeting with a committee that has been looking at policies that need to be voted on by the School Committee. They have also been discussing adding some policies that are not in the policy manual and the possibility of revisiting some old policies. Of particular concern is the PTA gifting to the school department for specific use for a specific school. Currently there is a cap of \$2,500 for this policy. The Bowman PTA is requesting permission to donate \$10,000 in gym equipment and about \$4,000 in technology equipment. Mr. Ravenelle did a comparative study with Tony Porter and they have a joint recommendation to present.

Mr. Ravenelle discussed the elementary school physical education equipment inventory spreadsheet, which gives a breakdown of all the elementary schools and what equipment they have for each school. It is his opinion that the donation to Bowman does not affect equity across the school district. It actually brings Bowman up to speed with the other elementary schools, the most important item being the climbing wall. The other major piece would be the purchase of mats. The contribution to Bowman does not put the school out of sync with the other schools, except for the purchases for the new Harrington and future purchases for the new Fiske. It is Mr. Ravenelle's assessment that the donation enhances the physical education program throughout the district but does not put Bowman ahead of any other school.

Ms. Gutttag reviewed the elementary physical education inventory spreadsheet and noted it makes a clear case for what each school has. In regard to Fiske, the PTA has provided a lot of their equipment including the climbing wall. She feels equity would be maintained if Bowman receives new equipment.

Andre Ravenelle said the goal is to enhance the schools but keeping equity throughout the schools as well. There are going to be times when there is a purchase or a direction a school is taking and that has to be added in the policy. As it stands now, the policy is not clear to this approach. Mr. Ravenelle provided the School Committee with draft procedures of how to make an appeal to the policy. There will be a follow up meeting with the PTA and they will form a subcommittee at that time to look at other policies.

Scott Burson said at some point the School Committee would have to decide what their participation is in this matter because they make the policies. Over the last couple years, the School Committee has been concerned that procedures are not being incorporated into the policies. They will need guidance from the administration of how to effectuate the policies the School Committee establishes.

Tom Griffiths noted that we are not under any mandate that would require us to consider state law. In this instance, we are interested in some kind of equitable fundraising policy. For large amounts raised by the PTA or other school orientated benefits, we need to have an understanding of an allocation in the system that will allow us to say what is or is not equitable.

Tom Diaz agreed with Tom Griffiths about forming a subcommittee to institute policy issues. We need to have a policy in effect that gives people a strong incentive to raise funds in their neighborhood yet somehow preserve the equity that is needed in a public system.

Olga Gutttag is uneasy about the reasoning behind looking over the policy that we have right now and questioned if the reason is because it is ill defined to distinguish between procedure and policy. In the Bowman case, the spreadsheet demonstrates that this gift does not unbalance the equity. In the policy, we have to refer to something that defines a concrete way of demonstrating equity. We would like to encourage the public to raise as much as possible and contribute to the schools. She is concerned that if we get to a point that we encourage everyone to contribute to their neighborhood school, she is afraid it may become unbalanced throughout the schools, as some people are better fundraisers than others.

Helen Cohen was at the PTA meeting and felt there was a sensible approach to equity. Two values were of concern. The first was equity and the other was value of each school is independent. Both are good values and she feels the policy is a way of trying to create something balanced enough to represent each one.

Members' Reports/Members' Concerns

Olga Gutttag spent three days doing site visits for Superintendent candidates. She also attended a SPED PAC meeting. At that meeting, Denise Rochlin shared her view of the special needs services. She appreciates all the work Ms. Rochlin is putting in to ensure that the services our children need do not have any gaps when she leaves so the next person who steps in knows where we are at and where we should go. Ms. Gutttag said she received an email from a parent who had concerns about bus fees and ridership. Ms. Gutttag expressed her thanks to Susan Bottan for the report she put together on ridership for all schools. There was a question regarding the drop in ridership from 2004 to 2005, some more particular in certain schools, and asked if this was because of increased ridership fees. Ms. Gutttag feels the more children who ride the bus, the fewer cars there will be on the roads and access roads. She asked to have the topic of ridership fees put on a future agenda for discussion.

Tom Griffiths stated he detests bus fees and thinks we should look at fees in general across the board.

Helen Cohen attended a meeting of the diversity task force. The focus was on minority hiring of staff. Kelly McCausland wants to aim for 20% minority hiring for next year. Right now we are at about 12%.

Discussion Items

The meeting was opened up to all School Committee members for Budget discussions.

Tom Diaz commended Bill Hurley and Linda Vine for all their work. The main item of concern is restoring fees for instrumental music. He is opposed to that and will make a motion when the time is right but feels it is not necessary. As for the budget, he does not feel we have to come that close to zero and would rather see \$79,000 go back into the budget and have no fee for music.

Scott Burson also feels it is a mistake to institute a fee for instrumental music.

Olga Gutttag is also opposed to a fee for instrumental music and is opposed to all school fees. We cannot do away with the fees we currently are charging but does not want to add any more. She would like to remove that item from the budget and try to make up the difference from free money. If we cannot, she suggested making up from other places. Ms. Gutttag discussed the possibility of taking the 128 classrooms at the elementary level and cutting them down to 126 classrooms. This would mean there would be two places in two schools that would have to have multi-grade groupings. This would ensure the protected 6.5 FTEs, which would mean sufficient staffing at the high school. This would accommodate the Lexington High School needs in order for students to gain access to physical education credits as well as growth needs. In regard to high school electives, Ms. Gutttag wants to make sure the School Committee is reassured that they do not inadvertently approve something that would provide high school offerings that are more limited than what students are getting now.

Tom Griffiths agreed with Tom Diaz and is not convinced that the instrumental music program can be fee based legally. Bill Hurley notes we cannot charge fees for programs that take place during the school day. If a fee is charged, it has to be either a before or after school program. Tom Griffiths thinks this may reduce participation.

Lucy Wall, an attorney for the state, informed the School Committee that we cannot charge fees if the program is part of the curriculum.

Mr. Hurley said the School Committee does not have to decide tonight where the \$79,000 in cuts will come from if they decide not to do a fee based instrumental music program. A decision can be made over the next few weeks. In regard to class size, the projections are just a guess. The hardest thing to do 8 to 10 months before the school year begins is to determine how much staff we will need.

Jessie Steigerwald, a parent, expressed her disappointment that drama is off the table completely.

Lucy Wall inquired if there is an updated class size projection. Ms. Bottan said the most current is the 128 classroom projection but will put any updated projections on the website as soon as possible. She does not think the number will go below 128.

Olga Gutttag wanted to clarify advocating looking at classroom size. The School Committee's preferred classroom size ratio is 1-18 children for kindergarten, 1-22 children for first grade, and 1-28 student in second to fifth grade. If we go over those numbers, we have to add an aid to the classroom or split classroom. We are not advocating increasing class size but are trying to get money where we need it since current staffing is below School Committee preferred ratio.

Stephanie Grimaldi said each grade level has to cover a certain curriculum and hopes the School Committee considers this when discussing split grade levels.

A motion was made to continue instrumental music on a no-fee basis. (Diaz – Cohen; 5-0).

Tom Griffiths said, as far as he is concerned, we should leave the gap as it is for purposes of going into collaboration. He moved that the School Committee now concentrate on working on the budget and not on closing the budget gap.

Scott Burson took the position as a School Committee member to accept the recommendations with the Tier I and Tier II reductions but not with the reductions in Tier III.

Tom Griffiths is concerned with the decrease in expenses for supplies in Tier II.

Helen Cohen appreciates all the letters received regarding the instrumental music program issue.

Olga Gutttag said she would be happy to go into the budget collaboration meeting with a gap of \$79,000. However, we have to be prepared to close this gap and will therefore need to go into the collaboration meeting with things that are at risk. If not, we will have an even worse impact than what we have now.

Tom Griffiths wants to go into the collaboration meeting with a stronger position. He wants to make sure our budget reflects the best for the education of the children without harming the town's budget.

Mr. Hurley advised the School Committee that they are trying to preserve as much as our programs and personnel as we can. He is concerned that if we increase the amount of \$77,000, we run the risk of having a \$1.3 budget reduction to make or close to that amount. Our contribution so far is roughly \$603,000 and the town contribution is

\$700,000 to \$800,000. If they are willing to absorb this and waive the \$77,000, it is incumbent upon us to live with that.

Helen Cohen would like to take \$200,000 out of free cash and restore Tier III. Tom Griffiths and Olga Gutttag are concerned about the reduction in maintenance and operations. They are worried about not being able to make a strong argument to the Capital committee.

A motion was made to split the line items from reduction in Services and Building Maintenance into two line items and take the \$14,000 from Maintenance and Operations and move that into Tier III. (Gutttag – Griffiths; 5-0)

Tom Diaz questioned the elimination of the drama specialist. Mr. Hurley believes the issue was that there were not enough tutorial hours to fill that position. Susan Bottan said it was a .5 FTE position in which \$25,000 was essentially set aside. We did not fill the position but have not used the money for other purposes either. Therefore, there is unfilled position dollars still allocated. Scott Burson said when the School Committee presents the budget to town meeting or endorses an override list to the town, we do not guaranty what is proposed. The School Committee cannot support this on the argument that we promised it on the override.

Olga Gutttag reiterated that we did not have this position before the override, we did not have it last year and we did not fill it this year. We have not had this position at least for a few years and feels the School Committee should follow the superintendent's recommendation on this issue.

Helen Cohen does not feel the position as described is sufficient or would actually make a difference in the program. Maybe in next year's budget we should fight for a drama specialist position that would make a difference.

Scott Burson recalled Joni Jay responding to this in which she said with that allocation of time, the drama specialist was more like a resource specialist.

A motion was made to move the line item of the Elementary Drama Specialist to Tier III. (Diaz – Burson; 2 in favor; 3 opposed)

Jennifer Wolfrum, coordinator of the health department, wanted to explain what the school department actually gets from each 1.5 FTE. She will submit her comment in writing to the School Committee. She wanted to emphasize how important it is to have elementary health teachers.

A motion was made to accept Tier I and Tier II as amended by the School Committee and oppose the recommendations in Tier III as it is defined this evening. (Diaz – Cohen; 5-0)

Superintendent Search Update

Helen Cohen reported that the search committee went on site visits to Ashland, Brookline and Westwood and then reported back. The School Committee intends to have a discussion and decision tomorrow at 5:30 p.m. at the Clarke Middle School.

Report on the PTA Discussion of the Fundraising Policy

Olga Gutttag said the School Committee structured this year's budget when they figured the supply allocation and went on a per student expense in the budget. Somehow one of dangers of aggressive fundraising is that we could end up with a substantial inequality amongst the schools. When the subcommittee takes a look at this issue, this has to be taken into account. As much as it seems foolish to approve every donation that comes through the superintendent's office, she feels it is a good policy. It makes the School Committee proactive in these issues and feels the School Committee meetings are a good place to acknowledge the generosity of donors.

The School Committee will send their suggestions regarding this policy to Andre Ravenelle.

Bill Hurley recommended a waiver and to accept the recommendation of the Director of Athletics. He recommended that the School Committee waive their policy and accept the \$14,000 donation directly to Bowman Elementary School.

A motion was made to accept the Superintendent's recommendation. (Burson – Diaz; 5-0)

A motion was made at 10:05 p.m. to go into Executive Session for the purpose of contract discussion and not returning to public session. (Burson – Diaz; 5-0 roll call vote unanimous)

Submitted by,

Lisa McGuire

cc: William Hurley
Tom Griffiths
Scott Burson
Olga Gutttag
Helen Cohen
Tom Diaz