

Meeting Notes
Board of Education
Future Needs Committee
April 23, 2018

Board Members Present: Christopher Lent, Linette Dooley, Gary Littlefield, James Chakulski, Kathy Tolsdorf, David Crim, Karin Vertefeuille

Others Present: Lol Fearon-Superintendent, Alyssa Gwinnell-Principal, Andy DePalma-Eastconn, and an audience of approximately 75 people including Roserie Rinaldi, Judy Ortiz, Michael O’Hearn, Carol A. Wiggins, Erin & Evan Paradis, Jessica & Jason Guilbeault, Michael & Mackenzie Collins, Robert Smeeton, Kristin VanSilver, Carrie Clark, Christine Sposito, Michael Sposito, Susan Smith, Erin Postemski, Jeff Buskey, Dililah Buskey, Kim Lewis, Bill Bright, Jennifer Bright, Jillene Smith, Mary Roickle, Jen Tew, Nelisa Reagan, Eileen Paulhus, Amanda White, Rachel Riendeau, Kelly DeForest, Ann Marie Drury, Jenny Laraia, Jenna Cooke, Neil Swenson, Jill Swenson, Tom Boardman, Christa McManus, Beth Bawabe, Shawn Kinkade, Jennifer Tigeleiro, John Murdoch, Jill Zorn, Allyssa Fortna, Leslie Poulos, Bill Stover, Emily Pezzulo, Tom Doyle, Lisa Dewitt, Patricia Lanza, Kate Starkey, Tony Franco, Christine Gamache, Amy Cordone, Alyson Cranick, Faith Kenney, Scott Kenney, Susan Archambault, Mark Walter-Town Administrator, Stacey Sherwood, Julie Rodriguez-Savino, Sheldon Mossberg, Marjorie Golden-Mossbert, Rachel Koerner, Kaitlyn Anderson, Lisa Napolitano, Kim Shirshac, Diana Sadlon, Elizabeth Gnazzo, Debra Millette, Tiffany Anderson, Paula Shepard, Mary Arico, George Sweetland, Sarah Perry. There were a number of participants who did not sign in.

1. Introduction & Brief Overview (Mr. Lent/Mr. Fearon)
 - Our “Why Statement?”
 - Handouts

Mr. Fearon opened the meeting by reviewing the parameters and purpose of the meeting and provided a brief history of the Future Needs Committee. The main focus of the meeting is for the Board to receive input from the public.

Mr. Lent noted many handouts are available with information concerning the Future Needs process at the meeting and on the hwporter.org district website.

2. Summary of the Results of Survey #2 (Mr. Andy DePalma, Eastconn)
Mr. DePalma provided a PowerPoint presentation and description of Survey #2 which included the following topics:

Goals of the committee include:

asking what the community regards as the most important factors to maintain the current prek – 8 system
asking what the community regards as the most important factors to move to a single high school
and asking what the community regards as the most important factors to send middle school students to another district

The open ended questions addressed:

who responded

what areas were identified as the most important to maintain in the current K-12 system

which is most important in designating a single high school

which factors are most important in deciding to tuition middle school students to another district

The survey indicated the top priority of those who responded is for quality education. 1/3 of the respondents don’t want to see any change.

3. Public Input: Q&A with BOE

Mr. Lent noted because of time constraints, the topic of the meeting tonight will focus on Future Needs. The Board of Education will be meeting on May 7th for topics outside of Future Needs.

Mr. Paul Kubala, 37 Lake Road asked how many children whose families are Columbia residents are not attending school in district.

Mr. Fearon said 40-46 students are attending magnet schools and that the number of magnet students has decreased over the last few years as some families returned students to H.W. Porter.

Mr. Kubala asked how many students are attending private school.

Mr. Fearon indicated there are less than 10 private school students.

Mr. Kubala said his daughters had only one high school option which was Windham. He feels one of his daughters may have had better success attending a smaller high school. He would like to see Columbia maintain the option of a large and small school choice.

Patricia Lanza, 41 Laurel Lane asked if students (middle school) are sent to another school what happens to the teachers?

Mr. Fearon said we would look to a district that could absorb our students. Our middle school teachers wouldn't be part of our school and it would be possible we would lose some teachers. That issue would be part of any contract negotiations between the districts.

Christine VanSkiver, 196 Pine Street – If declining enrollment has slowed, why would students be sent out of district?

Mr. Fearon said when enrollment declines it can be difficult to maintain a range of programs. Our administration has done a very good job of making schedule changes to offer additional programming.

Tom Doyle, 145 Route 87 – Have salary and benefits been calculated into the cost of sending students out of district? At a recent Board of Education meeting, it was noted that the tuition cost per high school student is calculated between \$12,000 and \$40,000 per student.

Mr. Fearon clarified that \$12,000 encompasses base tuition costs only. We are in a pay as you go situation and costs for special education and transportation are above the base tuition cost. The high average cost of \$40,000 includes tuition, support services and transportation costs. The overall average tuition cost is approximately \$27,000 per student.

Mr. Doyle said if we are sending out middle school students, the potential cost would be around 1.9 million in tuition costs and we wouldn't save much money. Peter Prowda's report of the number of students is lower than what we currently have.

Mr. Fearon said the Board has been reviewing the impacts and costs. The numbers in Mr. Prowda's report are slightly lower than current registration. A k-5 school and 6-8 middle school would also impact administration costs that would create a savings of approximately \$80,000 to the district. Finances were not identified as a high priority in any of the surveys and tuitioning out is not a significant savings. The board was looking at programs and offerings when considering tuitioning middle school students out of Columbia.

Kate Starkey, West Street feels the data is flawed. She did not learn of the survey in a timely manner and there was no communication of the survey except in the center of Town, Beckish Center, Town Hall and Library. She expressed concern that a small subset of the community could be making decisions.

Mr. Fearon said he appreciated the phone call he received from Mrs. Starkey and her suggestion to send out a Town wide mailing to help get information to the community. He noted this is not the end of the process and there are several more steps where community input is needed. Focus groups will be formed and as many stakeholders as possible are encouraged to participate.

Jill Zorn, West Street – her children attended Windham High School. She would like the Board to look at implementing a full year of science and social studies. She was concerned Columbia's students may not be prepared for high school.

Mr. Fearon said our current high schools were asked to respond to how Columbia students are prepared when they enter high school. The responses were very positive and indicate Columbia students are participating in high level courses and some E.O. Smith students are taking college level courses through UCONN. Columbia students are participating in many after school activities including sports and club sports. Both high schools responded with specific data which indicate our students are well prepared for high school. A report will be available in the future for review.

Mike Sposito said he is an administrator at a CREC High School. He said there are dozens of choices offered at open houses at magnet schools. He would like to see how Columbia competes with those choices and what we are doing to be more competitive and keep students here. He cited the risk of losing out on attending preschool in Columbia due to the lottery process and losing students early on.

A citizen said middle school is a tender age for children and she was pleased her children attended Porter through grade 8. She felt they were prepared for the choices when going to high school because of the base they built at Porter.

A citizen said anytime parents are surveyed on what is most important to them in education it will be the quality of education. She asked if programs could be expanded at the middle school.

Mr. Fearon said school administration has worked hard to expand the middle school programs adding labs for Math, English, STEM, and Current Events. Next year Porter will be offering a pilot French class for grade 7. Project Oceanology, a program in environmental and marine sciences will also be offered at the middle school level.

Superintendents are meeting monthly to review curriculum, programs and choices.

Brian Tarbell, 113 West Street noted that the decline in enrollment seems to have tapered off. He asked if the Board has considered absorbing students from other schools?

Mr. Fearon said other districts approach Columbia yearly to see if we are interested in sending our students out of the building but other districts are not interested in their students joining our system.

Sheldon Mossberg, Szegda Road said there were 2 high school options available, Lebanon and Windham, available when his children attended school. Both were very successful. He asked if our regular curriculum is similar to Bolton and Mansfield, what enrichment programs don't we offer that the other districts do?

Mr. Fearon noted sustainability in the long run is what the board was looking at when considering middle school options.

Kathy Tolsdorf, Board of Education Vice Chairperson said programs can be sustained in a larger population. Columbia doesn't have the capacity to offer things like several choral groups that a larger population could offer.

Kristen McManus, Route 87 said she is concerned with the sustainability of high school programming when contracts expire every 10 years. She asked if the Board has considered regionalization at the high school level.

Christopher Lent, Board of Education Chairman said the Board looked into the regionalization process and it takes approximately 2-3 years. He described how the process works indicating Columbia would need to agree to regionalize and each town associated with the regional school would also have to meet and accept Columbia into the region. An executive summary of the regionalization process was also included in the handouts.

Mr. Fearon said he has spoken with other towns. Regionalization is difficult in Connecticut and no schools have regionalized within the past 25-30 years.

Jennifer Tigeliero feels Columbia has a unique situation in our ability to have high school choice. Bolton is the perfect environment for a small school choice and EO Smith is the right choice for other students. She feels we have 2 perfect choices. Renewing contracts every 10 years is to Columbia's benefit.

A citizen said she is confused by some of the information out in the community and would like to know what schools the Board is looking at. Is the Board looking at high school scores?

Mr. Fearon said the State Department of Education has a new set of criteria and data available which shows high school student performance results in areas such as college acceptances, test scores and students attending college beyond the first year.

Karen James said the BOE needs representatives to participate from all citizens of the Town and not go on preconceived notions of "what we all want" – they need to look at everything.

Megan Maziarz, Fox Run said she has a 3-year-old son on the waiting list for the preschool program. She feels there are too many students and not enough teachers. She wants small class sizes and wonders why there is a wait list for preschool.

Mr. Fearon suggested the class size discussion could be held during the May 7th Board of Education meeting.

Lisa Napolitano, 7 Hunt Rd., said she moved to Columbia because it was affordable and she likes the K-8 school model. It is good for students and keeps them young. She said if she wanted a big school with lots of options she wouldn't have moved to Columbia.

Scott Kenney, 34 Route 87, Small schools give our kids a chance to participate in lots of activities without a lot of pressures. Our students are able to participate in band and athletics and leave as well rounded students who aren't pigeon-holed as can happen in a big regionalized school. Columbia's teachers do an amazing job. He said his oldest daughter attended Barrows then came back to Porter.

Bill Stover, 5 Sleepy Hollow Road would like to see Columbia improve on what we already have rather than looking elsewhere. We have lots of opportunities here at Porter and an incredible opportunity to work with the staff we have.

Mrs. Stover said she is a middle school teacher. One of the things she likes about Columbia is every single person knows your child's name which is very important for kids. They have opportunities at Porter. She is very happy there are high school choices. Our students do well in high school and keeping them in the community through middle school keeps them younger and allows them to participate in activities and to be known.

Mr. Fearon thanked everyone who came out to attend the meeting. A lot of information has been discussed. The next steps will include focus areas and smaller group meetings. Information will be provided to the community in as many forms as possible including the Porter website – hwporter.org (district) and social media. He urged people with questions to call or email him anytime.

Chris Lent said the Board is the public's representatives and he urged people to call or email Board members with their concerns and suggestions. The BOE meetings are typically held on the first Monday of each month.

Mr. Lent noted the Town Budget Public Hearing will be held on Wednesday, April 25th at 7:00 at Yeomans Hall for anyone who may want to participate.

Mr. Fearon asked for the audiences input by a show of hands for the following questions:

Who is interested in only the middle school question? No hands were raised.

Who is interested in only the high school question? No hands were raised.

Who is interested in both the middle school and high school question? - Most hands were raised.

The meeting adjourned at 8:10 p.m.