

**Amherst School Committee Meeting  
Tuesday, January 17, 2017  
Library, Amherst Regional High School**

**IN ATTENDANCE**

Katherine Appy, Chair  
Phoebe Hazzard  
Anastasia Ordonez

Eric Nakajima

**ABSENT:**

Vira Douangmany-Cage

Mike Morris, Interim Superintendent  
Sean Mangano, Finance Director  
Jennifer Reese, Science Coordinator  
Diane Chamberland, Fort River Principal  
Nick Yaffe, Wildwood Principal  
Derek Shea, Crocker Farm Principal  
Paul Wiley Executive Director of Leadership  
Press  
Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder

**1. Call to Order and Approve Minutes 6:04 p.m.**

Ms. Appy called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m. Ms. Hazzard moved to approve the minutes of December 20, 2016. Mr. Nakajima seconded and the motion was unanimously approved. Ms. Appy noted that the item "Sabbatical Request Vote" will be taken off the agenda because the Sabbatical Subcommittee is not recommending that the sabbatical proposal received be brought forward to the full committee.

**2. Science Presentation 6:06 p.m.**

***DOCUMENT: APS Elementary Science by Jennifer Reese, Elementary Science Coordinator (Powerpoint presentation)***

Dr. Morris introduced Jennifer Reese, part-time Elementary Science Coordinator, noting that she will be providing an overview of the science program, including STEAM initiatives, at the elementary level. Ms. Reese presented a Powerpoint that outlined her role, her priorities for the science program, and highlights of the program. These highlights include Kindergarten immersive garden learning, fourth grade engineering design curriculum, and the fifth grade earth and space systems unit. Ms. Ordonez asked if there are makerspaces in the Amherst Schools or whether the schools are utilizing the space at Amherst Media. Ms. Reese explained that makerspace is not formalized in the schools at this time, but there are makerspace activities. She noted that the schools have not worked with the makerspace at Amherst Media, but have used the space at the Jones Library. A number of district faculty members are looking at taking professional development to move toward creating makerspace for the district. Ms. Hazzard asked about literacy and science and how climate realities are taught at the elementary level. Ms. Reese noted that the science units are titled Seeds of Science, Roots of Reading and include leveled and differentiated readers. Teachers also access other types of literature and documents to expose students to different types of science writing. With climate connections, Ms. Reese noted that discussion must be done carefully with regard to students' emotional health when discussing climate change and its impacts. She noted that the focus is on "climate health" in a way that looks at the challenge and efforts underway to develop awareness and address the problem. Mr. Nakajima asked how students are encouraged to think about role models for careers in science, particularly girls and students of color. Ms. Reese explained that it is done through use of books that show a wide-range of science professionals, through a community STEM database of parents/community members in the field who come and speak to students, and by making sure all educators use language that shows they authentically believe each child can become a scientist.

**3. Announcements and Public Comment 6:33 p.m.**

There were no announcements of public comments.

### **3. Interim Superintendent's Update**

**6:33 p.m.**

**DOCUMENT: Interim Superintendent's Update to the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee January 17, 2017**

Dr. Morris reported on three Amherst-specific topics including:

- The gaps between the free/reduced lunch percentages of the student populations at the three elementary schools has reached the widest gap since redistricting in 2010, with Fort River at 48%, Crocker Farm at 43% and Wildwood at only 37%. Dr. Morris noted that he brought the data to the attention of the School Committee to see if they would like to have this as a topic of discussion at a future meeting. It was agreed that the committee would like to see more information about trends over time and to discuss the issue further.
- On January 9, Dr. Morris, Ms. Hazzard and Ms. Ordonez met with two representatives of the SuperKids publisher who shared their concerns about the imagery of the characters in the second grade series and presented mock-ups with different versions of the characters. The representatives will return to the district to meet with staff in the next 4-6 weeks to gather more feedback before books are reprinted for fall 2018. Ms. Ordonez noted that the representatives expressed interest in getting regional feedback to see if other school districts have input regarding the imagery. Ms. Hazzard noted that she was very impressed with how receptive the representatives were, particularly in gathering feedback from the teachers who use the materials.

Mr. Nakajima expressed appreciation for the regular updates on the water testing, which was included in the written update, and for the continual progress on repairs.

### **4. New and Continuing Business**

**6:47 p.m.**

#### **A. Vote on Formal Position on January 30th Town Meeting ARTICLE I Petition--Bond Authorization for Co-Located Elementary School Project**

Ms. Appy noted that there is a school committee statement in the Town Meeting packet, as well as information about the MSBA process and the MSBA accelerated repair program. She explained that she felt it would be important for the committee to take an official vote of support for the project prior to the Town Meeting vote. Ms. Ordonez moved to formally support the bond authorization for a co-located elementary school project located on the Wildwood site. Mr. Nakajima seconded and committee members made statements regarding the project. Ms. Ordonez made a statement of support, noting that she supports this plan without reservation. Mr. Nakajima expressed support for the project, stating that the opportunity to replace the Fort River and Wildwood facilities with a well thought-out, well designed facility is extraordinary. Ms. Hazzard noted that she echoes Ms. Ordonez's and Mr. Nakajima's sentiments. She stated that this model would move the district toward true community schools that embrace our community as a whole. Ms. Appy spoke regarding the equity of the preschool programming that would be available through the new model. After comments, the motion was unanimously approved.

#### **B. Implications/Actions Regarding MSBA Statement of Interest if Town Meeting Vote Fails**

**DOCUMENT: Statement of Interest (SOI) for Accelerated Repair Program; webpage**

[http://www.massschoolbuildings.org/building/2018 SOIs\[1/12/2017](http://www.massschoolbuildings.org/building/2018%20SOIs1/12/2017)

Dr. Morris noted that a committee member had asked for information/discussion of whether the district can move into the MSBA accelerated repair program if the building project vote does not pass. Dr. Morris explained the difference between the MSBA core program, which includes renovations and new buildings, and the accelerated repair program. Ms. Appy asked if applying for the boiler at Wildwood or the roof at Fort River would preclude the district from applying to the core program. Dr. Morris noted that the language indicates that a district should not submit an SOI for a project that goes beyond what is requested under the accelerated repair SOI. Mr. Nakajima said he does not understand why the district would apply in a narrow way that would preclude applying for a broader project, particularly without engaging public discussion. Ms. Ordonez noted that the accelerated repair program seems designed for buildings that need very discreet repairs, and discussion has been ongoing for years regarding the need to replace these two buildings. Ms. Appy noted that there is consensus among the committee that a vote is not needed at this time regarding submission of an SOI to the accelerated repair program. Dr. Morris noted that a question

has arisen from a community member regarding air quality at Fort River and Wildwood. He said a request has been put in capital planning for funds to have a company do air quality analysis at the schools, noting that there is a lot of gray area in air quality testing since it relies in part of how people using the facility experience their environment. Ms. Ordonez noted that it is important to continue to take steps to mitigate air quality issues just as we have done with the water issue.

### **C. FY18 Budget Presentation**

#### ***DOCUMENT: FY2018 Amherst Public Schools Proposed Budget; Amherst Public Schools FY18 Budget Proposal dated January 17, 2017***

Mr. Mangano briefly reviewed the layout of the budget binder presented to the School Committee members. He then utilized a Powerpoint presentation to review the highlights of the proposed FY2018 Amherst Public Schools Budget including:

- The proposed budget is for \$22,523,222;
- It represents a 1.7% increase over the FY17 budget;
- This includes a net level services reduction of \$101,469;
- Cost drivers of the budget include health insurance premium increases, an increase in the net charter assessment and employee steps/COLAS; and
- The proposed budget maintains library paraeducators, school garden curriculum, afterschool programs, specials, arts integration and class size.

Mr. Mangano answered clarifying questions for committee members throughout the presentation. He noted that there will be more specificity for the budget adds and cuts at the next meeting. Dr. Morris noted that he will need guidance from the School Committee regarding what to do related to the budget if the Town Meeting vote does not pass.

### **D. School Choice Hearing**

Dr. Morris noted that this is an opportunity for the public to share any feedback or comments regarding school choice before the School Committee votes on the issue at their next meeting. There were no comments.

### **E. Special Education Stabilization**

Mr. Mangano distributed and reviewed a document that explained the need to establish a special education stabilization fund, which has been made possible under MA General Law Chapter 40, Section 13E. Dr. Morris noted that a Town Meeting Article will be required if the School Committee chooses to move forward. Mr. Mangano noted that a separate fund will be needed for each District. Mr. Mangano answered clarifying questions and said that this will be brought back for a vote at the next meeting.

### **E. Superintendent's Goals**

#### ***DOCUMENT: Interim Superintendent's Goals 2016-2017***

Dr. Morris noted that he developed goals that are very tangible and student-connected with the assumption that the District will undergo a strategic improvement plan when a permanent Superintendent is appointed. Dr. Appy noted that she appreciates that the goals are specific and believes they are really good working goals. Ms. Ordonez noted that she would like to see a little more clarity about what the goal "Initiate and engage in dialogues about the role of out-of-school time in students' live..." means with regard to Superintendent Morris' role. With regard to the goal "Working with the School Committee and district staff, develop and implement communication strategies to improve internal and external communication and promote the excellent work of district staff and leaders," she encouraged Dr. Morris to revise the goal to include not just promotion of, but improvement of, the work of district staff and leaders. Ms. Hazzard suggested including more specific indicators of success in the goals. Dr. Nakajima noted that it might be helpful to have the communication goal be more tangible about what Dr. Morris is trying to do with the communication. Ms. Appy asked that Dr. Morris provide the committee with revised goals based on the feedback received tonight.

## **F. Elementary Homework Presentation and Discussion**

**DOCUMENT: Homework Primer dated January 17, 2017 (Powerpoint presentation); Bibliography**

Dr. Morris presented a Powerpoint that highlighted his findings in researching homework, including the results of the family and staff surveys that were done regarding the “no homework” plan that was put in place over the December break. His research showed, in part:

- homework has not increased in recent years;
- consensus is that homework positively influences academic achievement at secondary school but not at elementary school;
- there are non-academic benefits of homework, including at the elementary level;
- grading/feedback on homework increases completion rates;
- homework impacts families and is a major cause of stress and conflict between parents and children;
- other structured activities can also have positive influences on academic achievement;
- there are social justice components of homework; and
- over two hours of homework has been found to be academically counterproductive.

Dr. Morris noted that, based on feedback from staff and families, he suggests not having homework over the February and April breaks this year. He also suggested pulling together a stakeholder task force to look at the issue of homework. Ms. Appy noted that she likes the idea of the task force. She asked members to review the materials and be prepared for an informed discussion at the February meeting.

## **5. School Committee Planning**

**8:57 p.m.**

Homework; revised superintendent goals, school choice vote, special education stabilization, lead abatement, budget

## **6. Adjourn**

**8:59 p.m.**

Mr. Nakajima moved to adjourn at 8:59 p.m. Ms. Hazzard seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Debbie Westmoreland