

**Special Meeting of the Amherst School Committee
Thursday, January 14, 2016
Library, Amherst Regional High School**

IN ATTENDANCE

Katherine Appy, Chair
Vira Douangmany-Cage
Phoebe Hazzard
Rick Hood
Kathleen Traphagen

Maria Geryk, Superintendent
Mike Morris, Assistant Superintendent
Kathy Mazur, Human Resources Director
Faye Brady, Student Services Director
Derek Shea, Crocker Farm Principal
Nick Yaffe, Wildwood School Principal
Doug Roberts, JCJ Architecture
Tom Murphy, JLA Project Manager
Community & Press
Kimberly Stender, Recorder

1. Call to Order & Welcome

3:33 p.m.

Ms. Appy called the meeting to order at 3:33 p.m. She extended public comment by 15 minutes if necessary and limited speaker statements to 3 minutes. Ms. Appy requested time for members to deliberate and converse with one another in order to prepare for the vote scheduled for January 19, 2016.

2. Public Comment

3:39 p.m.

Ms. Appy invited community members to speak. Simon Rain thanked the school committee for the survey and for meeting with community members. He thanked Mr. Morris for sending the surveys to pre-schools. He stated that special education students benefit most in a small school setting. He added that the pre-school should not be involved in the re-configuration conversation. Vince O'Connor stated that the most important thing is to have a project approved by the public and perhaps a large school is not the best solution. He urged the committee to pay attention to the public opposition of a large school. He stated that the best plan would be to build a new Wildwood and eventually replace Fort River. Fort River students could be re-located to Wildwood as Fort River is being re-built. Laura Kent praised the Crocker Farm Pre-School staff for supporting special needs students and providing them with a transforming experience. She believes that all children should have the opportunity to attend pre-school as it would provide an equitable experience. Catherine Corsun stated her primary concern is to support the education system in Amherst. She requested that the open-ended survey responses by parents and staff be made public. She expressed disappointment with the lack of survey responses from underrepresented groups. She believed the survey did produce reliable information regarding respondents' opinions to maintain a K-6 educational structure in three elementary schools. Caridad Martinez expressed concern that the survey failed to elicit responses from Latino parents. She expressed concern with the dense population which would exist in a large school. She believes this would exasperate discipline and hyper-vigilance and position the education system to become oppressive primarily for students of color. She asked why smaller, neighborhood schools existed when the population of Amherst was overwhelmingly white and affluent and now that socio-economic demographics have changed and students of color are dominant, a megaschool is being considered. She concluded by stating that equity issues must be addressed. Laura Quilter stated that based upon the traditional legal definition of equity and pedagogical research a large school would not benefit all students especially those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, students of color, or require ELL and special education support. Kurt Wise expressed concerns with the survey's questions and structure. Carleen Basler stated

that the greatest asset is the pre-school program as this could potentially close the achievement gap. She was concerned that Latinos did not respond to the survey. She spoke about the emotional fallout students face if re-districting occurs. She asked committee members to vote for a 2-6 Grade model with an early childhood center at Crocker Farm School.

3. New & Continuing Business

4:00 p.m.

Ms. Appy thanked Ms. Geryk, Mr. Morris, Mr. Shea, Ms. Finocchio, and Mr. Yaffe for their commitment throughout this process. She distributed packets containing letters of recommendation from district administrators to all committee members. Ms. Geryk provided her recommendation for reconfiguration: Pre-K, Kindergarten and Grade 1 would be housed at Crocker Farm Elementary School and Grades 2-6 would be housed in one new school building. Ms. Appy thanked her colleagues for taking the responsibility as elected officials to consider what is best for all students. Ms. Appy invited the committee members to express their opinions regarding grade configuration. Ms. Hazard, Ms. Appy and Mr. Hood read prepared statements (which appear below). Ms. Douangmany-Cage did not read a prepared statement but expressed her viewpoint. Ms. Traphagen asked several clarifying questions.

Ms. Hazzard: This is a major and difficult decision that lies before us. We have an opportunity to receive money that would allow us to, in some form, build a new school building. I think this is a great thing. Faced with this great opportunity, there's a lot of disagreement about how we should best proceed. But I think it's important to recognize that, if we look at the big picture, we are in a great place. We live in a beautiful town with an amazing and diverse community that cares passionately about our children and their education. We love our schools, which is in many ways why the decision that lies before us is so challenging. We have something that we love that so deeply affects the most important, precious people in our lives, and we don't want to lose it. That said, I also believe that there is no option before us that would spell disaster. If any of these options were chosen, we could make it work and we could make it good. The strength of a school, whatever its size or configuration, is hugely impacted by the quality of the management and leadership. We have an amazing leadership team and staff that I believe will bring their strengths to whatever school is built to make it great for our kids. In exploring the options before us, I have felt strongly from the beginning I must support an option includes Fort River. To leave one building in poor condition without a clear time frame or clear financial plan for rebuilding when we have an option to do otherwise is, in my mind, inequitable and irresponsible. In considering a two-wing K-6 school or a two-wing 2-6 school with Crocker Farm as a pre-k-1 grade building, I have tried very hard to look deeply at the implications of these two options. I have talked to parents and read many, many letters and emails, attended forums, considered research, spoken with administrators and members of our staff who work with the more vulnerable members of our community, and gotten perspectives from educational leaders and educators in outside communities. I have found that there are weighty arguments, strong opinions, and research to support elements of both models.

Strengths of K-6:

- Community
- Continuity without disruption of transitions
- Relationships over an extended period of time
- Feeling known and valued (children and parents)
- Pride and ownership in their school and their identity as members
- Being able to look around and see people who know and care about you — former and future teachers, a known group of peers
- Older children mentor younger children, younger children bring out the positive mentoring side of older children
- Consistency, predictability as they proceed through grades

- Siblings can be part of the same community
- Some families can walk or bike to their school for their full elementary experience
- This kind of long-term “family” supports children to grow and thrive into confident, competent young people

This is work that our elementary schools do so well, it is deeply valued in our community.

Strengths of reconfiguration:

- While a majority of our students are experiencing the benefits of our system, there are children in our community who are not able to access it as successfully.
- All kids are going to the same place, access to the same resources-programmatic opportunities of having all resources in the same building (language? arts? after school programs, maker spaces, technology, etc.)
- Kids don’t have to be districted according to their socio-economic level
- Children don’t have to be sent to a different school because their school is full, as is happening and will continue to happen in the Crocker Farm district
- Class sizes can be more balanced, giving all kids reasonable sized classes
- Children with special education needs would have all the needed resources in the same building, allowing better opportunity for access, flexibility if a child’s needs for services change as they get older, able to be in the same school as everybody else including siblings and neighbors
- ELL kids can access the same resources, which can be more differentiated according to their needs
- We see our community as the larger community — the whole town
- Concept of equity in terms of access, participation, and benefit — while we are striving to do it in our k-6 schools, we can do it better with the reconfiguration option.

Academically,

- Better opportunity for teacher collaboration within a grade level which is beneficial to teaching and learning, harder to communicate from youngest grades to older with a building transition
- Again, programmatic opportunities when all resources are in the same place seems very exciting

Early childhood center

- Piece that I have been exploring more depth, talking to people with experience in similar configurations
- Great potential for creating an educational setting really designed for the developmental and academic needs of this age group, combined expertise of specialists, resources, playgrounds, especially designed for these needs
- Concern about a school with a large number of young children all in the same building (7-8 grades) — I’ve talked to people who work in similar settings, felt only positive about ability to manage kids and build community in this kind of setting
- Preschoolers coming at 3 years identified with special education needs no longer have to transition in the middle of their earliest educational journey- two more years in that setting could be a very positive boost to these students who are some of our most vulnerable
- Preschool can be expanded — something we really should look at in terms of how we could do this so it actually would allow access to preschool for those children who currently aren’t able to attend and arriving in kindergarten without the kind of preparation of their peers, thus seeing an achievement gap already looming at the age of five.

So, on one hand I see the k-6 model, widely loved and supported by the families and teachers in our community. On the other hand I see a new model, unfamiliar to us and garnering significantly less vocal

support, that I believe would do a better job moving us towards allowing all students to access the best education that can. So, the question I ask is: can we build those incredibly important strengths of the k-6 model into a reconfigured model? Can we build strong communities where children and families feel known and valued, where they feel pride and ownership and deep connections with the adults and children around them? Can we find ways for to foster positive mentoring relationships between older and younger children? Can we manage transitions well so that children are able to cross the bridge the a different school without it being negative and disruptive? Can long-term relationships be formed enough to do the important work of fostering positive development that our schools now do so well? Are there ways we can ameliorate the challenges of a family having multiple elementary children in different schools? Can we manage the transportation issues that arise of having children travel farther? As I said before, I believe so much depends on management and leadership. Any of these options could be done well or poorly. I believe that our schools are so well loved because education and equity in this town are approached with such intention and passion. I hear people say they don't want decisions to be based on finances but really what's educationally best for the students. That's amazing. We value our children's education so much. That's a huge reason I moved to Amherst. I believe our education team has every ability to build into this reconfiguration the strengths of community that are so critical to our schools. As a school committee, are we prepared to embrace an unpopular decision if we believe it is truly best for the students? If we do, we have our work cut out for us in terms of helping our community take on a major paradigm shift. This is the challenge before us.

Ms. Appy: When I was elected to school committee 5 years ago, the community was rightly demanding that we address glaring inequalities in educational outcomes --- more specifically the achievement gap, something that plagues the entire nation. Many community members have pointed out that this is a fundamental social justice issue and it should factor into all our discussions---whether we are talking about test results, collaborative teaching and best practices, regionalization, and now---debates about how to renovate or rebuild our school buildings. I strongly believe that the proposal best designed to advance educational equity is the one that brings together our pre-k through 1st grade students in one place, and does the same for all our 2nd through 6th graders. The evidence is clear that these configurations have the best shot of enabling our youngest students to build the strongest educational base as they move through our system. We know that early childhood education is the cornerstone of a successful academic experience. By the time kids get to kindergarten the gap exists between those that had the opportunity to attend pre-school and those who did not. There are now many 5 year olds in Amherst who must already play catch-up. What we must understand is that the creation of an early childhood center will open the door of opportunity for many Amherst children who have previously been denied because of the limitation of space. Further, the new system will keep children together rather than busing them in kindergarten based on their needs. It will also allow for pre-school educators to fully collaborate with all kindergarten teachers. As school committee members, it is our job to put students first. Not just some students, not just the students from whose families we hear from the most, but students who historically don't have the advocacy they need. That's what we are here for as elected officials. We have learned, through presentations, articles and feedback from our professional educational leaders that the best way to address the achievement gap is to have socio-economic balance in our school buildings, small and balanced class sizes and pre-school for as many children in our district as possible. These are the things that can make a real difference in our students educational lives. I have heard a lot about community schools in this process. I want to make clear that we don't have community schools as long as there are pockets of students being bused away from their neighbors, a population of students that have been long ignored. Currently, our town has students that are bused away from their neighborhood and their closest elementary school based on their lower socio-economic status or their special learning needs. I want us to imagine what we would hear if my neighborhood for example, two streets away from Wildwood, was bused to Crocker Farm to balance the socio-economic status in each school. The children who are currently bused out of their catchment area know why they are being sent to other schools. What is the

message to them? What is the message to all our students? How is that OK? We as a community HAD the opportunity to fix this problem of inequity when the district closed Marks Meadow school. At the time, perhaps it was felt that the change would be too much. We have that opportunity again. It is incumbent on us as elected officials to make the hard but fair decision that will be best for all our students. The 2 through 6 twin reconfiguration is the fairest option. I know that there are those that worry about the extra transition. But children experience transition all the time. Many have been redistricted every few years. And all students go to a new classroom with different students and a new teacher, every year. Kids are resilient. If they move to a new building, implemented in a thoughtful way, with their friends and classmates, I think it matters less. I have also heard that people value the K through 6 range and I understand that, and 2nd through 6th grade also provides a great range of ages and levels of development. Change in a traditional arrangement often makes people uncomfortable. Moving toward progress is hard and deliberate. But we shouldn't stick with an old system just because that's the way it's been done for a long time. Especially as we have growing evidence showing that equal access to pre-school education is CRUCIAL to closing the achievement gap. Traditional school's structure was developed in a fairly arbitrary way a very long time ago. There are many districts that now structure their schools based on developmental stages rather than an old outdated industrial age design. Again, we have this opportunity before us. If we stay with the K-6 model in the new building, we are going to continue to redistrict students and teachers and continue to bus students away from their friends and neighbors based on their families socio-economic status or the child's special learning needs. That isn't right and it isn't fair. A vote for the reconfiguration is a vote for social justice.

Mr. Hood: I will be voting for the consolidated plan, with a PreK-1 early childhood center at Crocker Farm and new 2-6, 2-wing configuration school to be built on the location decided by the building committee. When I started on the school committee in 2010, my youngest child was already 3 years beyond high school. My interest in being on the school committee was due to my interest in public education, not that my kids were still in Amherst schools. And that interest in public education was and remains entirely based the concept that public schools should be a place where equal opportunity is king. Where is equal opportunity more important than with our children? Nowhere. The word equity gets used a lot. Equity does not mean equality. Our kids will never be equal; each has unique gifts and challenges. Equity means equal opportunity. Equal opportunity means that resources and encouragement are there for every child. It means that every child is shown those opportunities and encouraged to partake, and that the resources are available to do so. In looking at the various options for building or renovating our schools, the key word for me is resources. There is only one configuration that provides the maximum resources for providing equal opportunity and that is the consolidated plan. While not a guarantee of anything, and implementation is everything, the consolidated plan has a much higher likelihood of being able to increase learning opportunities for our children. An early childhood center at Crocker Farm will make it much more likely that all our children will be able to learn to read at a younger age, critical to future learning. A 2-6 school housed all in one building will make it much more likely that programs for older elementary students can be available, rather than available in one building, but not another. I have been in favor of this 2-school plan from the first time I heard about it, long ago, way before the Superintendent made it her recommendation. Since then I have listened very hard to all the pros and cons for this option. The cons to this option include: giving up the continuity of the K-6 schools we are all so familiar with. Yes it is a wonderful thing to have a Principal and teachers of a school know your child from Kindergarten through 6th grade, though for grades 2 through 6 this will still be the case. Another con is that it is more likely that families will have children in more than one school. Another con is that older kids will not be able to mentor the very young children, though that is still available for 2 through 6. Another con is that for those who do live close to their school, the neighborhood school will be lost; certainly a big deal for those families. The one con I have heard that I just do not buy at all is the size of the school. First of all, the size of the proposed 2-6 school is not that much larger than what used to be the populations of Wildwood and Fort River years ago. Secondly and most importantly the 2-wing design mitigates any size problem in a huge way and also encourages the same communities that already

exist to continue and thrive. It is easy to imagine a future where we still have three reasonably sized communities just as we do now: an early childhood community at Crocker Farm, a 2-6 community in one wing of the new school and a 2-6 community in the other wing, with the same teachers, administrators and staff that we know and love. I have listened very, very hard to the cons of this plan I have heard from the community, and they just do not outweigh the opportunity provided by having an early childhood center at Crocker Farm and a new 2-wing 2-6 school. Change is always difficult and this is no exception. Especially when we like what we have, we fear that any change might take that away. But we have to remember that today not all kids are achieving at their full potential. It is my duty to do all that I can to make sure that they have every opportunity to do so. I have to vote for opportunity; otherwise the whole reason for my serving on the school committee to begin with would be for nothing.

Ms. Douangmany-Cage stated that this was a very difficult decision as she has followed this conversation for some time. She stated it became clear to her at Town Meeting when members failed to vote to replace a school boiler. She feared that Fort River would be neglected for the sake of Wildwood. She believed the parent and staff survey was biased. Ms. Douangmany-Cage stated that affluent parents have access to transportation and flexible work schedules so they could attend events if their children were separated between two schools. These parents could also choose to send their children out of district. Ms. Douangmany-Cage thought the best solution would be to renovate Wildwood first and then address the concerns of Fort River. She rejected the survey choice of design options and the supporting documents from the superintendent and district administrators. Ms. Douangmany-Cage recognized the work of the ARPS Family Center as they provide transportation, childcare and food at school events. She stated that elected officials must be trustworthy, transparent and considerate of timing. Ms. Douangmany-Cage is disappointed that the results of the survey and opinions of the respondents are being defied. In closing, she requested that more information pertaining to the memorandum of agreement between the school committee and APEA linked to the survey be made available to her.

Ms. Traphagen did not express her opinion regarding grade configuration. However she requested clarification on several topics which would help guide her decision. Ms. Traphagen asked which authority decides classroom wing configuration. She would like Fort River to remain in the discussion. She stressed that all students should feel safe in a school and be known by all staff. Ms. Traphagen stated that in a 2-6 Grade model, students, families and staff are afforded five years to build strong relationships. She is concerned that if families are split between two schools, those who struggle will have yet one more barrier to overcome. She inquired how re-districting would solve equity issues, especially those impacting families living in the apartment complexes, if there is a PreK-1 early learning center and a 2-6 school. Ms. Traphagen inquired about the estimated cost of code updates if Crocker Farm becomes an early learning center. She requested data around the number of 4 year-olds not enrolled in a pre-school program and 5 year-olds who are entering Kindergarten with no pre-school experience. Ms. Traphagen is concerned about the number of potential transitions placed on early childhood students as they enter Grade 2.

4. Adjournment

5:12 p.m.

Ms. Appy reminded members of next steps and then called for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Hood made a motion to adjourn at 5:12 p.m. Ms. Hazzard seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Kimberly Stender