

Amherst School Committee Meeting
Wednesday, January 24, 2018
Library, Amherst Regional High School
21 Mattoon Street
Amherst, MA 01002

IN ATTENDANCE

Phoebe Hazzard, Chair
Vira Douangmany Cage
Peter Demling
Anastasia Ordonez

Michael Morris, Superintendent
Sean Mangano, Finance Director
Faye Brady, Student Services Director
Jo Ann Smith, Student Services Administrator
Derek Shea, CF Principal
Jim McPherson, Facilities Director
Diane Chamberlain, FR Principal
Nick Yaffe, WW Principal
Andrew Grant-Thomas, Enrollment Working Group Member
Jeff Lee, Enrollment Working Group Member
Jon McCabe, Enrollment Working Group Member
Tracy Zafian, Enrollment Working Group Member
Mary Lee Austin, Enrollment Working Group Member
Maria Kopicki, Enrollment Working Group Member
Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder
Public and Press

ABSENT

Eric Nakajima

1. Call to Order and Approve Minutes

6:03 p.m.

Ms. Hazzard called the Amherst School Committee to order at 6:03 p.m. She announced that Mr. Nakajima cannot attend the meeting tonight, and noted that the meeting is being recorded and live broadcast by Amherst Media. Ms. Douangmany Cage moved to approve the minutes of December 19, 2017 with minor corrections. Mr. Demling seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

2. Announcements and Public Comments

6:05 p.m.

There were no public comments or announcements.

3. Superintendent's Update

6:05 p.m.

Dr. Morris reported that Senator Markey will meet with Lucio Perez, who has been provided sanctuary by First Congregational Church, prior to the Town Hall on Sunday. At 3:00 p.m., Dr. Morris has been invited to attend a meeting with Senator Markey regarding immigration and one School Committee member has also been invited to attend. Ms. Ordonez volunteered to attend to represent the School Committee, and Ms. Douangmany Cage has been invited to attend in another capacity. Dr. Morris noted that he interviewed Principals Derek Shea and Diane Chamberlain for the most recent episode of *A Window into ARPS*. He will share it with the community once it is posted on the Amherst Media website. Finally, Dr. Morris showed a copy of Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode's book *Affirming Diversity*, which is used nationally in University Education programs.

4. New and Continuing Business

6:11 p.m.

A. Enrollment Working Group Presentation: Declining Enrollment Subgroup

Dr. Morris provided brief background about the work of the Enrollment Working Group and the five working subgroups. He thanked the members of the group for their dedication and hard work. Ms. Cunningham of the Declining Enrollment Subgroup introduced the other members of the group, which includes Andrew Grant-Thomas, Jeff Lee, Jon McCabe and Tracy Zafian. Mr. Grant-Thomas introduced their report, providing information on the key takeaways regarding declining enrollment in the Amherst Schools, which are that the decline is overwhelmingly among white students and enrollment declines are confined to Fort River and Wildwood. Mr. McCabe spoke about potential causes of these declines. Some of the reasons include a decline in the number of school-aged children in Amherst and less availability of family-friendly housing than Amherst had in the past. Ms. Zafian spoke about the more robust competition from charter schools since the Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School opened in 2008. She shared some of the information that was gathered from families who were surveyed about why they choose to send their children to charter, private or choice schools instead of the Amherst Schools. Mr. Lee outlined

the recommendations of the subgroup, which include seeking a better understanding of the demographic trends. The subgroup also recommended considering potential curricular changes such as considering world language instruction at the elementary level, strengthening the Chinese language instruction at the middle and high school, adding a dual language or language immersion program to the Amherst Schools, increasing support for above-grade level learners, expanding the preschool and making physical improvements to school buildings and recreational spaces. Ms. Cunningham shared information about the subgroup's recommendations about ways to market the strengths of the Amherst Schools, including improving the ways in which we share information about ARPS programs with the larger community; promoting public discussion of the housing shortage; and preparing a contingency plan for continued declining enrollment. The members of the subgroup answered clarifying questions for the School Committee after their presentation. Ms. Ordonez noted that she agrees with the Subgroup's suggestion that a member of the School Committee take a seat at the table of the town housing committees, expressing her hope that this can happen. She suggested inviting one of the housing groups to a future School Committee meeting for a dialogue. Dr. Morris said he will speak with the Town Manager about ways to make that happen.

B. MSBA Statement of Interest Discussion

Ms. Hazzard noted that the window for submitting an MSBA Statement of Interest is now open, which is why this topic is on the agenda. Dr. Morris noted that the MSBA requires submitting districts to specify which school is their priority if they submit SOIs for more than one school. He would like to have Mr. McPherson review each of the schools, since he will be reviewing them with fresh eyes as a new employee, and submit a recommendation to Dr. Morris about which building he would prioritize due to deficiencies. Dr. Morris could then bring a recommendation to the School Committee on February 27.

C. Enrollment Working Group Presentation: Special Education Subgroup

Dr. Morris acknowledged members of the larger Enrollment Working Group who are here to listen to the presentations of the subgroups. Diane Chamberlain then introduced the other members of the Special Education Subgroup, which includes Mary Lee Austin, Maria Kopicki and Jo Ann Smith. Ms. Chamberlain outlined the purpose of the subgroup's work, which looked at the district's three specialized special education programs (Intensive Learning Center, Academic Inclusive Mainstream Support—AIMS, and Building Blocks) to see how enrollment, based on their centralized programming, impacts the students and their families. Ms. Kopicki reported that a survey was sent to 51 families who have (or had) students in one of the programs. She shared the data from the survey, which had a 27% response rate. One theme that arose was that most respondents would prefer that all of their children attend the same school. Ms. Austin reviewed the research and laws regarding placement of students in the least restrictive environment. Finally, Ms. Smith reviewed the potential solutions being recommended by the subgroup, which include:

- Reconsider enrollment policies to offer choice to those families who have other elementary school aged children to allow them to also attend the school where the sibling is enrolled in a specialized program, and allow students to remain at the school they had been attending when they no longer need to be enrolled in the specialized program;
- Reach out to other Massachusetts districts with similar configurations and enrollments to gather information about their programs and challenges;
- Have a dialogue with staff to identify opportunities for improvement with regard to the functioning of the program;
- Hold facilitated discussion with families with students in the programs to explore peer supports and/or neighborhood relationship building outside of school; and
- Review the district program models, including the implications of alternative models.

Subgroup members answered clarifying questions for the School Committee members. There was discussion regarding the proposal to consider allowing choice for families whose child in the specialized program has siblings in another school. It was agreed that it should be an agenda topic for a future meeting.

D. Initial FY19 Budget Presentation

Mr. Mangano distributed and reviewed highlights of the proposed FY19 Amherst Schools Budget, which totals \$23,227,365, including \$556,437 in reductions. He noted that rising health insurance costs are impacting the district and that out-of-district enrollment figures have all declined in FY18 for the first time in many years. Mr. Mangano outlined the budget timeline, the budget development process, and the expense budget details. He noted that health insurance costs are increasing by \$818,484 due to rising premiums. Mr. Mangano reviewed the proposed budget

additions and reductions list, which is still not at the level of specific cuts. That level of specificity will be presented at the budget hearing. Throughout the presentation, Mr. Mangano and Dr. Morris answered clarifying questions for the committee. Mr. Demling noted that at the next budget discussion he would like to see detail on the preschool fees and how we compare to local public and private preschools. Mr. Mangano noted that our preschool is integrated and special education students do not pay tuition. Dr. Morris explained that the district is ethically and financially obligated to serve the students in the integrated model, which makes the Crocker Farm preschool different from other local preschools. Ms. Ordonez noted the difficulty of finding full day preschool programs and expressed support for such a program.

Dr. Morris reported on the Capital Plan, specifically the study to replace the Fort River roof. He noted that it came in at \$1.3 million, and he would not recommend asking the town for those funds. Mr. McPherson explained a plan to have a professional crew patch specific current roof issues and project failure points for repair that will carry the current roof through three to four years. This particular plan would cost approximately \$30,000. Dr. Morris explained that this is the plan he will recommend that the Town fund.

For the School Choice hearing, Dr. Morris provided brief background on the district's history of accepting choice students and the reasons choice families give for coming to the Amherst schools. He explained that class sizes are relatively stable, so there are not likely to be many slots open in most grades. Grades Kindergarten and six will be the grades that would primarily have seats, depending on Kindergarten enrollments. Ms. Hazzard noted that the School Choice vote will be taken at the next meeting.

E. Superintendent's Goals

Dr. Morris briefly reviewed the five goals he is proposing for the Amherst District, which include:

1. Develop and implement a Communications Plan for the district to address feedback about how the district interacts with stakeholders, including current families and staff as well as prospective families and staff.
2. Manage the ongoing budget challenges in a way that preserves the core mission of the Amherst Public Schools and invests resources toward exploring the future sustainability of the district.
3. With the input of the key staff stakeholder groups, plan and implement a successful social justice-focused professional development session for all staff members in March 2018; utilize the feedback from this session to plan for continued social justice professional development in the next academic year.
4. Develop and finalize an overhaul of Elementary Homework Guidelines through an iterative process, utilizing research and involving key stakeholders including staff and families.
5. Support each of the five Enrollment Working Group subgroups to gather and present their findings; develop a process with a viable path forward for the Amherst Public Schools to address the challenges and opportunities identified by these subgroups.

He noted that he welcomes feedback and suggestions from the School Committee on any of the goals. Ms. Ordonez suggested adding a subgoal soliciting input from stakeholders across the districts, including parents and caregivers. This would supplement the input he and Ms. Cunningham solicited from faculty and staff.

F. Sabbatical Requests Vote

Ms. Hazzard noted that there were two sabbatical requests at the Amherst level, which she met with Dr. Morris to review. Dr. Morris noted that they are both worthy projects; however, while valuable, he does not feel that either of the submitted projects meet the level of a sabbatical. He would like to find ways to support the work within the traditional school year contract. Ms. Hazzard noted that she encourages Dr. Morris to work with the staff members to develop this work and to find ways to support it as he mentioned. After brief comments, Mr. Demling moved to not approve the sabbatical requests submitted by Anne Kornblatt or Alvaro Borrell. Ms. Ordonez seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

J. Accept Gifts

Ms. Douangmany Cage moved to accept a gift of \$2,500 from Hallmark Global Services LLC for the Fort River 2017 Crayola Education Winner; \$100 from the Fort River Parent Council for a Fort River art donation; \$50 from Patricia Schumm for a Family Center donation; and a Stamel ½ size cello (no bow) and Bobelock bag from James Kwak with an estimated value of \$1,940. Ms. Ordonez seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

K. School Committee Planning

8:40 p.m.

Ms. Hazzard reviewed the upcoming agenda topics, which include magnet/dual-immersion EWG presentation, preschool EWG presentation, safety presentation regarding school buildings as election polling sites, superintendent report on school visits, budget hearing, school choice vote, FY18 second quarter budget update, prioritizing for an SOI, open enrollment, and preschool model. Dr. Morris noted that for February 5, he would suggest the two EWG presentations, the safety presentation and the FY18 second quarter budget update. The budget hearing and the SOI will be on the 27th. The school visits report would be at the March meeting.

5. Adjourn

8:49 p.m.

Mr. Demling moved to adjourn at 8:49 p.m. Ms. Ordonez seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

MEETING DOCUMENTS

1. *Amherst School Committee Minutes of December 19, 2017*
2. *Superintendent's Update dated January 24, 2018*
3. *Report to the Amherst School Committee by the Enrollment Working Group Declining Enrollment Subgroup, dated January 24, 2018*
4. *Special Education Enrollment Group Report*
5. *Email titled Fwd: MSBA/2018 Statement of Interest Opening dated January 5, 2018 at 12:43 p.m.*
6. *Proposed Superintendent Goals for Amherst*
7. *Amherst Public Schools Budget Proposal*
8. *Application for Professional Leave for 2018-2019 submitted by Anne Kornblatt*
9. *Amherst Public Schools Sabbatical Applicatio from Alvaro "Alvie" Borrell, Special Education Teacher*
10. *Memo to Amherst School Committee from Jill Berry, District Treasurer dated January 23, 2018*