

**Regular Joint Meeting of the Amherst and Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committees
Wednesday, December 20, 2011
Town Room, Amherst Town Hall**

In Attendance:

Rick Hood, Chair	Maria Geryk, Superintendent
Irv Rhodes	Kathy Mazur, Human Resources Director
Katherine Appy	Rachel Bowen, Human Resources Assistant Director
Kristen Luschen	Beth Graham, Dir. of PD, Teacher Collaboration & Eval.
Debbie Gould	Jerry Champagne, Director of Information Systems
Kip Fonsh	Jo Ann Smith, Director of Student Services
Rob Spence (arrived @ 7:46)	Mike Hayes, ARMS Principal

ABSENT:

Steve Rivkin	Kim Stender, Volunteer Coordinator
Annemarie Foley	Jeanne White, Student Services Administrator
	Rob Detweiler, Finance Director
	Public
	Press
	Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder

1. Call to Order and Agenda Review 7:01 p.m.

Mr. Hood called the Regional School Committee meeting to order at 7:01 p.m. Mr. Rhodes called the Amherst meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. and Mr. Hood reviewed the agenda.

2. Announcements and Public Comments 7:47 p.m.

Pat Ononibaku, SEPAC Co-President, distributed a written statement entitled SEPAC Response to Special Education Survey Report, and Melissa Paciulli, SEPAC Co-President, read the statement aloud. The full statement is included as an addendum to the minutes.

3. Superintendent's Update 7:02 p.m.

DOCUMENTS: Memo to the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee from Superintendent Maria Geryk dated December 20, 2011

Ms. Geryk reported that Dr. Marta Guevara is conducting a survey of all parents/guardians of Latino students in order to gather feedback on ways in which the schools can better support Latino students. She also briefly reported on the latest episode of *Voices from Our Schools*, which featured members of the schools' PGOs; the Mentors4Me Speaker series; and on ARMS and ARHS student and teacher achievements and activities.

4. New and Continuing Business 7:06 p.m.

A. MSBA Vote

DOCUMENTS: Wildwood Elementary School Form of Vote and Fort River Elementary School Form of Vote

Ms. Geryk explained that the reason for the vote is to allow the district to submit a Statement of Interest (SOI) to apply for renovation funds for Wildwood and Fort River Elementary Schools. Mr. Rhodes made the following motion:

Resolved: Having convened in an open meeting on December 20, 2011, the School Committee of Amherst, in accordance with its charter, by-laws, and ordinances, has voted to authorize the Superintendent to submit to the Massachusetts School Building Authority the Statement of Interest Form dated January 9, 2012 for the Wildwood Elementary School located at 71 Strong Street, Amherst, MA which describes and explains the following deficiencies and the priority category(s) for which an application may be submitted to the Massachusetts School Building Authority in the future

- Priority 1 Replacement or renovation of a building which is structurally unsound or otherwise in a condition seriously jeopardizing the health and safety of school children, where no alternative exists.
- Priority 2 Elimination of existing severe overcrowding.
- Priority 4 Prevention of severe overcrowding expected to result from increased enrollments.
- Priority 5 Replacement, renovation or modernization of school facility systems, such as roofs, windows, boilers, heating and ventilation systems, to increase energy conservation and decrease energy related costs in a school facility.
- Priority 6 Short term enrollment growth.
- Priority 7 Replacement of or addition to obsolete buildings in order to provide for a full range of programs consistent with state and approved local requirements.

and hereby further specifically acknowledges that by submitting this Statement of Interest Form, the Massachusetts School Building Authority in no way guarantees the acceptance or the approval of an application, the awarding of a grant or any other funding commitment from the Massachusetts School Building Authority, or commits the City/Town/Regional School District to filing an application for funding with the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

Further,

Resolved: Having convened in an open meeting on December 20, 2011, the School Committee of Amherst, in accordance with its charter, by-laws, and ordinances, has voted to authorize the Superintendent to submit to the Massachusetts School Building Authority the Statement of Interest Form dated January 9, 2012 for the Fort River Elementary School located at 70 South East Street, Amherst, MA which describes and explains the following deficiencies and the priority category(s) for which an application may be submitted to the Massachusetts School Building Authority in the future

- Priority 1 Replacement or renovation of a building which is structurally unsound or otherwise in a condition seriously jeopardizing the health and safety of school children, where no alternative exists.
- Priority 2 Elimination of existing severe overcrowding.
- Priority 4 Prevention of severe overcrowding expected to result from increased enrollments.
- Priority 5 Replacement, renovation or modernization of school facility systems, such as roofs, windows, boilers, heating and ventilation systems, to increase energy conservation and decrease energy related costs in a school facility.
- Priority 6 Short term enrollment growth.
- Priority 7 Replacement of or addition to obsolete buildings in order to provide for a full range of programs consistent with state and approved local requirements.

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Ms. Appy seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

B. Affirmative Action Report

DOCUMENTS: Memo from Kathryn Mazur, Human Resources Director, to Maria Geryk, Superintendent of Schools, regarding Affirmative Action Report

Ms. Mazur thanked Superintendent Geryk for allowing her to give an Affirmative Action report again, noting that the last time she reported to the School Committee was in 2008. She then distributed and reviewed the highlights of the report. Mr. Rhodes noted that he was surprised by the percentages of students of color in the individual schools, noting that they are significantly higher than he expected. Ms. Mazur noted that the incoming

kindergarten classes have much higher numbers of students of color than in past years. Ms. Luschen asked for more information about how the number of applicants of color can be increased in our applicant pool. Ms. Bowen noted that in her recruitment visits she has found that experienced teachers are looking for jobs in January and February and, due to budgetary constraints, the district often does not know which positions will be filled until later in the year. She also stated that the strongest graduates are snapped up early, often by the districts in which they do their student teaching. Ms. Geryk noted that the district is working with UMass and the other area colleges regarding the pipeline of our students to their schools and their education students to our schools. Ms. Appy asked if data is available regarding the reasons teachers of color may leave the district. Ms. Mazur reported that the district utilizes an exit survey, noting that other employment opportunities and relationship issues are, anecdotally, the most common reasons for leaving. She also noted that Barry Brooks completed a "stay survey" in 2008 with staff members of color to determine why they choose to stay in the district. She will email Mr. Brooks' report to members of the School Committee. Mr. Fonsh noted that he believes it is time for the APEA to assume some responsibility for achieving this equity goal by considering contract alterations that will enhance recruitment and retention of staff of color. He noted that it is also time for the Town Manager and Select Board to work with the schools to provide town-wide incentives and supports for staff of color because this is a community issue. Ms. Luschen encouraged the Superintendent to roll this report into the action steps of the equity report that was presented at the last Regional School Committee meeting. Ms. Geryk noted that these issues are all part of the District Improvement Plan.

C. Special Education Update

DOCUMENTS: Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools Budget Guidelines dated December 1, 2011

Ms. Smith distributed copies of the Special Education Update memo and thanked Ms. Paciulli for sharing the concerns of SEPAC. She then reviewed the highlights of what has happened in Special Education in the district since her last update to the School Committee, noting that the districts have been selected by the state for a comprehensive program review in 2013. Mr. Hood said he would like to hear more about how progress on the issues identified in the PCG report will be monitored. Ms. Smith acknowledged that this is something the School Committee requested and that she will develop a way for the School Committee to monitor progress. Ms. Gould applauded SEPAC for doing the survey, but noted she would like to see another survey go out from the district with the same questions provided by PCG in order to monitor progress. Ms. Smith noted that she heard persistent feedback from SEPAC that the PCG survey was flawed so the challenge is whether to use the same survey or develop a new one. She is open to conducting a survey and to considering whether it should be an annual process. Ms. Gould noted that she would like for SEPAC to present their survey results to the School Committee when they are available. Ms. Gould asked if it is regulation or district practice that paraprofessionals are not allowed to attend Special Education Team meetings. Ms. Smith reported that it is district practice, which is not atypical of other districts, because paraprofessionals do not deal with the level of legality and regulation that is involved in legally binding team meetings. She noted that paraprofessionals sometimes participate in progress meetings, which are not legally binding. Mr. Rhodes expressed frustration at seeing some of the concerns still on the SEPAC list, particularly the restraint policy. He noted that he would like to see this addressed and eliminated by the next update. Mr. Rhodes also noted that he believes that conflict resolution can help tremendously for both parents and district staff in moving forward. Ms. Geryk noted that she does not want the School Committee to assume that any concerns still being expressed by SEPAC are not being worked on by staff. Ms. Smith noted that she did not receive tonight's SEPAC statement in advance so she did not come prepared to address each of the points raised, noting that she does not agree with all of them. She explained that the district has two highly-trained, certified staff members who provide intensive restraint training and a trainer from the Crisis Institute provided professional development in restraint for paraprofessionals on the last curriculum day. Ms. Smith stated that the intention is always to be hands off with students, while knowing there will be times at which students must be restrained for their own safety or the safety of staff. Mr. Fonsh thanked the members of SEPAC for their commitment to their children and other children in the district. He noted that their statement would be more impactful if it included hard numbers. Ms. Paciulli provided him with a document that includes some background data. Mr. Fonsh suggested that, as a progress measure, Ms. Smith provide the School Committee with an anecdotal update after each of the parent/staff meetings mentioned in the action steps. He also suggested having an open conversation with parents to define the language and terms used to ensure everyone understands what is being said and are on the same page with regard to goals. Ms. Smith noted that conclusions are being drawn based on information presented tonight and that there is a larger percentage of parents who are happy with the

Special Education services being provided to their child(ren). For instance, she noted that only 10 out of 600 families have requested mediation in the past year. Ms. Appy noted that she wants to recognize what is new, educationally, in the schools to address the needs of all students. She said she would like to hear more about PBIS and RTI. Ms. Luschen asked if the district is moving toward a "mediation first" protocol whenever possible. Ms. Smith said there has been a substantial shift in agreeing to utilize the mediation process, noting that a complicating factor is that you have to be willing to change your position if you go into mediation. Instances arise in which the district cannot be willing to do that. Mr. Hood thanked Ms. Smith for her report, noting that the Committee appreciates the opportunity to have this conversation with her.

D. School Choice

DOCUMENTS: School Choice Background Information FY2013

Mr. Hayes reported that the ARMS School Council strongly recommends opening school choice seats in both seventh and eighth grade for the 2012-2013 school year. They are looking at using school choice to support a model change to move away from use of a looping half-team to having three teams at both grade levels. Mr. Jackson stated that he does not want to underestimate the importance of school choice as a sizable revenue stream. The continuing enrollment decline at the high school, along with the budget deficit, means that a considerable number of young faculty members' jobs are in jeopardy without choice enrollments. Additionally, there is greater scheduling flexibility with choice students available to the district. Mr. Jackson noted that he would aspire to having 20 choice students per grade level. Ms. Geryk noted that she intends to bring more specific choice information and request a vote at an upcoming Regional School Committee meeting.

E. FY12 Budget First Quarter Report

DOCUMENTS: Amherst-Pelham Regional School District FY12 Quarter One Report

Mr. Hood asked if the School Committee members have any questions about the FY12 Quarter One Report that was provided in their agenda packets, noting that the Budget Subcommittee has reviewed the report. There were no questions.

F. Superintendent Evaluation Process

DOCUMENTS: Binder of Evaluation Documents for Each School Committee Member's Use

Mr. Hood reviewed the timeline and process that will be followed for the Superintendent's evaluation. Mr. Fonsh asked if it is possible for the School Committee to talk about discussion norms prior to the public evaluation meeting. Ms. Appy noted that she believes it is a good idea to have such a discussion since this is the first time the evaluation has been done in this way. Mr. Rhodes noted that this evaluation process is an example of excellent work, and he has full faith in those who put it together. He suggested that the norms for meetings will be a good start for the discussion. Mr. Hood noted this can be added to the January 10th meeting.

5. Policies None

6. Subcommittee Reports None

7. School Committee Planning 9:22 p.m.

A. **Calendar**—Mr. Hood distributed the updated schedule of reports

B. **Items for Future Agendas**—DIP update; FY13 budget; School Choice; Superintendent Evaluation

8. Adjournment 9:25 p.m.

Mr. Hood made a motion to adjourn the Amherst School Committee at 9:25 p.m. Mr. Spence seconded and the motion was unanimously approved. Mr. Hood made a motion at 9:26 p.m. for the Regional School Committee to adjourn to executive session for the purpose of contract negotiations with no intention to return to open session. The motion was unanimously approved by roll call vote.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

SEPAC Response to Special Education Survey Report

On behalf of SEPAC, we would like to speak to you regarding our concerns regarding the Special Education Task Force report and ask that you please request from the Special Education Administration how each of the below concerns will be specifically addressed in this plan for improvement and how the district will move these measures forward.

As you know, the PCG and CPI report were conducted over 2 years ago and SEPAC had some very strong observations that were presented to the School Committee and Administration in June, 2010 on July 22, 2010 in detail and then again when the draft report was presented on June 24, 2011. As such we feel it is critical for the Community and the School Committee, which provides oversight to the District to fully understand how these observations made by SEPAC have been integrated into this plan and how procedures, intended to improve the District, will be modified.

We encourage the School Committee, once again to review these documents in their entirety. The PCG Executive Summary does not reflect the data findings in the report. The CPI report addresses serious and strong concerns regarding closed door restraint use in the District. Responsible School Committee members will make it their business to read the full report, including data, to become informed. It is risky to ignore data collected in the survey which depict areas for improvement in the special education program.

It is imperative that the proposed plan or any procedural changes from the Task Force address the following:

- **THE IEP PROCESS:** A high number of parents are extremely unsatisfied by the methods that the District uses for creation and implementation of IEPs and 504 plans. Parents do not feel partners in the educational decisions about their children. Parent inclusion, satisfaction and involvement as a member of the TEAM is a real issue that speaks to systemic problems. It is critical that we address this procedurally.
- Transition planning is identified by both parents and staff as inadequate. As a result FAPE is being denied systematically to students 14 and older who qualify for transition services. This has the potential to lead to severe fiscal liability to the District. This alone could create a fiscal situation for the District, we urge you to look at this issue and put safeguards for these students, such that the District is consistent and thorough in the approach.
- A statistically significant number of parents believe their children are not receiving all the services on the IEP. Consistent benchmarks and goals with measureable progress is required to ensure that all of our children are receiving the appropriate services that are required for their respective IEP's. Teachers, parents, and staff do not have an accurate picture of the child's progress, which interventions are effective or if the child is making progress at all. Again, this is systemic and if FAPE is being denied, it puts the District at risk. There is a lack of consistent and effective progress monitoring.
- The children with the most needs appear to be the least well served based on the difference in performance. The MCAS scores reflect that the number of Special Education students in the *Warning* category is increasing in the Amherst District.
- Parents identify the need for more collaborative school-parent support for children with autism.
- The District has a stated goal to move towards a Zero Restraint. We urge the School Committee and the District to do this and to eliminate the use of closed door secluded restraints. This intervention has left our special education children with post traumatic stress disorder and as highlighted in the CPI report, should not be used. Many states have moved away from this, and we urge Amherst to set an example as a leader in this area for the State as this becomes a federal issue.
- The district relies heavily on undertrained Para-professionals who are not permitted to attend Team meetings despite being the educators most connected to Special Education students. We urge you to review this model of instruction and look closely at the District hiring policies and training requirements.
- The conflict resolution section of the report does not give an accurate picture of District response to conflict, the true cost of litigation or some of the aggressive tactics that parents have reported in our community to the SEPAC Board. This concerns us as a Board and should concern the School Committee and District. We need a consistent and deliberate conflict resolution process that insists on mediation and supports a child centered outcome. Please review this report and identify where systemic changes can be implemented to safe guard our children and parents and the District in this regard.
- PCG conducted 14 focus groups with 54 staff/administrators and only one focus group with 11 parents. It did not explore parent views of the Special Education administration. SEPAC has conducted an independent survey to access parents in our

Community and to learn more about their needs. We hope that as the District moves forward with any review or further evaluation that it will be mandatory to include SEPAC parents in a transparent process.

Special Education *demands* your attention. It is poorly understood by many and in the view of the SEPAC board, in need of far reaching reform to comply with the minimal standards written into Federal and Commonwealth of Massachusetts regulations.