

THETFORD TOWN SCHOOL DISTRICT
Tuesday, January 16, 2018
Thetford Elementary School

APPROVED MINUTES

Shannon Darrah convened the meeting at 6:36 p.m. The following were present: Julie Acker, Charlie Buttrey, Shannon Darrah, Kristen Downey, Scott MacPhee, School Board; Kevin Petrone, TES Principal; Melanie Elliott, OESU HR/Business office

PUBLIC PRESENT: Pam Fein, Bette Nunez, Mary Wunderlich, David Joyce, Kate Hill, Ben Williams

AGENDA REVIEW: Agenda approved.

MINUTES REVIEW: MOTION: (Acker/Buttrey) moved/seconded to approve the minutes of the January 2, 2018 Board meeting (unanimous approval).

REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF ORDERS: MOTION: (Acker/MacPhee) moved/seconded to approve payroll warrants # 6308 and 6290 (unanimous approval).

PUBLIC COMMENT/CORRESPONDENCE: The Board received an email from the driver of bus #3 regarding the condition of the roads during the first storm when school was held, and during the second storm when there was a delayed start. Concern was particularly about Gove Hill Rd., which was not passable by the bus. The roads were not ready. The email was also sent to Butler bus, the select board and OESU Superintendent, Sandra Stanley. Petrone stated the schools and bus company need to be in better communication with the road department when making decisions. The new process of deciding whether to hold school will incorporate the road crew. Downey added that some districts have a snow route plan. The school sends out notification of the snow route just like any other alert. This is a modified bus route that bypasses roads that are anticipated to be difficult to pass. For example, a snow route for Gove Hill Rd. could have pick up at the intersection of Rt. 132. Petrone stated early releases are avoided because many parents are not home. They also try to have consistent closure decisions for TA and TES. An email was received from parent Heidi Haghghi regarding strategies in the classroom related to SBAC scores. Darrah responded to her after speaking with Petrone. Darrah said SBAC score data can be discussed in more depth once budget season is over. There is some information that cannot be released to protect student confidentiality.

TA REPORT: Darrah reported most of the last meeting was budget and tuition discussion followed by a long executive session. Darrah presented TTSD's potential budget cuts. TA will be cutting approximately \$400,000 from their budget, which will affect staffing. The TA Board voted to increase tuition by 3%. TA is projecting fewer students next year. Darrah did not vote for the 3% tuition increase. Downey attended the public portion of the meeting. Downey stated

she was surprised by the defensive and uncollaborative tone of the meeting. It did not feel like a partnership. The budget issues faced by each Board and mitigating a tax increase did not feel like a common problem. TTSD is TA's largest client. Darrah will attend the board retreat this Sunday. Acker stated the 3% tuition increase is discouraging. TA is actively trying to recruit Chelsea students since Chelsea will be a K-8 district with high school choice starting with the next school year. Some students are planning to shadow, but it is not known yet whether that will result in enrollments.

PRINCIPAL REPORT (Kevin Petrone): After two cancellations, the first ski Friday will be this week. There are no remaining make up days. The first play casting meeting for Beauty and the Beast, Jr. was held today. Thetford resident, Perry Allison, is the director with collaboration with music teacher, Jessica Pierpont, and art teacher, Beth McGee. The play is being held slightly later in the year in May. There will be two Saturday rehearsals instead of four. Primary grade assessments, the POA and PNOA, are happening. Reading specialist, Marty Bouchard, and math specialist, Laura Sharpless, help with this testing. The PNOA is used until second grade and gives good data. The integrated field review is a state requirement that assesses schools based on five categories: academic proficiency, personalized learning plans, safe and healthy schools, high quality staffing, and investment priorities. Field review teams assess each school by visiting classrooms and meeting with parents, teachers and administrators, in order to make suggestions for progress. An overall OESU report is given, not one specific to TES. Petrone and sixth grade teacher, Colin McLaughlin, will visit schools in the White River Valley SU.

REVIEW UPDATED TAX WORKSHEET AND DISCUSS WARNING DEFICIT BOND:

Elliott stated a lot has happened since the last meeting. There is good news: The base tax rate should have been 1.0%, not 1.08%. The property yield calculation had already included the state's increase. TTSD mistakenly counted the 1.08% twice. Since the correction, Petrone and Elliott have developed three different budget scenarios that result in 2.4%, 4.1% and 4.6% tax increases. A table summarizing the three scenarios was distributed. All three scenarios are equally affected by: an increase in pre-K tuition; an increase in special education service plans with not enough offsetting revenue to completely compensate the new expenditures due to a new funding formula; and an increase in debt service costs resulting from the FY17 deficit. All three scenarios include elimination of one classroom teacher and one para educator. Petrone indicated that elimination of these positions is driven by enrollment. The 2.4% tax increase is the result of a 0.2% budget increase, which includes \$418,950 in cuts. The positions eliminated would be: Spanish program, school psychologist, reduction of librarian/technology to 0.6 FTE, and reduction of school nurse to 0.8 FTE. The 4.1% tax increase is the result of a 1.7% budget increase, which includes \$288,710 in cuts. This scenario preserves the nurse position. The librarian is reduced to 0.8 FTE. The Spanish program and school psychologist are each at 0.6 FTE. A 4.6% tax increase results from a 2.1% budget increase, which includes \$252,940 in cuts. In this scenario, the school psychologist and nurse positions are preserved, the Spanish program is reduced to 0.6 FTE, and the librarian position is reduced to 0.8 FTE.

A full time LEA will not be hired, which means the principal will continue in this role. There will be more special education students. The same time will be dedicated to special education by the principal, but more students means less time per student. Kristen Hansen currently helps with this and gets a stipend, but this takes her away from her typical duties. MacPhee commented that at some point managing special education needs to be dealt with permanently. Buttrey asked how adding a full time LEA would effect the budget. Elliott responded that assuming \$100,000 in salary and benefits, an LEA would result in a 0.6% tax increase. Buttrey stated he is uncomfortable eliminating the school psychologist. Downey stated she is uncomfortable eliminating the Spanish program.

Discussion followed regarding Spanish. Strafford does not offer Spanish in the primary grades. Norwich has Spanish across all grades. There is no correlation with test scores. Currently, grades K-2 have one 30 minute class per week. Grades 3 and 4 have two 30 minute classes per week. Grades 5 and 6 have three 40 minute classes per week. If modified to 0.6 FTE, solutions include offering Spanish only in the upper grades, or decreasing the time in the upper grades and increasing math and literacy. Petrone has gotten feedback from the upper wing teachers that they don't have enough time for math and literacy. Petrone referenced an article in the paper a few weeks ago about high school students teaching Spanish at an elementary school. Petrone stated it is necessary to think differently about how to provide services. Mountain School students work with children at Rivendell. The art and music programs are each 0.6 FTE.

Discussion followed regarding the school psychologist. Petrone reported she is busy and has been establishing relationships with the students. The psychologist is the only difference between 4.1% and 4.6%. If the position is eliminated, money will be spent for contracting out testing. There is no consistency between contractors coming to TES. There are no relationships with the students.

Acknowledging that the members of the public are not a representative cross-section of Thetford because they are parents and teachers, Buttrey asked for their opinions about what tax increase is acceptable. David Joyce suggested a different way to represent the budget cuts. Elliott cautioned that housing values change so it is difficult to say exactly how the tax increase applies to particular valuation. Pam Fein added an advantage to the community members who do not have kids in schools is their property values are tied to a good school. She feels strongly about keeping Spanish because it is part of a well rounded education. She supports keeping the psychologist and is willing to pay the increase. Buttrey stated that in view of what is happening statewide, he feels a 4.6% tax increase is passable. Petrone added that the elimination of a classroom teacher is not based on the budget, it is based on enrollment. Acker stated it would be a risk to reduce the school psychologist for fear that person would not want a part time position. She wants to ensure that the debt service costs are as accurate as possible. Elliott summarized that TTSD has to pay off the deficit from three years ago, and that is a solid number. A separate article is needed for the FY17 deficit.

Darrah summarized that based on discussion, the Board is leaning toward warning a budget that would result in a 4.6% tax increase. This budget retains the psychologist reduces the librarian to 0.8 FTE and reduces the Spanish program to 0.6 FTE. Downey posed, what is the likelihood that we lose the Spanish teacher because of the reduction? Elliott stated that in her experience with another SU school, it has been difficult to hire a part-time language teacher, unless the teacher can work for more than one school.

Kate Hill stated that class sizes will be 17-20 students, and asked if there is a class size cap set by the Board. She chose Thetford for smaller class sizes. Darrah responded there is not a firm cap. There was a sixth grade class with 26 students, and that worked for the particular dynamics of that class. The Board relies on the principal to make those decisions. Petrone stated that the state recommendation for grades K-3 is 20 students or less, and no more than 25 per class above third grade. The addition of another teacher would impact one grade level, not the school over all. Two to three more teachers would be needed to effect class sizes school wide.

Fein asked Petrone to elaborate on the new model for the paras. The five classrooms in grades K-2 will have four paras. They will be utilized as 50% general education and 50% special education, as they are this year. Anticipating other needs in the primary grades, two one on one paras may be added. Paras are being reduced in the upper grades. Grades 3 and 4 will have three paras in an 80% special education, 20% general education allocation, which is a change from the 50/50 this year. Since there will be more time spent by the paras with students who have IEPs, teachers will have more administrative duties.

Fein asked the Board to consider the 4.6% tax increase, but maintaining Spanish at 0.8 and reducing the school psychologist to 0.8. Elliott calculated that if Spanish is added back to 0.8, this results in a 4.7% increase. The difference between 0.6 and 0.8 FTE in Spanish is \$14,000. Buttrey stated the marginal value for the 0.2 justifies that expense. Darrah stated the highest tax increase since she has been on the Board was just under 4%.

Buttrey stated this is a very reasonable budget. There are other variables that drive the tax rate up. The CLA is down which means property values are up. Discussion followed. Buttrey stated it is in everyone's best interests to have a good school system. Discussion followed regarding area towns' expected tax increases. Darrah reported Strafford voted on their budget and will have an approximate 2% tax increase. They are supplementing their budget with reserve money. Norwich's budget is pending, but the last tax increase they were discussing was ~5%. The paper today reported Hartford was estimating a 6% increase. Acker contacted State Representatives Briglin and Masland, and encouraged others to do so as well. Kate Hill asked if some staff could be shared with TA. At one time the two schools shared a French teacher. Currently TES shares the music teacher with Strafford. Petrone is always looking for those opportunities. Elliott stated most of the OESU district Boards are motioning for 5% as their target tax increase.

Discussion began regarding the librarian position, and what is being lost by cutting 0.2 of this position. Mary Wunderlich responded, referencing a letter she wrote to the Board that itemizes what the library and technology programs provide. Her position is 50/50 between the two. There is a state requirement that a school with 300 students must have a full time librarian. For less than 300 it is prorated. She assumes the cut would impact the technology portion of her position. Most of the classes are scheduled on three days of the week. There are a lot of technology problems resolved by Wunderlich. At full time she can do extra project based learning. Joyce volunteered his services to TES for technology support. Petrone responded that most of the issues come up suddenly and someone needs to be onsite to address them. Wunderlich also helps teachers with technology integration. In OESU, two of the other elementary schools have a full time librarian, and one has a 0.6 librarian and full time technology. Wunderlich has a masters degree in technology. If her position is reduced to 0.8, she would be at TES four days. A Systems Plus contractor could come as well. Technology education would still happen, but the last minute tech questions would lapse. Maybe some of the clerical jobs could be distributed between the paras. Petrone responded that next year some of the paras will be spending more time on special education.

If the librarian and psychologist are kept at full time and Spanish is reduced to 0.6, the tax rate increase would be 5.0%. If librarian and psychologist are kept at full time and Spanish is kept at 0.8, the tax rate would increase by 5.2%. This is only the school portion of taxes, which is 80% of the total tax. Downey commented that this scenario is back to not making any cuts, other than one classroom teacher and one para educator. Most of the increase is due to debt and state issues.

Ben Williams added it makes sense the budget should not change much if it was already lean. It will never be universally accepted. Joyce suggested that when presenting this information to the public, to compare cuts against last year's staffing. Darrah suggested having conversations with the community. The Board is not ready to vote. Acker asked if there are any facilities issues that need funding – no. There is \$76,000 in the capital improvement line item. Elliott will be on a short medical leave after this week with limited email access. She can adjust numbers from home. Elliott will have the Board prepared for the warning, which will be signed by January 30.

OTHER BUSINESS: Discussion regarding school report to do list. Downey will draft the letter from the Board, due February 2.

EXECUTIVE SESSION (Para educator negotiations): MOTION: (Buttrey/MacPhee) moved/seconded to go into Executive Session at 8:36 p.m. to discuss para educator negotiations, the premature dissemination of which may place the Board at a substantial disadvantage. Out of executive session at 8:57 p.m. No action taken.

ADJOURNMENT: MOTION: (Downey/Acker) moved/seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:58 p.m. (unanimous approval).

FUTURE MEETINGS:

1/29/18 Thetford Town School District Meeting at Thetford Elementary School (sign warning) time 6:30 p.m.

Minutes Prepared By:
Amy Bosco, Minutes Clerk

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

Julie Acker, Board Clerk