

DRAFT (revised)
Minutes
Board of Education
Future Needs Committee Planning Meeting
October 15, 2018
6:00 p.m.

Board Members Present: David Crim, Linette Dooley, Joanne Prague Doyle, Chairman Christopher Lent, Gary Littlefield and Kathy Tolsdorf

Board Member Absent: James Chakulski, Jr.

Others Present: Maria Geryk-Superintendent, Alyssa Gwinnell-Principal, Lol Fearon-Former Superintendent, Tom Boardman, Tom Doyle, Christina Sposito and Jenn Tigeleiro

1. **Introduction and Brief Historical Overview (Mr. Lent/Mr. Fearon)** – Chairman Lent called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. and said this is a planning meeting of the Future Needs Committee. The last time this committee met was April 23, 2018. Tonight we will pick up where we left off and talk about what plan we support, moving forward as a subcommittee. The meeting was scheduled for this evening to allow former Superintendent Lol Fearon to attend.

Mr. Fearon said the process started in 2014 when enrollment was declining. Projections in 2013 were for enrollment to continue declining for approximately five more years. Concerns were raised about sustainability of programming due to declining enrollment, especially at the middle school level. The Board wanted to ensure cost effective comprehensive programs would remain in place to meet the needs of all students.

Discussions were held to consider the possibility of tuitioning middle school students to other districts. Opening Porter to students from other towns such as Andover and Mansfield did not seem viable options as those towns did not seem interested in sending students here on a cooperative basis.

Contracts with E.O. Smith and Bolton high schools end in 2022, requiring a decision by the Board concerning future contracts by 2021. The community and Board are involved in this decision keeping in mind the town has a long history of choice in high school.

Discussions were held concerning whether the District continues to offer two high school choices. Currently Columbia students have choices to attend E.O. Smith (Region 19), Bolton, and Windham Technical high schools.

The Board looked at student success at the current high school choices. All reports from E.O. Smith and Bolton have been positive with regard to our students participating in high level courses, rates of graduation and college choices. Both high schools report our students are well prepared when leaving Porter.

Preliminary costs of tuitioning out middle school students were reviewed. Calculations including both regular and special education tuition did not show a significant savings. Cost was not identified as a major factor in information gained through public comments and surveys. Families voiced concerns about the length of transportation rides and the need to start students days much earlier than what they currently do.

The Board held focus groups and a public forum. Quality of the school was identified as a high priority for high school choice. Economics on the surveys and in those meetings was not as impactful a factor.

Middle School - At the April 23, 2018 Public Forum Meeting, the general consensus seemed to be that residents wanted to continue as pre-K – grade 8 at Porter. There have been significant changes over the last three to four years with staff reassignments, expansion of programs, electives, and expansion into a second foreign language on a pilot basis, all using existing staff. Administrators have worked hard to maintain high quality. The decline in student population bottomed out two to three years ago and we have seen a steady increase of 10 to 12 students to our total population each year these past few years.

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To Ms. Tolsdorf's question, Mr. Fearon stated we have 38 preschool students. We now have a full-day and two half-day sessions. That has attracted families.

Peter Prowda's projection report indicated enrollment would decrease 20% - 30% over the next ten years. Columbia has experienced an upturn in the past two years, with families returning to Porter from private and magnet schools.

Ms. Tolsdorf asked if cost estimates considered teacher retirement costs that may be assumed by the Town.

Mr. Fearon said closing a building saves money. Shifting grades around is not much of a savings because a building is still open. Having our 6 – 8 graders go elsewhere means we would no longer pay salaries and benefits, but funds would be applied to tuition and transportation. If we had self-contained classrooms, we would be able to reduce more positions. Instead we have teams.

Superintendent Geryk said the team approach helps students transition from elementary to middle school.

Ms. Tolsdorf said she would like to see input on depth and breadth of programming if we were to tuition kids out. She would like members of the community and Board to compare that data collaboratively. Mr. Fearon said surrounding districts are facing a decline in population. Hebron, Andover and Marlborough are losing students. Some districts are looking to reduce staff, which impacts programming.

2. Public Comment

Jenn Tigeleiro, 31 Hunt Road, said she heard of this meeting from Mr. Doyle. She believes tonight's attendees are probably the same as usually attend Board meetings. She is willing to bet there was no e-mail or notification on Facebook or other communication. She was here for the April meeting and the room was full. She questioned where the communication breakdown occurred and expressed extreme disappointment. Ms. Tigeleiro requests another public forum be held for the people of Columbia because tonight's attendance is not representative of Columbia.

Chairman Lent stated there is a difference in the various means of notice provided for a public forum versus a subcommittee meeting. For public forums, additional means of notification are utilized, whereas subcommittee meetings are typically posted only in the Town Hall and the district website. For this subcommittee meeting, in addition to the Town Hall and district website, he communicated the meeting on the PTO Facebook page. Ms. Gwinnell corroborated the statement by Chairman Lent that this meeting was posted on the PTO Facebook page. Chairman Lent stated this is a planning meeting, similar to other subcommittee meetings that are typically held immediately before regular BOE meetings. Tonight's meeting was planned and communicated well in advance. The Board went above what is required and scheduled this meeting to review information while Mr. Fearon is still available to participate. Nothing is being done behind the scenes and no votes are being taken tonight.

Ms. Tolsdorf thanked Ms. Tigeleiro for bringing this to their attention, but her husband received an e-mail and it went to people from all different parts of the Columbia population. Superintendent Geryk said she met with a reporter and this meeting was included in the Upcoming Events section of the *Chronicle*. Ms. Tigeleiro said not a lot of people get the newspaper, even though this is a legal way of notifying the public. Ms. Prague Doyle said notification was also posted on the town website, as are agendas.

Ms. Sposito said tonight's meeting is not in the minutes from the October 1 meeting. Chairman Lent said it is in the draft minutes on the website. Further discussion expressing discontent about multiple Horace Porter Facebook pages and difficulty navigating town websites ensued. Ms. Gwinnell said she has worked on multiple occasions to remove the outdated HWP Facebook pages, but it cannot be done by anyone but the page administrator. Superintendent Geryk said her office can send out something to all parents saying where they

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may find such postings so it is consistent. Mr. Fearon said this was done for the April meeting. Ms. Sposito said that if the Board wants people here, we have to find a way to reach the community. Mr. Crim thanked her, saying we are trying really hard and appreciate ideas. Chairman Lent agreed communication could be improved upon, but are making all legal postings.

Mr. Doyle read from the Stakeholder Forum dated May 28, 2014 from Michael Wasta. "In response to this situation the Board of Education and Administration should work to develop a strategic long term plan to create a highly attractive program at Horace W. Porter School that will not only stem the attrition of students but attract students. This plan must be marketed strongly, collaboratively and persistently to the community in order to create a strong sense of investment throughout the community in the idea of the school as one of the hallmarks of what it means to live in Columbia." Mr. Doyle said the Board does not have the time to build that plan, mission statement, vision. There is so much data here he does not know how somebody can keep track of it. Are we changing the school or are we not? This marketing plan could act as the rudder. We need a group of people to put this plan together. This April 23 meeting was packed. This topic is a big deal to people. As a homeowner, this is important to him. It affects property taxes. We paid an individual to collect data. Did the Board include or exclude it?

Mr. Fearon said the work on the long range plan flowed into the Future Needs Committee. What came out of that besides Mike Wasta's conclusion was a look at program structure and how Porter School stood in comparison to that. He believes Chairman Lent will discuss continuing to offer high school choice after 2021 and the middle school question. Superintendent Geryk said she reviewed the strategic work, which was very helpful.

Ms. Tolsdorf sympathized with Mr. Doyle, saying we were in this process before Mr. Fearon came to Columbia. We are now on our third superintendent to guide us through this process. With the budget the Town allowed us to have, how could we change and maintain and add quality programs to Porter? She believes this is being done and said it takes time.

Tom Boardman, 10 Basket Shop Road, said the Board seems bogged down in quagmire, going nowhere fast. He asked what the priority is for the high school decision. Chairman Lent answered that is what we are discussing, trying to work both questions at the same time. The high school issue must be decided. Ms. Tolsdorf answered both are connected. Ms. Dooley agreed, stating these two issues, middle school and high school, are connected.

Ms. Tolsdorf said there is a strong group of parents who want to see us maintain our program. All the schools in the area have different models. Bolton is in one building, through grade 8, with grades 6 – 8 in a different section of the building. Mr. Boardman said he does not want his child where there is no other Columbia children. Ms. Tolsdorf said we must consider children five years from now, parents of children, residents without children in the schools and seniors. This is a community. We will thoroughly examine our options with information and facts and well-informed Board and community members.

3. Discussion

Our Two Essential Questions

- Should the Board of Education consider tuitioning-out our middle school students to another district as we do our high school?

Findings:

- Porter offers competitive quality programs and offerings to the middle school students
- Porter offers small class sizes with individualized instruction
- Tuitioning students will not demonstrate significant savings
- Community support was shared for continuing the Pre-K – 8 model

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- Should the Board of Education consider a single designated high school when our contracts expire with Bolton and Region 19 (E.O. Smith) in 2022?
Findings:
 - All schools offer high quality programs
 - While logistical issues do arise transporting to multiple schools, no significant savings would be realized if one school was identified
 - It was reported that our students are well prepared as they enter E.O. Smith and Bolton
 - Community members commented on the benefits of choice

FNC Next Steps (re: April 23, 2018 Public Forum)

- Review Public Input from April 23, 2018 meeting
- Discuss the Scheduling of Focus Groups (meetings with stakeholders)
 - Teachers
 - Students
 - Community Members
 - Parents

Superintendent Geryk said this is a Board decision and they need to review the information to answer these questions. She looked at these questions and the information available and feels if these questions were asked of her at this moment, she does not see a compelling reason to change from PK-8 or change the options of the high schools. We have a comprehensive program and also have the option to expand. Our offerings are comparable to other schools. There is a sense of community in PK – 8. If there is not a significant financial benefit, then there must be a very compelling reason to change the model in place, which she does not see at this time.

In the secondary level we have one school that offers diversity and another that offers small size. She reviewed the data and did not see anything to cause her to believe we should change what is in place now. Superintendent Geryk said her job is to advocate for the students and the Board has a decision to make.

Ms. Prague Doyle said she has a unique perspective in that she attended Porter School, taught and was an administrator here, and is now on the Board. As an educator and parent, keeping our children close, giving consistency and stability in a community holds great importance in the world we live in.

Students' mental health is important. As a teacher here, kids definitely felt that sense of community. She spent time in Ashford, K-8, and felt the same kind of feeling when you walk in the building. People feel like they belong. Parents feel strongly about this.

Ms. Dooley said we were in a different place when we started this process. 4 – 6 teachers were on the verge of being let go because of enrollment. Thankfully this has leveled off. The community does not want a change and we do not have to make a change. Administration has done everything asked of them for flexibility in scheduling and times. Each grade goes up and down and alterations are made. We have this option (tuitioning-out) available to pull off the shelf if needed down the road.

Mr. Littlefield said everybody knows everybody at Porter. Moving the kids in grades 5, 6, 7 or 8 would be hard. It's hard enough when they have to choose between Bolton and E.O. Smith or Windham Tech for high school. Currently students have the ability to start in Bolton and move to E.O., if that would be a better fit for the individual student. Mr. Littlefield does not see a need to change unless a school drastically increases tuition. If all goes as normal, he recommends we maintain what is in place.

Mr. Crim said that when he and his wife moved to town 18 years ago, they asked about the school, which was vital to their decision. There were a lot of people who participated in the discussions about the school options being discussed now, representing a wide range of demographics. The majority was in favor of keeping things

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the same. We have great choices with great programs. We researched regionalizing and tuitioning-out. He recommends staying with what we have at this time.

Ms. Tolsdorf said she would be interested in tuitioning-in because that would make us larger. She considers our size to be a weakness. Finding a way to tuition-in would be a strength. We do very well for our size. Administration has worked hard to add depth and breadth to programming. She was a middle school teacher for 15 years. It is not always beneficial socially to have a small group of students. When she worked here as a chapter tutor in the 80s, the enrollment was approximately 780 students. Five years ago she was very interested in working with other schools. She said Mr. Fearon's predecessor felt Porter should become an elementary magnet school, pre-k – 4 and tuition-out grades 5 – 8.

Ms. Tolsdorf is impressed with RHAM and Mansfield's middle school. Even if we don't save a lot of money, she thinks it is worth considering because the Board's job is to provide the very best opportunities we can for our children. Her opinion has changed over the years. She heard the other Board members say they are interested in maintaining pre-k – 8, but she says we should study the data more. A group of 8 – 12 people could do a thorough study to present to a large group of people.

Ms. Tolsdorf also stated Willington was interested in partnering with Mansfield. They decided not to pursue because the community had no interest in abandoning their schools. Willington is now approaching E.O. and Mansfield again about merging. Before we decide not to do certain things, we need to be sure. An opportunity such as this does not happen often. 15 years ago there was public outcry about discontinuing Windham High School. Ms. Tolsdorf said the uptick in student population may be due to E.O. Smith being a high school choice.

Ms. Tolsdorf does not know if we looked at everything with the depth we need to. She would like to study this in more depth. Mr. Crim said this conversation has been happening for four years. Ms. Tolsdorf said she would like to study the data we have. The community has been looking at the Board for leadership.

Ms. Tolsdorf continued with saying that if the Board decides to not change our middle school, our high school plan is wonderful. The ideal plan for Ms. Tolsdorf would be for our elementary students to be at Porter, grades 5 – 8 to be tuitioned to Mansfield, and for the high school students to E.O. Smith. Another option Ms. Tolsdorf raised was K – 6 at Porter, middle and high school at RHAM.

Ms. Prague Doyle said 11- and 12-year-olds in a large school does not go well for some kids. It was essential each be in the school of choice that works best for the individual child. The community speaks and we must respond to that. They worked long and hard for high school choice and do not want to give it up because one school does not fit all.

Mr. Fearon said the data Ms. Tolsdorf seeks is already available from the surveys, focus groups and public forums. The vast majority of folks overwhelmingly support the quality of our programs and like what we have. Mr. Fearon believes Superintendent Geryk is right in coming with a more dispassionate point of view. Data points to this being the time to make a decision about Porter being PK – 8 and more than one high school to choose from.

Mr. Fearon said the issue about tuitioning-in students to Porter difficult. Towns around us regionalized already, including Mansfield, Willington, Hebron, and more.

Discussion turned to the importance of sense of community. Some Board members questioned its importance as it was not ranked high on the first survey. Chairman Lent clarified the first survey was talking about the high school options, not middle school. A sense of community was increasingly stressed by respondents when talking about the middle school level. The idea of community is an emotional issue, not statistical.

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Ms. Tolsdorf said we must look at test scores and programs. Mr. Fearon said that data is part of the materials we already have. Chairman Lent spoke of the possibility of getting input from teachers and students. Superintendent Geryk asked if the Board feels like they need more input from smaller groups. Mr. Littlefield said they need input from teachers, students and maybe even residents without children in the school system. Ms. Tolsdorf said she feels we need to do more study, looking at the information and fully discussing the data. Copies were available for the public. It may be valuable to look at it one more time and be sure of our decision. If minds are already made up, it would be spinning our wheels, making it pointless to pore over the data again.

Ms. Dooley said that if we maintain two high schools there is no reason to consider tuitioning-out middle school.

Chairman Lent said the “next steps” communicated at the April public forum noted the Board would hear from teachers as a constituency and students as a constituency to look at this.

Ms. Prague Doyle said teachers/staff would be concerned about losing their job, and children are children. It should be the Board’s responsibility to lead.

Mr. Fearon said staff, including teachers, were invited under separate invitations to focus groups. They were also able to attend public forums. He recalled a whole table full of staff at one forum. Mr. Fearon said he does not think it hurts to go back to staff because they would be the ones to implement what is decided. However, he would not say they were excluded in any way.

Chairman Lent said he was looking for feedback from students. Mr. Fearon said powerful information was received from the high school students. He was also impressed with the essays prepared by grade 8 students, which talked about their time at Porter since kindergarten. They spoke of teachers in the hallways and teachers who greeted them at the door with a song. It was valuable from the perspective of a student.

Mr. Crim considered getting information from eighth grade students regarding the high school they plan to attend. Ms. Gwinnell said she has maintained this information for years and will be able to provide what he seeks. Administrators meet with students and parents as it is decided which high school the child will attend. Students come back on parent night to share their feedback.

Chairman Lent summarized, saying we have the data. Students and teachers were included in the process. He asked if anything else is needed to proceed. Ms. Tolsdorf says we need to review what we have. Everybody should consider the data on programming in all the middle schools. Mr. Fearon said they may reach out to other schools about their interest in tuitioning-in. Superintendent Geryk said we could look at putting something out to surrounding communities. She said she could pull out all the information discussed this evening to be sure every member has packets about the school visits, just to be sure everyone can review the data before coming to the table.

Chairman Lent would like to discuss this at the December Regular meeting. Ms. Prague Doyle asked why we are considering another presentation to the public, only to present the same information that was presented in April. Ms. Tolsdorf said the public did not have the information on the schools, even though it was on the web site and a mailing directed people to the web site.

Mr. Fearon said he must address the general perception presented by tonight’s audience that there is a lack of reaching out to families. He is extremely confident that Mrs. Morey sent out e-mails and provided the information on various websites about tonight’s meeting. He shared that when the April 23 meeting was being coordinated, a letter and packet of materials were mailed directly to family homes, and step-by-step directions to access all the information compiled by the Board on the website was provided.

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Chairman Lent said people look to the Board to make a decision based on the community's input. Therefore, it is confirmed we will meet in December and this vote will be on the agenda. People will have more than 30 days to look at the information again. The public may voice concerns and ask questions at that meeting. We will have a vote that night of yes, no, or more information is needed.

How information about the December Board meeting will be disseminated ensued. Hard copy will be in the post office, Yeoman's Hall, Library and Senior Center. Post cards, School Messenger (which also goes to families of high school students), e-mail to those who asked to be on the mailing list, Facebook, Porter's website and town e-mail blast list will be other potential forms of notification. The PTO is another good way to reach people. Superintendent Geryk agreed to provide copies of the materials to all Board members.

Ms. Tolsdorf said it is a moot point to consider Mansfield Middle if Willington is looking to move there. Mr. Fearon agreed.

Members agreed the December 3, 2018 Regular meeting will start at 7:00 p.m. This vote will be on the agenda. Both questions will be voted on.

Mr. Crim MOVED, Ms. Prague Doyle SECONDED, to adjourn.
MOTION CARRIES 6:0

The Board adjourned at 8:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Tolsdorf, Board Secretary/Vice Chairperson