

HAMPDEN-WILBRAHAM REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
MIDDLE SCHOOL TASK FORCE  
MEETING MINUTES – OPEN SESSION

Thursday, December 11, 2014 – 7:00 p.m. – Minnechaug Regional High School

**Members Present:** Susan Bunnell, Allison Digrande, Marc Ducey, John Flynn, Nick Fyntrilakis, Karen Grycel, Marty McQuade, Lisa Morace, Tricia Murphy, Tod O'Brien, George Semanie, and Sandra Sheehan.

**Members Absent:** Peter Salerno

**Ex Officio Members Present:** Tim Connor, Peter Dufresne, Marty O'Shea, Noel Pixley, Beth Regulbuto

**Ex Officio Members Absent:** Ed Cenedella

During the course of the meeting the following exhibit was reviewed with the members of the HWRSD Middle School Task Force members:

- MSTF Meeting Minutes – December 4, 2014
- “Middle School Task Force: HWRSD Budget Challenges – Next Steps

### 1. Call to Order

Marc Ducey called the HWRSD Middle School Task Force Meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in the MRHS Information Research Commons, recognizing there was a quorum present.

### 2. Minutes – December 4, 2014

**Mr. Flynn made a motion to accept the Minutes of December 4, 2014 and Mr. McQuade seconded.**

During discussion, the minutes were amended in *Section 3. Discussion of Enrollment Trends*, tenth paragraph, to read: Lisa Morace said that we take in School Choice students as we find them. **The amendment was unanimously approved and the Minutes of December 4, 2014, as amended, were approved with Mrs. Digrande abstaining.**

### 3. Discussion of HWRSD School Budget Trends

Mr. Ducey explained this evening would focus on reviewing budget history and trends and then discussing next steps and directional recommendations.

Superintendent O'Shea reviewed his presentation – “Middle School Task Force: HWRSD Budget Challenges and Next Steps.” He first explained that the information provides “a 40 foot view” of both FY12 and FY13 *Per Pupil Expenditures*, which includes all funds except capital expenditures. He discussed the calculations for the average per pupil expenditures (PPE) and how the HWRSD compares with other districts, noting the HWRSD “spends its money wisely.” He then reviewed some major challenges –

- State revenues increasing slower than expected, averaging less than 1% during the last three years, thus affecting Chapter 70 funding.
- Projected expenditure increases are expected to outpace revenues over the next few years, 10% and 2% respectively.
- Enrollment declines directly affect Chapter 70 funding.
- Projections indicate HWRSD enrollment will decrease 422 students in the next 10 years.

During discussion, Mr. Fyntrilakis talked about variable and fixed costs and that the longer this trend continues, the more pressure there will be on fixed costs. Mrs. Bunnell talked about the costs associated with the many educational mandates.

Mr. O'Shea then explained “the building blocks of the HWRSD budget,” including Chapter 70 aid, which is the State's program of funding to public elementary and secondary schools, *plus Minimum Local Contribution (MLC)*, which is the State's calculation based on a community's income and property wealth and thus a measure of local tax revenue for its schools. These added together are the *Foundation Budget, or Required Net Spending*, which is considered the amount needed to provide an adequate education and is based on student demographics and

specific education spending categories. In addition, there is the *Above Minimum Local Contribution*, which is a discretionary amount spent by cities and towns that is above the State's requirement. He commented that MLC is considered a "wealth factor" and that Chapter 70 aid is typically greater for less affluent communities. This is the State's attempt to "level the playing field," but communities can add to this basic funding with their *Above MLC Contribution*. There are other sources of revenue, such as Grants and Regional Transportation, but these three sources – Chapter 70, MLC, and Above MLC - are the major building blocks for the HWRSD budget. Mr. O'Shea pointed out that the *Foundation Budget* calculation was developed before all the modern realities in education – health insurance costs, unfunded mandates, technology, Special Education and other rising costs - and is based on enrollment figures.

Mrs. Digrande said this information is very eye opening and that we need to make this clear to people when making any recommendation, that the status quo, the current school configuration, is not sustainable in light of decreasing enrollment which directly results in decreasing revenue and that we need to decrease expenses. Mrs. Bunnell added that staffing is a big number in the budget and there can be some reduction due to lower enrollment. Mr. Ducey noted that when the School Committee decided to form this Task Force, it was with the notion that they wanted to create an education that was improved, more efficient and cost effective. Mr. Flynn questioned costs that are not directly associated with the educational process, such as retirement expenses, that are obligations regardless of the student enrollment. There was an ensuing discussion of the financial obligation of "Other Post-Employment Benefits" (OPEB).

Mr. O'Shea said that Chapter 70 aid has grown but is not keeping pace. He stated, too, that the *Foundation Budget* calculation is currently under review in an effort to make it more equitable. Mrs. Bunnell agreed and said the State has "flat lined" with its support of its schools, thus putting more pressure on the cities and towns. Mr. O'Brien asked how the Chapter 70 aid plus the MLC and Above MLC are determined, and Mr. O'Shea and Mr. Ducey explained the process of meeting with the towns, then setting the District's budget. The School Committee holds a Public Hearing on the budget in March, then approves their budget and sends it to the two towns for their annual town meetings.

Mr. O'Shea returned to his presentation and discussed two specific challenges facing the HWRSD – Unfunded Mandates and Regional Transportation Reimbursement. Reimbursement for Regional Transportation was promised to be 100% but has averaged only 61% in the last eight years, resulting in a short fall of \$5.4 million. In addition, the HWRSD was just hit with a substantial reduction to the Regional Transportation Reimbursement due to the State's 9C Mid-Year Budget cuts. Mr. Ducey added that he submitted an article to The Wilbraham Hampden Times regarding this issue and that 9C cuts cannot decrease local aid, but the State cut Regional Transportation so the HWRSD lost \$430,000. The Budget Subcommittee will be recommending that the School Committee take the money out of our reserves in order to cover this unexpected revenue shortfall, otherwise draconian measures would be needed to cover these unexpected cuts. The lack of 100% reimbursement has resulted in over a \$1 million shortfall to help fund our budget and this ties our hands for the future. We have scheduled a meeting with our legislators and we plan to discuss this as it is a systemic issue and something needs to change. Mrs. Bunnell added that regional school districts are required to provide transportation and cannot charge for it like other school districts. There was discussion about what cuts would be necessary if the District did not take money out of reserves. It was estimated that there would be at least seven teachers cut, classes could be cancelled, and there would be larger class sizes. Mr. O'Shea noted that there are regional school districts in the process of laying off teachers mid-year; however, due to Mrs. Regulbuto's sound fiscal budget measures, we are fortunate to have a budget buffer against some of these unpredictable cuts.

Relating to the discussion about budgets, Mr. Ducey talked about the School Committee's concern about some of the District's test scores and that they were ready to invest in some new support programs, but then we were hit with these unexpected 9C budget cuts. He also talked about some of the District's outdated textbooks. Mr. O'Shea added that the HWRSD adopted a math textbook series two years ago, but has not been able to do more since then. He said that the District made the investment in the new high school, with the support of our communities and we have done a lot at the elementary level, although there is still much more to be done. However, we are just now

outfitting the middle schools with interactive overhead projector equipment, and there is so much more needed at the middle school level. He noted that the District has had to delay investments in order to weather some budget storms, and we have done a lot, but from his point of view, he is worried about how much longer this can continue. He noted the importance of being fiscally sound, including maintaining our reserves, as eventually this could affect our ability to borrow. As Mr. Salerno has often said, "we cannot save our way to prosperity." This is much bigger than just cost cutting. Mrs. Grycel questioned transportation costs, specifically for athletic teams. While Mr. O'Shea agreed there are areas we can look at more closely, this is about systemic change. He wants to be thinking how can we re-organize and how can we restructure in ways that do not adversely affect services. In fact, he believes we should be expanding middle school extra-curricular activities and we need to think big and systemically. There was additional discussion about transportation costs. Mr. O'Shea said that although they have looked at different configurations, transportation costs still need further research. Mr. Ducey explained that transportation costs may increase if we make a change, but would be small when compared to savings in other areas. Mr. Fyntrilakis noted that as discussed at the last meeting, there would be savings with the consolidation of functions and the maximizing of services. Mrs. Murphy asked about potential fixed costs savings and Mr. O'Shea referenced the spreadsheet from the last meeting, which was a first pass on comparing operational costs for TWB and WMS.

Mr. O'Shea discussed some of the steps taken in the past to deal with budget issues, including building up the District's E&D, increasing Special Education in-district programs, conservative budgeting practices, organizational efficiencies, budgetary freezes, cost sharing, joint purchasing agreements, negotiations give-backs, pursuing grant opportunities, and closing Memorial School. We have done a lot, but there are other areas to consider.

In presenting the directional recommendations, Mr. O'Shea thought he would contrast them to tactical recommendations, and are not intended to be a set of "how to" recommendations but more his recommendation on the direction from his and the administrative team's perspective. He spoke about the basic question of how can we best meet the educational, social, emotional, and physical needs of the adolescents in the HWRSD. As Mr. Ducey has said – let's let the facts lead us, and educationally and financially they point to a single middle school. Mr. O'Shea then reviewed some of the potential benefits to a single middle school, including following the true middle school model concept; equity and consistency for students; expanded offerings; specialization of teaching staff; social and emotional benefits for students; scheduling flexibility; economies of scale; and focused curriculum, supervision, instruction and professional development.

With regards to directional recommendations, Mr. O'Shea said that we will need to consider both short-term and long term. Regarding the short-term, we need to consider the feasibility of accomplishing this in an educationally and financially sound manner for the 16-17 school year. In the long term, we need to look at a long-term solution for developing a plan for a facility that meets the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, the long-term enrollment trends and the fiscal environments in our two towns. Going forward, considerations to keep in mind include expanded community input through forums and surveys, overall budget implications, transportation, transitions and supports, programmatic offerings, scheduling and staffing. He noted that this is a directional recommendation – does not lay out the how-to or tactical considerations, it is more of a road map. Mr. Ducey thanked Mr. O'Shea for his presentation. He said that the group has heard a lot of important facts and figures and it is helpful to get the Superintendent's directional recommendation, but the Task Force is not bound to it. There is much to be considered and Mr. Ducey asked for thoughts and reactions to the presentation.

Mr. Flynn is concerned about how to balance both short-term feasibility and long-term facility solution – it seems they are mutually exclusive and asked would we be better off bearing with the current situation in the short term and trying to fast-track the long-term solution, in which case a plan would have to start immediately. Mr. Ducey feels that even fast-tracking could take upwards of four to five years and he isn't sure we can wait that long. There was discussion that waiting could mean less-than-optimal educational experiences. However, Mr. Flynn believes that during the time spent working toward the long-term facility solution, the School Committee would make sure that they are providing the best educational experience they can while the long-term solution is coming to fruition. Mr. Ducey believes that both the current education model and budget situation can be improved in the short term, although the facility situation cannot. Mr. O'Shea asked if Mr. Flynn was concerned that the short-term solution

would become the long-term solution? Mr. Flynn feels that if a short-term solution is successful, people may wonder why a long-term one is needed; so we would need to be clear that the short-term solution is merely a band-aid solution.

Mrs. Digrande questioned the specifics of a short-term solution. Mr. O'Shea said the solution is really a question – can we, in a way that makes sense educationally for students, pull this off in time for the start of school in 2016? It was noted that the projected 16-17 school year student population cannot be totally housed in either facility. The use of modular or portable units was discussed as a possible solution to merging the two schools for the short term. These units can be simple or elaborate, rented or purchased. They can be pricey, which would obviously draw down any potential savings.

Mr. Ducey then asked the group if anyone thinks we should continue to maintain two middle schools? Mr. Flynn recommended costing out some options, including the use of modular units at both schools in order to house all the students, and transportation costs. The cost of a new middle school should also be researched. Mrs. Bunnell talked about staff savings in having only one middle school and factoring in those savings as well. There was discussion about whether members believe that the District should maintain two middle schools in the long term. Mr. McQuade asked about the new high school – what does its numbers look like in five years and Mr. Ducey asked if there would be any value in moving the 8<sup>th</sup> grade there, thus freeing up space? Mrs. Bunnell said that may save space, but then that brings up social and emotional concerns for 8<sup>th</sup> graders and that is not what we want. Mr. O'Shea explained there are 7-12 high schools that segregate the younger students from the older ones, but MRHS was not designed for that model. Mr. Connor discussed the model middle school program considerations. There was a general discussion about the possibility of allowing Wilbraham 6<sup>th</sup> grade students to attend school in Hampden, and although that could make educational and budgetary sense, parents would probably not be in favor so this would not be a practical solution. Mr. Fyntrilakis believes one middle school is the way to go, but we need to analyze and explore the feasibility of the short-term and long-term options and consider next steps.

Mr. O'Shea explained about working with the MSBA programs and the time necessary to participate in them – the Accelerated Repair Program can be turned around in a year and the Core Program for renovation could take upwards of five to six years and new construction could be eight. Mr. Fyntrilakis commented that he was personally disappointed in the condition of both schools and that he didn't consider either of them adequate and thinks that we should seriously consider taking the time necessary to get a building that truly meets our needs. There was then discussion about not involving the MSBA, but Mr. O'Shea explained that it just makes financial sense to work with the MSBA and get in their funding queue.

Mr. Ducey asked if the members wanted to take a directional vote? Mr. Flynn talked about involving consultants and other groups that could assist in assembling the necessary data on the various options, particularly the costs, and what about a timeline? Mr. Ducey asked if the group wanted to give the Superintendent some direction to pursue during the next few weeks before our next meeting after the first of the year? Mrs. Bunnell feels she needs more information on the costs involved for modulars, how many would be needed at TWB versus how many at WMS and how would that serve the educational needs of our students? Mr. Ducey said he is coming at it from a different perspective - is this group ready to ask the Superintendent to look at a one middle school concept? Mrs. Sheehan asked if we can wait and at the same time maintain the good educational model? Mr. O'Shea feels that we are not really there now, and do we want to maintain the status quo in terms of education and budget while we look at the long-term solution? Mr. Flynn suggested presenting three solutions at the next meeting – 1) costs to put x number of modulars at TWB; 2) costs to put x number of modulars at WMS; and 3) build a new middle school – actually there's a 4) do nothing. These are possible solutions within five years, although he also pointed out that both TWB and WMS require millions of dollars of upgrades just to get to the point of being able to offer the modular solution. Mr. Flynn feels the School Committee is responsible for the short-term solution, the year-to-year operations, while the MSTF looks to the long term.

Mr. Ducey agrees, largely, but if the short-term solution is the one school model, it will require Towns' approval as it will require modification to the Regional Agreement. He believes this is part of the role of this Task Force. Mr.

Flynn asked if we could work with our legislators to approach the MSBA and inquire about fast tracking a project for our towns – he believes a middle school timeline is shorter than a high school. He believes we are making assumptions about the timeline and we should find out if it could be fast-tracked and if so, what would they need from our two towns.

Mrs. Bunnell expects that we are looking at a minimum of two academic years and she would like Mr. O’Shea and his administration team to investigate the possibility of one middle school model in the near future.

**Sue Bunnell proposed that we communicate to the School Committee and administration that it is the opinion of this group that we move to the one-school building option for a regional middle school for the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District in an expeditious manner. Mr. Fyntrilakis so moved, Mr. McQuade seconded.**

**Mr. Fyntrilakis then amended the motion to specify grades six (6) through eight (8) for a single regional middle school. Mrs. Sheehan seconded. The amendment was unanimously approved.**

During discussion, Mrs. Digrande asked if the School Committee would return to this group for future recommendations. Mr. Ducey suggested that this group meet with the School Committee, although he will update the School Committee at their next meeting. He cautioned that since the Task Force does not have the ability to spend money, we will need to engage the School Committee to authorize spending money when the time comes. Mr. O’Shea reviewed the possibility of two feasibility studies and that we would want to discuss this with the MSBA because we wouldn’t want to spend money on a study and then have the MSBA have us start over. Mr. Ducey invited members of the Task Force to attend the School Committee if they want. Mrs. Sheehan asked if we need approval from the towns before we conduct feasibility studies, but Mr. Ducey said that was not necessary. Ms. Morace is concerned, however, that this could all be turned down by the two towns; but Mr. Ducey said this could be done at the town meetings. Mr. O’Shea clarified that a feasibility study with the MSBA does need to be approved by the two towns, although filing a Statement of Interest to start the process with MSBA would require approval by the Selectmen - that is his understanding.

Mr. Ducey asked what this group needs to make a decision, and Mrs. Sheehan said we would need a feasibility study, but it was pointed out that much could be done prior to that step, such as talking with modular unit reps, getting costs, etc. Mr. O’Shea said that the feasibility study needs to be clarified – short term or long term? Mr. Ducey also mentioned that a feasibility study is costly – the one for Soule Road and Wilbraham Middle would have cost \$100,000.

**Mr. Ducey asked for a vote on the amended motion and the motion, as amended, was unanimously approved.**

Mrs. Digrande supports the long-term goal, but asked that the School Committee share with this group the potential short-term solutions – she needs to know more about the short term in order to be fully supportive. Mrs. Bunnell agreed and asked what it will look like in 2016-2017 to achieve housing all 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades students in the HWRSD in one building. Mr. O’Shea said that if this can’t be done in an educationally effective manner, providing students with the services we believe they need, or that the administrative team cannot support, it won’t have his support either. Mr. Fyntrilakis asked what do we need to accomplish this for 16-17 –what are the costs involved with modulars, transportation, upgrades and how will that look educationally, financially, and physically?

Mr. Flynn reiterated the need to change the Regional Agreement and in order to get that support, we will need to also have the long-term solution on the table so people understand what we are trying to accomplish in order to continue to provide a quality education on our way to achieving the best solution. In regards to this, to educating the public, Mr. O’Shea said that Mr. Connor had suggested holding public forums involving members of this Task Force, in order to educate the public on this process and to gather their input using forums, surveys, or other means.

Mr. Ducey suggested that we bring Mr. O'Shea's short-term and long-term solutions to the School Committee and then they can make some decisions on having the Superintendent move forward and start holding public forums. Mr. O'Shea suggested inviting representatives from the MSTF to the next School Committee meeting on December 16<sup>th</sup> to present the recommendation of the MSTF. Mrs. Digrande, Mr. McQuade, Mrs. Sheehan and Mr. Fyntrilakis volunteered to attend.

Mrs. Bunnell again mentioned the need to amend the Regional Agreement and is curious to see what is involved with that change. Mr. Ducey said that we will get our attorney involved.

### 3. Next Steps

Future meetings of the MSTF were scheduled for Thursday, January 8, 2015, and Thursday, January 29, 2015.

Mr. O'Shea will review the Regional Agreement.

**Mr. Ducey asked for a motion to adjourn. Mrs. Sheehan so moved, Mr. McQuade seconded and it was unanimously approved.** The Meeting adjourned at 9:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Karen W. Belsky  
Recording Secretary