

Facilities and Enrollment Task Force

May 20, 2020

Virtual Meeting

5:00 p.m.

Minutes

In attendance:

Scott Baker, Maria Capriola, Matt Curtis, Andy Estell, Josh Falco, Mike Luzietti, Wendy Mackstutis, Steve Matyczyk, Craig Meuser, Erin Murray, Andy O'Brien, Lisa O'Connor, Derek Peterson, Tom Roy, Susan Salina, Maggie Seidel, Jeff Shea, William Sickinger, Neil Sullivan, Colleen Thompson, Jeff Tindall, and Tara Willerup. Also in attendance: Jeff Wyszynski, Tecton Architects

Not present: Scott Aronowitz, Steve Patrina, Matt Wittmer

Jeff Tindall called the meeting to order at 5:04 p.m.

Mr. Tindall acknowledged the economic impacts that COVID-19 is having on the State stating that some have asked why the Board of Education is not delaying this process. He emphasized that it is critical that the task force complete their job as charged by the Board of Finance, and that delaying the process will not solve the demographic issue or the long-range needs of the Town. He went on to say that tonight's goal is to hear the reaction from the Task Force to better position the Board of Education to vote on a recommendation for the best first step of the long-range plan next week. That will allow the next phase of the conversation of working with the Board of Finance and the State of Connecticut.

Approval of February 26, 2020 Minutes:

Mr. Luzietti: MOVE that the minutes of February 26, 2020 be approved

Ms. Salina: Seconded.

So Moved

Mr. Sullivan stated that after having so much momentum coming off of the neighborhood meetings, the February task force, and the March 4 Public Forum, that the work was picked back up behind the scenes by involving the Administrative Council and 6th Grade teams in all five schools to discuss the 6th grade placement.

Mr. Sullivan briefly reviewed the survey data that the community results illustrated that the majority of people would support a 6th grade addition to HJMS, which was in direct contrast to the answer shared at a previous meeting regarding the 6th grade being housed in a 5/6 building. Due to the lack of support, the 5/6 option was moved off the table in February. An overwhelming 80% of staff answered in favor of moving 6th grade to HJMS.

Mr. Sullivan stated that he, Erin Murray (Asst. Superintendent for Teaching & Learning), and Betsy Gunsalus (Director of Elementary Curriculum) met with all five Grade 6 teams to discuss their thoughts surrounding the appropriate placement for 6th grade. More than 80% of the 6th grade teachers are in support of 6th grade being placed at the middle school. Mr. Sullivan summarized

some of the thoughts shared. They felt that their students are ready to move on after having been in the same school for 7 years. They stated challenges of working with 6th grade students in a setting that is so directed towards the younger population, and the advantage of added extra-curricular choices at the middle school.

Mr. Sullivan acknowledged that while the 6th graders may lose their leadership opportunities at the elementary level, the teachers they spoke with shared that those duties can easily be passed on to the 5th grade students. Lastly, given that the Common Core Education Standards are written for K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 configurations, the 6th grade teachers shared the challenge of not being able to interact with 7-8 teachers to work toward a common goal.

Mrs. Murray went on to share that many of these teachers have been teaching 6th grade for several years, and the potential for more collaboration in the Common Core areas of English, Math, Science, and Social Studies would have a positive impact on instruction. They spoke highly of the positive impact of the team approach at HJMS. Another important area they shared was the increased choices in World Language, Technology Education, Family & Consumer Science, and Health/Wellness. Mrs. Murray shared that in addition to Spanish, students would have the choice of French, Chinese, and Latin at the middle school. Mrs. Murray stated that teaching our 6th graders now is markedly different than 5-10 years ago, and that new learning opportunities in a different structure would be advantageous. Some of the teachers shared their excitement with the new design at the middle school and the chances to engage in new ways to promote 21st century learning. They also saw the benefits and opportunities to engage students in a 3-year time span.

Mr. Baker shared that he would be speaking to the developmental and social/emotional needs of 6th graders stating that the information he is sharing has come from research, conversations with 6th grade teachers, and his 25 years of exposure with middle level learners. He stated that while he is proud of what Simsbury Public Schools has done with their 6th graders at the elementary school, there are many advantages to having them with the 7th and 8th grade students. Mr. Baker stated that the developmental needs of a 6th grader are more similar to those of a 7th or 8th grader than those of a kindergartener. He went on to speak about the need for them to be challenged and have choice as an important part of their growth. He complimented the character programs at the elementary schools, but acknowledged the challenge of making them relevant for a kindergartener as well as a 6th grader.

He discussed the positive of having a strong leadership program in 5th grade at the elementary level and then again in 8th grade as they take on an increased role in the transition of the new 6th graders. Mr. Baker stated that independence is very important at this level, and that currently 6th graders are being walked to the bus and to specials in a straight line. Middle School placement of 6th grade would build in an earlier chance for them to be independent. He reiterated the previously shared advantage that extracurricular choices for 6th grade at HJMS are significantly more substantial than at the elementary level.

Mr. Baker stated that social emotional needs are unique in 6th grade sharing that 75-90% of 6th grade students cross the threshold of being a middle schooler in 6th grade - socially, emotionally, and physically. He went on to speak of the increased support system that is available at the middle school with experience in this age group as well as the ability to make more meaningful connections when having the students for a 3 year span.

Mr. Baker shared that feedback from some students and parents received during his years at the elementary level that 7 years in one place is challenging, especially for those students who may have had an embarrassing situation or challenging relationship with an adult in the building. The middle

school has the Counseling office as an added resource for students who may be less likely to share their struggles with their classroom teachers.

Mr. Baker shared his professional opinion that transitioning to middle school from 5th grade is a better time than transitioning in 6th grade. He shared that it will provide them with 3 years to become invested in Henry James. Additionally, from a system point of view – it will be an amazing experience for all Simsbury students to be able to spend 3 years in the newly renovated building. He shared that bringing 6th grade up would be an advantageous time to discuss middle school conferences to engage parents more in the school as well. He encouraged people to visit the HJMS Instagram account -- @HJMSLions -- for pictures of progress of the HJMS renovations.

Mr. Baker went on to address a few commonly asked questions:

Transition: HJMS does a great job now; however, they are thinking a lot of how that would change if we bring up the 6th graders. He stated that they would be leaning heavily on the 8th grade class for their help.

Recess: While it isn't called recess, HJMS does have Connections which meets twice per week. This is a midday break – 12 to 14 students – when the weather is good, it is held outside. Many great team building and community service projects are worked on during these daily breaks. This would be brought to the 6th graders, and would probably have an increased amount of daily time for them.

Leadership: Mr. Baker feels it is a net gain in that the 6th graders will get their opportunity in 8th grade, and 5th graders will now also get an opportunity at the elementary level.

Behavioral: Mr. Baker acknowledged that while there will always be behavior situations, this is where the HJ Way and character programs at the elementary schools will be important.

Operational Concerns:

Mr. Sullivan spoke regarding staffing, and shared that there were many 6th grade teachers who said they would gladly move to the middle school. Human Resources will need to review how we make transfers to these positions, look in to certification issues, and district needs. Other school districts have worked through these issues, so we know it is doable. There is time to determine what that will look like.

Schedule: Mr. Sullivan spoke of the concern raised about whether 6th graders are ready to jump into a secondary schedule. He stated that it is quite possible that 6th grade may run on its own schedule, but that will be discussed as we move forward in the process. There are many options up for discussion, and we will need to determine what works best for Simsbury.

Bus Routes: Mr. Sullivan spoke of two potential structures that will be reviewed:

- 1) 3 wave bus route schedule (high school, middle school, all 5 elementary)
- 2) 2 wave bus route schedule (middle/high & elementary) He stated that many of the middle and high school buses are under-riden because parents bring their children to school and many high school kids drive.

Budget: Mr. Sullivan stated that while there are some things that will allow you to create some efficiency, there would also be offsetting costs, including more administrative support.

Demographics: Mr. Sullivan briefly reviewed a demographic slide that illustrates the current enrollment (10/1/2019) and the Milone & McBroom 5-year projections. The projections were shared in K-6 and K-5 configurations. He noted that many of the K-5 projections are remarkably close to what the current enrollment is. A final column illustrates the number of classrooms that would be emptied by taking 6th grade out of the elementary level, stating that these may either be used for enrollment increases or possibly adding PK to more of the schools. He stated that it is important to remember that moving 6th grade to HJMS helps all of the elementary schools.

Mr. Sullivan stated that given where we came over the course of the year with the survey results, focus groups with 6th grade teachers, educational/social emotional reasons we've outlined, we are at the point where we believe that there is strong support for 6th grade students to be located at Henry James, and that will be the recommendation we will bring to the BOE next Tuesday night.

Questions:

Jeff Tindall – When looking at the current 7-8 configuration, is it a reality that the students are experiencing transition stress in both years at Henry James as they transition in during their first year and transition out during their second. Mr. Baker answered that although he does feel like the students do get a chance to feel part of HJMS, they are basically in transition during the majority of their time there.

Wendy Mackstutis: Given the current situation with COVID-19, should we be looking at things differently? There is a potential for instruction to change, limiting numbers of people on site every day. Additionally, she questioned whether there would be a change at the State level in terms of providing funding and how this would affect our ability to absorb costs in the current economic climate.

Mr. Curtis answered that while we all are thinking about these questions, it is important to think of this as a long-range plan and to make a decision on the best first option. Once we have that decision, these questions/concerns will be vetted through that option and timeline.

Andy Estell: How does this plan dovetail with the previously identified concern with Latimer Lane?

Mr. Curtis stated that once the option is defined, it would include Latimer Lane. The conversation from there will be which project is the first priority.

Ms. Willerup agreed with Mr. Curtis that this has been our priority for a long time with good reason, and we cannot lose that vision. Ms. Salina stated that distance learning as a long-haul answer would be challenging, adding that while we have to plan with the impacts of COVID-19 in mind, we need to do our best to address the long-range plan. She went on to say that she is hopeful that there will be some economic recovery prior to the project starting.

Mr. Curtis mentioned that the Town of Simsbury is entering into a long-range project with Tecton, which will result in conversations about needs town-wide. He shared his feeling of the importance of speaking with Board of Finance members to provide them with the education of what the needs of the school system are. Mr. Peterson agreed that meeting with the Board of Finance would be an important step as there will be many questions; however, he indicated that he is sensitive to the timing of the presentation given the current economic situation of residents.

Tom Roy: Would a renovation of Latimer happen before the 6th grade move to Henry James or would we move the 6th grade out of Latimer Lane first to allow some float space? Mr. Sullivan indicated that originally the projects were slated to be simultaneous; however, given the current economic

situation, it may not be realistic. He went on to say that we could move forward with either one happening first, and that would be discussed as we move forward. Mr. Sullivan asked Mr. Wyszynski to address the importance of having the long-range plan to present to the State.

Mr. Wyszynski shared that the State will be looking for the entire plan when you come in to discuss the first project. He went on to say that while the current economic situation is dire, he anticipates that will improve, and in this phase of discussing and decision making, the cost is minimal. He reminded the committee that if Simsbury submits a grant application in the Spring, the project wouldn't commence until 2024, so while we must be sensitive to the current situation, it is important to stay the course with the overall plan. Jeff also answered Ms. Mackstutis' earlier question stating that the State has not changed deadlines or given any indication of changes at this point.

Scott Baker – Will there be an impact on the current projections based on this financial crisis. Mr. Wyszynski indicated that generally in an economic downturn, you would see a dip in the projections; but in this case, 5-year projections include students that have already been born.

Mr. Sullivan stated that we are at the point where we can make a strong recommendation to the Board of Education for 6th grade to move to Henry James Memorial School as the best first step at their Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, May 26 recognizing that we will remain sensitive to the current situation and economic impact.

Mr. Peterson asked how many responses were received from the community and staff for the survey, and of the staff numbers, how many were Simsbury residents. Mr. Sullivan answered that there were approximately 320 responses to the staff survey, and that while we don't have actual data to share at this meeting, many of them are Simsbury residents. There were 1158 responses to the community survey.

Adjournment

Tara Willerup:

Move to Adjourn

Susan Salina:

Seconded. So moved at 6:08 p.m.