

Southern Berkshire Regional School Committee  
Mt. Everett Regional School  
Sheffield, MA  
October 30, 2014  
Meeting #1,482

School Committee Members: Mr. Stewart, Ms. Silvers, Ms. Rundle, Mr. Batacchi, Mr. Valentini, Ms. Sparhawk, Mr. Flynn, Mr. Sears, Ms. Sahn

Absent: Ms. Fields

Administration: Mr. Hastings, Mr. Turner, Mr. Simon, Ms. LeBlanc, Mr. Devoti

Others: Ms. Michele Peters; Mr. Nathaniel Yohalem, New Marlborough Select Board Member; Mr. John Tranfaglia; Mr. Thomas Scanlon, Jr., of Scanlon & Associates, CPAs; Mr. Scott Jennsen, Monterey Select Board Member; Ms. Linda Higgins

Student Representative: None in attendance

Press: CTSB TV; Ms. Julie Ruth, Berkshire Record

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Chairman Stewart called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. He noted that if Ms. Fields were able to attend, this would be her last meeting. He thanked her in absentia for her wonderful and dedicated service to the District.

Chairman Stewart also thanked Jeff Lang, Advisor, for the publication of the Mt. Everett student newspaper, The Bold Eagle. He particularly commended an article in the current edition entitled, "What Lies Within", written by student Austen Dupont.

2. **APPROVAL OF MINUTES:** Ms. Silvers moved to approve the minutes of School Committee Meeting #1,481. Ms. Sparhawk seconded the motion, and it was so voted, unanimously.
3. **COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE PERTAINING TO THIS EVENING'S AGENDA ITEMS**
  - A. There was no student representative in attendance.
  - B. There were no communications from the audience.

4. **UPDATES / PRESENTATIONS**
  - A. Elementary School Improvement Plan: Mr. Simon explained that the approved school improvement plan which was already on file was meant to be a multi-year document. He said that after the summer administrative meetings, he and Mr. Devoti had worked together to bring the goals of all the schools into line with the District goals. He had then brought the new document forth to the Elementary School Council and asked them their thoughts. He said that the document presented reflects the ideas of the School Council.

A question and answer session then took place. Mr. Simon explained that the goals for the year are mainly about school culture, curriculum development, academic rigor, and professional culture. Assistant Elementary Principal, Deanna LeBlanc, also spoke, explaining various school culture programs that are ongoing. She added that one of the main goals is to be sure the students are prepared for emergency situations, and in that vein, they have been introducing emergency personnel (police officers and firemen) to the children so they would know what they look like and be comfortable with them. She said that the

administrators and teachers are continuing to work with the PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention System), as well.

Members commended the rigor in grade 4. They also questioned what was happening with the math program in grade 3 and what was being done to improve the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade MCAS scores. It was explained that the elementary team, along with Curriculum & Professional Development Coordinator Kerry Burke, are working on that together. Mr. Hastings said that there would be a major presentation in that regard at the November 20 meeting.

Mr. Simon also reported that having the cultural calendar this year has meant that the staff is not only communicating with each other more, but is also collaborating more than in past years. He noted that there will be a joint performance with New Marlborough Central at Undermountain before Thanksgiving this year. He said that they will also have Undermountain classes visit New Marlborough.

Ms. Sahn suggested using the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher grouping for ELA and Math as a model for the rest of the elementary. Mr. Simon said that many of those things are happening at different levels, although it looks different in some cases.

Mr. Valentini noted the importance of the schools being considered part of the one district, rather than four separate elementary schools. He suggested that he and Ms. Silvers would like to do some brainstorming in that regard with Mr. Simon and Mr. Hastings.

Ms. Sparhawk then moved to approve the elementary school improvement plan, as presented. Mr. Flynn seconded the motion, and it was so voted, unanimously.

B. Audit Report: Mr. Thomas Scanlon, Jr., senior partner at Scanlon & Associates, presented highlights of the FY 2013 District audit which was conducted by his firm. He said that overall there were no significant adjustments, and the District had received an unmodified opinion, with no material deficiencies or weaknesses. He noted items in need of improvement, which included the following:

- A deficit in the school lunch account. It was noted that steps have been taken to be sure this does not happen again.
- Variances in the student activities accounts. Mr. Turner explained the problem to the Committee, noting that it began when the computer program crashed, and some of the information had not been backed up, thus the data needed to be recreated. Mr. Scanlon stated that the problem appeared to be a bookkeeping error, and it was not believed that any funds were missing.
- Mr. Scanlon said that the auditors would also like to see the accounting for health insurance withholding tightened up.
- He noted that the District's E & D had been over the limit, and the difference had not been returned to the towns until FY'14.
- Mr. Scanlon also noted concerns about GASB 65 and 68.

Much discussion took place, with Committee members expressing a desire to receive future audit reports much earlier in the process. They also made suggestions to alleviate the concerns of the auditors, and they requested that Mr. Turner focus on items in need of improvement which have appeared in more than one year's audit.

## 5. **BUSINESS**

A. Superintendent's Report: Mr. Hastings reported the following:

- Starting November 7, 2014, Southern Berkshire Childcare children will visit the Sheffield Senior Center twice each month.
- Southern Berkshire students have been invited to Halloween events on October 31 at the Sheffield Historical Society and Sheffield Fire Department.

- The Mt. Everett NHS will sponsor a Veterans' Day Dinner at the Sheffield Legion Hall on Nov. 7.
  - The Senior Citizen Luncheon Committee is preparing for the annual luncheon on December 4, 2014.
  - Kari Giordano's Design students will work to craft devices or supports that will help senior citizens. Kari will present these projects and others at the National Arts Conference in New Orleans later this year.
  - The Fitness Center has been cleaned. Repairs have been made, and it will be up and running next week.
  - A fire safety training took place on Monday at Undermountain Elementary, thanks to Tony Bleau and the Sheffield Fire Department.
  - A blood drive, sponsored by SWAG, took place at Mt. Everett today.
  - Sarah Siket took part in a summer program at the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), along with her colleagues, Lew Randall and Regan Morency. Sara will present field work completed pursuant to that training at the AIER next week.
  - Jeremiah Bickford is conducting an afterschool small engine repair project for students. He is volunteering his time in this effort. He also volunteers to run an SAT prep course for our students.
  - Kerry Burke will report on MCAS, Curriculum, and the formation of professional learning communities at our next meeting.
  - We will send a team to Lenox and Lee next week to collaborate on math.
  - Max Lowenstein has been presented the MASS Superintendent's Award for Academic Excellence. He and his family will attend the November 20 School Committee meeting.
  - Chickens raised in the culinary/agricultural science programs have been PROCESSED.
  - The Safety Committee has been meeting regularly and is in the process of refining suicide prevention, violent intruder, and evacuation protocols.
  - The senior class will present Halloween skits on Friday morning.
  - This week the Berkshire Record will feature stories on the Mount Everett school newspaper and safety initiatives.
  - Progress on the yellow house project continues. Most of the landscaping has been completed.
  - John Morello performed a one man play at Mt. Everett that was well received by students and staff.
  - Shakespeare and Company is in full swing, with performances scheduled in November.
  - Both the boys and girls soccer teams have qualified for Western Mass tournaments, and we will learn Friday night if we will be hosting home games.
  - Mt. Everett hosted a group of class officers from Monument Mountain on Monday, and our officers will visit Monument Mountain on Friday, October 31<sup>st</sup>.
  - The Café, which is our culinary class, continues to open every Wednesday for lunches. All are welcome.
  - The Mount Everett Guidance Department has been busy coordinating visits from college reps including Keene State, Williams, Bryant, Nichols, MIT, SUNY Geneseo, Lesley University, and UMASS Boston.
- B. Preliminary Approval for Nature's Classroom Trip: Following a brief discussion with Ms. Peters and Mr. Simon, Mr. Flynn moved to grant preliminary approval for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade trip to Nature's Classroom, April 13 – 17, 2015. Ms. Sparhawk seconded the motion, and it was so voted, unanimously.
- C. Consideration of New Marlborough Select Board's Request Regarding Community Schools: Mr. Flynn stated that the Committee had three letters from three separate select boards, calling for action (i.e., requesting the closure of one or more of the community schools). Mr. Valentini stated that the Regional Agreement appears to be mute regarding how the process is begun to close a school (i.e., a program of the District). He noted that those who drafted the Restated Agreement had left all decisions regarding the opening or closing of a District program to the School Committee. Once the Committee makes such a decision, it is up to the towns to ratify the decision.

Mr. Stewart asked whether the towns would have any recourse, should such a motion fail. Mr. Valentini stated that the town(s) could address the issue by agreeing to restate the District Agreement. Mr. Sears

added that the towns could also work together to put forth a warrant item to go before all five towns to change the Agreement. Also, he said that any citizen could petition the towns for such a warrant article.

Mr. Flynn then moved to vote to begin the process, Proposed School Action, as defined in Section 3, The District Schools, of our Regional Agreement, for the closing of one or more of our community schools. Specifically, the Egremont School, the Monterey School, and the New Marlborough Central School. Further, the three schools are not to be coupled, and each school will require a separate vote for a total of three votes.

Additionally, Mr. Flynn stated that a super majority of the School Committee (7 votes) would be necessary for an affirmative vote of each motion, per Section 3. It was also noted that an affirmative vote on any community school would result in the beginning of the “Proposed School Action” closure process, as described in the Regional Agreement for that school only. By “School”, the motion refers to the educational program being conducted by the Southern Berkshire Regional School District at this time. Mr. Valentini seconded the motion.

Mr. Sears requested that the sequence of votes be as follows: the Monterey School, the South Egremont School, and then the New Marlborough Central School. It was so agreed.

Chairman Stewart then opened the floor for discussion.

Mr. Valentini said the he believed that the framers and the “reiterators” of the District Agreement had placed the responsibility of moving forward with the closure of a school or program in the hands of the School Committee because they believed that the Committee was best able to consider all of the aspects of closing a school. He said that each of the School Committee members would need to examine the positives and the negatives of such action. Mr. Valentini said that he felt that the only positive aspect of closing a program would be in dollars; however, the negatives would include community relations, collegial feelings, educational aspects, etc. He asked that each of the School Committee members consider whether (s)he wished to go forward with the process of closing any of the programs.

Ms. Rundle spoke as the representative from the town of Monterey. She said that it was hard to see this issue come up again and again and not be able to see a way out. She noted her appreciation of the work Superintendent Hastings had done over the summer in bringing together the select boards, and she said that those discussions had been illuminating and had allowed them to move beyond some of the superficial discussion. She said that while she agreed that the decision cannot be only about money, it was important to have that information. Ms. Rundle recalled that at those meetings, Mr. Turner and Mr. Sears had each separately calculated the savings if the Monterey School were to close, and both had concluded that the savings would amount to a few dollars on each individual tax bill. Ms. Rundle said that she found the requests to close the school discouraging because the Monterey program is making an effort to look at early childhood programs, and she suggested that the uncertainty that is brought about when closing discussions are taking place does a disservice to parents of the District, as well. She noted that two years ago, Monterey citizens were asked to pay an 11.6% increase in their school assessment (due to a change in state formula), and the school budget was supported, as it has been every year. She added that the town has paid for their own engineering study to look at building needs, and that the town voted for the current regional agreement, even though it meant giving up some of their power. Ms. Rundle said that she felt like that dynamic has been exploited. She asked that the District look at how to start cooperating with other districts, and not just the towns of their own District. Ms. Rundle concluded by saying that she is appreciative of every aspect of the conversation and her own limited perspective of the conversation.

Mr. Stewart noted that Ms. Rundle is the representative for every town in the District, and he said that next Tuesday, District citizens will vote for every candidate for the School Committee. He stated that the letter from Alford had stated that the School Committee member from Alford is not following the wishes of the town of Alford, but, he said, he is representing the Southern Berkshire Regional School District, not just the town of Alford.

Ms. Rundle said that she understood that she is a representative of the entire District; however, she said that she wished to represent the town of Monterey in this particular conversation.

Mr. Sears spoke, saying that he also believes that he represents all five towns, and that he is concerned about continuing to go through the conversations about closing community schools. He said that the District needs to be focused on county-wide programs to address enrollment decline and on working with the South Berkshire Shared Programs initiative. He cautioned that if the District does vote to close one or more of the community schools, it would likely be the end of the District. He said that there are other solutions that do not involve talking about further regionalization, rather finding other ways to work with neighboring Districts on problems all are encountering. Mr. Sears stated that although much has been said about the financial impact of closing one or more of the community schools, he believes that doing so would, in the end, make a huge (negative) financial impact.

Ms. Silvers stated that the issues of fiscal plant and program need to be separated. She said that after listening to the Early Childhood Task Force and learning what the town of Monterey can offer to children, she would be more inclined to expand the program there. Ms. Silvers said that if there was a safe building there, she believed that many talented people in the community would avail themselves to give a great deal to the children. She noted that the District is wealthy in talented people in all five communities, and said that that talent is worth much more than the \$100,000 projected savings in closing the Monterey School.

Ms. Sahn said that the conversation is about the viability of the District, both the financial operation and the educational institution, as it encompasses the five towns. She said that she believes that each of the three community schools is a very important part of the District. Ms. Sahn also stated that she believes that it is a disservice to the District to keep bringing up the conversation about the closure of one or more of the schools every two years. She said that she resents the amount of time put into considering it, having attended twenty meetings the last time, and about a dozen this year. She suggested talking about the viability of each program and the correct period of time in which to reassess the number of programs the District runs.

Mr. Valentini said that he represents the District, and he noted that although there are differing opinions in each town, he thinks about what is good for the District as a whole.

Chairman Stewart then called the question regarding the Monterey School. He reminded the Members that a yes vote is for the motion to close the Monterey School, and that the motion would require seven affirmative votes to pass. The vote:

Mr. Flynn	No	Mr. Batacchi	No	Ms. Sparhawk	No
Ms. Silvers	No	Ms. Sahn	No	Ms. Rundle	No
Mr. Sears	No	Mr. Valentini	No		

Chairman Stewart then called for a vote regarding the proposed closing of the South Egremont School.

The vote:

Mr. Flynn	No	Mr. Batacchi	No	Ms. Sparhawk	No
Ms. Silvers	No	Ms. Sahn	No	Ms. Rundle	No
Mr. Sears	No	Mr. Valentini	No		

Chairman Stewart then called for a vote regarding the proposed closing of the New Marlborough Central School. The vote:

Mr. Flynn	No	Mr. Batacchi	No	Ms. Sparhawk	No
Ms. Silvers	No	Ms. Sahn	No	Ms. Rundle	No
Mr. Sears	No	Mr. Valentini	No		

Chairman Stewart said that he thought Ms. Sahn's idea of discussing when to revisit the issues is a good one, but he said he would not take up that conversation at this time. He expressed a hope that the closing issue has been laid to rest for a decent amount of time.

Mr. Sears moved that the Committee ask each of the five towns to put the motion to close the three schools on their next town meeting warrants, changing the wording of the last sentence to read, "unless said vote is ratified by majority vote of all five town meetings." Mr. Stewart noted that if approved, it would just present a sense of the community and may not be binding. Mr. Flynn seconded the motion.

Following discussion, the motion was defeated, with two members voting for the motion (Mr. Sears and Mr. Flynn), and six members voting in opposition.

Ms. Silvers then moved to ask the Superintendent to send a letter to all five select boards, indicating the motion raised at the meeting and that it was turned down by unanimous vote. Mr. Stewart said that he thought it may be better to just send the minutes of the meeting. Ms. Silvers withdrew her motion.

D. Subcommittee/Representative Reports:

1) Food Subcommittee: Mr. Tranfaglia, Director of Food Services, reported on the after-school snack program. He said that the trial period had run for a week, and that he had offered pizza, cheeseburgers, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and cold cut sandwiches. The program was advertised through brightly colored posters, speaking with the students during the lunch periods, and announcements at the end of the day. He reported that the program had taken in approximately \$34 per day. In the discussion that followed, Mr. Tranfaglia informed the Committee that the program would need to take in approximately \$100 per day in order to break even. Suggestions were made to consider focusing on paring down the menu and to figure out how to offer the program without incurring labor costs. It was also noted that parents need to be made aware so they can send their children with money. Following additional discussion, Mr. Batacchi moved to continue the after school snack program for the remainder of the year. Mr. Flynn seconded the motion. Concern was expressed regarding how much of a deficit the program might add, and it was agreed to amend the motion to hold the program until the January School Committee meeting and to reassess it at that time. The motion was then approved, unanimously.

(Ms. Sparhawk left the meeting at 8:50 p.m.)

- 2) Executive Evaluation: Chairman Stewart reported on the status of the evaluation of the Superintendent. He said that the evaluation had been completed by eight members of the School Committee and will be available in the Superintendent's Office. Mr. Stewart will prepare a written report, which will be appended to these minutes. Mr. Stewart explained that the Committee had conducted an in-depth evaluation of Mr. Hastings' first year in the superintendency. He said that ratings of exemplary and unsatisfactory were not used because they were not appropriate for a first year superintendent. On behalf of the Committee, Mr. Stewart thanked Mr. Hastings for his service and his performance in his first year.
- 3) Finance Subcommittee: Mr. Valentini reported that the group had received a proposal from the Reservoir Road Holdings, LLC to provide solar net metering credits, which would essentially reduce the District's electric bill by 3 cents per kilowatt hour. If the District entered into the agreement, the anticipated savings would be approximately \$27,000 per year. The Finance Subcommittee will review a proposed contract prior to making a recommendation. They will investigate whether it is possible to get out of the contract before it expires, given the anticipated 20 year term. Ms. Silvers asked to see if they could build a clause into the contract that would allow the terms to be reviewed every three years.

Mr. Valentini also reported that the District's E & D fund is healthy, and that they are aiming to bring forward the FY'16 budget at a 2% increase.

The Budget/School Committee Meeting calendar was tabled until the next meeting.

- 4) Policy Subcommittee: Mr. Flynn reported that the Policy Subcommittee did not meet. A meeting was set for next week.
- 5) Transportation Subcommittee: Mr. Batacchi reported that Superintendent Hastings is ready to send out a survey to see if there is a need for a 3:00 p.m. bus to go to Great Barrington. He said that the District is working with the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority to make that happen, if there is a need. Mr. Batacchi also reported that following discussion regarding whether to buy a program to map out the bus routes or to engage the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (LPVEC) for that service, the Subcommittee had voted to engage the services of the LPVEC.

Mr. Turner will look into the fuel adjustment clause in the bus contracts, given the falling gasoline prices of late.

Mr. Batacchi moved, seconded by Mr. Valentini, to authorize the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative to work on the District's bus routes. Mr. Turner said that the cost for the service will be \$6500. It was so voted, unanimously.

- 6) Ad Hoc Advisory Committee: Ms. Silvers reported that the Advisory Committee had made a decision to meet with the members of the community that had expressed an interest and that thus far, three such meetings have taken place. She said each has been invited to offer contacts.

E. Financial Updates: There were no financial updates.

## 6. COMMUNICATION FROM THE PUBLIC / REQUESTS FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

- A. Mr. Sears requested a future agenda item to look at the issue of whether high school students should start school later than elementary students. He said that there are lots of schools making that switch. He asked that the discussion take place prior to the new bus contracts coming due.

Mr. Valentini moved, seconded by Ms. Silvers, to adjourn the meeting. It was so voted, and the meeting adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

### *Documents presented for this meeting:*

- *Agenda, Meeting #1,482*
- *Minutes, Meeting #1, 481*
- *School Improvement Plan: Elementary Schools of the Southern Berkshire Regional School District, 2014-15*
- *Request for Initial Approval of Overnight Field Trip for the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade to Nature's Classroom, April 13-17, 2015*
- *Letters from the New Marlborough Select Board dated October 21, 2014 and March 17, 2014*
- *Letters from the Alford Select Board dated October 27, 2014 and May 12, 2014*
- *Letter from the Sheffield Select Board dated March 11, 2104*