

WILLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 23, 2013

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m. by Chairman Erika Wiecenski at the Town Office Building.

PRESENT: Erika Wiecenski, Herb Arico, Mark Jones, Michelle Cunningham, Barry Wallett, Leo Mercado, Heather Estey, Superintendent David Harding

ABSENT: None

PRESENT TO SPEAK:

Superintendent Harding gave a brief review of the budget stating it was originally presented as a 5.28% increase, but at last week's meeting the board voted \$13,000.00 of cuts resulting in a 5.11% increase for a new budget of \$8,029,617.00.

He explained that the per pupil expense is high for three reasons; one being there are two schools which is more expensive than running one school yet it is not feasible to consolidate or to build a new school at this time. The second are the programs which Willington has including gifted and talented, Spanish, music etc. which is atypical to have some of these programs for a school system of our size. Other schools only have Spanish for the 7th and 8th grades and do not have gifted and talented programs or 2.6 music teachers. The third reason is the class sizes. He explained that it is a value call for the community. He has in the past proposed to increase class size and each time the community has come out and responded saying no to that. The research is nebulous at best with some stating small class size is essential and some stating it does not matter. It is a fiscal decision and the community needs to voice their opinion about the programs and the class size.

John Collins stated he is active in the community and the schools, he works at a school and he values small class size. He thinks if two classes of 23 or three classes of 15 or 16 are the choices then going with the three of 15 or 16 is the way to go. He is an advocate of the smaller sizes. He also stated he is very involved with the music program at Hall School and is in support of that program and thinks it is special and needs to be kept intact.

Osha Roller stated they moved here two years ago and were drawn here because of the school, the small class sizes and the programs. Their child is at Center and is very happy, feels at home and she would hate to see the sizes increase. She said she grew up in an urban school with larger class sizes and once they go up in size it is hard to reverse that.

Tammy Dolce stated she has a child at HMS, she works at CES and that the BOE should think about what they want to do not in terms of numbers but in terms of students and their needs. Both schools are amazing because the needs and diversity are being focused on as individuals.

Alaric Fox thanked the BOE, stating they are in an unenviable position with difficult choices to make. He asked to leave the budget as intact and as robust as can. He said we are on a precipice each time and it is a value statement and judgment as to what to do. He moved here because of the schools after seeing the advantages of the students from Willington when he attended Windham High School. He has two children at HMS who share with him that at times they do not have enough time with the teachers as it is, with larger class sizes what would you see? It is paramount to success to students and the community to fully fund education.

Val Moseley read a letter written by the P.T.A. advocacy committee that had 26 signatures.

About 10 others in audience that had signed the letter stood as it was read. The letter stated that Willington schools are competitive compared to Mansfield and Ashford when they arrive at E.O. Smith and that the quality of education stems from small class sizes and highly qualified teachers. Studies show that 16-18 students per class is what is ideal for small learning community to be more effective, for teachers to focus on small groups, and for better safety and security in school. It would be a disservice to have larger class sizes. Study by Greg Dream show early math focus is an early predictor for success. Therefore we need the math program to be steady and solid before any changes are made. Sports, arts, and other academic programs are important for the students to have choices and to enjoy. They support keeping all programs and teachers for the 13-14 school year.

Mike Enright stated his family moved here about 10 years ago because the schools and people were great. There is no theatre, carwash or mall but there are great schools. Increasing class size is scary, stating that the students will still get a good education but not a great one. There are some situations that it is acceptable to be good but not in education, it needs to be great. He thanked the Board for their time.

Amanda Fox, grade 6 student at HMS, agreed with the town stating that there is not enough time with teachers at Center and Hall to get help with work or if you missed work. She asked not to increase class size stating it is not fair to the students or the teachers. She said that music and Spanish are needed for life. She learned to love music and Spanish through Hall and Center Schools.

Barbara Gounaris said she reiterates what people have stated already and that she moved here anticipating having kids and came here for the schools. She grew up in N.H. with population of 800 and combined elementary grades with 2 grades per class up to 3rd grade then in to a larger middle school where she felt unprepared and had a hard time learning and socially. She promised to give her kids a much better chance to succeed.

Lynn McAvoy stated she has one student at Hall and one at Center with another to come to Center in 2014. She has a special needs child and one that excels in school. The smaller class sizes and community helped her child become a part of the school community. She teaches (outside of Willington) grade 6 reading classes with 26, 23, 18 and 19 students and looks to the future of the middle school model with block scheduling. If you change the class sizes and eliminate a teacher then how will that change how the block scheduling is run? Asked Board to reconsider that and thanked them for their time. She also stated that small size allows challenges for kids that are doing well and differentiates for kids with special needs.

John Davies stated he did some research and found the Bill & Melissa Gates foundation spent 2 billion dollars on this subject with results showing that smaller class size did not make a difference but the quality of the teacher made the difference. He mentioned that clearly he is in the minority, he has a daughter in 7th grade with 21 in her class and she is excelling. The larger size does not make the difference as much as the teacher does. He also commented on the subjects of science and social studies for grades 7 and 8 stating they are currently 6 weeks on 6 weeks off and that reduces the amount of time on these subjects. Science and math are so lacking in America that they should not be reduced they should be back to full subjects. He mentioned he and his wife are engineers and he has two daughters in college studying engineering and that kids are influenced by science teachers.

Stephanie Somers has a son in grade 7 and she is surprised that the time for social studies and science is less than other subjects get. She can't understand that, with the future problems we are

facing with science, social and environmental issues. Her son has an energy for science and social studies that is not being fed. Six weeks on and off are not enough. Last year it was one week on one week off and there was conflict around the schedule. Science is now on the CMT's and it should be addressed as a core class, other students going to EO Smith are getting it every day. Class size in labs are 21, 23 so already there as far as size goes. Can we develop a program that teachers would be able to switch subjects and help with the issue? Or is there another answer?

Peter Watts has two grade 6 students and stated he is a product of a small school in Ellington with both parents as educators. He feels there is a connection to the teacher and the family and if the class sizes were larger you would not have that option to have one on one face time with a teacher, it would become less and less, if any. Hartford (and other larger areas) etc., has issues, we may not have football or a pool but we do have small class sizes and do very well with the core curriculums for the future. People are thinking about the financial part today and not looking toward the future, consider the reality if you lose the face time.

Gianna Stebbins has a grade 7 and a grade 5 student and she agrees with John Davies. She does not see how class size impacts learning. She stated we went from 4 to 3 homerooms and it worked it was not a problem. Center is smaller, Hall is larger, it prepares them to move on to E.O. Smith to work fast and work hard. She also agreed with Stephanie Somers about the science and social studies subjects, it is a major issue and we need the whole curriculum straight through.

Christina Conde, a parent and a teacher in another district, feels the sizes should be smaller. People know her son and he is in good hands. Consolidating services at a young age where literacy is developing can be major problem for students not at grade level by third grade. It is difficult and unlikely for them to catch up. Losing an opportunity to enrich kids down the road will look at more remediation later instead.

John Davies asked for clarification on whether Center and Hall have aides in the classes as well as the teachers.

Superintendent and Board responded that paras are assigned to specific students through PPT plans as required and there are not additional aides in the rooms.

Tina Gounaris spoke in favor of small class sizes stating at her employment she sees a lot of layoffs and is part of the group that has to take on more work because of those. She sees the effects of the work not being done right and not having enough time for the work. She says it is not fair to have the kids go through that same scenario as well.

Tanya Little says this is the third school for her child. She supports small class sizes. Even in the larger towns with more money she thought her child would lose out on benefits by coming here but even those towns did not have Spanish, or as much time in PE, library, computer, etc. as he does here. He gained so much being here, school was nice in Fairfield but he did not lose anything coming here. She believes class sizes should be small in lower grades but as kids get older class size can increase by a few because they do need to adjust. When she graduated from Ashford there were only 36 students in her grade and when she got to E.O. Smith it was a shock, it was a hard adjustment.

Bill Surette has a student in first grade and is a math teacher In another town. He does not see an upside to an increase in class size. He stated it was debatable if student achievement goes up

with smaller class size but anecdotally if a teacher cost approximately \$100,000 per year including salary and benefits then divide that by the number of tax payers and you roughly get a cost of about \$3.00 per taxpayer per month in savings. Why debate around that small amount of money per month, you cannot even get a cup of coffee at Starbucks for that amount. Tax payers would save \$3 per month but the 6 & 7 year olds would get larger class sizes and increase in work load for teachers of 50%, not worth it. When people move from town to town, if sizes go up less people want to live here, property value goes down. Also we are now in competition with magnet schools, anyone can send their child to a magnet school and then the town gets a bill for that. That \$3.00 savings could vanish with any of those.

Kim Kowalyshyn has four kids that have gone through the Willington Schools and she is on the Economic Development Commission, the small class sizes are awesome but there is not a lot of economic development in Willington. There is not a lot of money coming in and it is not just \$3.00 for the cost. She asked if there is somewhere else we can cut besides the teachers.

Peter Watts commented that in the future not a lot of people will want to come into town here if class sizes are large compared to other towns.

Tracey Anderson thanked the Board for the opportunity to speak and for all the people who came out today. She wanted to clarify that in the January 8th meeting it was said that the Region 19 cost was going to significantly decrease next year.

Board responded that yes, it would be approximately a \$400,000 decrease for next year.

Tracey Anderson then asked if the increase in the budget is \$400,000 and E.O. Smith price is a \$400,000 decrease then it is zero, isn't that an equalization? The budget remains the same so the proposed budget would be a 0% increase on taxes due to the education budget.

Superintendent Harding responded that in regards to the education yes that is correct however there are other groups of constituents in town that want to take a piece of that E.O. Smith savings yet when the budget is the opposite and there is an increase in E.O. Smith contribution then the K-8 budget has to make the cuts to compensate for it.

Tracey Anderson stated that in the 18 years she has been in town she does not ever recall the budget failing in referendum and has historically passed 2-1. Why is time being spent making cuts before it goes to referendum? Put it to referendum and see if it is supported.

Patti Locke stated that once you take out positions and programs from the budget they don't get put back in.

Lisa Finkelman said she is teacher, In another town, and supports the budget. She was amazed when she moved here to see the huge difference and direct impact on students with smaller class sizes, you reach more individual students.

Peter Latincics echoed the sentiment and thanked the Board for their time. He was present at the last meeting and was pleased to see the presence of community today but disagrees with passing to go to referendum. There was more discussed than class size at the last meeting and he wants to see discussions continued, he wants to know what the Superintendent feels and what the Board's consensus is. He asked if there was a policy regarding class size and if so what is in it. He stated the Superintendent is correct about facing a large increase, and substantial per pupil cost but with demographics going down each year and even if maintain teachers the classes are

shrinking. A discussion on temporary staff may not be required if there is a way to look at resources and allocate where needed rather than wait. He wants to know what the possibilities are.

BUDGET WORKSHOP:

Superintendent Harding thanked the community and stated it was good to hear the opinions and appreciated it. He has made recommendations in the past to increase class sizes and it has been refuted by the community. He responded to some of the comments stating that the policy references a commitment to smaller class sizes but it is not defined. There is not an optimum class size, it could be 15 or 25 depending on the research you get to support any position you want. It is better to have a quality teacher with 25 students than a poor teacher with 10 students. It is a value statement, people do move to town on the perception that small class size is better and for the programs offered. It is hard to make a plea to not increase class size when he has made such recommendations in the past. He also stated that he does not live in town, he does not pay taxes in town, nor do his children attend school in town. It is a value judgment that needs to be addressed by the town. He agrees that once the programs are cut it is difficult to get them back.

He explained that a small bubble of students is coming through and in two years they could be back up. The whole issue with the science and social studies time occurred as a result of the last round of teacher cuts to consolidate classes in 7th and 8th grade. This is what happens. We will lose the middle school model if the teams of teachers are eliminated. He instituted this model when he was Principal and hates to see it eliminated.

He stated that 85% of the budget is people, to get a large amount of money you have to cut people. There needs to be a conversation about sustaining schools and what kind of schools do you want to sustain? Budgets are a value statement by the community about the schools. Ashford has a .5 Spanish teacher and does not have a gifted and talented program but Mansfield has 4 languages and a gifted and talented program. When we produce ninth graders compared to their peers at the high school we do well, do you want to take opportunity away from them? He stated he will do a presentation on class sizes but we cannot cut our way to sustainability. Regardless of the cuts next year will be about a 3-4 % increase. It is the cost of running a school system. If the decision was between programs and class size he would favor keeping the programs.

The Superintendent then presented the class sizes in the region and the state averages for the past few years compared to Willington. Explaining that number of homerooms and class sizes are a function of how many kids you have per grade level. He also explained the differences in reducing elementary versus middle school positions because of certification and contract language. With Math and Science positions you risk not getting the most qualified teachers because they see that it is not a permanent position and will choose to go elsewhere so you are left with the lesser qualified people that would not get hired at other places.

Board member Barry Wallett thanked the audience members for being here. He explained that in Willington enrollment is decreasing and that as a Board member he has to wear three hats, one for the children, one for the teachers and one for the taxpayers. As a parent he understands parents wanting small class sizes. He moved here due to our schools, the small class sizes and his daughter currently enjoys a small class size. He loves our schools and respects the teachers. He stated if he wasn't on the board he would be in the audience this evening.

He spent time researching and found that what John Davies said was correct. He provided the Board with a copy of research compiled by the Center for American Progress a liberal think-tank organization (he stated he is conservative) entitled *The false promise of class size reduction*. This study references that there are two main studies used in class size discussion, one called STAR an experiment in Tennessee shows a 15% benefit in achievement the first year which is gone by year 4. The benefit was mainly seen in urban and disadvantaged populations which does not reflect ours. The second was a study of Connecticut schools using data that showed no evidence class size affects student performance. It is intuitive to parents including himself that in small classes kids perform better but the data doesn't support the expense. Our current 8th grade has 23 students and they are performing great if not better than Mansfield and Ashford. The conclusion in the study is to invest in and keep good teachers.

We have to do best for everyone and we are at a junction now and no one wants 23-25 per class. He believes it is best to look at reducing staff through attrition and since we have that opportunity now due to a retirement it makes sense to reduce a staff position. He gave an example that currently we will have 9 classes of 15 students. Our enrollment keeps declining and the question will remain on the best size of these classes possibly jeopardizing their positions. It would make more sense for us to surgically let the administration cut one of those positions through attrition and have two classes of 23 that are not going anywhere than to wait for the BOF to cut our budget and force us to gash our budget based on their numbers. He understands the greatest asset is the teachers and protecting that asset through attrition is the best course of action and might help to alleviate reductions in the future.

He stated that he believes that the town will provide for anything the BOE needs but not everything we want and our budget should reflect only needs. The costs are more than just cups of coffee.

Michelle Cunningham said the future and what might happen is irrelevant to what we do tonight. Those decisions have to be made each year. Tonight's conversation should be for next year and not for future years.

Michelle Cunningham commented that with regards to not getting the best teachers for just a single year she feels most people at this time would be happy to have a job even if for one year. She is not as concerned about teachers as the students. She thinks it is going to happen again every year, it does not have to be decided now.

Herb Arico commented that he thinks Center has to maintain small class sizes but the upper grades can begin to increase in some areas. Class sizes are pretty much same as last year and year before that. Twenty-five or more is not good but we are not that high. He favors small class sizes of 15-18 and agrees it is great that teachers get to know students, help them and in a larger setting will not be able to provide the same types of supports.

Barry Wallett wanted to clarify the statement that once cut things do not come back, he said we hired a remediation teacher last year, we don't just cut. If you do nothing, everyone is happy but when the budget goes to the Board of Finance we need to be diligent with what is needed not what is wanted.

Superintendent Harding said once approved by the BOE, the budget goes to the Board of Finance and once all the different budgets are compiled the BOF they will decide if we need to cut. He clarified that they cannot dictate what to cut but can determine a dollar figure. We do not know

what the outcome will be at this point. If asked to cut it will require cutting personnel. It is impossible to get \$50,000 by cutting paper and pens.

Barry Walleth stated that is why we need to be cognizant of reducing through attrition.

Mark Jones said these are all good points, but does not agree with going from 15- 23, the culture of the classroom changes and not for the better. We are talking about this year and not the future.

Barry Walleth responded if we don't make the cut then we can be made to cut even more.

Erika Wiczenski stated it is not our job to guess what the BOF does. Our job is to determine what the needs of the K-8 students are and that is what our budget reflects. She believes it is a fair budget. We have taken cuts the last 3 budgets and operated at a loss. A zero budget takes away. Most increases are out of our control, she believes this budget is for people that are necessary and beneficial.

Barry Walleth asked if it is what we need or want.

Erika Wiczenski replied we take cuts for every increase in the Region 19 contribution. It is a coincidence and a small gift that the Region 19 budget is a substantial decrease this year. If we cut teachers and programs then they will not come back. Look at the 7 & 8th grade science and social studies issues that are the result of past cuts. Cuts don't come back and will result in more losses.

Mark Jones said to the audience if you want to make change you have to make how you feel known when we present to the BOF and when the BOF votes on it you have to show up.

Superintendent Harding said he received many calls from people today and he asked them to come to the meeting and say how they feel, regardless of their position. There is no right or wrong way, no good or bad, it is what you value. It is an important decision that you need to weigh in on and he can see both sides.

Leo Mercado said he believes it is a fair budget, some things could get cut but it comes down to staff. Don't touch anything until we get a figure from the BOF and then discuss any changes. He saw only about \$20,000 other than staff positions and does not want to do that until he knows what the BOF will say.

Mark Jones said it is not about what the BOF feels but what the BOE needs.

MOTION: By Mark Jones, seconded by Erika Wiczenski, to pass the budget of \$8,029,617.00 as presented.

Board discussed motion.

Herb Arico asked when the BOF gets this budget and when they give the answers back by.

Michelle Cunningham said it is clear this is a needs based budget not a want based budget.

Erika Wiczenski was not sure this is even enough, things are not in this budget that we may have to put in later that are out of our hands. Security is not even touched upon and the new teacher evaluation is currently not funded.

