

**GATEWAY REGIONAL DISTRICT SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

**SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES**

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18, 2015**

**Room 214/216 Jr. High  
7:00 P.M.**

**I. OPENING OF MEETING**

BLANDFORD

Michele Crane  
Terri Garfield

CHESTER

Shirley Winer  
Martha Otterbeck

HUNTINGTON

Ron Damon  
William Hathaway  
Jeff Wyand

MIDDLEFIELD

Sarah Foley  
Noreen Suriner

MONTGOMERY

Anne Marie Buikus  
Sandra Haas

RUSSELL

Ruth Kennedy  
Mary Ann Laurie

WORTHINGTON

Sue Levreault

SECRETARY

Stacy Stewart

CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

Dr. David B. Hopson, Superintendent  
Stephanie Fisk, Business & Finance

ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL

Joanne Blocker, Director of Academics  
Megan Coburn, Chs,Lit,Ms Principal  
Jason Finnie, High/Jr. High Principal  
Amy Fouracre, Chs,Lit, Ms Assistant Principal  
Wendy Long, District Grant Writer  
Alice Taverna, Pupil Services Director

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES

OTHERS: \_\_\_\_\_

**7:05 p.m. II. FY '16 Budget (Enc.)**

- Mrs. Crane opened the meeting
- Mrs. Buikus is recording the meeting.
- Dr. Hopson – all have budget with administrative recommendations , last night per the regional agreement to vote on the budget, hopefully something will come through tonight or we will deal with it. We need 12 votes, at school committee and 4 of 6 votes with Worthington withdrawal.

***Mr. Damon made motion seconded by Mrs. Winer to approve a transitional budget with mitigation money included.***

- Mrs. Crane said discussion is on a Transition budget with mitigation money.
- Mrs. Buikus asked where is the amount for the well; she thought it was supposed to be in capital.
- Ms. Fisk said it is under the 7000 account.
- Mrs. Buikus asked shouldn't it be in the non-foundation budget; fixed assets like we did with phone system. If it is over \$100,000 it should be treated as capital.
- Ms. Fisk agreed. She thanked Mrs. Buikus for catching that.
- Mrs. Kennedy asked if Dr. Hopson let the state know one of the budgets that was sent to them included money from the state that has not a guarantee.
- Dr. Hopson did not share that with DESE or legislature. It is no different then counting on a magical number we won't know till June. Regional transportation reimbursement will most likely change; we always adopt a budget without knowing what the funds are.
- Mrs. Kennedy is different, it is brand new territory.

- Mrs. Levreault said a transitional budget allows us to look at the future for things like the NEASC visit. It includes \$630,000. If we vote for level services and we get the money it will lower the budget by \$630,000. If MSBA lets us out of the money we owe, the amount won't be so exorbitant. It will allow us to look at this more next year. We should vote on a level services budget. If Russell is successful renting the building to Westfield it will help Russell defray their costs. Looking at average cost per home, we won't to maintain the educational structure we have now. She is recommending a level services budget with six towns.
- Mr. Wyand said the unemployment compensation seems to be quite high in all three scenarios
- Ms. Fisk said that is for staff listed on the reduction pages and budgeting for two possible non-renewals.
- Mr. Wyand asked about the non-renewals
- Dr. Hopson said it is for teachers who are non professional status (first three years in district); the teacher might be let go, and another teacher might replace them.
- Mr. Wyand said we are planning \$66,000; if we don't get the \$630,000 it seems like a giant amount of money we are wasting to lay off teachers.
- Dr. Hopson said whether we do or don't get the \$630,000 you have to budget. If you passed level services or this transition budget and you don't have to release staff then the money would be available to school committee to transfer or put in E & D.
- Mrs. Winer asked what is the danger of not getting the \$630,000?
- Dr. Hopson said Mrs. Levreault and Mrs. Kennedy have valid points. If you vote for the transition budget and you don't get \$630,000, you will have to make changes. If you vote level services; 1 million to towns, it reduces assessment by \$630,000. If the towns reject it, then we start again. At that point you will have more information from the state on Chapter 70 and regional transportation.

Mrs. Laurie arrived.

- Ginny Lee asked for an explanation of the two budgets for the purposes of the audience.
- Dr. Hopson explained both the Transitional Budget and the Level Services Budget.
- Ginny Lee said the transition budget has two teachers being cut; does that include the non-renewal including
- Dr. Hopson said the difference between cutting staff for reductions and non-renewal is that the non-renewal will be replaced.
- Ms. Fisk said any position you cut beyond 20 % can collect unemployment.
- Mrs. Foley asked if it was standard in the budget to allow for two.
- Ms. Fisk said no.
- Mrs. McVeigh stated you are only cutting teachers in two grades in the transition budget.
- Ms. Fisk said four teachers are being cut and we are adding two for a net of two.
- Dr. Hopson said four teachers out of classroom; two are being laid off
- Mrs. Foley said level services leaves the structure alone; keeping copy machine in middle school, etc.
- Dr. Hopson said it does not change the structure in the district. It is what the school committee in essence sent to the state for our educational plan.
- Mrs. Mc Veigh said we could see another scenario when the legislature votes it in and then come November we could we find out we don't have it.
- Dr. Hopson said it depends
- Ms. Fisk thinks if we ask them to write it into Chapter 70 it would help. It would be a much better way to receive it.
- Ginny Lee asked are there other layoffs other than teachers in the transition budget.
- Dr. Hopson does not believe so. There is no replacement for the secretarial opening.
- A woman from the audience asked what is the impact on the class size at the elementary from now to what it is in the transition budget (level services verses a transition budget)
- Ms. Fisk said Kindergarten –Littleville 16/Chester 20; First grade – Littleville 16/Chester 20; Second grade Littleville 20/Chester 10; Third grade Littleville 22/Chester 20; Fourth grade Littleville 24/Chester 22; Fifth grade Littleville 21/Chester 22.
- Mrs. Levreault said the transition budget is something we can fall back if we move forward with level services. If we get the extra money and we get the money we can move forward. A transitional budget makes us look like we are going backwards. We might find ourselves back here in June or July anyway.
- Mrs. Foley said in the level services budget there was a jump in class sizes is that due to enrollment or is it something else.
- Ms. Fisk said in the transition budget they go up; in the level services budget they stay the same.
- Mrs. Winer said we are worried about the assessments to the towns. There is no easy way of easing their pain.

- Roger Booth can see both sides; but you are talking a total difference of over \$172,000, that is less than \$20,000. Your responsibility is not to help the towns balance their budget. Your job is to educate the students and meet DESE and federal requirements. He would vote for the working level funded budget and if the money doesn't come the money doesn't come, that is the towns' problem not yours. There are a lot of ways to make up the \$172,000. There are creative people on school committee along with Ms. Fisk and Dr. Hopson. Level funded is not the way to go.

***Mr. Damon made motion seconded by Mrs. Winer to approve a transitional budget with mitigation money included.***

***Motion Failed (VOTE) Yeas 1 Nays 11 Abstain 1 Absent***

***Mrs. Levreault made a motion seconded by Mrs. Foley to approve a level services budget.***

- Mr. Wyand would agree with level services budget, but there is a lot we can do to tidy up this budget. It would be nice to have the time to go through it line item by line item and if we don't get the money we will still be in better position.
- Mrs. Winer asked Mr. Wyand what he means by that, don't you think Ms. Fisk has done that. Who do you think will do that?

Mrs. Otterbeck is here.

- Mrs. Winer said according to mass general law, the school committee does not pick apart the budget, we can approve and overall budget.
- Roger Booth looked at other districts similar to ours. We are equal to Hampshire in cost per student; Southwick is only 1,000 lower and they have a \$26,000,000 budget. They are going to use \$500,000 to balance their budget. This budget is not different then what you see at Hampshire and Southwick; same issues.
- Mrs. Kennedy said M.G.G. 71;37 gives school committee the power to review and approve budgets.
- Mrs. Winer said that is true to make, but not make decisions.
- Mrs. Buikus said do we want to put a level services budget out there knowing the towns' won't approve it.
- Mike Crochiere said that is going to be true no matter what budget you vote. It is the same with the town budgets; until the state comes out with the state figures in May. We are taking our best guess. He feels we should go with a level services budget and adjust it needed; it makes sense.
- Mrs. Winer said it seems like we have an audience that says go for it.
- Mr. Wyand said if we were successful in the lawsuit and Worthington stayed in the district we would want to have a school they would want to come to.

***Mrs. Levreault made a motion seconded by Mrs. Foley to approve a level services budget.***

***Motion Failed (VOTE) Yeas 7 Nays 5 Abstain 2 Absent***

- Mrs. Winer asked those members who don't want a level services budget what they do want.
- Mrs. Crane asked if anyone who voted no wanted to explain why.
- Mrs. Suriner voted no because the finance subcommittee make some suggestions that have been dismissed, that would have provided level services and recognized places where we do have inflation.
- Mrs. Winer asked why can't you bring that forward.
- Mrs. Suriner asked for cuts in inflated administrative costs.
- Mrs. Winer the rest of the school committee.
- Mrs. Levreault said if we make reductions now it isn't level services and we didn't keep to what we said we would. With a level services budget we have kept education the same way moving forward despite that we lost a town. The finance and school committee can still work on it. We don't know what the towns want to do. We've had years where the towns have had to do an override. If towns don't vote it; we bring it back. It buys more time to figure things out.
- Mr. Damon said Mrs. Levreault has the right to vote and he would encourage her to vote.
- Dr. Hopson said if you don't have a budget, you have nothing to go out to the towns; what are the towns' going to put on their warrant articles. If we don't have a budget we have to go to state to see what we do. August first the commissioner will set a budget. That still gives you till December 1 to adopt a budget. If the towns or the school committee don't vote something you leave it up to commissioner.
- Mr. Damon said if this committee votes a levels services budget we have provided a budget; if it is not voted by the towns, it goes back to us or the state.

- Dr. Hopson said state law says the Commissioner sets a budget at 1/12 of this year's budget. You could potentially be saving the towns money.
- Mrs. Winer asked why the finance subcommittee doesn't give us their recommendations in a form we can vote on.
- Mrs. Kenedy is not going to vote for a budget just to send it to the towns. She has to feel comfortable and she doesn't like not knowing what is coming up. We don't know if we will get \$630,000 or if Worthington is gone. We don't have all the facts.
- Mrs. Winer said we can't run a school without a budget.
- Mrs Kennedy said we have a budget we are working on a July 1 budget.
- Mr. Finnie said we have the budget we have right now, but next year's work begins now. Scheduling starts in April. Level services verses a transitional budget impacts how we use our staff. There is a lot going on between now and June.
- Mr. Wyand said you are betting on getting money we don't know we will get. Just because we approve the budget doesn't mean that's the direction we end up in.
- Mrs. Buikus said usually when we send the budget to the towns, Montgomery for instant votes the Foundation Budget separately since that is usually set in stone.
- Ms. Fisk said not always; a couple of years ago it changed significantly (it was at 100% then much lower).
- Mrs. Buikus was going to suggest we approve part of the money.
- Ms. Fisk said in the past Worthington has only approved the foundation budget so they would have their first payment.
- Mrs. Buikus said that is what Montgomery does too. Could we do a foundation and non-foundation amount? Could we put out an above minimum later?
- Ms. Fisk said you could do all of them.
- Mrs. Buikus said weren't you asking us to go to towns and ask them to put off their vote until June.
- Dr. Hopson suggested putting off all the votes until June.
- Ms. Fisk said last in June or July we were still waiting.
- Mr. Finnie said it is true we still have to prepare every year while waiting for the towns to vote to budget. It is important for staff and students to see what support is out there for them.
- Mr. Damon said there is no reason why the committee can't vote for a level services budget and change it later. If we don't get 12 votes, he doesn't know if the commissioner will do a 1/12 or on current budget.
- Mrs. McVeigh said according to DESE you cannot force a governing body to take a vote when there is an alternative; the 1/12 budget would be negotiated based on Worthington leaving. So you are not left without having adequate funds to run the school. There are several faces here that attended finance when the letter was read that the recommendation by the finance sub committee was before considering cuts in teaching staff that the district should look at cutting inflated administration costs.
- Mrs. Winer said why not bring it for a vote.
- Mrs. Levreault said we all can't attend subcommittee meetings or there would be a quorum. NEASC is in 2017, and some of us have been through it. All these subcommittees have to work on stuff. If we cut administrators or teachers we won't be as well prepared for this NEASC. We need to have a fully accredited high school; if not people won't want to move into the district.
- Mrs. McVeigh said that is why the subcommittee had asked for other cuts prior to cutting teachers. It was sending a message, by increasing the size of your classes from 16 to 22 it is a lot of extra work for the teachers. Littleville is a level 3 school and we are now taking PARCC.
- Ms. Laurie said the committee already voted the transition budget and all the cuts to teachers.
- Mr. Finnie went over the accreditation standards.
- Mrs. Foley asked to have the list sent to school committee via email.
- Mr. Wyand said we want to support the teachers; they are among the lowest compensated with in the state, we want to pay them competitively. We are already in a deficit, we are already looking at a 2 ½ override. We need to trim the fat now.
- Mrs. Winer said we have fewer administrators than we've had, they are all very busy, and when we cut administrators, we add to the burden of other administrations.
- Mr. Wyand said the teachers are at the bottom; he said cut the fat not administrators.
- Mrs. Winer said it is not for us to suggest.

*Mrs. Levreault made a motion seconded by Mr. Damon to reconsider a level services budget.*

*Motion Carried (VOTE) Yeas 12 Nays 2 Abstain Absent*

- The level services budget is back on the floor.
- Mrs. Levreault said tonight is 45 days before the first annual town meeting and we need to vote a budget by regional agreement.
- Melissa McCaul hopes you move forward, she thinks you voted to soon; not everyone had voiced opinions. She hopes that those who voted no will reconsider. It doesn't look like you are communicating together. She requested a clear discussion before school committee votes again.
- Mrs. Suriner said it makes her profoundly sad we have the lowest paid teachers in 17 surrounding schools.
- Dr. Hopson said you cannot use average, as far as top step goes they are high than the three schools you compared.
- Cheryl Wright said it is not just the bottom, she is on masters and she is not making more.
- Dr. Hopson said as you know, you have to pick similar schools just like in negotiations. He isn't saying teachers' salaries shouldn't be changed. You look at an average length. It all depend
- Cheryl Wright agrees with the average, but not step.
- Mr. Wyand said to bring the average up is going to cost money.
- Dr. Hopson said for the last 15 years the school committee has been looking at reducing budgets not increasing them.
- Mrs. Crane said level services gives us more wiggle room for unknowns, it keeps the 5<sup>th</sup> grade where they are, it doesn't lay off anyone staff, and most importantly it supports what we said in the education plan; just like we said we would.
- Mrs. Smith wishes that whatever budget moves forward, school committee does not have a cavalier attitude that it is all on the backs of the towns. Understand your salaries and money is being paid by the communities and not every town can vote an override.
- Mrs. Kennedy asked how many times have there been overrides.
- Dr. Hopson each town has to make the decision. Blandford would need an override in any of the budgets. There are other issues facing the towns. Twelve years ago the state was picking up 60% and now less the 45%. We don't get a lot for our tax dollars. All of our towns are in the 230-270 rank for impact.
- Mrs. McVeigh as chair of Huntington finance, not one member has asked her or the town of Huntington what critical issues they have other than the school. She does care about the school. Everyone should be considered part of their community. How would you like it if she said they were cutting the council on aging because they are not the future. Stabilization was set up in 92/93 and it has take that long to build it up to 1 million; she thinks their fund is the highest. They have a fire department that is so old, they have to special equipment and an old salt shed. All her department came to her with a level funded budget asking to increase it. Everyone who works in the district gets post retirement healthcare. The town of Huntington is 1 out of 4 towns trying to pay their employees post retirement healthcare.
- Mrs. Levreault said in the time she has been on school committee Worthington has had two override votes. Russell had one at the same time as their second. Worthington's was prompted by the Ed Reform Act. There might have been a third before she was on school committee. If your communities have not had an override and we are having reduced budgets, are we doing our job as educators for the services we need.
- Michele Fieldstadt-Booth said she pays attention; as they years have gone by the school committee has been sensitive to the towns. But your number one priority is the students. You have to come forward with a budget because you support this district and the children. You've been given opportunities why level services makes for sense. Choose something and stick to it and then educate those around you; parents, community members, and people who work in this town.
- Val Zeh asked if you are voting for a dollar amount or by line item.
- Dr. Hopson school committee votes for the bottom line.
- Dawne Piers-Gamble said isn't it possible for the finance or school committee to then decide what needs to be removed. In terms of the line item.
- Dr. Hopson said yes; essentially even after the budget they can transfer funds between line items.
- Mrs. Kennedy called Glenn Koocher at MASC and told him about our predicament. He told her that each one has a fiduciary duty to the school and towns to go through the budget with a fine tooth comb. We don't have time to go through them. She takes it very seriously. We have until June 30. We don't have to vote tonight. We are constantly asking questions.
- Ms. Fisk said as far as the budgets go in FY'10 we cut \$767,000; FY'11 we cut \$404,000; FY'12 we cut \$129,000; FY'13 we cut 137,000; there was less then a 1% increase in FY'14; FY15 an increase of \$227,000; and a decrease of \$418,00 in FY'16.
- Dr. Hopson said the finance and school committee had the first line item in December. There have been more questions at school committee.

- Michael Crochiere said two months is an extraordinary amount of time to prepare a budget; there are only about 12 pages. If it takes you that long maybe you need to rethink how you look at it. That is a poor excuse. That is more than enough time.
- Val Zeh said if you are voting on a level services aren't you voting on the same budget as last year and isn't it actually a little less than last year.
- Dr. Hopson said there are a few changes.
- Ms. Fisk said yes the changes are because of the 6 town budget, special education items and bussing.
- Mrs. McVeigh said the issue is not with the expenses but the anticipated revenue. The 1.1 million dollar deficit was not brought to the committee until February. We have a funding gap
- Ms. Fisk said the revenue is not clear now. The governor's first budget came out March 4. She was just taking taking a stab prior to that.
- Mr. Wyand said two months is a long time when you are a professional working on just a budget. When you are ayou are working 40 hours a week and trying to create a budget, it is a short amount of time.
- Mike Crochiere said he is on other committees in his town and he has other obligations.
- Roger Booth said ask yourselves what is the district's plan; the one you gave to DESE a few months ago. This district has the opportunity to fix some of the ills like one man one vote. Because we are in violation the attorney is going to say do whatever you want; Worthington is gone. Count on the \$630,000 even if it is a onetime deal. Maybe towns we will have to figure out what do do after. If you look at revenue; you don't use you stabilization money to offset. He is proud of this administration for not using E & D. Think about the Ed plan you voted on before you vote. You know you can't do it with 1/12. It shouldn't even be a discussion. A level services budget with 6 towns with or without \$630,000 gives the best opportunity for short and long term goals. Town population goes up and down. Some towns use a five year average. He agrees school committee has a fiduciary responsibility. If school committee believes you can survive on a 1/12 budget thy can all leave, he doesn't care.
- Dr. Hopson said we did put \$400,000 against E & D in this budget.
- Ms. Laurie said a level services budget would be great for the district. Giving the towns the option is their right. It will go up because there are 6 towns now. It is still possible to work on contracts in the future and there are members who feel they need to be gone over perhaps we can find a way to cut. It doesn't have to be tonight or before the towns vote. She is a Gateway graduate and her daughter graduates next year. She appreciates the education Gateway has provided.
- Mr. Wyand said if level services passes today he hopes that everyone else who is here and comes to these meetings continues to support the budget at these meetings and at annual town meetings. Perhaps we can have an auto dialer survey to ask where people think we can trim to make up the \$630, 000 if we don't receive it.
- Mrs. Winer said Ms. Fisk and Dr. Hopson have kept the budget within 16 million since 2006.
- Ms. Fisk said we have been in the 16 million range since FY'11. We we were in the 16 million range in FY'03.
- Mrs. Winer said Ms. Fisk is very good at jiggling and adjusting money in the budget. We can't possibly look at all of this, but we can do our best to understand and work with it.
- Derrick Mason, Russell finance and GTAC said we all have a fiduciary responsibility. There is a lot of anxiety and rush. The DESE will work with the district to resolve the budget issues. There is no reason to rush to pick a budget.
- Dr. Hopson said there is nothing stopping the towns from saying no or the school committee.
- Derrick's town is fully prepared to put a placeholder on the warrant and vote it up or down.
- Mrs. Suriner said that was what she thought was her direction.
- Dr. Hopson said we have to vote a budget by law. If you put a budget in place it can change up until December first. If you don't have a budget in place, according to regional agreement, you will have a budget in place either by us or the state. That gives us all of April, May, and June. It is a crap shoot.
- Derrick said the town can put figures based on what they deem appropriate. They have plenty of numbers they can work with. All the options are reasonable.
- Dr. Hopson said by law the only people who can set a budget is the school committee. If this school committee sets a million dollar increase to the towns, the town can vote a different amount and in essence it is a no vote. If we don't send a budget we will be the first not to adopt.
- Roger Booth said it is illegal for the town to put a number in there. The school committee has to give you a number, and then the town can change the number. Huntington tried to do that and the DA said don't do that. It has to come from the school committee.
- Michael Crochiere said as far as a placeholder goes; what what is the difference between the school committee picking and you picking. Each town could then pick a different number.

- Mr. Otterbeck said they do several budgets, if you have a budget you can put in place and adjust it up till December that is unheard. He doesn't have that opportunity.
- Mrs. Smith said if the school committee votes this they are backing it. If there a vehicle that says if you vote this tonight, is there a disclaimer.
- Ms. Fisk said every year she and Dr. Hopson offer to go around to the towns and answer questions.
- Mrs. Otterbeck doesn't want the teachers to feel that they aren't supported. She appreciates that you don't want to be rushed. She has to go to her town and she advocates for the school. She would like to have something for them to work with. She is satisfied knowing we have the option to work with it and fine tune it hoping someday we do have the money.
- Ms. Laurie said some of the reluctance is she feels it is more of an administration than the committee creating the budget; we rely heavy on the administration. We don't make it; we try to change it a little.
- Sue Luppino's concern is there is nothing to stop the committee members from reaching out to us. She would love to talk to more of you more often. Coming to meetings feels like there are other issues you need to work out. The budget is getting held hostage. There are things we want to do. Don't ask us to do the work for what it would take for 6, 7, and 8 to work and then don't do it. If you were uncomfortable with things six months ago you should have addressed it then. We can't wait till June or July to put stuff in place.
- Mrs. Buikus asked if we approve a level services budget and we get mitigation money, what are we going to do with it.
- Ms. Fisk's suggestion is to write it into the revenue page to come off the above minimum.
- Mrs. Buikus said what if we get money from not paying for closed schools will it go back to the towns.
- Ms. Fisk said it will come off of the expenditures.
- Dr. Hopson said as in the past you can say if we get mitigation money it will be used to reduce assessments.
- Mrs. Buikus said last year we put aside money and we got 9C cuts and we lost it.
- Ms. Fisk said that's why she wants it part of our Chapter 70.
- Mrs. Buikus said to write your legislators and tell them you want the money.

*Mrs. Buikus made an amendment seconded by Mrs. Otterbeck that if we get mitigation money it is returned to the towns to reduce assessments. (Ms. Fisk said it is not going to be on the revenue page)*

*Motion Carried (VOTE) Yeas 14 Nays Abstain Absent*

*Mrs. Levreault made a motion seconded by Mrs. Foley to approve a level services budget.*

*Motion Carried (VOTE) Yeas 13 Nays 1 Abstain Absent*

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**III. ADJOURNMENT** *Mr. Wyand made a motion seconded by Mrs. Otterbeck to adjourn at 9:18 p.m.*

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Respectfully Submitted  
 Stacy L Stewart  
 School Committee Secretary