

Joint Amherst, Pelham and Regional School Committees Retreat
August 14, 2014
Lewis Sebring Room, Valentine Hall, Amherst College

In Attendance

Lawrence O'Brien, Regional Chair/Amherst
Darius Modestow, Pelham Chair
Katherine Appy, Amherst Chair/Region
Trevor Baptiste, Pelham/Region
Stephen Sullivan, Region
Kathleen Traphagen, Amherst/Region
Dan Robb, Pelham/Region
Sarah Dolven, Region
Emily Marriott, Pelham
Rick Hood, Amherst/Region
Amilcar Shabazz, Amherst/Region

David Singer, Facilitator
Maria Geryk, Superintendent
Mike Morris, Assistant Superintendent
Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder
Press/Public

Absent:

Tara Luce, Pelham

1. Call to Order and Business Agenda Review 3:02 p.m.

Mr. O'Brien called the Regional School Committee to order, Ms. Appy called the Amherst School Committee to order, and Mr. Modestow called the Pelham School Committee to order at 3:02 p.m. Ms. Geryk introduced Mr. Singer, the facilitator, who then provided background about his qualifications and experience. The committee members then introduced themselves and noted on which Committees they serve. Mr. Singer noted for the public that today's meeting is a working session, not a public forum; therefore, no public comment is planned.

2. Facilitated Discussion 3:07 p.m.

Members were asked to indicate their top three priority areas for discussion at the retreat today. Topics for consideration included:

1. Working as a School Committee
 - a. Over the last year, what has gone well and what needs improvement?
 - b. Roles and authority of School Committee officers (i.e. the Chair and Vice-Chair) in relation to the roles and authority of the whole committee?
 - c. School Committee goals for 2014-2015?
 - d. How can we more effectively carry out our responsibility of crafting and approving district policies?
 - e. How can we more effectively carry out our fiduciary responsibilities?
2. School Committee/Superintendent Working Relationship
 - a. Sharing input about areas within the Superintendent's authority in and outside of public meetings?
 - b. How can we (as individuals and as a committee) more effectively carry out our responsibility of evaluating our superintendent (in light of DESE regulations)?
3. Organization of Meetings/Effective Use of Time
 - a. How should information that falls outside the authority of the School Committee be shared at meetings?
 - b. Are changes needed in our public comment policy?
 - c. What should be the primary purposes of our public meetings?
 - d. What should be the primary focus and content of our public meetings?
 - e. Are changes needed in our meeting norms and protocols?

The three areas identified for discussion were: 1) What has gone well and what needs improvement (working as a school committee); 2) Role of the School Committee officers in relation to authority of the whole committee (working as a school committee); and 3) Are changes needed in the way public comment is shared (organization of meetings/effective use of time). Discussion began with the topic "What has gone well and what needs improvement," and each member was asked to share his or her thoughts. The budget process was identified as an area of strength and the superintendent evaluation process as an area in need of improvement. After each member

spoke, Mr. Singer noted that it is clear that the members like each other and want to build on what has worked well. He noted that he heard two common themes: 1) the role of the school committee and 2) trust and the need to be able to say whatever you think even if it is different from the group. Mr. Singer asked the members to each speak to what they believe the role of the school committee to be so they will have an understanding of each other's perspective.

What is the role of the School Committee?

Ms. Dolven: Finding a balance between individual passions and process with policy is the biggest area of challenge. She sees policy as a way to express passions within a framework.

Mr. Shabazz: School Committees are a microcosm of a macrocosm, and they need to model a very high-functioning, collaborative microcosm of the communities they serve. They should be a force to hear and convey the concerns of the community.

Mr. Hood: School Committee and administration should get better at giving advice to one another regardless of whose purview an issue falls under, knowing that the advice will be heard but may or may not be taken.

Mr. Baptiste: Public school is public school because the public has the chance to shape it. It is the responsibility of the School Committee to shape the direction of public education, and advocacy is a responsibility along with policy, budget and superintendent evaluation.

Ms. Traphagen: School committee has a hard balance between their desire to support the Superintendent and the success of the administration and their need to push for things they believe need improvement. It is important to find the best way to listen and help to resolve things in a positive way.

Ms. Marriott: The School Committee itself is a team and is a team with the administration.

Mr. Modestow: Respectfully disagrees with the idea that the School Committee must push back as far as possible on all issues. The School Committee hires a CEO to run the district and for some policies the School Committee simply does not have all the information to deal with the issue. The School Committee needs to find a way not to get caught up in some of the minutia.

Ms. Appy: Historically there has been an issue with the School Committee understanding the role of the School Committee versus the role of the Superintendent and the administrative team. If the School Committee is unclear, it becomes unclear to the community, and the process goes well when there are structures and rules to move things forward.

Mr. O'Brien: The School Committee is an elected body to act as the communities' agents and representatives to serve as the people's voice to share with the Superintendent and administrative team. The committee needs to do a more effective job of communicating back to the people who elected them.

Mr. Sullivan: The School Committee's role is to serve constituents and hear their voice.

Mr. Robb: The School Committee is responsible for communication with constituents and advocacy for them. They should create a tone that is inclusive, welcoming and open along with an atmosphere where people can say difficult things without creating a tone that makes it appear that they are unsupportive of the Superintendent or of each other.

Are changes needed in the way public comment is shared?

Mr. Robb: Changes are needed in how public comment is heard and responded to by the School Committee. There has to be an opportunity for the School Committee to do its business without it being dominated by public comment, but there also needs to be occasions where public comment and response is the dominant thing. Perhaps meetings are needed that are specifically to hear and respond to public comment or a subcommittee could be established to hear public comment.

Mr. Sullivan: The School Committee needs to find a way to allow the public to share their stories. It is hard to shut people down so we need to find a way to hear and respond.

Mr. O'Brien: We need to distinguish between business meetings and public forums, such as the public comment sessions that will be used by the Regional Agreement Working Group. We also need to fix the current process for public comment and consider how to allow people to sign up to speak in an orderly way.

Ms Appy: It is hard to respond to public comment in the moment because you can't give thoughtful answers. The committee needs to find a way to hear from the public without giving short shrift to either the work of the School Committee or to the public.

Mr. Modestow: Mr. Modestow suggested looking into procedures used in other districts to handle public comment.

Ms. Marriott: Ms. Marriott suggested finding a way for the public to make comments that will be recorded publicly without having to make them at the public meeting. She noted that posting emailed comments might be a solution.

Ms. Traphagen: The current response system does not work because sometimes things are aired that are inaccurate and they are never responded to, and, on the other hand, concerns are raised that are not responded to. She suggested having a rotating responsibility to respond to public comment at the next meeting of the committee.

Mr. Baptise: Public comment is designed to affect deliberation so having separate meetings may not have that impact. He suggested that having the chair invite public comment during discussion of agenda items would be beneficial to deliberation.

Mr. Hood: School Committee members should have already done their homework prior to meetings at which they will vote rather than being swayed at the meeting. It would be beneficial to have public forums prior to voting, especially when a big issue is coming up.

Mr. Shabazz: Mr. Shabazz suggested having a system through which those wishing to speak at public comment sign a card with their name and the topic to be addressed in public comment, with the Vice-Chair collecting the cards and reporting to the chair on the topics, number of commenters, etc. He also suggested using a similar system to Cambridge, which has a structured calendar of community forums.

Ms. Dolven: Ms. Dolven suggested that as we plan ahead it would be important to put forums in place for known "hot topic" issues, knowing that things will come up during the year.

Facilitator Singer noted that there has to be fairness in public comment. It is OK to have time limits as long as there are clear rules about what you're going to do. It is important to make sure the public trusts that they are all given the same opportunity to be heard. He noted that the Roberts Rule system puts the Chair in charge of determining who speaks and when people should stop speaking. If the committee wishes to change the rules under which public comment operates, they will need to choose a different system to run meetings.

What are the roles and authority of School Committee officers (i.e. the Chair and Vice-Chair) in relation to the roles and authority of the whole committee?

Ms. Dolven: Ms. Dolven said she felt disenfranchised by the action of the chairs this summer, and she does not want a repeat of that, but she recognizes that officers do have a different role than members.

Mr. Shabazz: Being the vice-chair meant absolutely nothing during the time he served in the role and that serves to keep the body from not empowering one another. He believes the committee needs to revisit the role of vice-chair so it becomes more than just serving in the absence of the chair. This will also relieve some of the burden from the chair. Mr. Shabazz also noted that there needs for a clear line of access to legal counsel due to financial constraints, but we need to work on the ability of the public body members to access counsel.

Mr. Hood: There is too much on the chair, and we need to keep in mind that what the majority of the committee thinks is all that matters. He suggested considering a change in policy to make agenda setting a role of the majority. He believes it will help the committee work together better.

Mr. Baptiste: There needs to be a change in the policy around agenda setting, and there needs to be clear parameters around what a chair is supposed to do. He said it is important to do the "will of the committee" and consideration should be given to changing policy around when the committee has to reorganize and around the role of officers.

Ms. Marriott: Ms. Marriott noted that the committee has rules and they need to follow them unless there is agreement to change the rules.

Mr. Modestow: Mr. Modestow noted that when you create leadership, you have to vacate some power. If the committee decides to move away from using Roberts Rules, they will need to be careful to set another system.

Ms. Appy: Ms. Appy agreed with Mr. Modestow, noting that the role of the chair is not to have one person who is more powerful than others, but to run the meeting. She said that the chair does not always get to participate as fully as other members because they are so focused on running the meetings.

Mr. O'Brien: Mr. O'Brien agreed with Mr. Shabazz that the Vice-Chair should have a bigger role and a policy change is needed to address that.

Mr. Robb: Mr. Robb believes the committee should be able to reorganize whenever the majority of the committee wants to do so. He noted that anytime he chairs a meeting, his last question is "Would anyone else like to be chair" so the committee should be able to vote that person in if they want to.

Facilitator Singer noted that from his view this is a very well-functioning school committee, and they will have a better year than anticipated if they use this as a platform to move forward.

3. Reorganization of the Regional School Committee

Mr. Robb moved to close the Pelham School Committee meeting at 5:41 p.m. Mr. Baptiste seconded and the motion was unanimously approved. Mr. Hood moved to close the Amherst meeting at 5:41 p.m. and the motion was unanimously approved. Mr. Baptiste moved to suspend Policy BEBB: Retreat Meetings in order to allow the committee to vote on reorganizing. Mr. Robb seconded and the motion was unanimously approved. Ms. Geryk asked for nominees for Chair of the Regional School Committee. Ms. Appy nominated Mr. O'Brien, noting that she believes he has done a great job while serving as Chair. Ms. Dolven nominated Mr. Robb, noting that much of what he said today was impressive and a neutral party as Chair would be very helpful. Mr. Shabazz nominated Mr. Baptiste noting that he does not see an issue of factionalism, especially moving forward from the discussion today. He believes selecting Mr. Baptiste as Chair would send a very important signal that the School Committee values leadership diversity. The roll call vote was then taken as follows:

Traphagen: Baptiste
Baptiste: Baptiste
Hood: O'Brien
Sbazz: Baptiste
Dolven: Robb
Robb: Baptiste
Sullivan: Baptiste
O'Brien: O'Brien
Appy: O'Brien

After being elected Chair, Mr. Baptise asked for nominees for Vice-Chair. Mr. Robb nominated Ms. Traphagen for vice-chair. Ms. Traphagen was appointed by unanimous consent. Ms. Westmoreland was appointed Secretary by unanimous consent.

4. Adjournment

5:56 p.m.

Mr. Shabazz moved to adjourn at 5:56 p.m. Mr. Robb seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

Approved September 9, 2014