

**Regular Meeting of the Amherst School Committee
Tuesday, January 19, 2016
Library, Amherst Regional High School**

IN ATTENDANCE

Katherine Appy, Chair
Vira Douangmany-Cage (arr. 5:48 p.m.)
Phoebe Hazzard
Rick Hood
Kathleen Traphagen

Maria Geryk, Superintendent
Mike Morris, Assistant Superintendent
Sean Mangano, Finance Director
Kathy Mazur, Human Resources Director
Rachel Bowen, Ass't Human Resources Director
Faye Brady, Student Services Director
JoAnn Smith, Student Services Administrator
Jean Fay, APEA President
Nick Yaffe, Wildwood School Principal
Derek Shea, Crocker Farm Principal
Jasmine Robinson, Crocker Farm 3rd Gr Teacher
Carol Ross, Media/Climate Communications
Jim LaPosta, JCJ Architecture
Tom Murphy, JLA Project Manager
Community & Press
Kimberly Stender, Recorder

1. Call to Order & Welcome

5:46 p.m.

Ms. Appy called the meeting to order at 5:46 p.m. The agenda was reviewed. Ms. Appy requested that public comment be extended to a full 30 minutes if necessary. There were no objections to this request. Ms. Robinson presented her sabbatical request. Ms. Geryk made mention of Ms. Robinson's recent receipt of the Roger L. Wallace Excellence in Teaching award. Mr. Morris stated he was in full support of this request as Ms. Robinson's work provides a great resource and examines a critical need in the district. Mr. Hood moved that the Amherst School Committee accept the proposal and grant the sabbatical to Ms. Robinson for the 2016-2017 academic year. Ms. Hazard seconded. Ms. Robinson explained the vital scope of her work and her post-sabbatical plans and workshops. The motion passed unanimously. Mr. Hood moved to approve the minutes from the meetings on December 22, 2015; January 13, 2016 (4:00 p.m.); January 13, 2016 (6:30 p.m.); and January 14, 2016. Ms. Hazzard seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

2. Announcements & Public Comment

6:01 p.m.

There were no announcements. Prior to public comment Ms. Appy reminded the audience to speak about issues and not about people. Jean Fay stated that no matter the decision of the school committee regarding the school building project, educators will continue to provide the best education for the whole child. Julie HawkOwl stated her greatest concern is social equity and how underrepresented people may become lost in the education system. Nurah Jaradat spoke to her experience as a child at Marks Meadow School. Joanna Morse shared teacher feedback from the survey and implored the school committee to listen to educators' viewpoints. Sarah McKee expressed her financial and educational concerns regarding a larger school. Jim Oldham read teacher feedback from the survey and expressed his concerns regarding equity. Manulani Sherlock spoke about trust and equity issues regarding the schools. Caridad Martinez asked to see measurable evidence regarding equity initiatives. Sovann-Malis Loeng questioned the reconfiguration proposal in regards to equity and transportation concerns. Kathleen Anderson stated that the best way to achieve equity in schools is to hire educators who mirror the current

student demographics. Laura Quilter read teacher feedback from the survey and recommended the small school model. Mary Wentworth stated that the imminent vote is pre-mature and inappropriate because a change of this magnitude has yet to be absorbed by the public. Taryn LaRaja stated that students who are of most need academically should be grouped together by classrooms in one school so teachers can collaborate. Andy Churchill stated that an early childhood center is very important because it addresses issues of equity and closing the achievement gap. Derek Shea cited Sean Riordan's work at Stanford University which states that public schools are equalizers and early childhood centers are critical to ensuring equity. Vince O'Connor proposed that if Fort River School is closed land would become available to build the new Department of Public Works center or UMASS student housing. Kiana Connor stated that transitions may be difficult for young students in a large school and families would be split between different schools.

3. Superintendent's Update

6:48 p.m.

Mr. Morris clarified questions which were raised at the January 14, 2016 meeting. He addressed at length DESE codes for the new school(s); early childhood center bathroom upgrade costs; district pre-school enrollment; social justice leadership outreach; code of ethics; commitment of educators to students; structural inequities; construction factors and swing space; transportation concerns; closing the achievement gap as it pertains to the PreK model; English Language Learners program; and Special Education programs. He spoke at length about the reasoning that led to Superintendent Geryk's recommendation for the most equitable elementary school model. He stressed the difficulty and importance of the school committee's decision and vote.

4. New & Continuing Business

7:07 p.m.

A. Amherst Elementary School Building Project

Ms. Appy called for a vote. Ms. Douangmany-Cage announced that Open Meeting Law was violated because the agenda was improperly posted on the Town of Amherst website. After a lengthy discussion, it was decided that the agenda was indeed posted on both the Town of Amherst and district websites and adhered to past practice and Open Meeting Law. Ms. Appy concluded that based on the discussion a vote was in order. Mr. Hood moved to vote tonight on the Amherst Elementary School Building Project. Ms. Traphagen seconded and the motion passed with one opposition (Douangmany-Cage). School committee members referenced the document which listed three proposed motions. Mr. Hood read the 750 Students Proposed Motion: "We move to change the grade configuration of the Amherst elementary schools to have Crocker Farm become a PreK-1 school and for the result of the MSBA process to be a 750 student, grade 2-6 school building, with two autonomous, roughly 375 student schools with their own principal, teacher teams, and specialists, thereby closing Fort River School, assuming a project scope and budget agreement and funding agreement are enacted. We request that the grade configuration section of the educational plan be updated to align with this official vote of the Amherst School Committee." Ms. Traphagen seconded the motion. Ms. Douangmany-Cage called for a point of order and asked why the vote was taking place in this manner (eliminating motions by vote). A lengthy discussion followed. Throughout the discussion process there were several points of order and incomplete motions that received no seconds. Ms. Traphagen requested that the words "Fort River School" be struck from the motion and that "one elementary school building" be added. She read the motion with the amendment (in bold): "We move to change the grade configuration of the Amherst elementary schools to have Crocker Farm become a PreK-1 school and for the result of the MSBA process to be a 750 student, grade 2-6 school building, with two autonomous, roughly 375 student schools with their own principal, teacher teams, and specialists, thereby closing **one elementary school building**, assuming a project scope and budget agreement and funding agreement are enacted. We request that the grade

configuration section of the educational plan be updated to align with this official vote of the Amherst School Committee.” Ms. Hazzard seconded the motion. The motion passed with one abstention (Douangmany-Cage). Ms. Traphagen moved to add additional wording and read the existing motion with amendments (in bold): “We move to change the grade configuration of the Amherst elementary schools to have Crocker Farm become a PreK-1 school and for the result of the MSBA process to be a 750 student, grade 2-6 school building, with two autonomous, roughly 375 student **Grades 2-6** schools with their own principal, teacher teams, and specialists, thereby closing one elementary school building, assuming a project scope and budget agreement and funding agreement are enacted. We request that the grade configuration section of the educational plan be updated to align with this official vote of the Amherst School Committee.” Mr. Hood seconded and the motion passed with one abstention (Douangmany-Cage). Ms. Appy asked that the committee return to the amended motion to vote. Ms. Traphagen read the motion: “We move to change the grade configuration of the Amherst elementary schools to have Crocker Farm become a PreK-1 school and for the result of the MSBA process to be a 750 student, grade 2-6 school building, with two autonomous, roughly 375 student, Grades 2-6 schools with their own principal, teacher teams, and specialists, thereby closing one elementary school building, assuming a project scope and budget agreement and funding agreement are enacted. We request that the grade configuration section of the educational plan be updated to align with this official vote of the Amherst School Committee.” Ms. Hazzard seconded the motion. Ms. Appy opened discussion. Ms. Douangmany-Cage read a letter from a community member regarding how the over-stimulated learning environment in a mega-school would negatively impact the learning of some special education students. She added that the fallout of this could lead to lawsuits against the district. Ms. Douangmany-Cage praised the voices of those who spoke in opposition of the school project. Ms. Douangmany-Cage then stated that she, as a minority voice on the school committee, could not deliver what the committee wants to do which is to vote for a large school. She spoke to the proliferation of area charter schools and about the exodus of students from the district to these charter schools. She spoke about the distrust of community members toward the administration. Mr. Hood stated that it was important for committee members to share their thoughts at the January 14, 2016 meeting in preparation for tonight’s meeting. He was at a loss as to why people who are normally for equity would oppose this configuration proposal. He stated that people do not seem to be paying attention to the model of two smaller schools which would be hooked together in one school. Ms. Traphagen read a quote from the teacher survey. She stated she would like to include Fort River in this process now and that there is no perfect option. Ms. Traphagen stated that the vote for re-configuration is not a popular vote but it is the right vote. She then spoke at length about structural inequities; and potential periodical re-districting. She also mentioned the eloquent letter from Wildwood Elementary School Principal Nick Yaffe to create and sustain supportive school communities. Ms. Traphagen spoke to transitions and socio-economic balances. She mentioned the conversation she had with her son who attends ARHS about ways to create the conditions for school community. Ms. Traphagen spoke to the public’s distrust of the administration and the opposition to re-configuration. She expressed the need for an early education learning center in the community and an extended day for these students. She sees the need for managing class sizes and supporting teacher collaboration throughout grade transitions. She feels strongly that the district must improve transparency to represent all voices in future discussions. She urged the community to see the opportunity to build a new school for what it is and move forward past Town Meeting.

School Committee members read prepared statements (see below):

Mr. Hood: At the last school committee meeting on January 14, I explained that I was in favor of the “consolidated plan” - a new building with twin wings housing grades 2 through 6, and a Pre-K through 1 early childhood education school at Crocker Farm - and I gave the reasons why I favored that plan. But I did not address the survey results and why I was supporting something that was clearly not the choice of the majority of parents and educators who took that survey. I want to try to address that now. I am particularly concerned that educators will feel they are not being listened to. Fifty percent of educators took the survey, including 70% of classroom teachers. My comments are meant primarily for educators, though the same comments apply for parents as well. I read the survey results and all the comments very carefully. I feel that I have listened hard and understood, but I disagree. That disagreement surely raises the question “*why does Rick think he knows better than the majority of educators do*”? My answer is that I do *not* know better than educators do, it is that my viewpoint is different. I believe my viewpoint is much longer term than most educators, and parents. With such a major structural change, I have to think about 5,10,15 and 30 years from now. That also includes taking a fresh look, without preconceptions; such as if we had no elementary schools now, what would we build? Educators are primarily thinking about today, not 5 or 10 years from now – which is as it should be, since their day to day job is focused on the students in their classroom today, not years from now. I was not expecting most educators to be in favor of going through such a major change, away from something they know so well, to something that has no implementation plan to look at yet, but in my view has structural advantages in the long term. In the survey comments I was looking for issues I had not heard about or thought of before. I did not find anything new in those comments. But there was valuable input. One comment, which was mentioned multiple times, was to add grade 2 to the PreK-1 school. That is surely not on the table because it would not fit at Crocker Farm, but it is worth talking about, since most early childhood programs go through grade 2. But then, that suggestion also goes against the “continuation” argument, where 2-6 is a pretty decent stretch of continuation – not as long as K-6, but fairly long – 3-6 would be less so. What the best balance is between the case for early childhood education, and the case for grade continuation, is certainly debatable, and an indication of the pros and cons that have had to be weighed. Equal opportunity is not everyone’s highest priority. Many think it is better to have differences between schools and thus choice. Many think it is best to have three separate K-6 schools and allow choice between them, which may work well for those who have the ability to choose. I am in the equal opportunity camp, not the choice camp. I was clear about that when I ran for this position both times I ran for school committee. A school configuration that has all same-grade students in the same building has an ability to better provide equal opportunity to programs and educators needed for those grades, whether reading instruction in Pre-K through 1, or specials in the upper grades. Educators who listed equity as their highest priority favored options C and D, the consolidated options. We have had equity issues for many years under a multi-school K-6 model, under many different administrations. I believe that if we have an opportunity to help change that now with reconfiguration, we should take that opportunity. It is not impossible to do better under a K-6 configuration, but it is much more likely under the consolidated plan for the reasons I mention. Educators also include the Principals, and they are all in favor the consolidated plan, some more so than others. For those who may wonder if they were arm-twisted for support, I would argue that they are a lot stronger people than that. And while I might understand how they would not publicly voice *disagreement* with a plan the administration supports, I cannot see them publicly voicing *support* unless they really believed in it. Having said that, I know that they are very concerned about educator morale and I believe that leading educators through this change, should we vote to approve it, will be top priority for them. In my opinion we have the best school building leadership in the state, and I have faith in their abilities to help lead teachers and staff through such a change. While I know that this explanation won’t cause those who disagree with where I come out on this to suddenly agree with me, I hope it at least helps to explain why I think there is this difference of opinion.

Ms. Hazzard: Today we must vote on a very difficult, contentious, and emotional decision: how to configure our elementary schools given the funding commitment we have received from the state. I have exhaustively considered the implications of each option, as well as our role as a school committee as we

make our selection. Last Thursday, I spoke at length about what I see as the strengths of preserving k-6 schools through a two-wing k-6 building while leaving Crocker Farm as it is, as well as the strengths of reconfiguring the elementary schools into a building with two 2-6 wings, each with a separate administration and staff, with Crocker Farm becoming an early childhood center, grades pre k-1. In weighing the pros and cons of each of these models through much research and consideration, I went back and forth, at different times arguing passionately on each side. I would like to speak to the survey results from teachers, staff, and parents, which clearly indicate mixed feelings about these options, with a majority leaning towards a twin k-6 school. I deeply respect the experiences, knowledge and expertise of teachers and staff as the trained educators who make our schools what they are every day, as well as the parents who know the personal experiences of their children in the Amherst schools. I think people's arguments for maintaining a k-6 structure hold a lot of weight — this is by far the option that is closest to what we know and love, while not leaving Fort River out of the equation, and it would cause the least upheaval. It is definitely a good “compromise” option. However, as I have delved into the issues at stake, I have come to understand more clearly how, while our k-6 schools are providing a great education to many students, there are children in our community who are not able to access it as successfully. As one of our esteemed principals said in a meeting a few weeks ago, we are at a crossroads. In choosing how we approach this new building, we have the potential to provide more children, particularly those on the margins of our community, with better access.

If we keep the k-6 model, the following will continue to be true:

- Kids will continue to be districted and bused to different schools according to their socio-economic status.
- If the district is to stay committed to balancing socio-economic demographics across the schools, children will continue to have to be redistricted every 5 or so years.
- Crocker Farm will continue to be over crowded, and some students in the Crocker Farm district will continue to be sent on to a different school because there isn't space.
- Class sizes will continue to be difficult to balance, with up to 24 students or down to 14.
- Special education students will continue to be sent to programs that may be at a school different than that for which they are districted, separating them from siblings and neighbors. They will continue to have to face the question of whether to switch schools again if their needs should change.
- It will continue to be challenging to meet the differing needs of ELL students depending on their proficiency levels
- As a result of limited space, the preschool will continue to turn away many children who may not otherwise attend preschool programs, a well-known first step in the looming achievement gap.

I believe the administration has made a compelling argument that, given the opportunity to change these inequities, we should choose the option that can do so.

I have read and heard many passionate arguments for preserving k-6 in the interest of:

- Having strong, small communities
- Maintaining continuity without disruption of transitions
- Allowing children to feel known and valued through strong relationships over an extended period of time
- Fostering mentoring opportunities for older and younger children
- Building connections between neighbors through schools
- Allowing for walkability/bikeability to elementary school.

I believe most of these priorities could be addressed with intention and effectiveness in option C, a pre k-1 and 2-6 model. Two 2-6 wings will be small schools with separate administrations and staff. They will

be strong communities where children will feel known and valued and parents can feel engaged and part of a community. School wings of 3-4 sections per grade will allow children to know the other teachers and students in their grade level. Grades 2-6 allows five years to establish strong, lasting relationships with opportunities for mentoring. Families can make connections with their neighbors through their school because all children of the same age will be going to the same location. There are losses and challenges, but I believe the administrators and staff have the expertise to creatively address and surmount them. Many people have mentioned reading buddies with kindergarteners and older students as an incredibly important and positive experience for their children. In a new configuration, it is paramount that opportunities for mentoring and positive age crossover be created. There will be one more transition, but it will be with all of a child's peers, and an intentional and effective bridging process can be planned to mitigate the effects of this transition. Siblings may be separated for some of their elementary experience, which is hard on parents. Schools must work together to ease this difficulty for families. Transportation must be addressed so that bus rides are reasonable and pick up and drop off are manageable. These are challenges that can be intelligently addressed. Furthermore, an early childhood building could become an educational setting specifically designed for the developmental and academic needs of that age group, with the much-desired opportunity for the pre-k students to become integrated members of the school community. The potential for improved teacher collaboration at all levels along with shared resources and expanded programming available to all students has great potential benefits for learners of all abilities. I fully recognize that this option has passionate proponents and opponents, and it is not the popular choice. Personally, it is very difficult for me to select an option that has met with so much controversy, and to say I have agonized over this decision is to put it mildly. Change is extremely hard. As a friend of mine said, "The idea of losing Wildwood gives me a stab in the heart." However, our job as a school committee is to take the wide view and the long view, and to deeply consider what provides the best access, participation, and benefit to the most students for many years to come. We live in a community of families with incredibly diverse needs and backgrounds, and to ignore some in favor of others goes against our ethical responsibility as leaders. As we go forward, I urge the administration to fully embrace the values and priorities that have been so strongly expressed by our community and make every effort to make them the beating heart of our new schools. I urge the school committee to help the community understand this major paradigm shift, and I urge the community to join together to make these schools the schools they want for their children. I am voting for option C because I don't think it's the compromise option. I think it is the best option for the most children, and I am so excited about how great our schools can be.

Before speaking, Ms. Appy thanked members for their thoughtfulness and hard work around this incredibly difficult topic.

Ms. Appy: Our district mission statement charges us to support policies that advance educational equity and opportunity for all students. To me, this requires us to ensure that all students have equal access, full participation, and maximum benefit from our school system. I am convinced that these guiding principles are best served by the proposed reconfiguration of our system into a pre-k, k and 1 early childhood center and a co-located twin school building for 2nd through 6th grade. Every convincing proposal to address the achievement gap has always included some key things, including small class sizes, best teaching practices with the opportunity for teachers to learn from one another and the vital importance of early childhood education. An early childhood center in Amherst with an expanded pre-school would go a long way to helping our town and our community make huge strides toward closing the achievement gap. I also think it gives our second graders the best chance to arrive in their new schools with the skills and confidence they need in order to succeed. I want to remind people concerned about the size of the new building that it will be divided into two distinct schools each smaller than Wildwood is right now. While at the same time giving students and staff 5 years of continuing relationship and access to a state of the art building to support the very best teaching and learning. I fully recognize that there are some in the community who disagree with my position and this may well be one of those issues around which we cannot build a

perfect consensus-- right now. It is my hope, however, that as we go forward with our new schools that a great majority will embrace this as a positive change. I truly believe that this is our best opportunity to meet the myriad needs of our students and work toward our goal of access, full participation and maximum benefit for all.

Ms. Appy called for a vote on the motion: "We move to change the grade configuration of the Amherst elementary schools to have Crocker Farm become a PreK-1 school and for the result of the MSBA process to be a 750 student, grade 2-6 school building, with two autonomous, roughly 375 student, Grades 2-6 schools with their own principal, teacher teams, and specialists, thereby closing one elementary school building, assuming a project scope and budget agreement and funding agreement are enacted. We request that the grade configuration section of the educational plan be updated to align with this official vote of the Amherst School Committee." School Committee members voted and the motion passed with one opposition (Douangmany-Cage). Ms. Appy called for a 5 minute break to allow the audience to leave the library before returning to the remaining agenda topics.

B. Fees

8:27 p.m.

DOCUMENT: FY2016 Fee Review and Proposed Changes for FY2017

Mr. Mangano reviewed the document and explained that the Preschool hourly rate would increase by \$0.25; lunch fees would increase by \$0.25; and milk fees would increase by \$0.10. Mr. Hood moved to approve the fee schedules. Ms. Hazzard seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

C. FY 17 Budget Presentation

8:30 p.m.

DOCUMENT: FY 17 Budget

Ms. Geryk reminded the committee that this presentation is an overview of the budget and proposed cuts will not be addressed until February. Mr. Mangano reviewed the budget and answered questions from members. He agreed to provide detailed cuts to committee members approximately one week prior to the February 9, 2016 meeting. He reminded the committee that the February 9, 2016 meeting will contain a budget public hearing and the school committee will vote the budget at the March 15, 2016 meeting.

D. School Choice Forum

8:50 p.m.

Ms. Geryk explained that the reason for school choice is to round out classrooms. Mr. Vince O'Connor requested a table spanning the past five years indicating the number of choice slots at each grade level; the number of applications received; the number of choice students enrolled; and the impact of costs associated with choice students. He also requested documentation regarding the legal provision that students who move from Amherst due to certain circumstances are allowed to remain in the Amherst Public Schools. Ms. Caridad Martinez requested exit interview data. Ms. Douangmany-Cage requested that school choice process information be available on the website.

E. Memorandum of Agreement

8:59 p.m.

DOCUMENTS: Contract Between McBassi & Company, Inc. and Amherst School Committee; Memorandum of Agreement between Amherst School Committees and Amherst-Pelham Education Association

Ms. Appy explained Ms. Fay's concern regarding the survey and staff negotiations. She then explained the timeline involving counsel and the APEA representative which lead to her signing the MOA as Chair. Ms. Appy read in its entirety the "Duties of the Chair" section as stated in Policy BDB: Officers and Duties. Ms. Douangmany-Cage inquired about additional attorney fees associated with MOA and requested clarification from Ms. Tate regarding another instance involving OML and the Attorney General. A discussion followed. Ms.

Traphagen suggested that Mr. Hood, as Vice Chair, contact Ms. Tate via email to gain her perspective. Ms. Douangmany-Cage requested that the discussion end.

F. Wellness Policy

DOCUMENT: Amherst Public Schools, Pelham Elementary School, and Amherst-Pelham Regional District Policy Manual Policy ADF: Wellness

Ms. Geryk explained the reasoning behind the language change per the Pelham School Committee. Ms. Traphagen inquired about the omission of physical activity in relation to discipline section. A brief discussion followed. Ms. Appy suggested the policy be brought back to the Policy Sub-Committee on Monday, January 25, 2016 for further discussion. All agreed to table the vote.

G. Accept Gifts

9:21 p.m.

There were no gifts to accept.

5. School Committee Business

9:21 p.m.

Ms. Geryk suggested that the following topics be included on the agenda for the February 9, 2016 meeting: Amherst Elementary School Building Project Update, FY 16 2nd Quarter Update, FY17 Budget Public Hearing, School Choice vote, field trips, recess/detentions, Wellness Policy, and Amherst Media Makers Space.

6. Adjournment

9:25 p.m.

Ms. Appy called for a motion to adjourn. Ms. Traphagen made a motion to adjourn at 9:25 p.m. Mr. Hood seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Kimberly Stender