MINUTES OF THE TEACHER/STAFF INPUT SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE CHESHIRE TOWN COUNCIL SCHOOL MODERNIZATION COMMITTEE (SMC) MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2020, 3:15 to 4:00 P.m. IN THE HIGHLAND SCHOOL LIBRARY REFERENCE ROOM, CHESHIRE CT 06410.

Present
Jen Bates, Rich Gusenburg. Absent: Anne Marie Kemp
Staff: Dept. of Education Asst. Supt. of Schools Marlene Silano; Highland School Principal Scott Jeffreys.

1. ROLLCALL
The Clerk called the roll and a quorum was determined to be present.

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
The group Pledged Allegiance to the Flag.

3. INTRODUCTION OF PURPOSE OF INPUT SESSION
Supt. Silano explained that the School Modernization Committee (SMC) was formed between the Town Council and Board of Education. There are a number of subcommittees within the SMC, and the Teacher/Staff Input Committee is one of them. Members of this committee are Rich Gusenburg, Chairman, Jennifer Bates and Ann Marie Kemp (SMC Chair). The goal is to gather information and hear from the people who work in the school buildings on how to improve the school facilities and have the instructional means to meet the academic needs of the students. All meetings will be videotaped.

Mr. Gusenburg explained the BOE had a plan four (4) years ago for school modernization with a grade 6 to 8 middle school which was not accepted by the Town Council. The BOE and Council collaborated to move forward with a new plan and Council appointed the SMC to undertake the mission and report back with a plan.

The goal of the SMC is to have a full plan for modernization of the schools by September for November referendum. Mr. Gusenburg noted this is an aggressive timeline, and it is uncertain if the SMC will meet the timeline. The committee meetings are being videotaped in order for the full SMC and community to see, first hand, what is being done. Meeting minutes are submitted to the SMC members and are on the town website. The SMC plan could include renovations or new construction, and there are financial issues for consideration. The most advantageous plan will be looked at along with the cost to the community. The SMC has three (3) subcommittees – RFP Committee for selection of an outside consultant; Out-of District Committee to visit/tour districts with recent modernization of schools; and Teacher/Staff Input Committee to meet with staff and get their input on the status of their school and its needs.

4. COMMENTS FROM CHESHIRE PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STAFF REGARDING SCHOOL FACILITIES
Kathy Weston I.A. Special Education, commented on the need for easier access and entrance for students in wheelchairs. She noted the handicapped buttons in the school are turned off and at least one entrance is needed for wheelchair/handicapped accessibility.

Eric Brinkman, 6th Grade Teacher, talked about the removal of carpets throughout the school, the installation of tile flooring, and the poor air quality in the building. Within hours of arriving at school, Mr. Brinkman is affected by the poor air quality and ventilation in the building. He noted there was an investment of $5M for the new HVAC system roof unit, which has not worked properly since it was installed. There are daily requests to turn on the air-conditioning and insure it is functioning.

Deb Hollander, 6th Grade Teacher, has changed her mind about 6th graders in middle school, and now supports a 6-8 grade middle school due to changes in instruction and curriculum. She believes 6th grade students will do better in middle school rather than elementary school. Ms. Hollander talked about Science in a real Science room and the benefit to 6th grade students. She commented on having allergies and asthma health issues since the new HVAC system was installed...during winter break she was fine. There must be a correlation between her health issues and the poor air quality.

It was noted by Mr. Gusenburg that students in the Cheshire School System have excellent academic achievements, and he said this is thanks to the excellent teaching staff in all the schools.

Jen Ziebarth, 5th Grade Teacher (formerly 6th grade), talked about 6th graders being too young to move to the middle school and interacting with 7th and 8th graders. She said these students are very young, and there would be the need for some configuration to initially keep them separate from the older students. Science instruction in a real Science room and lab would be beneficial for 6th grade students. Ms. Ziebarth mentioned the concepts of a K-1st-2nd grade school, 3 and 4th grade level school, and 5th to 8th grade middle school.

This is a design issue and Mr. Gusenburg said it would be reviewed and decided on what the middle school would look like...such as having three (3) wings...one for each grade level. He said there are pros and cons for breaking out grade levels and transitioning students into middle school. When the design concept is being considered, there should be staff advisory for the building layout, with input from teachers, architects, and others involved in the design of the school.

Megan Bolger, 2nd Grade Teacher, talked about the big discrepancy between 8th graders and 6th graders, and keeping the 6th graders young. She does support a 6th grade Science/education program.
Denise Scialabba is a Chapman School parent, and said it is a wonderful school for K through 5th grade, and by 6th grade students are ready to move onto middle school. They need a new base, make new friends…and the transition into 7th grade is hard on students. Ms. Scialabba said this was the situation with her daughter in 7th grade as the only Chapman student in her home room.

It was pointed out by Ms. Hollander that elementary curriculum is written to 5th grade, and then 6th to 8th grade.

Cathy Biello, Special Education Teacher, supports the 6th to 8th grade middle school. Ms. Biello commented on the poor air quality within the school, shades that have dry rot and cannot be moved up or down, window gaps resulting in leakage on rainy days, sediment from the old heating system (black grit) evident in the classrooms.

Heather Garber, 4th Grade Teacher, stated windows do not close or go up or down, and cannot be opened in an emergency situation.

Principal Jeffreys explained the BOE capital budget has Highland School on the cycle of window replacement of two (2) windows per year. In the event of an evacuation the windows must be able to open. Mr. Jeffreys noted Highland School was built in 1971 and needs modification, the school is totally ADA compliant, and everything is based on a limited budget for needed items for the school. The overall school security is important and needs to be modernized. "Man Trap" security is coming; new exterior cameras will be added and installed this year; and there is immediate camera access on the computers.

The issue of better outside lighting was raised by Ms. Biello, especially for teachers leaving the school building after 5 p.m. when it is dark.

The committee was informed by Mr. Jeffreys that district school buildings are being worked on regarding installation of exterior lighting on a sensor system.

Ms. Garber reported that the need for more electrical/power outlets and data ports in the classrooms. Wireless activity in the building is working well; Chrome Books are working well; Go Guardian is awesome; and there must be the best version of Smart Boards throughout the school.

Chrome Books – Ms. Hollander advised there is at least once a week request for repairs and other issues, and most Chrome Books are failing apart.

With regard to school modernization across the district, Ms. Hollander noted it does not have to be a new building. It can be utilizing the existing buildings, redistricting, and having a middle school concept…and people will be open to this. Mr. Hollander said
she has used her own funds or small grants for funds to make her classroom seating more flexible.

Redistricting – Staff talked about equity after redistricting; Highland School has 21 (or more) students per classroom, while other schools are much smaller; there is a huge discrepancy between class sizes from building to building. Redistricting would result in class size equity throughout the school district.

Whatever plan is proposed, Mr. Gusenburg said the public must be convinced it is a good plan, and parents support the modernization plan.

Denise Scialabba is a Chapman School parent, and said it is a wonderful school for K through 5th grade, and by 6th grade students are ready to move onto middle school. They need a new base, make new friends…and the transition into 7th grade is hard on students. Ms. Scialabba said this was the situation with her daughter in 7th grade as the only Chapman student in her home room.

Furniture – The school has old furniture and Mr. Jeffreys is trying to get new furniture for a few classrooms each year. Some classrooms have new furniture for more collaborative learning…staff must know how furniture will help with learning and be flexible.

Tara Corcoran, 5th Grade Teacher, said the size of the children and learning is affected by the furniture, and flexible seating is preferable.

Marion Sweeney, Kindergarten Teacher, reiterated the concerns and issues about windows, and cited bathroom issues as another concern. The bathrooms need new tile, grouting (leaks), plumbing, and sinks with hot water. The soap dispensers are too difficult for Kindergarten children to use, and she provides other soap for their use.

Ms. Corcoran commented on there being only four (4) faculty bathrooms for a school the size of Highland, and believes this is a low number of bathroom facilities.

Alison Ranciato cited the bathroom issues as well, and the noise coming from hand dryers as disturbing to nearby classrooms.

Ms. Ziebarth believes the decibel level of the hand dryers is damaging to hearing, and questions their cleanliness and sanitation. The walls behind these dryers are scummy. Special Ed students are terrified of the noise/volume from these dryers and cover their ears when they hear them.

Highland School is totally handicapped accessible.

When Highland School opened in 1971, it had an “open classroom” concept, and Mr. Jeffreys reported these classrooms are now closed rooms. He cited some items of
importance with modernization such as power outlets and data ports, good acoustics, sound proofing between music rooms (with portable walls).

Lindsay Grant spoke to the pocket walls in her room. She has two outside walls with tracks on the ceiling; acoustics are not good; there is a one foot gap between her wall and solid doorway.

Over the years, Ms. Hollander said fire codes changed and walls had to be closed.

Principal Jeffreys stated that overall, staff has modified and adjusted to adequate use of space, but with modernization there are things to be fixed. Highland has 745 students and 100+ staff members…before visitors to the building each day. Mr. Jeffreys talked about issues with parking, entrances and exits, special events and leaving the campus. A reconfiguration of the parking/entrance movement is necessary. There are 14 school buses daily, parent drop off on the south side, special education buses on the north side, parent pickup in the cafeteria area in the afternoon.

Ms. Nichols noted that the Town Council is discussing how to get exits out of Highland School to be safer.

Thanks to the Cheshire Police Department, Mr. Jeffreys reported there is now a 40 second light extension at Highland in the afternoon, and a 15 second light extension in the morning. This has made a big difference between a safe exit, limiting the time kids sit on school buses in the parking lot, and making for the most efficiency given the situation.

Portable Classrooms – are not attached to the main school building; there are handicapped accessible ramps to the portable classrooms; and there are security concerns with people leaving the building going to the outside.

Ms. Nichols talked about “kids stuff”…i.e. backpacks, coats, books etc. and the space for these items in the hall or classroom closets.

According to Mr. Jeffreys, storage is always an issue. Each grade level has limited amount of storage for supplies and materials, and classrooms have limited storage areas. Some classrooms have cubby areas which get crowded. The teachers would appreciate more storage space in classrooms and closets.

Supt. Silano asked about spaces where all students and staff can get together.

The gymnasium is large but a tight space, and Mr. Jeffreys said it is not comfortable for a full school assembly. Events are usually split into two sessions based on grade levels.
Cafeteria – there is adequate space to accommodate six (6) lunch waves of 25 minutes each…11:20 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The cafeteria is noisy; students comment on a long time to get hot lunch, eat and go out to recess.

Ms. Ziebarth informed the group that her students did a project/survey on “building the perfect school” and the hot lunch line was a priority for them. They worked on a science report on protecting the earth…and 50,000 styro-foam trays are thrown into the trash just from Highland School…and there are ways to become more eco-friendly.

Storage at Highland is at a premium, and Ms. Ziebarth said each grade level should have a storage closet (outside of a classroom closet) for materials/supplies and other curriculum needs. In her room she has a student coat closet; other 5th grade teachers have a coat closet in the hallway; some district schools have small lockers which cannot fit anything.

Mr. Gusenburg thanked the teachers for attending the meeting and giving their input to the committee…it is important information for future decisions on school modernization.

5. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Ms. Bates; seconded by Mr. Gusenburg

MOVED to adjourn the meeting at 4:45 p.m.

VOTE The motion passed unanimously by those present.

Attest:

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Marilyn W. Milton, Clerk