

Minutes of the School Committee
Regular Meeting
Charles C. Winchester Auditorium, Milton High School
October 16, 2012

Committee Present: Glenn Pavlicek, Chair; Lynda-Lee Sheridan, Vice Chair; Mary Kelly, Kristan Bagley-Jones, Leroy Walker, Becky Padera

Staff Present: Mary Gormley, Superintendent; John Phelan, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Personnel; Matthew Gillis, Assistant Superintendent for Business.

Call to Order

The Chair called the October 16, 2012 meeting of the School Committee to order at 7:37

Chairman's Report

Topic One: First Grade Assignment Policy. Mr. Pavlicek opened the meeting by explaining that there was only one item on the agenda, which was the First Grade Assignment Policy. He went to provide some information on prior assignment policies. He noted that that the district can accommodate a total of 14 classes for each grade. In recent years, there has been the addition of a 15th classroom, the "auxiliary class," which has rotated from school to school.

He outlined the 2002 ballot petition which dealt with bilingual education. Once passed, this legislation affected how Milton's French Immersion program operated. In addition, state and federal mandates on English Language Learners, special needs classrooms and ADA requirements has changed over the past decades. The district added co-taught classrooms, which has also impacted assignments.

He proposed a format for the evening. The chair recommended allowing 6 to 8 people to take a turn at the microphones, after which the school committee and administration would do their best to answer questions. Then, the next 6-8 people would take their turn until everyone had their chance to speak.

A summary of the speakers is outlined below:

Bob Tamkin: Came to speak on behalf of his neighbor, Ralph Jaeger. Mr. Jaeger moved to Milton for the FI program and has been a strong advocate. He said he left Europe because of the demise of the educational system and urged the committee to reject the proposed cap.

Pat MacNaught: She urged the committee to add another, special program in the English students, which would prevent the need for a cap.

Craig Wright: He proposed asking parents to choose the program in Kindergarten, to allow more time to plan. He also supported a grandfather clause and sibling preference. He would like to know more about the STEM program.

Christine Howley: She said there have been many victims over the past few weeks, especially the English teachers. She said thank you to the English teachers.

Emily Speck: She moved to Milton for FI. However, she supports the need to cap so everyone gets the education they need. She pointed out there was an inequity in how students will be assigned, with a smaller percentage of Tucker and Cunningham students.

Colleen Woods: She works for a multi-national company and recognizes the importance of speaking a second language. She said she hopes the committee hasn't already made its decision. She would support a Prop 2 1/2 override to continue to provide FI to all, and supports sibling preference.

Keith Wick, He also pointed out that Cunningham and Tucker school students would have a much lower chance of accessing FI. He also didn't think that creating a lottery would impact the role model pool.

Jessica Laine. She said this is more about doing the right thing than housing values. She was upset by the accusations that the English program was an inferior program and parents who choose it are "irresponsible."

MaryAnn Rull: She has children in FI and was on the World Language committee. She supports a cap and strongly disagrees with the content of the Facebook page. She pointed out many of the reasons why a cap makes sense.

Erin & Jerry Vitti: They said their family is French, English, SPED, co-taught and private school. They described themselves as "heartbroken: over some of the language being used to describe special needs students. They described their daughter's disability and pointed out that, as a public school, it is Milton's obligation to provide an education for all students.

Response: Mr Pavlicek apologized to the crowd for having neglected to mention STEM in his opening remarks. He briefly outlined how the program works and said that perhaps if the STEM program had been in place for this year, and 20 people chose English instead of French, the cap would not be necessary. Ms. Gormley explained how the creation of co-taught classrooms several years ago has been impacted by the smaller percentages of English students. Ms. Gormley addressed the concept of sister schools and said were considering partnering the schools to even out the percentages.

Margret Eberhardt, said she did not move to Milton for FI. She pointed out that Milton is a community of caring, loving, giving people and she is proud to call this town her home.

Response: Ms. Gormley clarified two issues, sibling preference and non-MPS kindergarten. She explained that offering sibling preference would have a significant impact on the number of seats available. She also explained how a tiered lottery works.

JP Plunkett: He is not against FI, but said he is pro-cap. He said that FI was originally started to augment what was a great school system, not to dominate and control an issue. Supports the right to choose French, but wants a cap.

Matilda Baldwin: She is a student in FI and said her parents moved her from another city so that she could learn French. Asked the committee to keep the FI program intact.

Patti Elliott: Supports the cap. She cautioned people with small children not to make the choice for FI at too young an age. Assess which program would be best for your child and wait until kindergarten to choose. Said parents should visit both classrooms.

Julia Hogan: This discussion has devolved into an “us versus them” which is unfortunate. She proposed allowing FI students to act as role models for the co-taught program. She also said it is more important to make a long-term plan for FI correctly, rather than quickly.

Carole Seidman: Pointed out that not all kids who are on IEPs are excluded from French. Noted that intelligence and disabilities are mutually exclusive. She said the town needs to reallocate resources so that kids with different abilities can participate in all the programs.

Aaron Mann: Said that the most important thing is equality for all students. Something to strive for in many ways. The issue of sibling preference is tricky. He said when you think of equality, you have to think of equality within a family. We're losing sight of equality in the family, not just equality in the school.

Anne Gatnick: Spoke about an incident at Glover where her daughter's classmate from the co-taught classroom was being teased on the playground. She said being in the co-taught classroom has been enormously beneficial for her daughter, as well as the other role models. She also said that children who are not given a spot in FI will have equal opportunity to succeed in English.

T. Atilla Cerangolu: Thanked the school district and the superintendent for undertaking this challenging task. Asked how can we justify the decision to tell a child they cannot learn the same thing as their brother? Asked for a delay of the vote. Also asked to see how the STEM program will impact enrollment, and asked to see the design ratio for the number of role models.

Sami Ramadan: He said there are a lot of parents in his situation, who have a connection to the French language and choosing FI is not a haphazard choice. He asked, what is the outlook? How many families will be affected?

Response: Ms. Gormley explained how the number of FI classrooms would be spread throughout the district. She noted that over the past decade, there were only two times that the number of students enrolled in FI exceeded 182. She also noted that there is not an immersion program in the country where enrollment is not capped. This year, nearly 200 students are in FI and had there been a cap, 18 would not have been enrolled.

Debra Milbauer: She is against the cap. She also noted that she had an issue with format of the evening. She didn't feel it was a true Q and A session. She said the format doesn't really allow a process, and she felt it was silencing. She asked why the committee is not considering a 2 week or 4 week delay to explore non-cap solutions. Not getting into French is a lifelong consequence with no opportunity to access it later. She noted that she learned to speak Spanish as an adult and considers acquiring a second language a gift. She said the home school preference does not apply to all families, and she would be willing to change schools if it meant keeping FI. She asked for more information on why a sibling preference policy is considered unfair.

Jessica Delaney: She said the English program needs to be marketed better and there have been many misconceptions. She applauded the addition of STEM and asked if perhaps music and art could be added.

Response: Mr. Phelan noted that he was the cochair of the world language committee and explained the timeline of the committee and how they arrived at the recommendations in their report. He noted that the issue of capping FI has been in the works for 3 or 4 years and there were discussions during the summer of 2012 and throughout the fall on this topic. Regarding siblings, he explained that the administration feels it's necessary for siblings to stay together in the same building, especially K-5. The sibling issue is more school-based than program-based. Also, because the number of students currently in FI with siblings is quite large and it is a difficult task to balance equity and inequity.

Andrea Synnott: Asked how the lottery would be run. She said there is a rumor that the SC wants to balance the lottery, and asked for details on how the lottery would work. Asked for an explanation of what a "home school" is, because children in her neighborhood go to all four elementary schools. She feels the administration is driving parents to choose English.

Mary Claire Cantor: She chose FI for her daughter and is against the cap. She asked for what percentage the administration is looking for regarding the FI/English mix. She asked if there would actually be 26 FI students in each First Grade class. She wondered if the goal of the lottery was balancing the classroom? Would there be a separate lottery for boys and girls? Asked for sibling preference.

Response: Ms. Gormley explained that the administration has conducted lotteries in the past. Right now, there are no details as to exactly how it would be run. She said they would make it as public as possible and are not going to separate any subgroups

out. All children will be in the same lottery. Regarding class size, Ms. Gormley explained that the administration will first assign the English students to classrooms. The class-size cap will be driven by the English program. They will watch those #s all through the summer. She said they go through a tremendous amount of work to try to equalize class size. There will be no separating of children in the lottery.

Beth Rooney: Said she heard the Vittis speak and felt compelled to come to the meeting to speak. Her children were in the English program. She referred to another parent who called FI a “gift” and said that her son had the gift of being a role model student, which was an amazing opportunity for him. She praised the English program.

Jonathan Boyden. Asked the clarify the number of spots available in FI. Is it 182, or a different number? He also said his personal preference is home school, but he noted that this policy is forcing parents to choose English if they want to guarantee their home school.

Reponse: Ms. Gormley noted that there will be a waiting list for any open seats.

Vivian Zimon, 8 Conway Road. Her daughter is in FI and has a younger sister. She asked if the school-based lottery would if she doesn't find a place in the lottery, does she go to a different school? hard with working parents. STEM, we don't know what it is, and publish a timeline. My younger daughter may enjoy this.

John O'Neill: Wondered about the allocation of seats, and asked if teachers would still have to move from school to school. He thinks sibling preference for home school is more important than sibling preference for program.

Shannon Mahoney: Said that the assumption that parents who choose French are choosing against the English program is wrong. Also, the thought that parents who are against the cap are representative of those who make negative comments is wrong. Would like more information about STEM. Reminded the committee that the vote tomorrow night is a drastic step that can't be reversed.

Mike Zullas: My perspective is as a parent of a prospective student in FI. He said if there is a lottery, his family will participate in it. He also said that families shouldn't assume that because one child is enrolled in FI, they should expect that all of their children will be enrolled. He thought that families currently enrolled in FI should be given some type of sibling preference, even though this didn't apply to his family.

Stephanie Hartwell: She's a sociologist and said she's interested in “acrimony of subject matter.” She said the town is doing a good job, but the clear pattern that is emerging is sibling preference. She asked if the SC would consider making an exception for siblings in “straddle families.”

Keith Wick (again): Wanted to know how the co-taught classrooms would be affected by the cap and lottery. Is not sure that it will add more role models. If the lottery is not weighted, you are adding EIP students into the English side, so how will a random lottery meet the goals that are outlined in terms of balancing students? He also asked about the upcoming time frame. If there is a vote tomorrow, is there a time frame for a new proposal? Is there a wait period before it can be re-proposed? Asked for a delay.

Response: Mr. Pavlicek noted that, regarding IEPs, the law states that districts must conform to the outline of the IEP. Also, on the issue of differentiating within the lottery, legal counsel has told them that they cannot differentiate legally within the lottery. Ms. Kelly noted that, according to a SC report on demographics, the vast majority of students with IEPs are in the English program. There is a much smaller %age of students with IEPs in FI. Ms. Gormley concurred that the district cannot create a weighted lottery. Also, a parent asked if we could survey current K parents, and Ms. Gormley said the district does do this in February, in order to give parents a half a year in K and have the chance to talk to teachers, etc. It would be difficult to ask parents to choose any earlier than that. Ms. Gormley said that, regarding STEM, this program was first discussed last spring, when we saw the FI numbers rise to 66%. It has been in the works for several months. She said the administration will communicate better to the public about STEM program.

Linda Cooper: She supports a cap and a lottery. She thinks this will send a message to all our teachers that SC is acting in a responsible manner so they feel good about the school system. I agree that the cap should be implemented without preferences.

Bill McDonough: Said he appreciates the fact that people are looking for solutions and talked about volunteerism. Ask parents if they would volunteer to move to another district. Some parents would volunteer to move across town.

Carol Seidman (again) Asked about why the cap would be for 26 in FI. Asked to avoid the phrase "regular education." Disagreed with an unsigned ad in the Milton Times. Reminded the SC of the mandate to provide for children with disabilities.

Christine Fisk: Moved to Milton for FI. Said she's impressed by the role model program and hearing about it made her feel that my daughter missed out on that opportunity. She urged the SC to consider option of creative solutions. Some type of integration of FI and co-taught classrooms.

Shannon Mahoney: Said she wished there were more education about the STEM program. She disagreed with the cap and lottery and said is not a creative plan. It does not directly solve the problem. Supports grandfathering because to not provide that devalues how difficult it is to acclimate parents, especially for those who don't speak French. She asked to have an expert come and talk about the value of having siblings share this experience.

Maria Karimbakas: She reiterated that all other immersion programs have a cap. She said the only thing wrong with the English program is the French program, which has caused single strands, limited option for inclusion, and organizational instability. She thinks what the superintendent has recommended is reasonable.

Nicque Bradshaw: She praised her former high school principal and said that Milton must create and maintain optimal learning environments. Thanked the SC for sharing the data and is grateful that the SC willing to identify and address the problems. Supports the cap.

Elizabeth Baldwin: Has one child in FI and one child in English. Does not want to limit choices given to children. Opposed to the cap.

Peter Feloney: Supports FI and opposed to the cap. He sees the cap as creating a potentially resentful environment. Said it is cruel to have families go through this every year. Encouraged school system to market STEM and see if that helps limit the FI numbers.

Matthew King: Said he might not have chosen FI for his family if they had known it would be capped. Noted that, although most other immersion programs in the country have caps, many also have sibling preference. Asked about how twins/triplets would be placed.

Response: Mr. Pavlicek said there has been no decision yet on how to treat twins/triplets. If the policy is that multiple birth families stay together, then the children could be together in the English program.

Terry McNeill: Said there was a lot to be proud of. Is concerned that the Q and A session was too close to the actual vote. Told the committee that they should take their time and it will show that you listened and are responsive.

Kari McHugh,: Is upset that FI parents have been painted with a broad brush. We've been called a lot of names. She said she was accused of hiding because she made a Facebook page about this issue. Said that FI families are also concerned about special needs students. Does not want a situation with "winners and losers." She wants to create a solution that works for all children and thinks we can come together and find a solution.

Gerry Vitti: (again) Wants to be clear that most of this conversation has taken place before. At the last SC meeting, the cap presentation was given and two parents showed up to argue against the cap. Just because it's just now being covered in the media does not mean that the issue is new. Also, he wanted to reiterate that not every child can access FI.

Leila Mitchell: Identified three themes: community, communication and contrast. She thinks the decision to cap is a band-aid. She wishes there were more marketing for

STEM, and doesn't like the win/lose aspect of a lottery. Wants to find a creative solution and asked the SC to dig deeper.

Jay Rooney: Asked for a compromise. Asked if the SC was willing to take the ideas they heard tonight and tweak them, or is this black and white?

T. Atilla Cerangolu: Said he is worried and hopeful. If the SC haven't decided about twins, then there are still some details to work out. So he is hopeful.

Response: Ms. Gormley said thank you to everyone who showed up for the meeting. The most important thing is your children and your families. She said that is why she chooses to work with you in this town. She wants both programs to flourish in this town for years to come. She said the administration's goal is to communicate with parents and guardians to be sure they are fully informed. Mr. Pavlicek also said thank you to the audience and said their statements have not gone un-heard. When asked if there would be a vote on this issue on Oct. 17th, he said that if a member calls for a vote, they will have a vote. He then entertained a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Move: Ms. Sheridan

Second: Ms. Bagley Jones

Vote: 6-0-0

The meeting adjourned at 11:02 pm.