

Minutes of the School Committee
School Committee Retreat
Superintendent's Conference Room
Date: August 7th, 2015

Committee Present: Michael Zullas, Chair; Becky Padera, Vice Chair; Kristan Bagley-Jones (via phone and then present) Leroy Walker, Sheila Varela, Kevin Donahue.

Staff Present: Mary Gormley, Superintendent; Janet Sheehan, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Human Resources; Dr. Glenn Pavlicek, Assistant Superintendent for Business.

Call to Order

The Chair called the August 7th retreat of the School Committee to order at 2:15pm

Chairman's Report

The chair began the meeting by suggesting the committee come up with a short list of committee goals— about five or so. He said it would be fair to have a discussion of what worked and what didn't work.

Mr. Zullas introduced Jake Olivera, who will be facilitating the meeting. He is a 7th year member of Ludlow School Committee is the president-elect of MASC.

Planning and Goal Setting

Mr. Olivera said that regarding goal-setting, it's really rare for School Districts to do this. Most committees get caught up in day-to-day or week-to-week objectives.

Ms. Bagley Jones (via phone) said there has been positive progress around data but she also worries that there has been an overemphasis on data. She thinks it's important to hone in on priorities and feels there are conflicting ideas about what direction to go. She would like to be more concise with data presentations. Ms. Bagley Jones also said that the French Immersion/English issue has come a long way, but there is still a lot of concern about this, in terms of achievement for subgroups. Ms. Bagley Jones said the graduation rate for our subgroups is not great, which is worrisome to her. The overall rate is very high, but there are some subgroups where the graduation rate is very low.

Ms. Padera said she likes that we base some decisions on data, but we can get too overwhelmed with data. Some of this is more useful internally for administrators and teachers. The School Committee may request things that may be misinterpreted by the public. She thinks the committee should keep an eye on the fact that many of our meetings have data. This confuses people, especially since data changes quickly. We should look at other means of feedback.

Ms. Varela said she reviewed last year's goals. She mentioned the "rolling three year financial plan," and the "reduce proficiency gaps," goals as ones that seemed to be data-based. She said she thinks it would be better to present the results to us, not necessarily the data.

Dr. Donahue would like to reconstruct the goals to be a list of short-term action items that can be achieved in next 12 months -- and meanwhile, maintain the "perennial" action items.

Mr. Zullas we may want to consider a goal that addresses the use of data. Mr. Olivera said these can be multi-faceted goals. He then circulated materials regarding SMART goals. Regarding the 3-5 year goals, he suggested creating a subcommittee of the School Committee to work on that, to make sure these are timed and tracked. He also suggested the School Committee "check in" on these goals, either mid-year or quarterly. Goals are the big ticket items, and action items are what lead to the goals. He noted that several goals were repeated with common themes. "communications" "guidance" "strategic plan," and "override."

Mr. Zullas began discussion of each of the goals.

Goal One: Tuition Free Kindergarten. Mr. Olivera asked, what's the timeline? Ms. Bagley Jones said she thinks free FDK (full-day kindergarten) is important, but should probably not be its own goal, but perhaps part of a larger goal. Ms. Varela said to implement free FDK, we would need approximately \$1.1 million for the first year and about \$850,000 moving forward. Ms. Padera said that kindergarten has become part of the educational track. Most schools have moved to free FDK and we need to move in this direction. Ms. Bagley Jones said she is on board with FDK, but not on board that it should be free. Mr. Zullas said, should we offer FDK as part of public education. He said if we spend \$250,000 we get \$850,000 in Chapter 70 funds for FDK. Ms. Gormley said by not offering free FDK, we're leaving state money on the table that we would be getting. In addition, it is likely that we won't get a state grant again. Mr. Zullas said 11 states make this FDK mandatory and he thinks that Milton should get out in front of this. Dr. Donahue said there are two issues: 1. Should we offer free FDK? 2. Should this be its own goal, or part of another goal? Mr. Olivera talked about the difference between strategic direction and a goal. Ms. Bagley Jones said that she's hung up on the free part. Is this one of the most important things that we can do? Ms. Varela said that nationally, data shows that FDK is a no-brainer. Not having FDK is a step backwards. The world has evolved, where today's K is like first grade from 20 years ago. We can't count on state money, so we would continue to have to ask parents to keep paying more money. Ms. Bagley Jones said, only five students district-wide are not enrolled in FDK. Mr. Olivera said the State House is now moving to free Full Day Preschool (FDP). Dr. Donahue said his inclination is to support funding free FDK townwide. He also noted that being enrolled in MPS kindergarten gives you preference in the French Immersion lottery. Ms. Varela said she hasn't heard from one parent who would not support it. Ms. Bagley Jones said we do not know if this will take from other resources. Ms. Varela said she is dismayed about the middle school budget cuts, including the off-team approach. She does not want anything else to be taken off the middle school or high school. She supports FDK, but does not want to keep skimming off the AP classes, or things at middle and high school. Ms. Varela asked, if we did an override, would \$1 million be put aside for FDK? Dr. Pavlicek said we cannot ask for \$1 million for the override — we have to ask for \$250,000. Ms. Varela said that's fine, but that means that we need to come up with \$850,000. Mr. Walker and Mr. Zullas and Dr.

Pavlicek recently met to talk about this. There has been some free cash in recent years. Perhaps the free cash could be used for this purpose. This would be a townwide discussion, not just a school committee discussion. Dr. Pavlicek said the state may change Chapter 70 formulas. Ms. Bagley Jones said the goal should be "Develop a Plan by January 2016 to offer free FDK to implement by June of 2016."

Mr. Walker said he is working with both the 14-15 goals and using the current list. He thinks we did a good job last year developing these goals, and our Superintendent's goals are aligned with ours. He is hoping we don't get rid of the 2014-15 goals. For the FDK issue, he doesn't think this is a strategic goal. It does influence and inform some of the other goals, such as proficiency gap. Mr. Walker thinks we should have a plan by next month. He also said the committee should quickly develop a plan for free FDK, but this does not rise to the level of a goal. Ms. Padera said that last year, she was torn with some of the things that were cut because of advancement budget. If we have to cut the entire music program to pay for FDK, then I will not vote for it. Mr. Walker said he agrees with Ms. Bagley Jones on the point of it not being its own goal. Each school level has different needs and each parent group wants something out of it.

There was some discussion by the members about the need for an override this year. Mr. Olivera asked the committee to return to the list of goals and begin to prioritize. He asked what must absolutely be done. Space issues? FDK issues? Ms. Varela asked a logistical question — when the committee has long-term strategic goals, how can they integrate last year's goals into this year's goals? Do we simply add to last year's? How do we take the multi-year strategic goals and make sure they're pursued, without having 15 or 20 goals? Mr. Olivera suggested making two lists -- one year goals and multi-year goals. Today, the goals we're setting, are short-term, action-oriented.

Ms. Padera said that there is a need to communicate with parents about PARCC testing and thinks there is "hysteria" over this test. She suggested conducting info sessions. Ms. Varela talked about how parents may not show up for these, so we should offer this a few times in the fall. She said there is a need for great PR on this topic.

Ms. Bagley Jones said communication is key. Perhaps we should develop a fact sheet about PARCC. She would also like to look at inclusion and/or SPED issues. Mr. Olivera asked if the school has developed a communications plan. Ms. Varela noted that all the principals do e-blasts, and so does the Superintendent. She said, in this day and age, if you can't text it or communicate it in 10 words or less, nobody pays attention. She would like to see more blasts, less verbiage. The current Superintendent's E-blast is excellent and thorough, but people don't read it. We need to find another way, using "bullet point" format. There are multiple ways of taking materials in it. Mr. Olivera suggested that the committee develop a communication plan. He asked how the administration communicates with students, and talked about the RAVE system, which is for text messaging.

Mr. Zullas said that so far, the committee has listed three big goals and it is time to flesh them out.

FDK

SPACE
COMMUNICATION

Mr. Walker suggested adding SPED as another goal category. A program review is starting now. Mr. Walker said the goal should be to develop a strategy to reduce the SPED proficiency gap. We need to have a goal that articulates a vision. Mr. Olivera then reviewed the four categories:

FDK
SPACE
COMMUNICATION
SPED

Ms. Bagley Jones said she would like to define what data we need as a committee. Ms. Gormley said we used to have 20 people giving data at each meeting. Now, we have a data specialist and it is more efficiently organized. Dr. Donahue said, when we ask for data, there are two kinds: 1. to make decisions 2. to assess the effectiveness of our decision.

The committee began working on adding detail to each goal.

SPACE
FDK
COMMUNICATION
SPED
DATA

Mr. Walker confirmed that last year's goals won't "go away." Ms. Bagley Jones said should we add to last year's goals? Mr. Olivera said, you have made progress on these goals. Ms. Varela said this would make a total of 10 or 15 goals and feels that this is too many. Mr. Walker said some of these would be short-term tasks, not goals. We should "just do it." There was discussion about whether to "merge" the goals with last year's goals. Mr. Zullas said we are establishing our goals for 2015-16.

Ms. Padera said the School Committee goals do not need to align with the Superintendents goals. We can have ours goals and she can have her goals.

Ms. Bagley Jones said she would like a working document. Mr. Zullas said the current document exists, we don't need another one. Ms. Bagley Jones said she thinks it is going to get lost. Mr. Walker said they are not lost. We are constantly updated on these. Ms. Varela said, I know the "old" goals are still there -- they're ongoing. There are still some FY15 goals out there. Can they be on the website? Dr. Pavlicek said, the reasons we have the goals the way they are is because there is a 2-year evaluation cycle. If we change the goals, that wreaks havoc with the eval cycle. He suggested, if you're going to add goals for the second year in a two-year cycle, be careful who is responsible for them. If it's the School Committee, fine. If it's the administration, that could create a problem. Dr. Donahue said we should have one set of multi year goals and one set of single year goals.

Mr. Olivera clarified that there are four goals now:

1. FDK Develop a plan to introduce free FDK by January 2016
2. SPACE Develop a plan to assess current and future space needs by June 2016
3. COMMUNICATION Review and investigate new methods of effective communication by School Committee and Administration by June 2016, with recommendations by spring of 2016.
4. SPED Develop a strategy to address the SPED proficiency gap.

Ms. Varela asked about whether the committee should require a vote to extend meetings past 10pm. Also, she said parents who want to come to SC meetings are frustrated by how long the meetings are. She said she liked Mr. Zullas's idea of having presentations one meeting and votes, etc. at other meetings and she thinks this will result in more tasks getting accomplished. We are dealing with a lot of crucial issues at 10pm. Mr. Zullas said we will try to do that. We can all take it upon ourselves to be more parsimonious. Ms. Bagley Jones asked about putting time limits on agendas. Also, presentations should be shorter. She would like to see a template for the presentation. Groups are given too much latitude and they should all present basically the same way. The administration should work with them on what they present and how they present it. Mr. Olivera suggested using a "consent agenda," which does not include controversial items, and you can vote them all at once. Mr. Zullas asked, what if we did executive session at 6pm, before the meetings? Ms. Varela also liked the idea of timed agendas. Times posted next to the item as a "guideline." Mr. Olivera recommended a "chair's workshop" which gives guidelines on how to structure meetings. It's helpful, you can see what other school committees do. Ms. Padera noted that only two meetings have gone late — one was due to Citizens Speak, and one was due to the data presentation.

The Next School Committee meeting is scheduled for August 29th.

The meeting adjourned at 4:25pm