

TRSU BOARD

Regular Meeting Minutes

Thursday, May 7, 2020

6:00 p.m.

Zoom Access

I. CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

TRSU Board: Rick Alexander, Dan Buckley, Joe Fromberger, Jeff Hance, Paul Orzechowski, Dave Venter

Other GMUSD Board members: Deb Brown, Fred Marin, Doug McBride, Lois Perlah, Mike Studin, Jeannie Wade, Wayne Wheelock

Other LMHUUSD Board members: Sebastian Frank, Courtney McGuire, Kelly Tarbell,

Staff: Meg Powden, Cheryl Hammond, Lauren Fierman, Karen Trimboli, Michael Ripley, Whitney Haber, Mary Barton, Mary Moeykens, Angela Hurd, Pattie Rumrill, Raelynn Collins, Pam O'Neil, Betsy Olson, Lisa Marks, Sue Willis, Amy Hamblett, Jennifer Parks, Deb Beaupre, Holly Gauding, Karla Waite, Laurie Cloud, Jeannie Spafford, Devin Brown, Kristi Flack, Mindy Munroe, Ann Thompson, Bruce Patterson, Lauren Baker, Deanna Romstad, Robin Varga

Public: Shawn Cunningham, Marilyn Mahusky, Mary Alberty, Jared Gunnell

Mr. Orzechowski called the meeting to order at 7:27 p.m.

II. APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Mr. Venter **moved** to approve the agenda. Mr. Buckley seconded. Mr. Orzechowski added discussion about adopting Small Board rules under Old Business, as well as discussion of Payroll Procedures During Covid-19 Crisis under new business. The motion to approve the agenda as amended carried without opposition.

III. PUBLIC COMMENTS:

Ms. Wilson noted that the board had been discussing ways to increase participation in the board meetings and she suggested that when they are able to participate in person that they continue to have an electronic session to increase public participation.

Ms. Willis suggested that it is worth reconsidering having the lawyer appear at every negotiations session. She felt that the cost of the attorney is an expense that could easily be removed and then have the attorney review the document at the end.

IV. APPROVE MINUTES:

A. April 2, 2020 Regular Meeting

Mr. Buckley **moved** to approve the minutes from the April 2, 2020 meeting. Mr. Venter seconded. The motion carried with no opposition.

V. SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Ms. Powden advised that they have made the transition from the maintenance of learning plan that happened when schools first closed to the continuity of learning. The plan was sent out to the board a few weeks ago. She discussed the rubric that the AOE used to review the plan. There were 5-6 areas that they needed to provide more information on. This afternoon, they were advised that they have met all the elements of the continuity of learning plan. It was a lot of work on the part of all of the

teachers and staff. She thanked Mr. Eppolito for his work on the plan, including his dedication and research. She advised that the AOE made note about the way that they have overcome all obstacles for students to receive their education. There were 37 households that reported unreliable or no internet. The team has worked very hard to connect all of these students. There was an agreement with VTel to get many students connected. Ms. Baker ordered several Kajeet hot spots to get the other students connected.

Ms. Powden advised that Ms. Trimboli and Mr. Hutt Vater are working on identifying the items at BRHS that they would like at their schools. Once that is complete, they will be discussing the contents with the town of Ludlow and working on the purchase and sales agreement.

Ms. Powden advised that the teachers are very impacted by the Covid-19 situation and all that they are being asked to do. There is a crisis team who are working to support the students, but also the teachers and staff. They recently participated in mindfulness activities. She described some of these activities. The administrative council meets 3 times per week and they frequently discuss the wellbeing of the teachers and staff, as well as the students. They also discuss the food service delivery. Ms. Fierman is also working on a re-entry plan for next year.

Mr. Hance noted that several schools are putting boosters on their Wi-Fi and wondered if that is something that the school can do. Ms. Powden advised that several families are driving to Wi-Fi hotspots. There was discussion about a WiFi hotspot at Jackson Gore. There was discussion about getting test kits before they reopen in the fall. Ms. Powden advised that this has not been finalized. She advised that Mr. French is under the feeling that in the fall they will still have to social distance and temperatures will need to be taken upon entry into the building.

There was discussion about Governor Scott's press conference regarding graduation tomorrow. Ms. Powden will send out this information tomorrow when she receives it.

VI. OLD BUSINESS:

A. Small Board Procedures

Mr. Orzechowski advised that last year the board had agreed to operate under small board procedures. Under small board procedures, seconds are not needed and the chair can vote. Mr. Fromberger advised that the GM board has adopted those procedures, and he recommended it for a board this size. Mr. Buckley agreed.

Mr. Buckley **moved** to adopt Small Board Rules for meetings. Mr. Venter seconded. The motion carried without opposition.

VII. NEW BUSINESS:

A. Recommendation for New Hires

Ms. Powden advised that Ms. Barton has led two searches for special educators. Patricia Diehlmann is being recommended to serve in the Autism Program. Most recently she has been working at Poultney Elementary School in special education. She has also worked with students with autism in other areas of her past. Ms. Barton advised that she is excited to work with the program. There are 4 students in the program who would have to be served out of the district at a cost of \$200,000 each, so this is a savings to the budget as well as a benefit to have the students in the district. Ms. Barton advised that this is a replacement for someone who resigned recently. There was discussion about the salary. Mr. Venter questioned the savings that this position will show. Ms. Barton advised that each student costs \$200,000 to tuition out to other autism programs plus transportation. So, this program is very cost effective. There was discussion about distance education costing the same tuition as traditional learning. Next year

they budgeted \$252,000 for the program, which reflects a savings of about \$348,000 by keeping the students in the district.

Ms. Powden believes that the salary is about \$48,135 based on the 2nd step in the teachers' contract with a Master's degree. This position is \$3000 more than what they had been paying.

Mr. Venter **moved** to approve hiring Ms. Diehlmann as discussed. The motion carried without opposition.

Ms. Powden advised that Ms. Barton has been working with Ms. Trimboli to develop a social emotional learning center to bring the students home to their home district. She advised that there are times that the students have been doing so well that they are able to enter the LES classrooms. The special educator for this program would be Emily Burlett. She is currently a special educator in a social emotional program classroom in Rutland. She has been working with students in this area for some time. She has also supervised para-educators. They will be saving tuition for 2 other students currently placed out of district, plus their transportation along with the cost of a para-educator for one of those students. The plan is to have 3 children in this program. There was discussion about students in this program being an SU-based program so there are kids from both GMUSD and LMHUUSD in this program. There was discussion about this being a new program. The board had agreed at a prior meeting that this program is worth doing.

Mr. Fromberger advised that the projected savings in the autism program did not materialize. Ms. Barton advised that the first year that the autism program did not save money was due to a legal matter. They are saving the money now. Mr. Fromberger noted that it seems crazy to start a new program when the board just discussed times being so dire that they weren't going to do any salary increases this year. Ms. Barton advised that they will be spending more than this amount of money by sending the students out of district. He wanted to raise a note of caution because they do these things with the best intentions but sometimes they don't work out, but he won't push the issue. Ms. Hammond advised that this year they project a savings of about \$75,000 this year but that is because of some renovations. Next year they would anticipate saving more, particularly if they can take on more students. Mr. Buckley suggested that when these things are discussed, the board would like a one-page document describing the plan. Ms. Hammond advised that they did that in February in Cavendish.

Mr. Alexander asked for a brief description because he is new to this discussion. Ms. Barton advised that this program provides the opportunity for students to be educated in the district instead of being sent out. It also aims to mainstream them when appropriate. She advised that when they provide the services in a therapeutic setting, they will cost less to educate them later on. Ms. Hammond advised that the cost is \$244,000 with the renovations and they are currently paying about \$340,000. She also advised that some of this thinking is due forward-thinking regarding Act 173. Mr. Venter advised that while this program might not be saving as much as the autism program, it seems more oriented to getting the students back in the classroom which is another savings.

Ms. Parks advised that she is a special educator and has been developing an emotional support program at the high school and feels that this type of investment at this young age is worth the investment. She reported that she has helped run a program for the last several years to aid these students. This sort of program can change the trajectory of the students for the positive. Ms. Willis advised that she is a para-educator at the high school who works with Ms. Parks. Many of the students that they have dealt with have massive absentee rates. Many of the

students are transitioning over their high school years to get be able to get their diplomas. She advised that it is imperative to help these kids at a younger age. Mr. Hutt Vater felt that this program saves money and serves kids and families. He felt it was a no brainer, but just because it syncs up during a crisis, it would be foolish to not approve this. Ms. Cloud supports this classroom. She has been doing the EEE special education for about 20 years and the number of kids who are coming in at 3 and 4 years old with these problems has continued to rise. If they can address the needs younger, this will save money in the long run with being able to keep students in district. She has several para-educators in preschool and felt that with this plan there would be fewer needs. Mr. Buckley advised that with the pandemic, there will be more needs, and having the program in place would be helpful.

Mr. Venter **moved** to hire Ms. Burlett. Ms. Parks felt that this is an excellent opportunity for collaboration and mentorship to be sure that they start off strong. Mr. Alexander asked if this was in the budget. Ms. Hammond advised that it is. The motion carried with no opposition.

B. Incoming Superintendent Proposal

Ms. Fierman advised that the GMUSD board has discussed this proposal already, but wanted to be sure tha the TRSU board is in favor of it. The proposal is that GMUHS will move the associate principal, Mr. Ripley, into the interim principal slot. There will be two small stipended positions at the high school to help with the associate principal work. Between them and the guidance department, that has an additional guidance counselor, they feel that the administrative work can be covered. She will have a more visible position at the GM High school. The high school will keep the same administrative structure and during this time to bring in a new person into the mix would be counterproductive. They felt that this would be an effective way to maintain continuity and have fewer disruptions at the high school and save the GM board about \$100,000. She advised that the GM board as voted in favor of the proposal, but she will be an employee of the TRSU board. She assured the board that they will have a full-time superintendent, but there will be some additional time spent at GM.

Mr. Fromberger advised that the GM board reviewed the proposal and they are very happy with it and recommend adoption of the proposal, but recognize that the superintendent is an employee of the TRSU. Mr. Venter **moved** to approve the superintendent proposal as presented. Mr. Buckley noted that if they had hired a new principal, some portion of the superintendent's time would have been hand-holding of the new principal so it wasn't a big change from what would have happened if the GM board went a different direction. The motion carried without opposition.

C. Fiscal Year Budget 19-20

Ms. Hammond reported that Mr. Venter had requested an update of anything she has learned regarding ed financing. She advised that she has reviewed the Senate Ways and Means Committee. Next Tuesday they have asked the AOE to come back with more information. She advised that the proposal is based on the December 1 tax rate that was set (\$1.55 and \$1.64), there will be shortfall of \$152.9 million. Before Covid 19, they had decided that the rates would be about a penny cheaper, which would have been \$168 million short. The CARES Act has very strict rules and they can't give the tax payers the money or tax credits. They can only put the money in the budget by replacing the general state support grant. They might receive \$21million in Covid funds to help bring people in to help with counseling, but this money is thought to replace the GSSG, so they are looking into various ways to replace the funds. The senate is talking about an increased tax rate and/or taxes on services. They are also looking at a loan for the taxes, but it is unclear what situation the state will be in in a year. She advised that the House Ways and Means meetings are live streamed.

She advised that Ms. Hance, the Chester Town Manager, had advised them that the towns can cross fiscal years when giving money to the school districts which can cause a problem for the school districts. Mr. Fromberger noted that he was concerned with the discussion about schools not opening in the fall without inoculations available. He advised that this is all an unknown at this point. Ms. Powden clarified that Secretary French's feelings about opening school in the fall has evolved and schools may open with specific guidance. He has been consistent with social distancing. There was discussion about the need to keep groups to 10 or less. Ms. Hammond advised that Secretary French spoke about saving money in the current budget to help next year, but it doesn't work that way. Money saved this year would have to be audited and then applied to the following year's budget projections (21-22).

Ms. Hammond advised that they may have about a \$25,000 savings since the part time position ended in March and much of the professional development hasn't been spent. They have saved in postage and supplies.

Mr. Fromberger advised that several people on the GMUSD board who discussed not increasing salaries for the following year recommended applying that to the central office as well. He recommended that the business office produce a document that would illustrate what that savings would be.

Ms. Hammond advised that there have been some issues with the Mt. Holly bus so that will take up any fuel savings that they would have had. She is anticipating a \$28,000 savings in the GM transportation, but that depends on where they are with inspections. Mr. Parah advised that fuel consumption is low.

Ms. Hammond advised that EEE had a few extra para-educators than they had budgeted. There were 5 new students who moved into the district or who were transitioned out of district that was unanticipated. She advised that they are not paying for transportation for the out of district placements, but still are paying for the tuition for these programs. She advised that the extended year wasn't budgeted. Ms. Hammond advised that there are some positions that were pulled out of the district into the SU. There is about \$280,000-\$300,000 that will be billed back to the districts. They are looking to see what contracts they can get credited back. Ms. Hammond advised that the \$300,000 is after the reimbursements and is shared between the two districts. She also advised that Act 173 is planned to be delayed until next year at this point.

D. Fiscal Year Budget 20-21

Ms. Hammond advised that she, Ms. Powden and Ms. Fierman have looked at what could be cut. She reminded the board that they did many cuts in January at the board's request. She sees some savings in the superintendent's position, but can only see about \$15,000-\$20,000 savings to be had. She advised that the SU office is understaffed, but will work to get the work completed. Ms. Fierman advised that she has spent a bit of time reviewing the central office budget and reported that the money that is being spent is being spent appropriately for the positions. She didn't recommend eliminating positions. She also advised that if they don't need to spend money, they won't. She also suggested that if they want to develop a coherent system with 4 elementary schools that are trying to align their curricula and technology, they need someone at the SU leading that alignment. She advised that there isn't any more room in the budget. Mr. Venter questioned what the difference would be at the central office under Zoom schooling versus traditional schooling.

Ms. Powden advised that the work has changed significantly. The day to day work would be meeting with each principal in each school, as well as different work in her office. She advised that how they conduct their work and think about their work has changed. They have had to think about how to educate students in their home and how to provide the social and emotional supports in their homes. The lessons and instruction are conducted electronically as well as the counseling sessions. Ms. Fierman advised that one of the big differences since distance teaching is the length of the day. She is regularly working until 6, 7, 8 pm even on nights when there aren't board meetings. The teachers and staff are taking time to seek guidance on their work. They have more frequent conversations at the SU. Ms. Hammond advised that the work takes longer waiting for responses.

Mr. Wheelock commended Ms. Hammond for finding any savings given how hard she worked to save money in the budget during the budget season. Mr. Venter questioned if there is anything the SU has planned for formal distance education training for next year. Ms. Fierman advised that they are working to develop a fairly coherent plan. She noted that his question is one they are asking themselves to develop a well-thought out approach to online learning. They have started to draft a plan for re-entry, but they don't have any secret information yet. She advised that they hope to have some in-person teaching in the fall but she doesn't believe it will look like it did. She gave some examples of how they are discussing logistical questions about re-entry. They also are discussing how to develop a plan for quality remote learning, instead of emergency remote learning.

Ms. Hammond advised that LMH had a change in the plan to buy a bus. She noted that they will be refinancing GM's busses for 1.95%, so this savings might be shared on the LMH bus. The savings might come with how they run their buses.

Ms. Hammond advised that 4 of the 5 new special education students were planned in the budget, but there is the one unplanned, as well as a potential new student. They can't make cuts currently because they are already behind. Mr. Venter questioned how they can get more kids in the autism and social/emotional programs. Ms. Barton advised that any eligible and appropriate students can be put in this program. There was discussion about the needs of the autism program students and determining if a student could be served by this program.

Ms. Hammond advised that the business office is fully aware of the need to save money. Ms. Hammond advised that they pay a transportation service for about \$47,000 per year for one student. They are looking into purchasing another van. She noted that they are now seeing savings with the van that they had purchased.

B. Payroll Procedure for COVID-19

Ms. Hammond advised that one of the issues with federal grants had to do with paying teachers while school is not in session. They didn't have a procedure, but have now developed one. She shared the procedure with the board and noted that this procedure is specific to COVID-19 for the next year. She advised that it sounds like they may be in and out of school closure for next year as well. There was discussion about this being referenced in the executive order. Ms. Hammond was sharing the procedure with the board for their review, but approval is not needed. Ms. Powden advised that only policies need to be approved by the board and this is a procedure. Ms. Moeykens advised that in her email she mistakenly referenced it as a policy, but it is a procedure.

VIII. PUBLIC COMMENTS:

Mr. Orzechowski thanked everyone for participating in the meeting. He also noted that the executive session was for the same topic but was just moved to the end of the meeting.

IX. EXECUTIVE SESSION

Mr. Orzechowski **moved** to find that premature general public knowledge regarding bargaining and non-bargaining negotiations would place the board at a substantial disadvantage because the board risks disclosing its negotiations strategy if it discussed contract terms in public. The motion carried without opposition.

Mr. Orzechowski **moved** to enter executive session at 8:56 p.m. for the purpose of discussing bargaining and non-bargaining negotiations under Title 1 V.S.A. § 313 (a)(1)(B) Labor Relations Agreements with Employees inviting Ms. Hammond, Ms. Powden, Ms. Fierman, Ms. Tarbell and Mr. Wheelock. The motion carried without opposition.

The board returned from executive session at 9:06 p.m.

Mr. Orzechowski **moved** to offer the central office support staff and administration their contracts at their current salaries due to the COVID-19 crisis and the likely financial crisis. Mr. Fromberger noted that the board appreciates the work that the staff has done and will continue to do for the SU. They will look at the salary schedule in another year. There was discussion about this being an unfortunate event during these unprecedented times, but they appreciate their work tremendously. The motion carried without opposition.

X. NEXT MEETING:

The next regular TRSU meeting will be Thursday June 4, 2020 at 6:00 p.m., via Zoom.

XI. ADJOURNMENT:

Mr. Fromberger **moved** to adjourn at 9:08 p.m. The motion carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Amber Wilson
Board Recording Secretary