

Minutes

SUPERINTENDENCY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Meeting on Wed., January 29, 5 p.m. Richmond Consolidated School Conference Room

PRESENT: Rachel Kanz, Lauren Broussal, Melissa DiMassimo, Errin Roney, Karen O'Donnell, Bob Gniadek, Ina Wilhelm, Neal Pilson, Kara Smith, Beth Smith, Penny Saupe, Ryan Sabourin, Melissa Roller, RSC member Adeline Ellis.

ABSENT: Jill Pompei

PUBLIC: Tim Walsh

The meeting was called to order at 5:01 p.m.

1. Minutes from 1/9/2020 meeting. This item was erroneously put on our agenda, since that meeting was a School Committee meeting, not a Superintendency Advisory Committee meeting. Those minutes will be reviewed by the school committee and posted on the Town website after their meeting next week.
2. Open Meeting Law. It was confirmed that all 13 members in attendance had read the OML materials. Certification forms were handed out and collected after the meeting, to be given to the school committee.
3. OML complaint. It was explained that School Counsel Fred Dupere will handle everything. He has advised us not to discuss the details until we meet with him next week. Everyone will receive a copy of the complaint before we meet with the attorney. Based on a sign-up sheet, the meeting was tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 5, at 5 p.m.
4. Conflict-of-interest training. Brought up in the OML complaint and did not belong there. Applies only to paid school employees who are on the committee, and they have already done this, as required, every two years.
5. List our Priorities.
It was believed that listing priorities for the school and town will help us form a basis for evaluating options, so we can advise the school committee on the best path going forward.

RCS teachers had already listed what they value most about the school. (Post-it notes reflecting their thoughts were on bulletin board.) Committee members then wrote down what they feel is most important for the school going forward, and each member read his or her thoughts. These included:

- Autonomy, local control, independence, and/or a Richmond-based school (10 members)
- Flexibility and community input in curricular and policy decisions (5 members)
- High school choice (4 members)
- Retain financial control and oversight (3 members)
- Long-term sustainability (2 members)
- Retain excellent teaching staff and high-quality instruction (2 members)
- Students and staff to feel loved and supported, or supportive school (2 members)

The following were also mentioned once each:

- Retain uniqueness of RCS
- No bus rides greater than 30 minutes
- Retain small class sizes

- Full access to support staff
- Long-term solution to administrative oversight that is most professional and cost-effective
- Safety for children and staff
- Family atmosphere in the school
- Well-rounded school budget

6. Review letter from Richmond Educators Association (REA).

A letter from the REA was read aloud. To summarize, the REA praised Sup. Peter Dillon as an excellent, professional superintendent stating that he and his BHRSD colleagues have been outstanding in their positions when they are available. However because they all had full-time jobs before taking on their new roles in Richmond, it is impossible to spend enough time in the building serving Richmond's needs. Therefore the REA is in favor of retaining the Shaker Mountain School Union (SMSU) and its model of a shared superintendent between Richmond, Hancock and New Ashford. The REA also believes that it is critical to maintain preK to 8 autonomy, community input, and high school choice, and that these add value to residing in Richmond. The teachers on the subcommittee state that members of the REA unanimously support the opinions in this letter.

Committee members discussed the REA letter and found it very helpful. Superintendent Dillon's role was clarified. It was noted that it will be critical to obtain Principal Jill Pompei's input, since she was absent from tonight's meeting. Examples were given of services that are not working well under the shared-services arrangement, such as the school psychologist's absence from the building for long stretches. Opinions were expressed that a school psychologist needs to be in the school more often to see and get to know the students, and also to be able to schedule meetings with families and teachers.

It was pointed out that previously as part of the SMSU we had a part-time superintendent, secretary, SPED director and school psychologist who all worked for the three small school districts. It was then noted that many small districts in Berkshire County have had difficulty finding part-time superintendents, while full-time superintendents are too highly paid for small districts. That needs to be balanced, however, with what we might encounter financially in terms of capital costs down the road if we align with Berkshire Hills.

7. Review "Charting a Path" from Superintendent Peter Dillon

This handout was reviewed with the subcommittee, noting that Sup. Dillon did a good job of summarizing some of the options open to Richmond.

Some concerns were expressed:

--Both this handout and the BHRSD proposal (see below) state that it was Richmond's desire to leave the SMSU. It was felt that clarification from the School Committee is needed on this point in order to move forward.

--On the second page there are several different models which were reviewed. Richmond continuing in the SMSU is not one of them, but was added by the subcommittee and discussed.

--It was pointed out that the shared services model (listed as an option) could only continue for one year on an interim basis, and then we would have to join BHRSD in a different arrangement.

--Richmond joining BHRSD as a union-regional district relationship was also added to the list.

--Questions were asked about the grants mentioned in the document. The requested amount is for \$20,000 to help Richmond and BHRSD come together via a consultant, and \$15,000 to help Hancock and New

Ashford with their transition (again via a consultant). Sup. Peter Dillon has stated that the \$20,000 can only be used to help Richmond combine with BHRSD. It was noted that at the last BH School Committee meeting, it was announced that they also have a separate grant to study or help with the merger of BH and Southern Berkshire.

A discussion ensued about the SMSU response to the possible Richmond-BHRSD merger. Based on what they've been told by Richmond School Committee members, Hancock and New Ashford school committee members assume that Richmond will be gone from the SMSU as of June 2020, and intend to advertise on Feb. 1 for their own superintendent and SPED director. It is not yet clear whether Hancock and New Ashford would reconsider this step.

8. Proposal from BHRSD

The proposal from the Berkshire Hills Shared Services Subcommittee of the School Committee was introduced as the initial statement of what they would like from Richmond. It was made clear by Sup. Dillon in an earlier meeting that in any scenario, one of the trade-offs for Richmond combining with BHRSD is that the high school students will be regionalized, which means that they will all go to Monument Mountain. Continuing on with a shared-services arrangement like we currently have, but with just Richmond, is only possible for one more (interim) year while a permanent arrangement is worked out.

Some concerns were expressed:

--Second paragraph – once again stating that it was Richmond's "desire to limit the scope of the partnership" to exclude the rest of the SMSU.

--"We propose... a set of relatively quick meetings to solidify our plan to share services between BHRSD and Richmond for the 2020-2021 school year." This immediately excludes Hancock and New Ashford as if exiting the SMSU is a done deal.

--Next, they say "structure matters less than the negotiated details." Some committee members disagree, pointing out that with some structures it's very easy to undo what's been negotiated, especially when a town only has one or two votes on a large school committee.

--A built-in exit plan is good, but where would Richmond exit to, if no longer part of the SMSU?

--Richmond is required to burn its bridges with the SMSU now, since the interim year will be shared services between Richmond and Berkshire Hills only, but won't know what the final plan is going to look like until next November. If the BH offer is unacceptable, Richmond will end up a stand-alone district, paying 100% of the cost of a part-time superintendent, superintendent's secretary, SPED director and school psychologist, instead of roughly 70% in the SMSU. It also may be harder to fill those positions.

It was noted that only two options are listed in the formal BH proposal, which are: (1) regionalizing the high school with RCS as an autonomous preK – 8 district; and (2) a combined (regionalized) preK – 12 district. The benefits of having access to professionals such as the current superintendent and business manager were discussed, but it was also pointed out that Richmond would be joining a district, not hiring those professionals. The current professionals will not be with that district forever, nor would Richmond have much say in who replaces them.

There was a general discussion that the committee is not ready to vote on accepting or rejecting any of the possible options at this point, and further information is needed.

9. Goals for next meeting

An estimate of the costs to the Richmond taxpayers is needed of the only two options that Berkshire Hills seems willing to consider: regionalizing just the high school, or regionalizing the entire preK to 12 school district. There is concern about possible upcoming capital costs and the effect on the tax base in Richmond. Bob Gniadek and Neal Pilson agreed to meet with Sharon Harrison to obtain information about the financial implications of the two options.

Lauren proposed seeking more information to find out if it would be a viable proposal to recommend staying in the SMSU for the interim 2020-2021 year, while we continue negotiations with BHRSD. She volunteered to meet with BHRSD officials to see if this would be acceptable to them, and also to meet with SMSU officials to see if they would consider an interim year with Richmond remaining in the SMSU. This would involve hiring a part-time superintendent and other staff for next year in the SMSU. By next November it should be clear which direction Richmond should go – with SMSU or BHRSD. We might also know by then if BH will be combining with Southern Berkshire.

This was discussed and it was felt that meeting with both parties to obtain the necessary information would be helpful. It was suggested that BH be asked during that meeting to add a third proposal to its list stating that Richmond will remain in the SMSU for the interim year 2020-2021 while negotiations are ongoing with BH. No vote was taken.

10. Public Comments.

Tim Walsh said that it sounds like a high-stakes poker game and the committee must be careful for the next year. “There’s a fiscal piece to it all for the taxpayers of the town that could blow up on you.”

The meeting was adjourned at 6:47 p.m.