

SCHOOL COMMITTEE

(Official Report)

Special Informal Meeting

Tuesday, January 4, 2005

Called by Mayor Michael A. Sullivan in accordance with Chapter I, Section 3, of the Rules of the School Committee for the purpose of a Roundtable discussion on the No Child Left Behind Act and the FY05-06 School Department Budget.

Members Present: Mr. Fantini, Mr. Grassi, Mr. Harding, Mr. Lummis, Mr. McGovern, Ms. Walser,
Mayor Sullivan

Mayor Sullivan in the Chair.

The Chair called the meeting to order at 6:10 p.m. The Superintendent introduced Dr. Richard Elmore, Harvard University, who walked the Members through a slide presentation on NCLB, its basic requirements, improvement processes, elements of a system-wide strategy, and the kinds of problems it presents for districts like Cambridge.

Dr. Elmore responded to some questions, comments and concerns from the Members:

- How does blaming outside forces start and how do we catch it and cure it at the same time
- What kind of graph could be drawn from our Benchmarks
- What percentage of our budget should be spent on professional development
- What is the feeling on promoting from within
- What is the role of the paraprofessional
- What happens in districts that have hit the wall
- Are there any foreseeable changes in NCLB
- What is the proposal for closing the achievement gap

Dr. Elmore stated that the way to face NCLB now is to get a system-wide strategy in place. He said that investment in professional development (15% of budget) matters more than anything in closing the achievement gap. He stressed that Cambridge has the resources, and it needs an organizational culture of high-level acceptable practices, and motivation. Dr. Elmore suggested that training programs be set up for paraprofessionals to help them become teachers. Dr. Elmore said that if we teach it the students will learn it and if they can read the test they can pass it.

The Members thanked Dr. Elmore for his presentation.

At this time, the Superintendent spoke to the Tobin School with respect to NCLB and gave a brief statement on the parent meeting held at the Tobin. The Superintendent and staff responded to some of the following questions, comments and concerns raised by the Members:

- What is being done re site-based professional development
- What is being done to create a culture to help teachers teach "Little Johnny"
- Where are we in the process of improving schools and who will lead the process
- It will be helpful during the budget process to hear how we will move forward
- Does the Superintendent feel confident that the Tobin is under control and that we will be successful
- Will we be licensing teachers and administrators

At this time, the Chair turned the meeting over to Mr. Grassi, Budget Co-Chair. Mr. Grassi said that the Co-chairs want to have a roundtable at the beginning of the budget process to receive feedback from Members on their expectations and broad-based concerns regarding the budget.

Members raised the following questions, comments, concerns:

- Is it possible to have the budget document by individual categories
- How are the school improvement dollars tracked
- How is the money being spent in every school towards our goal
- Need an overall policy for each building on how dollars are being spent to meet achievement
- If benchmarks are driving school improvement plans (SIPs) and SIPs drive the budget, we are doing it backwards
- If goals are driving benchmarks that are driving SIPs, SIPs should be developed for the next fiscal year
- Is there enough budgeted for SIPs
- Is the money that is allocated actually being spent on what they said they will do
- Do not depend on MCAS for everything we are doing
- Need a reporting mechanism
- Need assurance that dollars are being spent on the plan
- Need to see a plan that deals with the rising costs of health and special education
- Need a larger amount of budget that is focused on building blocks
- How do enrollment projections play into formulating the budget
- How are enrollment projections done - we are off 100%
- Where do things stand with the administration/administrative report - hope it goes into more detail than a headcount
- Administration and administrator count is way above other districts - want to see why it is so high
- Need to understand why decisions are made to keep certain positions
- It is hard to say if positions are warranted or not without seeing how they help
- Why are there so many people in the system making a lot of money who are not in front of children
- Need rationale on why there are so many people in administration
- Justify how so many people in administration gets us to our goals
- Concerned with increasing money at CRLS for professional development
- Look at schedule of professional development in middle school
- Increase specialist time in elementary schools to improve the quality of art and language to improve the quality of teaching
- Interested in how money is being spent on the science initiative and where we are going with that
- Expanding kindergarten classes is good preparation for children
- Need a strategic plan to deal with the structural deficit in years 3, 4 and 5
- Increase SIPs funds for five years
- Be open to not increasing base in schools - increase free/reduced
- Money for capital improvements needs to continue
- Need strategy for improving professional development
- Are we moving gradually to closing a school in the future
- Reduce administration/administrative – move away from creating specialist positions
- How does the safety/security structure work
- Need a better security presence in schools
- How does the court liaison work with elementary schools
- In support of hiring coaches rather than increasing class size
- Think about recommending cuts and then adding them back

- Look at paraprofessional formula over the next 6-8 years
- Look at five-year plan to turn enrollment around
- How does the reduction in teachers affect hiring

The Superintendent asked the Members to look carefully at the enrollment chart as the system will continue to experience a decline.

Mr. Grassi asked the Superintendent to respond in totality to the issues and concerns raised.

On a motion by Mr. Fantini, seconded by Ms. Walser, the meeting adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Marilyn Y. Bradshaw
Executive Secretary to the School Committee