

ROCKPORT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES OF OPEN MEETING
Wednesday November 20, 2019

Chairperson Michael Kelley called the regular meeting of the Rockport School Committee to order at 7:00 p.m. in the Middle/High School Library. Present were Nicole Altieri, Colleen Coogan, Richard Drost, Michael Kelley, and Cathy Reilly. Also, present were Superintendent Robert Liebow and Recording Secretary Ingrid Keating.

I. Opening of Regular Meeting

Opening statement from Chairperson Michael Kelley:

What does the School Committee do? Don't worry, it's a rhetorical question, which means this is erupting into a teaching moment. Sure, we approve field trips, deny requests by seniors to end the school year even earlier than planned, hire and review the Superintendent, approve goals for the district and provide oversight and tonight, will be in part two of our multi-stage public budget creation and review activity which is probably the single most important task of the year -- but all of those functions and more sit under a more general umbrella.

We are charged, mandated and held accountable by the State of Massachusetts to represent the interests of the one constituency who can't legally represent themselves in the state: That's you -- the pre-k through grade 12 crowd. And we are given some tools that are pretty unique in town government: For example, the budget that we will be in the process of creating tonight is totally the responsibility of the School Committee. While everyone can have an opinion on what we create, and while we collaborate with many our departments, we answer not to the Board of Selectman, nor to the Finance Committee, but to the voters. We get graded on how we perform on the floor of spring town meeting when we present and pass that budget every year.

Now why is that? It's because the School department has a unique mission that is fundamentally different from other departments in the town. From the moment you arrive as an adorable pre-k ball of protoplasm to the time Mr. Liebow hands you your diploma the majority of your waking hours are spent in this group of three buildings. Scary, eh? And what's happening during those hours as you grown into a -- hopefully -- confident, competent and engaged young adult -- is that you are browsing from the menu of western civilization. Sounds grandiose, but really, part of the reason you are here is to sample, and to see what may light a fire and a passion in you for a lifetime, whether that passion be math, biology, literature, a stringed instrument, singing, a sport, stage crew or all of the above.

To do that, you need all sorts of basic skills, taught to you by subject matter experts, who have been trained themselves to realize all of you are developing, evolving and maturing at different rates. You are not widgets, and the journey is hard -- I mean both your bodies and minds are evolving -- it's like a science fiction movie coming to life. If you think it's a drag to live through it at times, think of your parents. Have mercy on them.

All of which is to say, the mission of the school department is unique. It takes place over the course of more than a decade, with constantly changing rules and expectations with customers who are completely unique and in some cases totally different from year to year. Its mission, in that sense, is profoundly complex.

It's also expensive. School budgets are always the largest item in any town budget -- no surprise there -- and the staffing cost is always the largest item -- no surprise there either. The single greatest asset a school can have is a great teacher. You can probably think of one right now, and here's a secret -- every adult in this room can think of one right now who impacted them as well.

So what happens when you have complexity and expense intersecting with competing needs, competing agendas and limited funding? And all of this amplified by social media?

Often you have oversimplification and opinion replacing expertise and planning. One of the most critical skills I hope you learn as you leave these walls is to trust your ability as a critical thinker to come to your own conclusions regarding the motivations of the voices you will meet in your journey.

A School Committee in Massachusetts -- guided by the department of elementary and secondary education -- is charged solely with representing your interests, because the state realizes that the temptation by adult voters to compromise the future in order to fund the present is omnipresent. Without an advocate, it would be far too easy to reduce what the schools do and how they do it to a simplistic comparison to a widget factory.

That's why the people beside me are here. They understand the complexity and fragility of the ecosystem that is a school system, understand how it is at the center of every town that wants to be a living, breathing, community and care about it enough to get up and do something to support it. Your efforts and achievements as students make our effort worthwhile and motivate us. Keep up the great work.

And no, as seniors we will not release you even earlier.

There is one more item I wanted to mention tonight. It's far more serious than a budget, but is worth reflecting on, as we move towards Thanksgiving next week.

I'd like to read a few paragraphs from the NYTimes coverage of the tragedy that occurred last week at the Saugus School in Santa Clarita last week, where three students dies as a result of a school shooting. This is the 11th School Shooting in 2019.

"... For Saugus students, the sound of gunfire came with the shock of recognition that the lockdown routine they had practiced would not be a drill. For parents, there was the terror that this time, their children might be the ones to die.

Kristine Almaraz, 50, said she was dropping off her younger son... when she saw police cars flying past.... "I thought, 'I pray to God it's not the high school,'" she said.

"Are you ok?" she texted her son, Maxximus, 16, who was at Saugus, sheltering in place in his first-period classroom.

"Yea," he texted back "Don't worry mama. You know I'm too smart to die."

The sophomore told his father that there had been shots fired at school. His older son, a senior, told him by text that he and his classmates had barricaded themselves in a classroom and covered up the windows.

Ms. Holt, a rookie teacher, who started in January, quickly wheeled a grand piano in front of the door and ushered dozens of her students into an office, locking the door behind them.

The students sat on Ms. Holt's floor with the lights off. They were afraid, they were crying, but they also knew how to keep safe, she said. They knew to muffle their sobbing. They knew to keep their phones silent and dark. One quietly called the police. Another grabbed a fire extinguisher — just in case the gunman made it inside.

Ms. Holt also knew what to do. After barricading the door, she grabbed a gunshot wound kit that she keeps in her classroom and wrapped the wounds of the freshman girl who had been shot in the torso and shoulder, she said. The girl survived.

"I really, truly did not believe that this was going to happen to me, which was really ignorant," Ms. Holt said. "Every time this happens, in every interview, they always say that, and I still really thought it wasn't going to happen."

It can't happen here. That's the one common sentiment expressed at every school shooting. Even in Rockport, before and after every Alice safety drill we conduct, we hear commentary -- often by those who haven't even read the carefully crafted scenarios that we follow during the drills and debate twice a year in this room -- about how we are traumatizing children with this practice.

We hear dismissive comments about the cost of anti-clot kits and annual training and the impossibility of protecting against every scenario as a rationale for not doing anything at all.

At times, it feels framed as a politicized debate between an imaginary cost-free past and a needlessly cautious present.

For the children and school staff at the Saugus school in Santa Clarita, it wasn't an intellectual exercise to endure the unthinkable. It was real and physical and survivable in no small part by the muscle memory of "lockdown routines" and "sheltering in place" -- phrases most adults in this building would not have been familiar with two years ago -- and yet today you would be hard put to find an adult or child in this building who can't explain these terms. A horrific situation was not made worse by total unfamiliarity with the options for attempting survival. The Boy Scouts sum it up in two words. "Be Prepared." Santa Clarita was. And Rockport is.

We ask a lot of our school staff. We ask them, as educators, to guide and support the social, emotional and intellectual development of every child in their classroom. We ask them to do this buffeted by constant criticism, both professional and amateur, constructive and unwarranted, regulated and heedless, often by observers who measure their worth only by their number or their cost.

And like firemen, policemen and emergency responders, we require them to literally risk their lives should the unthinkable happen. I don't think that was mentioned in teacher's college for most of our staff.

I am thankful in this Thanksgiving season as a School Committee member and parent that Alice Training -- like any insurance policy -- ensures that were the worst to happen, we are not unprepared to react and survive it.

I am thankful for the teachers, administrators and support staff who protect and enrich the lives of every child in our school system.

I am thankful that we have a supportive Town Government and Town departments that work together and treat seriously the potential risks and supports needed to make our school viable and great and safe.

I am thankful that we have a town of generous and supportive residents who make a safe school system a priority, ensuring that we have a safety officer, emergency medical supplies, equipment and training necessary that we all pray we will never need to use.

And finally, in a brave new world of often simplistic, reductive, disrespectful and adversarial behavior, I am always thankful when there are grown adults in the room.

In hearing how the Santa Clarita students were locked down for a few hours as the police assessed whether it was safe to extricate them, It was reassuring to know that our own police department would -- if needed -- have access to cameras to help make that assessment and help keep both the students and the police safe.

I am thankful for the parents, grandparents, police officers, selectman and citizens who — not so long ago — came out in support of seeking emergency funding for those cameras in the wake of the Parkland School shooting tragedy and who worked after being denied that funding to ensure cameras were in place regardless.

I am thankful for the town resident who wished to be anonymous and reached out to privately help fund and expand our security coverage as a result of that troubling meeting. The School Committee often hears the phrase "I am a great friend of the school" precede a request to damage the system by removing services or staffing that are not understood. The anonymous benefactor was a true friend of the school, stepping forward and stepping up, part of the solution, not part of the problem. I am thankful the school has many friends like this.

I am thankful that the town has collaborative members on town boards that make the challenge of budget discussions now less fraught with personal agendas and more focused on the structural and in some ways

philosophical issues we face as we answer the question: "What do we want Rockport to be?" over the next decade or two.

I am thankful that our students are safe. I would like to invite you to take a moment of silence to think of the children of Saugus School in Santa Clarita. Be thankful that you live in a town that cares and protects the children in its school district and please be aware that in that and so many other respects we are no different from Santa Clarita.

- A. Approval of Minutes N/A
- B. Personnel Actions

Cindy Theriault has been appointed to the position of bus driver effective Dec. 1, 2019 at the rate of \$22.50/hour for 5.5 hours per day.

Danielle Osier work days have been increased from 3 days to 5 (school days that in session) as of November 13, 2019.

Robert Tierney has been appointed to the position of bus driver effective November 25, 2019 at the rate of \$22.50/hour and the position of Bus Driver Transportation Co-coordinator effective December 1, 2019.

II. Community Participation

A. Student Advisory Representative

Noah Cook boys soccer team's season ended after a loss during tournament play. Patrick Morin reported that the RHS Jazz band offered a free concert, conducted by new band leader, Anthony Prestigiovanni, at the Shalin Liu last Wednesday. Nathaniel Kirby reported that music students are having a music residency with a professional ensemble from Maine assisting with some growth music that the students have been working on this year, the week ends with a concert tomorrow including grades 4 through 12. The Green Team sold potted plants from the greenhouse at the Holiday Fair last Saturday. Patrick Morin reported that students helped make the gingerbread houses this year. Austin Matus reported that career day was last Thursday, students were happy with their placements with the professionals. Nathaniel Kirby reported that the student advisory representatives explained the purpose of the advisory council at a recent assembly.

The superintendent added that a grant, for a biodigester project, written by Rhisnon Husrt and Sam Crocker, enabled students to take green waste from the greenhouse and turn it into energy, and after two and a half years they boiled water. It was a great celebration of their efforts and what we are all about.

B. Public Participation

RTA President Whitney Day statement:

Hello School Committee Members,

My name is Whitney Day, and I am the Rockport Teachers' Association President. I am speaking to you on behalf of the membership. We know you have been discussing the budget for the school district, and we thought it was important that we make a brief statement.

To start, we feel privileged to be working in this school district. We are part of an incredible community that allows children to grow and thrive in a school that can work towards building life-long learners. We have many staff members who grew up and went to school here, and have returned to educate new generations of Rockporters. That speaks to the lasting impact of our schools on its students. In addition, we feel lucky that we have the opportunity to expand our school community to include so many students from other districts. There is a myth that these students are a drain on our resources, and we want to make the reality clear. These students

enhance our school community and bring a number of different perspectives which help enrich the educational experience for all.

While over the past few years, overall student enrollment has gone down, academic programs and student needs have increased. I have been here for 11 years, and the students who walk through my door every day are very different than the students I taught in my first couple of years. Other staff members who have been here longer than I have feel the exact same way. The increased social-emotional needs of these students requires significantly more interventions in the way of counseling, staff training, and staff assignments, as well as considerations in scheduling and course offerings. As it is, teachers and staff are spread thin trying to juggle all of these needs so that all students can access our curricula and learn to the very best of their abilities.

Because of this, cutting funding or staff would be extremely detrimental to our student body. All of our students need to be provided with the best educational opportunities, and decreasing the supports that they receive would be counter-intuitive to that goal. We know that asking the town of Rockport for an override this Spring is one option to continue to keep our school district functioning. We strongly believe that this is a necessary measure. These kids are Rockport's future and they deserve the same opportunities that have been afforded to students in the past. Without funding, we can't do that.

To end, we are very thankful for our School Committee. We feel supported by you in our mission to provide excellent educational and extracurricular opportunities for our students. We look forward to working together to do what is necessary to continue making Rockport a school district that parents want to send their students to, as well as one that students want to attend.

Thank you.

Paul Murphy thanked Mr. Kelley for his comments and having been in education for 30 years appreciates the message. Mr. Murphy graduated from RHS in 1984, taught here for 2 years, and has been a member for both the School Committee and Selectmen and knows the importance of education. "This place is very, very special and doesn't want to see our schools diminish because of budget issues." He states we all have to work together, stuff that happens in Rockport doesn't happen in other districts. Regarding enrollment, in the 80's Gloucester High School graduated over 400 students, now there are less than 200, Peabody over 700 and now just about 400. Enrollment is going down everywhere, it's scary and we'd like to see more families move into Rockport. The schools are doing a great job, producing great kids, as a selectmen I will continue to fight for the school budget and as a majority the townspeople support the schools.

Selectperson Sarah Wilkinson, speaking as a parent, reported that Erin Caniff took 24 students to a championship cross country meet in Lynn. The girls team finished 3rd and the boy finished 2nd. The kids had the time of their life, bus ride was equally exciting as the race. "As Paul said, it's one of those things that happens at the Rockport Public Schools, where one of our teachers volunteers to take 24 kid on a holiday to run cross country." Huge thanks to Erin and to the Education Foundation supporting the event.

FINCOM Member Carl Engel and previous member of the school committee offered history on school choice. Between 1993 and 1998 Rockport was a sending district for school choice along with students going to private schools. When Superintendent Joe Lisi came on he saw the issue and sent out a letter to parents and asked what can the Rockport Public Schools do to get you back. The responded that they would like AP and honors courses offered, reading specialists, and math specialists which we all know costs money. So an override passed and programs were put in place, students returned and stayed and we became the receiving school of school choice students, which has enhanced our schools. I would encourage you to preserve that you have a man (Mr. Liebow) here with 30 years' experience, go with his guidance, go with his leadership let his experience guide you.

Bill Tobin, 24 Beach St. Rockport, retired teacher for 35 years in Cambridge. He mentioned that the Horace Mann Charter School program is an alternative for the Rockport Schools. Teachers remain in unions and qualified. Law was amended to Horace Mann 2, you don't have to start a new school, can keep all the students and teachers. School Choice brings in about \$5,700 per student. Instead of receiving school choice monies you get the per pupil expenditure amount of a charter school and with Horace Mann 2 the control

stays in the hands of the school committee and the superintendent. You would see a tremendous increase in the tuition from the communities that have students attending Rockport schools, adding possibly 3 or 4 or 5 million. I recommend immediately forming a research committee for next year's school budget. We just went for DPW override and feel an override for the schools will not be approved. Our students and the students who attend Rockport from other districts are worth the effort.

III. Discussion and Recommended Action

A. District Budget/Workshop w/Public Participation

Superintendent Liebow offered 5 different budget scenarios at the last meeting and the committee narrowed it down to two. Mr. Liebow presented the two remaining models: Model 1 is full predicted override which continues to provide level of excellent educational services and Model 2 is the 2 year CASE Study interim override which would require an override amount of \$450,000 in the first year and \$835,000 in second year. Major new increase needs are the following: teacher "lane movement" on salary schedule, increase in substitute wages, increase in contracted "out of district SPED coordinator", utilities, purchase of bus, ELL curriculum and addressing replacement of bus drivers. Mr. Liebow gave a detailed explanation of the budget for each department or school. He also explained the student loads per teacher and how removing school choice students would have minimal effect on the number of teachers needed. After explaining the effects of an override on the taxpayer the school committee supports Model 1, a full override. There is the assumption that the budget model would continue if an override is approved, the only factor that would alter that is an excessive health insurance increase.

Cameron Smith asked if about enrollment projections and if they affect the budget. Mr. Liebow responded that it can, for example if an elementary grade did not have enough students for 3 teachers and the enrollment was within the policy limits then a teacher would be eliminated from that grade. It is harder to reduce at the middle and high school without reducing courses that

Wally Hess passed out a brief outline and gave his figures on enrollment, his data shows that teachers could be reduced by eight and what he feels are immediate savings from the initial CASE study. He agrees not to go with a two year override plan. His total potential savings equals \$930,000. His recommendation is to wait until the FY22 fiscal year to propose an override.

Chairperson Kelley stated that the school committee is taking the advice of someone with 30 years of experience and that we do not agree with your goal, methodology, conclusion and we don't agree with your numbers. We appreciate your effort and understand where you are coming from but we are putting our faith in Rob, looking at the future with CASE, it doesn't solve anything for next year or avoid an override. It will be up to the voters of Rockport what kind of town they want to live in.

Mr. Liebow explained that the amount saved by reducing teacher would be less due to contract language. He presented "RPS Student Loads per teacher" chart that supports the number of teachers under the current class room size policies.

- B. Field Trip N/A
- C. Policy revise/review N/A
- D. Warrants and Payroll

IV. Information and proposals

A. School Council Update

Richard Drost reported that three middle school parents have applied to join the middle school council, he will be in touch with the PTO to move forward with an election. Nicole Altieri reported that the Elementary School Council discussed the readers workshop, ALICE protocols and received an update on the status of the Student Information System replacement. She reported that the Reading Initiative has sparked renewed excitement around reading.

B. Donations

Cell Signal Tech, Inc. donated \$7,900 to purchase Robotic kits for the Rockport Middle School Science students.

C. Updates

Sub-committee reports:

Cathy Reilly reported that the Wellness Committee met today along with Amy Epstein with the Gloucester Health Department. There were lots of questions regarding a YRBS grant of \$2,500 that was not spent from 2016. In the future programs will pay the group or presenter directly. There is now a more positive data collection model that they will fund.

Communications sub-committee had brochures and budget guides available at the PTO fair.

The CASE study group has started Interviews of individuals, from both Rockport and Gloucester, to get the viewpoint from the educators in the trenches.

D. Other Business

V. Correspondence

Letters from the Rockport Teachers Association regarding lengthening of the school day at the elementary school.

Mr. Liebow received a googlemail from a 4th grader regarding the net less basketball hoops at the elementary playground. Mr. Liebow went to Sue Collin's classroom, presented the student with new nets and installed them.

VI. Future Agenda Items

- A. Sustainable Workforce Housing Update (12/5)
- B. K-12 Social Studies Presentation (12/5)
- C. CASE Update
- D. Superintendent's Report/FundFlow

VII. Calendar

- A. December 5, 2019, regular meeting
- B. December 11, 2019, Budget Forum at Town Library
- C. January 8, 2020, regular meeting

VIII. Executive Session

N/A

Motion: At 9:35 pm Nicole Altieri motioned to adjourn the regular meeting.
Seconded: Colleen Coogan seconded the motion.
Vote: The motion carried 5-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Liebow
Superintendent of Schools