



SPECIAL SCHOOL BOARD MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2007

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Board Members Present: Ginny Burley, Chair; Mark Berry, Vice-Chair; Conrad Smith, Clerk; Susan Chickering, Allen Gilbert, Adrienne Magida, Tom Williams.

Administrators Present: Keith Gerritt, Principal; Tom McKone, HS Assistant Principal; Tim Flynn, Special Services & Programs Director; Lisa LaPlante, Guidance & Counseling Director; Robbe Brook, Superintendent

Student Representative: Alanna Webb

Also Present: Jeff Rubin, Luna Larkin, Alison Howland, Emily Smith, Denise Dalmasse, Steve Barrows, Peg Wilmott, Kathy Segar, Jessica Smetana, Beth Dant, Linda Hall, Wes Cate, Monique Haupt, Kim LaGue, Patty Connor, Patrick Joy, Ethan Marshall, Sarah Sbardellati, Barbara Korecki

1.0. The meeting was called to order at 6:05 p.m. by Chair, Ginny Burley.

- 1.1. Reception of Guests: Ginny Burley welcomed the guests and asked everyone to sign in. The members of the board introduced themselves.
- 1.2. Agenda Revisions: None.
- 1.3. Public Comments and Correspondence: None.

2.0. Discussion Agenda

2.1. Continue discussion of U-32 Schedule Proposals: Ginny Burley invited the audience to discuss the schedule proposal issue(s) and reminded those present that the agenda has allowed thirty minutes to discuss. She stated that, following the thirty minutes, the board members plan to discuss and deliberate. Discussion followed.

A parent spoke about the difficulty of trimester scheduling for her own children. She cited a study that shows students in semester systems carried higher GPAs than those in block scheduling or trimester scheduling.

Nancy Disenhaus spoke in favor of semester scheduling. She spoke about the homework load in semesters versus trimesters. She spoke about relationships with students that can be fostered over the course of an entire school year. She suggested school board members devoting a few days to being facilitators to conversations with students in the atrium to open communication.

Emily Smith spoke on behalf of the foreign language department; she stated that she represents the consensus of the foreign language department, which is in support of the semester system. Allen Gilbert asked about the suggestion to run a foreign language course all three trimesters. Emily stated that the foreign language department would be in support of that; what stands in the way are scheduling constraints and staffing. Corrine Stridsberg asked whether the foreign language consultant had addressed this issue; Keith Gerritt replied that as of yet no one has received a report from the foreign language consultant (Carole Meyer.)

A parent voiced her dissatisfaction with her child's current schedule under the trimester system; for example she is a freshman with first band open and no course with which to fill first band.

Allen Gilbert asked if this problem is unique to trimester schedules or if this is a universal problem. Allen also asked: what is the problem created by structure of trimester versus what is the problem created by lack of staff?

An English teacher spoke in support of the semester system, particularly the continuity and the relationships the structure allows.

A student asked the board about lunch bands in the proposed semester schedule; she spoke about a half hour not being long enough for lunch. She asked about how credits would transfer from trimester to semester (they would transfer one-for-one.) She brought up the disruptiveness of bells between/ during classes.

Barbara Korecki spoke to Allen Gilbert's question of staffing versus scheduling constraints.

Michelle McFadden spoke to the board about the various departments that she polled regarding their feelings of semester versus trimester.

A student stated her dissatisfaction with the students not having been included in discussions and informed of deliberations regarding scheduling. A student asked about meeting every other day and how semester course load would impact her understanding of material and her homework load.

A parent spoke about her dissatisfaction about communication around this issue.

Ginny Burley stated that the board now intends to deliberate on this issue and she invited those in the audience to stay and the board will try to make the deliberation/ discussion as interactive as possible.

Adrienne Magida stated that with semesters the teachers actually spent less *days* with students than with trimesters (due to the length of class). Conrad Smith reported on the past two days that he spent at U-32 talking with students and staff. Nearly all students wanted trimesters, for many different reasons. Nearly all students had some misconceptions about the semester model. Nearly all students, by the time they finished conferring, felt that it was a "closer call" than they originally had thought. Nearly all students recognized that change was difficult and that was



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part of their objections. Conrad Smith stated though that in the end almost all students still preferred the present trimester model. The board thanked Conrad Smith for spending the time today in school.

Robbe Brook spoke about the original move from semesters to trimesters, and the problems that have arisen from the trimester model. She spoke about the issue of students transferring from schools with trimester versus semester; she spoke about the issue of coordinating with area vocational schools on semester schedules; she spoke about the problem with creating the school calendar every year. She stated that, with fall assessments as well, the first trimester is rushed and difficult to fit into the calendar before Thanksgiving break. She stated that she didn't think we should create a schedule just to align with neighboring schools, but she does see a benefit and more ability to collaborate.

The board agreed that this issue was not a priority or a goal but it might be a beneficial outcome.

Tom Williams asked about the issue of "planning time."

Keith Gerritt spoke about the idea of blocking time each week so students would not miss (as many) classes for performances; could provide larger school-wide activities. He spoke about how staff members could utilize that time for professional development, collaboration.

The board reviewed Act 31 and how this impacts this proposed planning time.

Mark Berry stated that this discussion has been one of the best he's experienced being on the board so far. He stated that the issue of communication as it has come up – students and parents feeling left out of the discussion/ deliberation - should be a future agenda item. He invited people to come forward with questions as they arise. He also stated he is in favor of semester schedule and he stated his commitment to better communication going forward.

Barbara Korecki explained to those present the system that began the scheduling committee and the attempts that were made initially to get parents involved and informed. She defended the committee's efforts to involve parents and students in the process. She stated that after a certain point of lack of response, the committee discontinued inviting students.

Adrienne Magida stated that whatever decision the board makes tonight, the board has an obligation to make it right with the school and to bring staff and students together.

Allen Gilbert stated his lack of comfort in making such a weighty decision without sufficient information. He also stated his worries about the impact of Act 31. He proposed staying with trimesters for another year and giving the faculty a year to come up with solutions to the main problems identified with the trimester program. If at the end of the year, solutions have not been found, then the board can all agree that a solution was found and can move onto this semester model which is proposed. He is willing to spend another year trying to make it right.

Conrad Smith suggested that waiting a year to make this decision does not seem wise. He pitched the semester model. In the trimester system, we have some classes that don't fit the design (e.g., music and science). The only way to take away these inherent constraints is to go to the semester model.

Tom Williams stated that he has been critical of the trimester system from the beginning. He has never been able to get over the issue of "gaps." We have never been able to "tweak" the trimester system; he does not think the system will help get U-32 to "the next level" of academic rigor; he reiterated his support for semester model.

Sue Chickering stated that she has gone back and forth listening to both sides of solid arguments. She applauded the committee's work and would like to support their recommendation but cannot fully support the decision. She asked whether the initial constraint the board placed on the committee – of staying within the present school day – was an unfair constraint and she wished the committee had been given carte blanche to "think outside the box" and come back with models, for example, of a longer school day. She's not sure the semester model is really going to address the problems that have been identified. She stated that she is like a "hung jury" in herself and can't fully get her heart around one option or the other; she leans toward Allen Gilbert's suggestion to hold off on making such a huge change without assurance that it will indeed solve the big problems.

Adrienne Magida stated that additional teaching capacity is an issue; not necessarily teaching staff. If in negotiations, teachers were required to teach more, some of the scheduling problems would be eliminated (regardless of semester/ trimester.) Adrienne Magida stated her concerns with the climate of the school; last year was rough, there were some hard decisions made – this change is creating divisiveness in the staff – she's not convinced that semesters are going to solve the problems faced in trimester model. Again she stated that teachers meet with their students for fewer sessions. She is not convinced one way or the other.

Maggie Eaton stated her concerns with literacy in the school. She stated her concerns with the NECAP scores that are coming in February. She felt that semesters impacted more students in a positive way. She spoke in favor of a year-long relationship with students and the difference that can make.

Tom McKone stated that the criteria with which the committee starts, affects the outcome greatly. He explained two reasons that the trimester model remains a problem are: not having unity within school leadership after the decision was made; for example, blaming things on trimesters that really have nothing to do with trimesters. Second, when the trimester model was selected, the administration did not make difficult decisions to make it work; the administrative leadership now is prepared to make these difficult decisions, no matter which schedule model is chosen.



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Ginny Burley was asked her feeling. She stated that she sees no obvious answer “jumping out.” She values the work the committee completed and she would like to honor what they have done, unless there is some really compelling reason not to. She is not afraid of change and she applauds acknowledging mistakes and making changes to address them. She thanked Conrad for spending the time he spent in the school.

Allen Gilbert moved to reflect the comments he made earlier: to stick with trimesters for a year, and move to semesters after a year, unless the faculty comes up with solutions to the main problems that have been identified about trimesters. Seconded by Adrienne Magida.

Discussion: Keith Gerritt asked the board to please decide one way or the other tonight and not drag this out for two more years, or two more weeks. He is concerned that this will continue to consume all of our energy and effort for another year or two. Allen Gilbert stated that the assumption that we will be able to “move on” might be a false assumption. Lisa LaPlante stated that it has become clear to her that the U-32 community is split on almost every issue. She has spoken with parents, faculty, administrative leaders and she feels that whichever decision is made, that if the adults are working cohesively then the students will be ok.

Allen Gilbert stated that his conclusion is that U-32 is a “different place” in that it tries to reflect the messy process that democracy within community is. Not top-down management, but including as many people as possible in the process and thereby coming to the best conclusion. He feels that this is worth another “go around.”

Sue Chickering asked, what if the board decided to wait for a week or so, to see if there is any desire out there to take on the charge of finding solutions to the problems in trimesters. Many board members felt that this would undermine the ongoing and long-term effort made by the scheduling committee.

A student stated her support for Allen Gilbert’s motion because it would enable more open communication and enable students to get more “behind” whatever decision is made.

Some discussion followed regarding the middle school schedule.

Wes Cate asked the board whether it was structurally feasible to go along with Allen Gilbert’s motion which, as he hears it, is committing to semesters, but not right now. He stated that a lot of the dissention he hears is “shock effect” and the lack of time to “digest” such a huge change. He stated the benefits of waiting a year to implement this change.

Corrine Stridsberg asked about the subject of teachers teaching more classes and whether this is relevant to the discussion. Board members agreed that this is universal to both semester and trimester schedules.

Sue Chickering and Adrienne Magida asked whether the suggestion to hold off on making a decision for another week or two is feasible. Keith Gerritt stated that this is not possible as the development of the schedule of classes and program of studies has waited until the last possible minute.

Ginny Burley called for a vote on Allen Gilbert’s motion. The motion was defeated with a vote of three to four.

Mark Berry moved to accept the recommendation of the committee. Seconded by Tom Williams.

Discussion: Sue Chickering stated that she has to recuse herself from the vote at this time. Jeff Rubin asked whether the administration could move ahead with the preparation for semesters, so that we had a small amount of time to get student “buy in.”

Keith Gerritt stated that the board must consider the “life cycle” of the school; trimester exams are coming into full swing; followed by December which is budget development time. Jeff Rubin asked for clarification on this issue.

Ginny Burley suggested that putting off the decision could make matters worse.

Robbe Brook stated that she often hesitates to weigh in but tonight she would: The committee was given a charge and worked hard to meet that charge, the principal followed by making a recommendation to the board; she recommends that the board accept the recommendation of both the principal and the committee.

Conrad Smith moved to recess for ten minutes at 8:50 p.m.

Sue Chickering asked to hear from the student representative before the board makes a vote. She stated that she feels caught in the middle based on opinions she’s heard from constituents and she feels for students and faculty and she can’t vote tonight.

Alanna Webb spoke on behalf of the students. She stated that many students are full into exam preparation right now and could not attend but overall the consensus of students is in support of staying with trimesters. Adrienne Magida asked whether Alanna thought that giving the students and faculty another week or two weeks to gather information and dialog and “digest” would be helpful. Alanna Webb stated that Conrad Smith’s presence in the school today was very useful to students; she felt that having board members in the building to gather input and also inform students was useful. Conrad Smith recognized that board members should be mindful of the first line of communication being between teachers, administrators and students.

A vote was called: 4 in favor, 2 opposed, one abstention. Adrienne Magida clarified that her vote was not against approving semesters; it was against making a decision tonight versus waiting another week or two.



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A parent suggested an assembly to present to students, parents, the process and the information gathered/ shared, the plan for implementation.

The board asked Keith Gerritt his plan for rolling out this change. He stated that he would share his plan at a later date; for now the focus is Trimester 1 exams.

3.0. Action Agenda

3.1. Approve U-32 Schedule Recommendation

3.2. Approve Tuition Waiver Request: Adrienne Magida moved to accept the tuition waiver request, as discussed at the previous meeting. Seconded by Mark Berry; this motion carried unanimously.

3.3. Resignation: Mark Berry moved to accept, with regret, Albert Petrella's resignation. Seconded by Adrienne Magida. Discussion: Jeff Rubin asked whether thought has been given to his replacement yet. Jeff Rubin asked whether a proposal has been made to Albert Petrella to consult during a transitory time. Keith Gerritt stated that both of these issues are under discussion.

The board thanked the scheduling committee for all their hard work

Mark Berry moved to go into Executive Session at 9:08 for the purpose of discussing personnel issues. Seconded by Adrienne Magida, this motion carried unanimously.

Upon motion of Mark Berry, seconded by Adrienne Magida, and approved unanimously, the Board went into Executive Session at 9:08 p.m. to discuss personnel matters.

At 9:39 p.m., upon motion of Conrad Smith, seconded by Adrienne Magida, and again approved unanimously, the Board came out of Executive Session.

Tom Williams moved, seconded by Conrad Smith, to approve the Administration's recommendation for a fulltime Buildings and Grounds Director position. The motion was approved unanimously.

4.0. At 9:41 p.m., without taking further action, the Board moved, seconded by Susan Chickering, and approved unanimously, the Board adjourned without objection upon the suggestion of the chair.

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Stoudt
Board Recording Secretary
&
Conrad Smith
Board Clerk