

NESHAMINY SCHOOL DISTRICT
Langhorne, Pennsylvania

PUBLIC BOARD MEETING MINUTES
NESHAMINY BOARD OF SCHOOL DIRECTORS
February 24, 2014

The Neshaminy Board of School Directors met in public session on February 24, 2014, in the Harry M. Dengler, Jr., Performing Arts Center, at Maple Point Middle School. The following persons were in attendance:

BOARD MEMBERS:

Mr. Scott E. Congdon, President
Ms. Irene Boyle, Vice President
Mr. John Allen
Mrs. Susan Cummings
Mr. Mike Morris
Mr. Stephen Pirritano
Mr. Ron Rudy
Mr. Mark Shubin
Mr. Anthony Sposato

ADMINISTRATORS:

Mr. Robert L. Copeland
Mrs. Barbara Markowitz
Mr. Anthony Devlin
Mrs. Theresa Hinterberger
Dr. Gloria Hancock

BOARD MEMBER ABSENT:

OTHERS: Approximately 125 persons from the public, staff and press

SECRETARY: Mrs. Jennifer Burns

SOLICITOR: Thomas J. Profy, III, Esquire

1. Call to Order

Mr. Congdon called the meeting to order at 7:07 p.m.

2. Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. Congdon requested those in attendance join in the salute to the flag.

3. Announcements

Mr. Profy stated that the notice of this Special Meeting was advertised in the Bucks County Courier Times on February 21st.

Mr. Congdon stated that the purpose of tonight's meeting is to begin a detailed process to potentially close one of Neshaminy's elementary schools as proposed by the Ad Hoc committee last week. Furthermore, the topic of moving fifth graders to middle school will begin to be reviewed starting with an Ad Hoc committee meeting the week of March 10th to review the findings and recommendations.

Mr. Pirritano gave a summary of the February 19th Ad Hoc committee meeting.

4. Public Comment

Michelle McIntyre, Central Bucks school psychologist, resident of Levittown, stated that the research that she has read indicates that sixth graders who are placed in middle school do not function as well as those who remain in elementary school. Ms. McIntyre said that these sixth graders have lower test scores and more discipline problems than their elementary counterparts. For this reason, she says that she is very opposed to moving fifth graders to middle school.

Paul Lobecker, teacher at Bucks County Technical School, resident of Levittown, commented that closing Walter Miller Elementary School is not prudent. He stated that, while he does not agree with closing any school, there are other schools that would be better suited to close than Miller.

Mr. Morris made a motion to extend public comment from three minutes to five minutes for this special meeting. There was no second to this motion.

Angie Manning, New Jersey school teacher, resident of Middletown Township, requested that Ad Hoc Committee meetings be televised for the benefit of the public. She also expressed concern over the sudden decision to consider closing Walter Miller Elementary School. Ms. Manning implored the Board to reconsider moving fifth graders to middle school because 10 and 11 year old children are not ready to be bused and schooled along with older 13 and 14 year olds.

Andrea Spencer, parent and co-president of Walter Miller PTO, resident of Levittown, asked for proof that sufficient research has been done regarding the closing of Walter Miller Elementary School.

Holly Miller, parent of Walter Miller student, resident of Levittown, asked why would the Board consider closing the most updated elementary school in the district. Ms. Miller also asked if it is true that there is a \$1 million grant to improve the library at Walter Miller, and if so, why would the Board consider losing that grant.

Kristen Gildea, parent of Walter Miller student, resident of Levittown, stated that Walter Miller has a family atmosphere and she expressed her opposition to the proposal to close the school.

Darlene Csolak, parent of Walter Miller student, resident of Levittown, expressed her support for keeping Walter Miller Elementary School open. Ms. Csolak said Miller is more than a school, it is the foundation of their community. She concluded by imploring the Board to keep the fifth graders in elementary school and not take their innocence away by moving them to middle school prematurely.

Megan Amati, parent of Walter Miller student, resident of Levittown, stated that the closing of Walter Miller School would cause too much disruption for the students and this is not putting their best interest first.

Charles Alfonso, semi-retired, resident of Langhorne, offered suggestions for reorganizing the school district classes, such as moving sixth graders back to elementary schools, consolidating Maple Point into Sandburg and Poquessing and making Maple Point a second high school to alleviate the crowding at Neshaminy High School.

Debbie McNickle, teacher, resident of Doylestown, said she supports the idea of moving fifth graders to middle school if it is carefully planned and there would be a separation of the younger students from the older students.

Jerry Thomas, parent of a Walter Miller student, resident of Levittown, voiced his concern about merging Walter Miller students with Samuel Everitt because of the potential larger class sizes and the problems that can occur for the students.

Steve Rodos, retired, resident of Villages of Flowers Mill, congratulated Mr. Copeland and the Board for working together to achieve better educational programs while also saving taxpayers money. Mr. Rodos said that closing schools is never a popular action, but it is the only plan that makes sense at this time.

5. Items for Approval Tonight

a) Consider and act upon authorization of the scheduling of a Public Hearing.

Mr. Congdon read the following resolution:

RESOLUTION

Resolution of the Board of School Directors of the Neshaminy School District to hold a Public Hearing of the Board to consider the permanent closure of Walter Miller Elementary School.

The Board of Directors of the Neshaminy School District do, pursuant to Article VII, Section 780 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code of 1949, as amended, resolve that a Public Hearing of the Board will be held in the auditorium of Maple Point Middle School, 2250 Langhorne-Yardley Road, Langhorne, PA 19047 on Monday, March 17, 2014 at 7:00 p.m. and Tuesday, March 18, 2014 at 7:00 p.m. upon the question of whether or not to permanently close the Walter Miller Elementary School located at 10 Cobalt Ridge Drive, Levittown, Middletown Township, Bucks County, PA at the end of the 2013-2014 School Year.

The Administration of the School District and the Solicitor hereby authorize and direct to advertise the Public Hearing and to take all action required by law to be taken in conjunction with the holding of the Public Hearing. The public will be invited to attend and participate in the Hearing as permitted by law.

Resolution adopted this 24th day of February, 2014.

Attest:

NESHAMINY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Jennifer Burns, Board Secretary

By: _____
Scott E. Congdon, President
Board of School Directors

Mr. Sposato made a motion to accept the above resolution.

Mr. Pirritano seconded the motion.

Mr. Morris asked Mr. Copeland if he has previously been involved in moving 5th grade to middle school.

Mr. Copeland replied that although he was not involved as a school superintendent he was familiar with the process.

Mr. Morris asked for documentation regarding this matter.

Mr. Copeland replied that the information can be found on the website of the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Mr. Morris asked if it was accurate that there is a \$1 million dollar grant for the library at Walter Miller Elementary School.

Mrs. Markowitz replied that she will look into that issue.

Mr. Copeland asked Mrs. Markowitz to elaborate about state money coming back to Walter Miller Elementary School.

Mrs. Markowitz explained that there was reimbursement money from the state for work that was done and completed and the bond was matured in February 2014.

Mr. Morris asked if a large school setting is better than a smaller school setting.

Mr. Copeland replied that the school size isn't nearly as important as the staff, administrators, and curriculum.

Mr. Morris asked if we have considered placing the 6th grade down back in the elementary school.

Mr. Pirritano stated, to date, it was not considered because the committee has not received any information or recommendations from the district's professionals regarding the matter.

Mr. Congdon requested a roll call tally and the tally indicated the resolution passed by a vote of 8 ayes, (Mr. Allen, Ms. Boyle, Mr. Congdon, Mrs. Cumming, Mr. Pirritano, Mr. Rudy, Mr. Shubin, Mr. Sposato) 1 nay, (Mr. Morris).

b) Publication of a Notice of Public Hearing for the closure of an elementary school of the school district.

Mr. Congdon read the following Public Notice:

Notice of a Public Hearing of the Board of School Director's of the Neshaminy School District to consider permanent closure of Walter Miller Elementary School pursuant to Article VII, Section 780 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code of 1949 as amended notice is herewith given that the Board of Director's of the Neshaminy School District will hold a public hearing on Monday March 17, 2014 at 7:00 p.m., and Tuesday March 18th, at 7:00 p.m. in the auditorium of Maple Point Middle School, 2250 Langhorne-Yardley Road, Langhorne, Pennsylvania 19047, upon the question of whether or not to permanently close the elementary school of Walter Miller Elementary School located at 10 Cobalt Ridge Drive, Levittown, Pennsylvania 19057 at the end of 2013 - 2014 school year. The public is invited to attend and participate in the hearing as permitted by law.

Mr. Pirritano made a motion to accept the above public notice of hearing.

Ms. Boyle seconded the motion.

The Board approved the above motion by a vote on 8 ayes, and 1 nay, (Mr. Morris.)

6. Public Comment

Raina Schumaker, resident of Langhorne, stated that she understands the Board's consideration of closing an elementary school for financial reasons. She also supports moving fifth graders to middle schools as long as they are segregated from older students.

Dawn Lynch, parent of Walter Miller student, asked why the Board is rushing the decision to close Walter Miller Elementary School. She stated that an important action like this cannot be accomplished in a six month time frame effectively and in the best interest of the children. She asked the Board to take the appropriate measures to make such an important decision in a more timely manner.

Kayla Davidson, middle school student, stated that fifth graders should not attend middle school. She said that the middle schools are already too crowded and it is not in the best interest of the fifth grade students to move to middle school.

Michele McIntyre, psychologist, resident of Levittown, questioned why the matter of moving fifth graders to middle school has not come up before when discussing school consolidation. Ms. McIntyre said she thinks the Board has not been transparent enough with this issue and asked them to carefully think it through more thoroughly.

Roseann Sauer said she feels that the Levittown area has been targeted by the Board when considering closing a school. Ms. Sauer pleaded with the Board to reconsider moving fifth graders to middle school stating that these students should be allowed to be children and to preserve their innocence.

Dave Prasch, federal worker, voiced his opposition to closing Walter Miller Elementary School. He said Walter Miller is a superior school and he does not want to see his children moved to another elementary school where it will be overcrowded.

Darlene Csolak, parent of a Walter Miller student, said it is not appropriate for fifth graders to be exposed to the possible perils that may be faced at middle school.

Courtney Capriotti, Bensalem school teacher, resident of Levittown, stated that she is familiar with the situation of closing a school due to low enrollment as this occurred in Bensalem years ago. Ms. Capriotti said that in subsequent years the situation usually changes causing problems in the future of overcrowding and large class sizes.

Julia Capaldi, sixth grade student, said Walter Miller School provides students with self confidence and assurance. She also voiced her opposition to moving fifth graders to middle school.

Lisa Capaldi remarked that her family chooses to stay in the area because of Walter Miller School.

Charles Alfonso, semi-retired, resident of Langhorne, questioned the qualifications of the Ad Hoc committee to make recommendations regarding moving fifth graders to middle school when the committee members are not in the teaching profession.

Erin Tierney, parent, resident of Levittown, voiced her disappointment that Mr. Mahoney, principal of Walter Miller School, was not given sufficient notice that the school was being considered for closing. Ms. Tierney said that Walter Miller School has a family type atmosphere and the parents and staff help each other.

Nancy McGinty, resident of Levittown, stated that not enough notice was given to the public regarding the possible closing of Walter Miller School. She questioned why the decision is being rushed.

Dawn Cherrington, resident of Levittown, commented that she is concerned about class size if Walter Miller students are transitioned into another elementary school.

Debra Harker, sales manager, resident of Middletown Township, remarked that there are many successful school models and each model has its supporters and oppositions. She said she has no problem with fifth graders moving to middle school because she finds that in these cases fifth and sixth graders tend to bond together and segregate themselves from the upper classmen. She said Neshaminy needs to be financially responsible and implement STEM programs, foreign language expansion and full-day kindergarten and the Board should not allow themselves to be pressured into changing their decisions.

Julia Prasch, elementary school student, said she is fearful of moving into middle school as a fifth grade student.

Angie Manning, public school teacher, resident of Langhorne, stated her concern over the conduct of the older middle school students on the buses.

Jennifer Boughton, appliance worker, resident of Langhorne, asked how class sizes will be affected by the closing of an elementary school.

Ms. Prasch, Carl Sandburg student, voiced her opposition to moving fifth graders to middle school.

Sharon Vittela, assistant superintendent of Mt. Laurel School District, advised the Board to make a plan that is fiscally responsible and in the best interest of the children.

7. Future Topics

None.

8. Board Comment

Mr. Shubin said he intends to exercise due diligence in making the decisions about closing an elementary school and moving fifth graders to middle school. He said whatever the decision is he will insure that it will be good for the district and the children both educationally and socially.

Mr. Morris said that he supports renovating the school buildings rather than closing a school. He stated it is his understanding that an outside agency conducts drug sweeps of school students and not employees which he would like to see changed. Mr. Morris mentioned that class size is very important.

Mrs. Cummings recommended that the issue of televising Ad Hoc Committee meetings be put on the Policy Committee meeting agenda this week.

Ms. Boyle acknowledged that closing a school is a difficult matter for parents, taxpayers and Board members equally. She remarked that while this is an emotional issue, questioning Board members qualifications and experience is not appropriate. Ms. Boyle advised that when candidates for school board are presented in the newspaper every four years their qualifications and professions are freely available for the public to make a judgment as to whom they wish to vote for.

Mr. Rudy agreed that the matter of renovating school buildings is something that the Ad Hoc Committee will be considering. Mr. Rudy said he understands the feeling of the community regarding school closing and moving fifth grade to middle school and he wants it known that the Ad Hoc Committee has put a lot of careful study into the matter and the Board will do what is right for the entire community.

Mr. Sposato remarked, in response to a public comment, that throughout his life he has developed much knowledge and experience and he is abundantly qualified to hold his position on the Board. He said that the Board works closely with the administrators and the decisions are not based on the single knowledge of one person, but rather as an effective leadership team. Mr. Sposato said that these difficult choices have been deliberated for 11 years and at some point a decision must be made.

Mr. Pirritano advised that no decision has been made yet and this is the process of making recommendations in which the public will be included. He reviewed the financial obligations of the district and explained that in order to increase educational programs then difficult decisions must be considered. Mr. Pirritano assured the public that plans for the vacated building, redistricting, busing and all the issues that have been brought up will be carefully considered and well thought out.

Mr. Congdon said he is happy to hear parents support their neighborhood school and would expect that from all the Neshaminy schools. He said that class sizes will not change, closed elementary schools will not be sold, and there will not be unnecessary disruption and building changes for students. He urged the public to attend committee meetings and present their questions and concerns during that forum. Mr. Congdon said he was initially hesitant about moving fifth grade to middle school, but after hearing some of the educational benefits, such as science labs, he reconsidered his opinion. He advised that the hearing meetings will be on March 17th and 18th and invited everyone to attend.

Mr. Copeland clarified that the Board has gathered the information in order to fulfill the legal obligations to make a decision if so desired, but it also could be postponed if it was not possible to implement.

Mr. Congdon concurred that nothing has been finalized and the discussion will continue and the public is welcome to participate.

9. Adjournment

Mr. Congdon moved the meeting be adjourned and Mr. Shubin seconded the motion. The Board unanimously approved the motion. Mr. Condon adjourned the meeting at 9:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Burns
Board Secretary