

Voluntary Regional Education District Study Committee

October 3, 2012

Gould Wing in the Dutton Gym @ Leland & Gray

7:00p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

R.E.D. Committee:

Emily Long, Drew Hazelton, Bruce Parliman, Cory Stark, Neil "Bucky" Pelsue, Ken McFadden, LeeAnne Parker, Joe Winrich, Antje Rupert.

Administrators:

Steven John, Superintendent; Frank Rucker, CFO; John Everitt – VSBA Consultant.

Board Members:

Jamaica – Jake Forester, Stephanie Amyot, Laura O'Brien, Wes Amidon
Windham – Beth McDonald.
L&G – Patti Dickson

Members of the Public:

Sheila Friedli, Ernie Friedli, Jerry Dyke, Nancy Dyke.

7:00 Emily Long called the meeting to order at 7:03p.m.

1.Review Agenda :

Bucky - At the August Meeting it was decided the committee would not meet in September in order to allow members to meet with their boards respectively to discuss next steps. It seems appropriate to review discussions with respective school boards. The information gained will suggest to the committee what we will do. This review will occur after #3 on the Agenda.

2. Comments from the Public:

Ernie – After Windham announced they would resign from the R.E.D. Committee study, a meeting was held in Windham. Following the Windham meeting, it was reported that the attendees agreed with Windham Board's decision, but there was no official vote or show of hands by town members at the Windham meeting. Someone needs to be addressing this from a high level and school boards need to come together on a local level. A decent proposition hasn't come to tax payers in Windham yet after a year.

Emily – Beth and Antje, members of the Windham School Board, will address the details of the Windham meeting held on September 10th, 2012. The review is happening of structures at the state level. Expenses are up and enrollment is down across the state which is something we are dealing with all the time. Unfortunately, there was misunderstanding about where the RED Committee was in the process when Windham made the decision to pull out of the study. The committee was trying to decide whether or not we were going to move forward as a RED. Community members didn't know yet because the committee didn't know yet. There were some inaccurate statements made. The committee hadn't

been at the point where they could answer their questions yet. If the decision is made to move forward, the public will be informed of everything.

Antje – “I planned to come here tonight to give the committee a report on the Sept. 10th Windham meeting. The article in Brattleboro Reformer was quite charged. Windham School Board felt that as the Articles of Agreement stood and as the law States, a RED Board formed would have the authority to close the school, which Windham School Board felt strongly against. Board members felt that no other body or authority should have the ability to close a school other than the town. Also, they wanted the best interest of their students in mind. There’s a lot of talk about cost savings. I outlined a 10-page document of the RED study’s findings and found there would be no apparent major cost savings. I thought they had projected 3-4 years for a construction. I didn’t feel comfortable going to my town and saying that the proposed budget promised cost savings when they weren’t eminent. The meeting was very well attended (approximately 65-70 people). It was evident that the majority of people agreed with the Windham Board’s decision. It was true the public wasn’t very involved- at town meeting Windham laid out their studies and asked people to reach out with input and questions. The Windham Board never received any input or questions. “

Nancy Dyke – The Windham meeting in September was highly attended. The board made their goal very clear about why they wanted to pull out. However, there wasn’t a balanced representation of the conversations that have taken place. The pros and cons were heavily weighted toward the cons but didn’t focus on providing information on the balance of the pros. There’s rampant misinformation and confusion, especially after the meeting. She disagreed with the newspaper article saying that there was agreement at the meeting that night. Some people just want the whole study to go away. Many people were so confused they didn’t know where to go with it. Windham needs a neutral person to come give a balanced view of the whole study and to provide as much information as possible including timelines and what happens in the process. She can’t emphasize enough on the amount of confusion of the whole RED Committee study. There’s still a group of people in Windham who would like fair access to this process and to be able to vote on whether or not Windham stays in the committee. She understands that it is under the authority of this Red Committee to either accept or deny Windham’s request to drop out of the study and that it’s possible to deny the request and would urge the group to do that simply so the process could go forward and allow Windham voters to have a say in the process. Windham tax payers should have access to a decision as far reaching as this.”

Emily – We were still in the conceptual stage at the last RED meeting. We weren’t ready to hold an information meeting at that point in time when Windham pulled out. Emily doesn’t believe the RED Study Committee would have the ability to deny a request for Windham to pull out.

John E - The State Board would not force any of the towns to do anything. The RED Committee is voluntary. That’s why it was entitled a “*Voluntary* Regional Education District Study Committee.” The committee can propose any articles of agreement they want to the State. It’s an internal matter. If Windham is not part of the RED, the town would not vote. The State Board of Education has the authority to approved articles and the voters of the towns not in the RED are not part of the vote. Windham voters can petition the School Board’s decision to pull out of the RED Committee. The Secretary of the State’s office can tell you exactly how to word the petition and everything that needs to be included. Windham would be welcomed back to the study if they wished.

Emily – “My interpretation was more about the students than the financial aspect of the Committee. Operational efficiencies were also a high priority which while somewhat similar, differs from financials.”

Nancy – “I don’t believe Windham was well informed.”

Emily – “If we decide to move forward and come out with a R.E.D. there will be a lot of informational meetings. I will never move forward submitting a proposal without having every answer in place. It is a time-consuming process. “

Wes – Question for Windham: “Would you still be interested in studying the new school idea without the RED Committee?”

Antje – “We don’t have issues with the structure of our school building; we have a wonderful staff, students are doing really well, and if our student population keeps decreasing we will need to make a decision in that regard. At the moment we feel that we shouldn’t fix what is not broken. Plus, we don’t anticipate much cost savings which seems to be the underlying motivation for a RED. To answer the question, no, Windham would not be interested in studying the new school idea even without the RED Committee. “

Bucky - “On the notion of cost savings – cost savings are nice. If we could do the same things at lower costs – that certainly is a win. There might be things that the new district can achieve that may cost more and those should also be laid out to the voters. I don’t like the word “cost.” I like to think of education as an *investment*.”

Beth – “Windham is still all about collaboration and working together. “

Steven John doesn’t think the articles in the Articles of Agreement were considered carefully. Representatives of the town have to vote in favor of the closure of the school and if not the vote of the town is obliged which the RED Committee addressed previously to make sure there wasn’t an arbitrary closure. In other words, the RED Committee can’t close a school if the town votes against it. WCSU will provide leadership to member districts with the boards.

Sustainability – A collective effort, larger than the individual towns, could result in benefits for ALL students. We need to hold ourselves to these articles.

Steven distributed a hand out of the WCSU Core Values.

Reminder: SCHOOL BOARD CODE OF CONDUCT – Expect equitable amount of time spent both on learning and education as members of the board.

There are limitations and boundaries but the whole challenge of the legislation is to try to empower Vermonters to think more broadly and encourage collaboration. Collaboration can be narrow or broad. Broad collaboration is what happened last Wednesday, Sept 26th, 2012 between the W.C.S.U & W.S.W.S.U.

Emily – These were the WCSU Board Core Values and Mission Statements dated back to 2007, before Steven was the Superintendent and created by all of the boards.

3. Review and Approve Minutes from August 7, 2012

Neil "Bucky" Pelsue made the motion to approve the August 7, 2012 meeting minutes as is. Joe Winrich seconded the motion. All in favor. No opposed. 1 abstention – Drew Hazelton. Motion passed.

Bucky – NewBrook is very comfortable with its own district. I don't get the sense that they are either anxious or eager about becoming a part of a larger district at this time. They have just been through the process of combining. They are making great strides.

Leanne – NewBrook is interested in collaboration. When merging Newfane & Brookline schools boards, the two boards worked well together, info went out well to the communities, and they are still working through issues in combining the two schools together. We are still finding out things about each of the two communities that were unbeknownst at first. There are levels of learning that weren't expected. That will happen any time you get schools together. Right now we are researching Geo thermal heating and photo voltaic energy – great money-savings for tax payers – and we will also add RED Committee information when we feel prepared to explain it to the tax payers. We want to continue to examine and be a part of the RED study but still think we need to finish answering some questions we still have before we move forward. The towns need to get behind supporting the process of forming a RED or this study won't go anywhere if it continues. Brookline is not ready to take another step in this merger yet after recently losing their school and still adjusting to NewBrook.

Ken – Newfane is not against a RED district but there are many different variables. Education is not all books; it's social interactions, foreign language, sports, etc. which would be taken away by combining that. Each school has certain things that people like about the school. We want to keep our ears open and remain involved.

Emily - If the red moves forward, Newfane and Brookline will still be in the RED Study. NewBrook voted for the k-12 at their meeting.

Drew Hazelton- The entire Jamaica School Board is here tonight. Earlier in the study, the Red Committee voted that everyone is either in support of forming a RED or the study ends. He remembers that vote very well and one board pulled out so he's not sure why we're still here. There are too many unknowns to make a decision. Jamaica has a quorum and has legally warned their meeting so they can make a vote tonight.

Emily – the law changed so more options are available.

Wes –At Jamaica's last board meeting, we talked about the RED and about Windham's meeting, but Jamaica Board couldn't figure out where they stood and went into Executive Session where we discussed a conflict regarding Windham because they needed a principal and needed to have a principal to come into the school about 5 hours per week. Windham, no longer part of the RED Committee, needed to share resources with Jamaica and the timing seemed parallel to the discussions surrounding forming a RED. Wardsboro, also not part of the RED Committee study, may need to borrow Jamaica's kitchen for their food service. These two issues that have recently come up both involve sharing resources and the timing seems ironic. Change is always hard but I don't think anyone would consider taking back kids from L&G and teaching them in our own towns.

Clarification for the public:

Windham does have a principal, Dr. Steven John. He's licensed and is serving as Windham's principal because it's essential that they have a hierarchy of authority regarding student discipline. Laura Hazard is in charge of supervision and evaluation of staff at Windham, the process of hearing (an appeal) if they feel they are mistreated by the principal. Viability has always been dependent upon an excellent teaching principal – dually licensed, which is the plan for Mickey Parker-Jennings – currently the head teacher. There is a long-term plan. Steven made it possible not to have to find a retired or semi-retired principal to fill in.

April Chase – Townshend will stay aggressive with what's going on. We are disappointed to not have as many student opportunities as we would with a RED but Townshend will continue.

4. Review benefits

- Benefits to students (See attached appendix from Articles of Agreement)

John Everitt – Positives include building another school to follow along NewBrook Elementary. Special Education could also benefit. One of the first priorities was the construction of a new school – the board would start investigating before they decided they'd take over the whole operation. John E. is mixing in the cost a little but the assumptions were if we combined schools the best result we could see was NewBrook's school. What the bond payments would be. Appendix A reduces it quite a bit with Windham taken out. The savings would be a little less than it was before. The most powerful part is how to assemble the administrators from WCSU – what would happen if we formed this RED? Their words:

Bruce P – Cost benefits vs. Efficiencies - Qualitative not quantitative – maybe that's some of the confusion.

John E. – The audience for the articles is the State Board of Education, not the public-at-large.

Ken – Money being saved – combining two schools into one school – getting rid of the staff positions to run one school. Heating three schools and then heating 1 school. Now have two buildings sitting vacant with no electricity, no heating, etc. All that is, is consolidating the staff, so the number seems misleading.

Bucky – quantitative – expand title to read – “ Student Opportunities and Cost Benefit Analysis“

John E. – Move people around to meet student needs in an efficient way – when there's staff available instead – only happens at WCSU District level happening right now (teachers moving around).

Ernie – Transportation needs to be addressed.

John E – This would be a priority for the RED board to look at, not this committee, if a RED board is formed.

Frank Rucker made a model of cost-benefits if three towns were to build a new school. John zeroed out Windham's information. Frank would like to address Ken's concern as he is bringing up transitional issues but that's not what we were asked to define. If sometime in the future, three schools built one school and operated it, what would the cost be? We have a very good example, which is NewBrook with

an enrollment of approximately 140 students. To hypothetically combine Townshend, Windham, and Jamaica, enrollment would be near 170 kids. Enrollment would be about 150 students with Windham out of the equation. This makes for a very comparable model. Is that the sort of thing we would want to duplicate? NewBrook is spending 1.9 million, annually. Townshend & Jamaica are spending 2.4 million. There's a \$400,000-500,000 dollar difference (cost-savings).

It's not a model as to whether or not it would be the best thing for TES & JVS. It's a matter of looking beyond our individual schools. This committee is not a "build-a-new-school committee".

John E- Frank's estimate makes all the sense in the world.

Frank - Transition costs – we haven't talked about the state giving us an incentive of 400 dollars/student. \$200,000 would deal with most issues of vacant buildings, etc. The concept is that it's likely we could down the road look like NewBrook (in good shape) – permanently operating for less money than they are operating now. Enrollment is lowering in Wardsboro. Our valley is ready to look at what we did in 1969 at the HS level when we formed the unions.

Emily – Those schools don't need to remain vacant.

Leanne-It's incumbent between the Superintendent and school principal to deal w/ building and the use of it.

Frank – Added a bond payment – still not modified – substantial 15% lower of operating the school. Bond payment est. \$200,000. Because the two schools are costing so much more than NewBrook standing alone + capital investment going on in JVS and TES... intuitive common sense, well significant piece is that they won't get the capital project if bond isn't paid off. Buildings need that reinvestment – do we want to invest in individual buildings, roofs, systems, or just invest in it once?

Wes – Whole committee basically fell apart but came together when talk of the new building came up. Starting to question that the NewBrook people aren't getting a new building and that the RED Committee should dissolve as NewBrook wouldn't get a new building and feels there's no real reason for them to be here.

John E- Parallel pieces of work – RED & Building – Committee looked at that and didn't want that because of the building aspect and wanted to continue w/ RED with less emphasis on the building and folding that aspect into it. Building doesn't directly impact the RED Committee. It was present because that was what came out as the best for students.

Frank – Contemplated k-6 or k-12. NewBrook landed at the decision of k-12. L&G will need to ratify it's status in the upcoming years because of enrollment dropping. In 1969 – 1970 – left a couple of floors undeveloped so when extra kids came through, they had space. Short-sited to look at just the numbers of students today. K-12 Concept, whether its two or four towns, is essential in terms of being responsible with the investment in education which takes into consideration the principals point of view, curriculum change with the common core and the need to share resources, Frank urges not to jump to another joint board. It's quite a challenge to administer a joint board because state sends the money where you're not spending the money. It's a challenge to administer.

Stephanie – at some point will L&G be 5-12?

Frank – Classes are going from 90 kids per grade To 50 kids. Consider redefining grades 5-8. If the state says you must roll out a continuous lesson plan for grades 5-8 maybe we should be thinking about the ways we are utilizing our educational resources to demonstrate to the state that our students are proficient. To build a two-town school in isolation is short-sited.

5.Options for next steps

- Regional Education District
- Modified Unified Union District

John E- Options:

1. A Regional Education District (RED) with all 5 towns – This option was eliminated when Windham opted out.
2. A Unified Elementary District –This option was eliminated due to the importance of it being a k-12 situation like everyone agreed upon.

This leaves two options:

1. A Regional Education District (RED) with the 4 remaining towns (K-12) – Windham is still part of the HS Union, Windham would have a seat on the RED Board for 7-12 decisions (strictly HS Decisions). In this situation, Windham would run their own k-6 situation but not be a part of the RED Board. The other individual school boards involved in the RED Committee Study would no longer remain individual boards; they would become one board (the RED board). In order for that to occur, the state board would have to approve a set of articles of agreement. All four towns have to vote yes without Windham voting. If one town votes no, then it's off, and all structures stay as they are.
2. A Modified Union District (MUD) would be formed differently, however, the governance and decision making would still be the same. The four towns would need to vote. If only 3 towns voted yes and 1 voted no, then, the rest could continue and the other boards would remain as a 7-12 participant like Windham. The vote is on whether or not to have the committee. Once the vote is made, if they choose to have a RED or Modified Union (MUD), they will then vote as one board on matters. LGUHS would dissolve in either scenario.

Discussion followed.

Leanne – Can we say we don't even want to look at a modified union? We want to stay with a regional education district with four towns not modifying the union so if we found it would be too chaotic we could simply not consider the mud?

Emily – Correct.

Bucky – Which of these organizational combinations makes the most sense for our students? What will cause the most benefit and what will be limiting? Let's determine first what we want to do for our students and what the organizations do or do not do for our students.

Discussion ensued.

Drew Hazelton made a motion to eliminate the MUD option by this committee. Bucky seconded. Vote of R.E.D. Committee: 10 Members – All in favor of the motion. No opposed. No abstentions. The vote unanimously passed.

Drew still believes if there is not a combination of schools there is no benefit to students.

Next Steps:

Questions before making the decision:

- Should the RED Study Committee propose a Regional Education District to the State and proceed to present the Articles of Agreement to the towns?
- What should the Articles of Agreement include?

John E- The committee needs to have the final approval of the articles. When the towns reported, I don't recall anyone deciding to take this to their communities. That decision needs to be made. There's no point in bringing them to the state if no one wants to proceed to take the articles to their towns for approval.

Emily – What is the Agenda of the next meeting?

Drew - The decision hasn't been made to go forward with a RED. We only voted against a MUD.

Bucky thinks it's time to put together the pros and cons of a RED. He finds it difficult to vote yes or no on having a RED because it's an individual town's responsibility. The towns should vote regardless of whether or not it makes sense for them.

Emily – We are required to present all the information to the voters and allow them to make a decision surrounding the RED. Beforehand, we have to decide as a committee if we're going to go forward to present these articles to the State Board.

Ken – Quick question: JVS & TES are sitting on the fence because if a school isn't built they don't want to pursue the RED. Principals and staff members should get together and whatnot – use the skype, use technology to share teaching resources/staff members.

John E – If you form a RED with the notion that the first priority of the board is to build a new school and the RED is formed based on the voters decision that is not a guarantee that the school would be built. The voters would be approving a RED with the idea of the new school flashing at the top but it's not a guarantee even if the RED comes through. A bond vote would have to come through from all the RED Board towns, including schools it would not affect.

Bucky made the following motion: "With the information we have utilized including Frank's new information I move that the next meeting focuses on the developement of a RED." Leanne Parker seconded the motion. All in favor. No opposed. Motion passed.

Drew doesn't feel like they have enough information to go forward with proposing the articles to the State, yet. We are then obligated to take them to the towns to vote. We only have one shot at this. Windham wasn't ok with these articles so why would we send them up to the State?

It was suggested that the Red Committee looks at the student population portion more.

Next Meeting's Agenda:

Enrollment - NewBrook's enrollment is going back up – Oddity because they were told they were going to be down to 60 students and predictions aren't always accurate. Predicting enrollment doesn't really work.

Ask boards what they would like to see.

7.Adjourn

LeeAnne Parker made the motion to adjourn the meeting at 9:30p.m. Ken McFadden seconded.

Meeting adjourned at 9:30p.m.

Ground Rules:

- Work positively through the process
- Capture pros and cons
- Maintain open minds and listen
- All ideas are good ideas
- Stay focused on students
- Methodical and deliberate decisions
- Transparency to community and boards

Next RED Committee meeting to be held on November 28th at 7:00p.m. in the library at L&G.