

WILLOW RUN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
Ypsilanti, Michigan

WORK-STUDY SESSION

March 1, 2007

The work-study session opened at 6:30 p.m. at Willow Run High School, 235 Spencer Lane, Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Those present were:

Claudette Braxton, President
Andreas Blakita, Vice President
Clifford Smith, Trustee
Dorothy Stewart, Treasurer
Sheri Washington, Trustee

Absent: Brenda Clay, Secretary

Members of the Administrative Council Present Included:

Ron Ciranna, J.D., Superintendent
Joe Ann Allen, Principal, Ford Elementary School
Dr. David Houle, Controller
Laura Lisiski, Principal, Kaiser Elementary School
Katie Smith, Director, Technology and Community Services
Shannon Smith, Assistant Principal, Willow Run High School
Lana Tatom, Director, Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
Kelly Webb, Principal, Cheney Academy of Math and Science
Regina Williams, Curriculum Coordinator

President Braxton called the meeting to order at 6:43 p.m.

Citizens' Time

Ms. Braxton asked if those people responding to the proposed budget survey will wait until it comes up on the agenda to share their comments about it.

Mr. Travis Greer, Willow Run High School student, said the high school counselors sent out letters to students last week, notifying seniors whether or not, they have enough credits to graduate on time. Mr. Greer said these letters should have been sent out earlier, so students could have adjusted their last semester schedules if needed.

Mr. Greer also pointed out there has been no student representative on the board for the past 28-days. Considering there are a lot of pressing issues, he asked Dr. Ciranna to press for the position to be filled.

Mr. Greer suggested next year, professional development be scheduled around the Michigan Merit Exam (MME) preparation schedule, due to the fact that professional development causes a large amount of substitute, rather than regular, teachers be in the classroom during this crucial time.

Communications

Ms. Kimberly Searcy highlighted the changes she has implemented in the Transportation Department since taking the position in 2000. When she began the job there were 24-daily routes, which she has been able to lower to 18-daily routes, for a savings of 25% and decreased miles on the buses.

Ms. Searcy praised Mr. Dean Johnston for revamping the bus maintenance schedule to one of preventative maintenance, which resulted in the District's bus fleet receiving a 100% passing grade from the State.

Ms. Searcy also shared the following information about the transportation department:

- Three new buses purchased in 2003.
- 21 buses in the fleet.
- Schools of Choice student transportation started in 2003.
- Homeless student transportation provided by both bus and cab, at a cost of \$800-1,000 per month, which is supposed to be covered by Title I and/or split with other districts.
- Increased numbers of students able to participate in the breakfast program due to transportation getting them to school on time.
- Child-Check program to ensure all students are off of buses when routes are completed.

Ms. Searcy said policies regarding who is to be transported and who is not; need to be looked at, in regards to distance from school buildings. Ms. Washington urged us to consider doing so, in order to keep students in Willow Run. Mr. Smith said this is especially necessary when competition among districts is as strong as it is now, saying if we are losing students, especially our own student, we need to look at that. Ms. Stewart asked Ms. Searcy to share how the bus stop set-up can be improved upon.

Ms. Searcy urged the board to look at redistricting the district, to allow for smoother transportation, and more equitable student distribution among the schools, especially considering the talk of possibly closing a school.

Mr. Blakita questioned if the District needs to consider purchasing cameras for the buses. Ms. Searcy said this is not something we need at this time.

Mr. Smith asked what the total transportation budget is. Ms. Searcy said it is \$1.3 million. Mr. Smith also said other districts are doing a lot of transporting of students and asked if there is anything the board can do to get these students. Ms. Searcy said some students are too far beyond what she can arrange for pick up, but for the most part, if students are in the Greater Ypsilanti area, they are being picked-up and transported.

Ms. Stewart mentioned the Bus Idling Policy proposed by Dean Johnston and asked if the board needs to do anything with it. Dr. Ciranna said a policy is not necessary; Ms. Searcy just has to instruct her staff not to idle.

Dr. Ciranna said he will meet with Ms. Searcy and Dr. Houle to discuss bus routes and cameras and will report back to the board about the meeting's outcome.

Curriculum

ICT

Ms. Sandy Riley, Teacher Consultant at Holmes Elementary School, shared information about the Instructional Consultation Team (ICT) program. She said all Willow Run schools, with the exception of the high school, are now participants in the program, which helps train teachers in instructional processes that work for their students.

Mr. Smith and Ms. Stewart both questioned Ms. Riley about who covers her position while she is gone for ICT related reasons. Ms. Riley said her other duties were cut down, when she became the Teacher Consultant, so no substitute teacher is needed to cover her duties. Mr. Smith asked what part of the budget pays for ICT. Dr. Houle said this is paid for out of a variety of grant monies. Mr. Smith questioned why this contract is just now being brought to the board, when the work began in September of 2006. Ms. Riley explained the University of Maryland was very slow in providing the contract to the District. Dr. Ciranna said the contract was just received and the work could not be held up due to that. Mr. Smith said yes it could be. He said we have been receiving many contracts three-four months after the work starts and this needs to stop. He suggested anybody who wants to work with the District needs to bring in their contract during the summer and receive approval before the work starts, not after school starts. Mr. Smith said there are over \$2 million worth of contracts and he bets we can cut 20-30% of them.

Ms. Braxton said this contract is very beneficial to the District, because it is getting our name out into the other schools. Ms. Riley said the University of Indiana filmed this program at Holmes and she also works this program at Ypsilanti, Milan and Chelsea schools, which reflects positively on Willow Run.

Ms. Stewart asked Ms. Riley how much time she spends working in the District. Ms. Riley said she works 120 days, in buildings and doing prevention work for at-risk kids. She said she provides technical support to all of our buildings by going into schools and meeting with teams to provide staff development. She also assigns cases to teachers and helps them implement strategies to improve students' performance.

Ms. Vonck said the ICT program works collaboratively to help teachers match their teaching to students' skills and needs. She explained Ms. Riley coordinates the whole thing, which results in fewer children being certified as special education.

Ms. Riley shared the Holmes special education placements from 2002-03 through 2005-06, which decreased from just over 25 students to five during this time-frame. She said this results in only those students truly in need of special education services receiving them.

MME Overview

Ms. Tatom said this year the high school juniors will not be taking the MEAP, but rather the ACT and the Michigan Merit Exam (MME).

Ms. Melissa Hunt-Loy, Assessment Coordinator, said the format for this year's assessment is very different than previous years. She explained students have received the following preparation; 10 hours reading and writing, four-hours math review and three hours of science. The students did this by leaving their normally scheduled English, Language and Arts classes to attend training sessions.

Ms. Hunt-Loy said the ACT provides recordable scores, which can be sent to colleges for consideration in the application process. She said in addition to the ACT, students are also taking the Work Keys test, which includes a reading and math assessment, as well as a Michigan portion, including science, social studies and reading.

These tests will be given on March 13th and are timed. Ms. Hunt-Loy said all students will be required to take the test at the same time. Ms. Washington questioned how special-needs students will take the tests. Ms. Hunt-Loy said Ms. Rhonda Williams reviewed all 11th grade IEPs and sent them to ACT for approval of special-needs accommodations. She said another group of students received approval of special accommodations for the Work Keys and MME tests.

Finance

Dr. Houle shared the 3100 accounts with the board as requested by Mr. Smith at the last board meeting and invited all board members to ask any questions they may have about the breakdown of the accounts. He explained professional services of any type, including independent contractors fall under this account. Dr. Houle explained how every account is broken down with every transaction that makes it up, including to whom each check was written, the check number and the amount being recorded, along with year-to-date expenditures and encumbrances.

Mr. Smith said this is something we need to take a thorough view of, before this summer, to see if the District needs all of the independent contractors it has.

Technology

The board reviewed the approval of purchase – network copier as presented by Ms. Smith, for consideration at the March 15th, board meeting. This copier would replace the administration building's current one, for which parts are no longer being made. Ms. Smith explained we currently have three demonstration network copiers here to use to help us make a decision about which one to purchase. The ballpark figure for cost is between \$8-10,000 and the quote will be available at the next meeting.

Superintendent

The board discussed the approval of two out-of-state field trips for the Robotics Team, the suspension of bylaws, and the acceptance of a donation to Kaiser Elementary School, that will appear on the March 15th agenda.

Regarding the proposed suspension of bylaws, Mr. Smith, said he would like not to resend policy and asked if Ms. Tatom can report to Dr. Houle for the rest of this year. Ms. Stewart said she read in the policy manual that you can only suspend bylaws in the fall. Ms. Washington asked why we are proposing to suspend policies 2450, 2750 and bylaw 1032 and asked why this is up for discussion now. Ms. Braxton explained that back in 2005, when the change to the Organizational Chart was made, it was decided it would not be correct for Ms. Tatom to report to Dr. Ciranna, but to the Curriculum Committee. When the board went from a committee structure to a committee-of-the whole, she took over supervision of Ms. Tatom; she said she does not have a problem with Ms. Tatom reporting to Dr. Houle.

Mr. Smith said Ms. Tatom knows so much about curriculum, she does not need supervision, but that he is comfortable with Dr. Houle filling this role. Dr. Houle said he will do this with the caveat, in deference to Ms. Tatom, that she has forgotten more than he will ever know about curriculum, pedagogy and instruction.

Survey

Ms. Braxton read a letter she wrote thanking those who participated in the Focus Group. She said research shows those who are expected to carry-out a plan need to be included in its development. Ms. Braxton said the survey is just a tool to gather information to guide the board in making a decision.

Ms. Braxton said in December the board instructed the superintendent to develop budget reductions to present to them. The superintendent worked with the Focus Group to solicit their input on the reductions. The group developed recommendations which were included on the survey, which was then sent to board and community members for their input prior to its being sent out to the community.

Ms. Braxton next read letters from Laquelle Moore and Karyn Goven, both Focus Group participants, saying it is time for a change and pointing out the need to face the fact the District is in a budget deficit. Both letters said parents want to know what is going to happen and for the board to stand behind the parents and teachers. Ms. Moore's letter said for every day a decision is not made another student leaves the District.

Ms. Stewart reread a letter brought to the board in December from Rebecca Cole, urging a resolution to the District's problems. In the letter Ms. Cole questioned what kind of cuts would be done at the administrative level, and said the board is the only constant in the district, with the superintendent looking for another job. She also said there is a problem with the lack of books and Task Force recommendations not being followed, along with the lack of contracts being settled. Ms. Stewart said a conversation is being held as though the community is here, but they are not here.

Ms. Emily Brumbaugh, Kettering parent and Focus Group participant, said she was also speaking on behalf of Ms. Rhonda McGill, also a Focus Group participant, who could not attend this meeting. Ms. Brumbaugh said the Focus Group was not hand-picked, but was comprised of volunteers. She said the group is looking for validation that when a parent puts forth an effort, their input is heard. She said she was told the survey was not sent out, because some felt there were not enough representatives from all schools on the Focus Group.

She said the Focus Group was able to develop three models to bring forth for consideration, and these did not include Dr. Ciranna's recommendation. Ms. Brumbaugh said it was the parents, not Dr. Ciranna who recommended closing one, if not two, buildings. She said Dr. Ciranna took notes and most of the talking was done by the parents and a school bus driver. She said Dr. Ciranna stopped the discussion often, to ask if there was consensus. She said to have the survey stopped from going out, says parent input will not be heard.

Ms. Carol Blackburn, Willow Run employee, resident and Focus Group participant, said the meetings were very open, with varied opinions. She said the group thought of kids first, but changes do have to be made. She said this is not about Willow Run, but about Michigan. She said the group was asked several times if they were in agreement about what was said.

Ms. Blackburn said at one time it was felt the community did not want any school closings, but they are now ready for it. She said every day a decision is not made, we lose another student and the stakeholders need answers. Ms. Blackburn questioned how best we can educate our kids. She said sometimes it is not quantity, it is quality. She said Ypsilanti Schools has less buildings open than they did, but are able to offer more quality programs because of this.

Ms. Blackburn said not to ask people to join a group if you cannot or will not accept their input. She said the group truthfully gave their options to keep our head above water.

Ms. Fawn Martin, Willow Run parent and Focus Group member said the problems are not Willow Run schools, but changes in the economy, fuel consumption and other economic issues that are making changes necessary. She said the reality is if we do not close a building, we will not exist.

Ms. Martin said this group attended meetings and presented ideas to do what is best for students and said if you do not like these ideas, to give suggestions. She said if you are going to make change, make it because everybody was heard, not because of politics.

Dr. Ciranna said \$3 million needs to be saved, and cost savings of building closings, attendance numbers, incoming schools of choice students, open enrollment, bonds, building histories, square footage and land owned by the District have been looked at in regards to the development of options for the survey. He said all of this information was put together to provide the different models to select from, as well as an area, which is included on the survey, for

Mr. Smith said he is shocked most by how the community reacts to drastic change. He said building square footages, which are reflected in the presented building capacity numbers are not a good way to figure the capacities, as they include areas such as gymnasiums, which are not classrooms. He said we have to look at what is here in Willow Run.

Mr. Smith said he remembers when we closed Thurston and then opened E.C.D.C. We lost students because they moved. He said when we put the sixth-grade at the middle school, we lost students. He said if we make a drastic change, affecting every attendance area in the District, we will lose a significant amount of students. He said if we make changes, Ypsilanti Schools will recruit our students and we cannot afford this. He added Ypsilanti lost 342 students by closing a building, which resulted in a loss of over \$2 million. He said next year they have to cut \$4 million from their budget, because they lost \$2 million by closing a building. He said there is nothing in this plan that says we will lose students and added there are other plans out there.

Ms. Washington said she is speaking for herself, not for the board, and in listening to the communication tonight, it is apparent there is an inherent problem with communication in this District. She said the Focus Group gave a lot of effort and it shows. She said it is important for the community to have a say so in the entire process, adding she would like more options to choose from, saying these are all close-ended options. She suggested bringing the research, along with the recommendations to the public.

Ms. Stewart said she appreciates the hard work done with the options provided, but the recommendations are narrow and there are many more options besides closing a building. She said research does show you lose many students, resulting in lost money over the years by closing a building. She said we need to look at the Deficit Elimination Plan (DEP), as an opportunity to grow and shared a summary of a draft (attached) to save money. She said Willow Run is a great district and we need to recognize this.

Mr. Smith said we need to try to partner with organizations outside of Willow Run. He said he will be meeting with Washtenaw Community College next week and will listen to every option out there. He added we have to be different.

Ms. Washington said we need to stop making decisions for our teachers, students and parents and allow them to have a voice.

Mr. Blakita said the survey should have been sent out. He said the choices are great, but adding to the amount of choices would be bad. He said you need to present a lesser number of choices in order to get a consensus. He spoke about the large number of vacant homes in the Kettering area, saying the people are gone.

Mr. Blakita said we need to rationalize the survival of the District; there are over 60 districts in the state in a deficit. He said the state is in serious trouble and the only thing we can do is to provide an education in the best framework we can afford. He added we may not be here in three-four years if we do not do it right.

Ms. Braxton said the bottom-line is we are not going to please everybody. She said the board is committed to getting input from the community and the work of the committee should be respected. Ms. Braxton said this is just one-piece of the plan, not the whole plan. She said we need to market and we have to make ourselves attractive, so people who want to come here will come.

Ms. Braxton said Ypsilanti Schools lost kids, because their board was a mess, just as our board is a mess. She said we have wasted a lot of time and we are still wasting time. She said by sending out the survey we are not making a decision, we are just asking what people think.

Mr. Smith said from a financial point of view, you know you are going to lose students.

Ms. Martin asked the board to send out the survey and get input and make a decision. The board then discussed whether, or not, the survey needs to be sent out. Mr. Smith asked for a straw vote to decide this issue.

Dr. Ciranna offered to add another option of leaving five-buildings open, with the sixth-grade students going back to the elementary schools. Ms. Stewart stressed the need to offer options other than grade reconfigurations. Mr. Blakita said we need to be able to financially support whatever is put in place.

Ms. Braxton said this is an opportunity for community input, whether you like it or not. She said we have asked for community input and need to use it. She said we will include the options Ms. Stewart mentioned.

Ms. Webb urged the option include a K-6 elementary set-up. She expressed concern about the low number of parents involved with the Focus Group.

Ms. Coffey said if we do not have something to present to parents soon, we will lose them. She said it is not what we are not doing; it is the situation in Michigan. She added we need to be able to give parents information and to get their input. She said we have to take the personal and emotional issues out of the decision and said this is about dollars and sense and kids.

Mr. Stewart said he has been involved in fighting against three decisions within this community over the last few years. First was the Michigan Avenue median in downtown Ypsilanti. He said this would hurt businesses and it did. Second was the Water Street Project. He said the residents of Ypsilanti will be paying for this for years. The third was the Convocation Center at Eastern Michigan University, which cost millions and is too far off campus for students to get to. He said these were all bad decisions you cannot recuperate from. He said if we do reconfigure grade levels, we will not be able to recover.

Ms. Kathleen Miller, Willow Run teacher, said we must work as one, putting kids first. She said everyone needs to be on the same page and it has not been harmonious with the board, staff and community for a while.

She said employees need decisions, direction, and a goal from the board. She said she agrees if we do not do something, there will not be a Willow Run. Ms. Miller said if a fair and equitable contract can be agreed upon, she will personally get teachers out to recruit for the District. Ms. Miller added people need to feel empowered and data can be found for anything you wish to support. Ms. Miller said it is crucial to get information into the hands of the parents.

Citizens' Questions

Mr. Mark Wilde, Willow Run parent, suggested talking to some of the board member who did not bring their kids to Willow Run to find out what it would have taken to bring their kids in. He suggested also talking to some of the teachers.

Ms. Anita Smith shared her experience of approaching a group of parents who reside in Willow Run, but were putting their children on an Ypsilanti School bus. She let them know they could catch a bus to Kettering Elementary, so the parents ended up moving their students to Kettering.

Ms. Vonck, said parents are asking what will happen next year and she has to tell them she does not know. She said she has no information to share with them and asked what she can tell her parents to sell this District to them.

Ms. Tatom said she served on last year's Task Force and said we need to stop wasting time and to trust the Focus Group. She said we have the best preschool through graduation program around and need to remember we are about educating the kids. She urged everyone to start working together, because no one else is coming into this district to save us, we need to save ourselves, adding we have driven a lot of people away by not getting along.

Ms. Ellen Gorbaty, Holmes teacher said we need a decision in a very timely manner. She said the board needs to make a decision and make it now.

Dr. Ciranna said recommendations will be made to the board at the March 15th meeting.

Ms. Braxton said she wants the survey sent out on Monday. Mr. Stewart said a vote needs to happen, or the board will be out of compliance. Ms. Braxton said this is an administrative decision, not a board decision and the final vote will be the boards, but the survey needs to be done to gather information.

Ms. Williams asked if the board was out of compliance by allowing a board member to add a section to the survey at the board table.

President Braxton declared the meeting adjourned at 10:09 p.m.