MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
SCHOOL DISTRICT 4J, LANE COUNTY, OREGON

November 16, 2010

The Board of Directors of School District No. 4J, Lane County, Eugene, Oregon, held a special public input board meeting at 6 p.m. on November 16, 2010, at the Wheeler Pavilion – Lane County Events Center, Eugene, Oregon. Notice of the meeting was mailed to the media and posted in the Education Center on November 12, 2010, and published in The Register-Guard on November 15, 2010.

ROLL CALL

BOARD MEMBERS:
Craig Smith, Chair
Alicia Hays, Vice Chair
Jennifer Geller
Beth Gerot
Anne Marie Levis
Jim Torrey
Mary Walston

STAFF:
George Russell, Superintendent of Schools
Barbara Bellamy, Chief of Staff and Communications Director
Carl Hermanns, Assistant Superintendent/Chief Operating Officer
Susan Fahey, Chief Financial Officer
Celia Feres-Johnson, Director of Human Resources
Jon Lauch, Director of Facilities Management
Sara Cramer, Director of Elementary Education
Kerry Delf, Communications Coordinator
Laurie Moses, Director of Secondary Education

MEDIA:
KRVM

CALL TO ORDER, ROLL CALL AND FLAG SALUTE

Board Chair Craig Smith called the special meeting of the School District 4J Board of Directors to order.

AGENDA REVIEW

There were no changes to the agenda.

SUPERINTENDENT’S REPORT

Superintendent Russell thanked all participants for attending the meeting. He said that he and board members had received many emails and comments from parents, students and
community members over the past two weeks. He wanted to give a summary of the comments that had been received, and then to ask the audience for additional input.

Using his handout describing his preliminary recommendations, Superintendent Russell began with the topic of **Revenue Enhancements**. Some input had expressed concern at any attempt at raising taxes or proposing a bond measure, he noted, because of concern for the impact on families of any additional taxation. Some support had been shown for increasing revenues, but generally the area of revenue enhancement had not received much commentary. There was some support expressed, he said, for selling or leasing property to raise revenue and/or to work with the City to find an additional tax to support schools.

**Fewer School/ Work Days.** Recommendations had been received, Superintendent Russell said, ranging from cutting 20% of the school/work year to having all employees take an equal cut in pay rather than making staff reductions or raising the student-to-teacher ratio. Some people preferred considering temporary furloughs rather than work year reductions, with the intent of restoring days when the financial situation improved. Some others felt it would be better to raise class sizes than to cut the school year.

**Reduce Staffing, Services and Programs.** Considerable input expressed that more cuts should be made in central services and central administration before making cuts in schools. Concerns were expressed about increasing the student-to-teacher ratio and the resulting impact on class sizes and program offerings. Other concerns included loss of electives in high school and the potential loss of music, art, physical education and specialist time at the elementary level.

**School Closures and Consolidations.** Most comments received related to this area. While some people supported the idea of K-3 and 4-8 school configurations, most expressed opposition, particularly those whose schools were recommended for closing or consolidation, he said. Concerns were especially expressed about configuring 4th and 8th graders together, especially for the safety of the 4th graders. Further concerns were expressed about current language immersion models in middle school being reconfigured as K-8 immersion schools. Considerable opposition had been expressed, Superintendent Russell continued, about closing any schools, although there was general acknowledgement of the need to do so.

Some sentiment had been expressed, he said, for closing immersion schools and other alternative schools before closing any neighborhood schools. Others wanted to see higher performing schools closed before closing or consolidating those that were not as high performing. Alternative configurations suggested were K-5/6-8, K-4/5-8, K-7/8-12, or even K-6/7-12. As well, concern was expressed about using different configurations throughout the district. Another concern was that some parents would feel driven to seek other options such as private schools, home schooling or charter schools. And while some felt choice should be done away with, others expressed that choice was what kept their families in the school district. Further concerns included timing, cost and the significant disruption that would ensue from substantial reconfiguration.

**Shared Services/ Contracting Out.** Not many comments had been received on this item, Superintendent Russell said, though some had suggested contracting out bus services with LTD or other private bus companies as some other area districts had done.

**Materials, Supplies and Services.** Suggestions in this area were to cut as much from these items as possible before cutting staff or programs for students.
School/ Instruction Redesign. Most comments in this area were regarding reconfiguration, though there was also some concern shown about 4-day weeks and large lecture classes, and ways to use technology differently.

Non-Instructional and Student Support Programs. Students had expressed concerns about cutting athletic programs and other extracurricular activities, though staff and parents had not commented much in this area, Superintendent Russell said.

Reserves and One-Time Funds. There was some general support to use some reserves to balance the 2011-12 budget, although not many comments overall were received in this area.

Compensation and Benefits for Employees. A number of people suggested decrease in pay or benefits for employees, and early retirement incentives.

Superintendent Russell explained that nothing was cast in concrete at this point. Mostly what he was hearing was that people did not want their particular schools to close, and they did not like the 4-8 grade configuration. He appreciated the alternative suggestions being offered, he said, and these would be considered in moving forward.

PUBLIC INPUT SESSION on the Superintendent’s Preliminary Recommendations for Achieving a Sustainable Budget

COMMENTS FROM CHURCHILL AND NORTH REGION SCHOOL REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. Smith commented that speakers tonight would be from the North Region and Churchill, while speakers from South and Sheldon would speak at the next night’s meeting. The next night’s meeting would also include a more traditional public session where everybody would have time to talk, he said.

Heather Brinton introduced herself as a parent representative to the Adams Elementary Site Council. She appreciated the hard work that had gone into the preliminary recommendations. There was openness, she said, to consider grade reconfigurations as proposed by the superintendent, though there were some concerns about students being able to thrive in a K-3, 4-8 system. She said that if the system was implemented with care, there was merit in the proposal. She asked those who criticized the plan to offer alternative proposals. School closures and consolidations must occur in order to harness resources, she said, though the plans were unpopular. The method that Adams Site Council supported, Ms. Brinton continued, was for the administration to make rational and careful decisions now in a transparent manner. Small schools such as Adams could not remain viable in an atmosphere of a 20% decrease in the district’s general fund, she said. It made sense to operate a neighborhood school in the Adams facility, she felt, as it was structurally sound and had the capacity to accommodate more than 400 students. As well, it was located in an area of affordable housing that housed many elementary aged children. It made sense, she said, to put the schools where the kids were.

A problem that must be fixed before next year, Ms. Brinton continued, was the proposal to implement a hybrid system next year, putting Churchill area schools on a K-3, 4-8 track while leaving some South area schools on a K-5, 6-8 track. This would create an unfair burden on some parents, she noted, who would be asked to send their children to Adams for K-3, Jefferson for 4-5th grades, Roosevelt for 6-8th grades, and then high school at South. She offered three possible fixes that had been brainstormed by Site Council members: 1) to adopt a
K-3, 4-8 system for all of the South Region’s neighborhood schools, with a minimum need to add a 4-5th grade at Roosevelt, 2) to keep Adams a K-5 school until the South Region switched to the new grade configuration, and 3) to put the entirety of the Adams attendance area into the Churchill attendance area, which was felt to be the least desirable solution. She noted that there was pride felt for the fact that Adams test scores ranked 4th for elementary schools in the district, despite having 60% of students eligible for free and reduced meals.

Denisa Taylor, principal of Chavez Elementary said she appreciated the hard work being done to achieve a sustainable budget. Formal conversations at Chavez had been severely limited so far because of time constraints, she said, and so they were not yet prepared to share their thoughts and would email them at a later date.

Lisa Christon, PTA President at Crest Drive Elementary, said she had three children in the district. Their parent advocacy group was very puzzled and concerned about why the reconfiguration issue was thrown into the mix in this attempt to address the $30 million shortfall, as this measure seemed to have no relation to reducing the budget. To further destabilize families and classrooms in these ways was felt to be unhelpful. She requested that no changes be made in the coming year in order to have time to take a good look at this proposal before making a decision.

Spike Gildea of Family School had a somewhat different perspective. At Family School, he said, it was believed that equity did not mean that every school should be the same. Children and parents needed opportunities to do things differently and to find schools that fit their particular values. It was felt that alternatives were very important to maintain in the district. They also recognized that there was a tremendous financial need in the district currently. He felt that revenue enhancement was exactly the right direction for finding the needed funds.

He wanted to make three points, and noted that Family School would be emailing a detailed counterproposal soon.

1) Alternative schools were an important resource,
2) Alternative schools did not necessarily use more resources, and
3) Family School was already co-habiting with a larger school, so there would be no cost savings to close it.

At Family School, he said, parents met monthly with faculty and administrators and were involved in teaching “explore” classes, and attended weekly music programs with the students. A recent experiment involved bringing their two separate components—K-5 and 6-8 schools—together under one roof, Family School with the Arts and Technology Academy. Research they studied showed how every time a student transferred from one school to another, a year of lower performance occurred, which did not happen when the student transferred to a new classroom inside the same school. Using the K-8 model limited this transitional time, he said, and if some kids in the district would be asked to make four transitions to different schools, this would mean additional poor performance for many students. He wanted to see the district find a better way.

Tasha Katsuda, principal of McCormack Elementary said that the wish of those at McCormack was to wait until an evening presentation could be offered for just McCormack’s views regarding the recommendations to be heard.

Amanda Deedon, Vice President of Twin Oaks PTA, said that the current recommendations worked in direct opposition to the core values that had shaped the board’s direction and actions over the past ten years. The Churchill district had been singled out to receive the majority of the
changes, she noted, and the future equity of the region would be compromised. The region was already disadvantaged, she said, because immersion school options were available only in the other three areas which promoted an achievement gap for those students unable to partake of such an option. Eliminating the K-5 schools and creating the K-3, 4-8 configuration would cause some parents to look elsewhere for better options and would negatively affect attendance at Churchill schools, she said.

Twin Oaks could accommodate 330 students, Ms. Deedon said, and had the largest library within the 4J district. Closing the highest performing schools, including Twin Oaks, Family School and Crest Drive, would force even more parents to look elsewhere for better educational opportunities. She wondered if there was data to reinforce the proposed reconfiguration, and if all the costs had been considered, such as remodeling that would be necessary at Kennedy to add a playground for younger children and eliminate shop and home economics areas. Overall she felt that the reconfiguration would have devastating effects next year and in the future for Churchill schools and offer little relief for the budget crisis.

Jeremy DeGuc represented Arts and Technology Academy (ATA) and said that all five of his children attended ATA. He acknowledged the hard work being done to address the budget crisis. His wife was President of the PTA at ATA and volunteered many hours with the school, he said. The school was in its fourth year and student enrollment had increased from 285 to 412, and state test results had been improving by 10% each year. As well, great success was felt with the co-location of ATA with Family School. There was great concern being felt and expressed now about the possibility of closing these two wonderful schools.

Mr. DeGuc read a letter from Apple regarding the Apple Exemplary Program designation awarded to ATA, one of only 38 schools in the nation to receive this award. He said he felt the technology focus of ATA was every bit as important as the language immersion programs in the district. He also noted that if the population of the school was increased by 50% to 600 students, the technology available would be diluted so that students would not receive the quality of education as was currently possible. If K-3 students were forced to leave the school, he continued, they would need to have preferential status for re-entering ATA at the 4th grade level. He asked that the recommendation to close or reconfigure these schools would be reconsidered.

Churchill and North Region Principals: Kim Finch, Principal of Churchill High School, introduced herself and three other high school principals—Doug Kelly of the Academy of Arts at North, Cassandra Kamens of the School of Ideas at North and Anne Erwin of North Eugene IHS—noting that the four principals shared some key understandings. They were each very concerned about the potential increase to the student-to-teacher ratio. An increase of 6 students per teacher at the high school level meant an actual increase of 8 students per class, which would have a huge impact on the ability to provide a rigorous, high caliber education for every student. Another issue addressed the potential for cuts in athletics and other extracurricular activities at the high school level, which could lead to loss of students and state funding. Further, there was concern expressed regarding the dedication at North Eugene to a small school model, which had led to their first ever “outstanding” state report card. Mr. Kelly commented that it was critically important to maintain support for interventions that were making it possible for students to meet graduation requirements in reading, writing and math.

Mr. Smith remarked that the board was hearing all the remarks being expressed, that there would be another public hearing the next night, that Superintendent Russell would make his final recommendations in December, and the board would make its decisions in January.
CONVERSATION TIME AROUND THE ROOM

Members of the audience were invited to talk informally with board members and to add written comments at the wall display around the room during the next hour. Board members moved from area to area around the room during this time, in order to discuss the various issues with many participants.

SUMMING IT UP: COMMENTS BY BOARD MEMBERS

Mr. Smith announced that there was a website that had been developed by some supporters of the school district called www.wesupportheugeneschools.blogspot.com which he suggested people connect with to see what support could be offered during the budget crisis.

Mr. Smith invited board members to give feedback from the discussions just finished.

Anne Marie Levis reported that she had heard many good questions tonight, that she had taken extensive notes which she intended to transcribe and go through, and she believed that if everyone put their heads together to work with the budget challenges, the right choices would be made. One person had commented to her that if they just knew where the district was headed, they could more easily get on board and be helpful. She appreciated the honesty of comments and the dedication of community members, and noted that she had heard quite a bit about the rushed feeling of the process and also about the reconfiguration of grades not making sense.

Beth Gerot spoke of the commitment to students she had heard in discussions. Teachers had expressed concern about the impact on struggling and vulnerable students if school days were cut. Concerns had also been expressed about wanting to slow down the process of considering school closures and reconfigurations, with a special concern about 4th graders potentially being in school with 8th graders. Careful attention needed to be paid, people felt, to teachers being able to maintain their collaboration time and students continuing to receive needed interventions.

Alicia Hays said the discussion time was a great process, and she very much appreciated receiving student input. She had heard a question about whether the district had greater reserves than other districts, and noted the need to continue the process with transparent conversations. She had also heard comments about rushing into changes, and the desire to do things in a most thoughtful way. She thanked all participants for their input.

Mary Walston also appreciated the opportunity for the discussions, and had heard as well about the community’s desire for the process to move more slowly, and for maintaining strong neighborhood schools. She also heard concern about the safety of 4th grade students being placed with older students, and about ELL and Special Education students. Another concern, she said, was pitting schools against each other in the reconfiguration process and lack of unity in proposed configurations across the district. About moving to a K-8 model, some thought that transportation costs and professional development costs could be saved with this model.

Jennifer Geller felt the format for the discussions was a great one. She noted that one thing board members were often hearing was confusion about why schools would need to close if their closing did not save a lot of money. She had also heard concern about rushing with decisions. A conversation about revenue enhancements pointed to a need for a wider
conversation to consider long-term solutions throughout the state. There was a sense that some of the problems were caused by the recession, and some by policies that needed to be looked at.

Jim Torrey said he had participated in a long meeting earlier in the day about whether to increase the urban growth boundary, with a major theme about how to keep the schools strong and questions about why it was necessary to close schools. He was struck by the fact that only 21% of Eugene households had kids under 18. The public needed to be informed, he said, about issues being considered. He felt it was important for community members and parents to contact their legislators and city officials and offer suggestions. He felt it was important to be selective in choosing areas to tackle.

Mr. Smith thanked everyone who had attended the meeting and commented that he had heard a lot of the same comments that had already been mentioned. He spoke about the transparency of the decision process, saying that board deliberations were being done in public, and that board members had heard the proposed recommendations at the same time the public did, so that they were in the same boat as the public in terms of hearing the various alternatives. There would be more time to hear suggestions and comments from the public, he said, with more input planned for the next night, and later in December as well.

**ADJOURN**

Mr. Smith adjourned the special meeting of the School District 4J School Board at 8:45 p.m.

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George Russell      Craig Smith
District Clerk       Board Chair

*(Recorded by Judy Burton)*

Attachments to Official Minutes
1. Written comments from wall displays at meeting