

The Board of Education Town of Vernon

Anne Fischer, Chairperson
Dean Houle, Vice Chairperson
Vicky Rispoli, Secretary
George Apel, Treasurer
Laura Bush
David Kemp
Susan Norlie-Hesnan
Kyle Percy
Paul Stansel

30 Park Street – PO Box 600
Vernon, Connecticut 06066

February 3, 2010

BOARD OF EDUCATION BUDGET WORKSHOP

A Vernon Board of Education budget workshop was held at the Administration Building on Wednesday, February 3, 2010.

Chairperson Fischer called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. Present when the meeting was called to order were Mr. Apel, Mrs. Bush, Mr. Percy, Mrs. Rispoli, and Mr. Stansel. Also present were Mrs. Murasso and Mr. Paskiewicz.

Mr. Paskiewicz opened the meeting by stating that as requested by the Board, Administration prepared a list of potential reductions to the 2010-2011 budget totaling \$1.5 million. The goal of Administration in preparing the list was to cause the least amount of impact on students, to spread the impact around various areas, and to minimize the impact on programs.

Mr. Houle joined the meeting at 7:06 p.m.

Mr. Paskiewicz continued by noting the fact that the potential elimination of the 5th grade instrumental music program has drawn a lot of attention. He stressed that Administration does not endorse any of the potential cuts and believes the impact of any of the cuts would be devastating to the school system but had to prepare a list based on the Board's request. Mr. Paskiewicz concluded by noting his support of the Vernon band program.

Community Forum

Gene Ambeau, 8 Northview Drive, addressed the Board. Mr. Ambeau noted that Vernon's Board is facing similar issue to all municipalities but he does not agree with the backwards approach the Board is taking. He believes that the health care/medical insurance issue be addressed instead of cutting programs and staff and suggested the Board research the option of grouping together insurance with other municipalities in order to realize economies of scale.

Elizabeth Nutt, 23 Davis Avenue, addressed the Board. Ms. Nutt, a RHS student, noted her understanding of the financial stress the Town is under; however, she could not stress enough how much of a difference the band program made in her life. Music was her outlet and helped her deal with personal issues. She stressed the importance of providing children with something

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to get rid of their stress and pleaded with the Board to not take away the 5th grade instrumental band program.

Regina Lee, 7 Seneca Drive, addressed the Board as a parent of four Vernon Public School students and as a substitute teacher. Mrs. Lee currently has three children in the band/chorus program in Vernon and begged the Board not to eliminate the 5th grade instrumental band program. Mrs. Lee believes that eliminating the 5th grade band program is the first nail in the coffin of the entire band program in Town. She encouraged Board members to attend a 5th grade band concert and noted that her child decided to not attend the Academy of Math and Science because the school did not offer a band program. Mrs. Lee concluded by noting that band creates a niche for certain kids and elimination of any aspect of the program would bring down the Town.

RHS Band Teacher Darcy Davis, 20 Boulder Crest Drive, addressed the Board. He noted that he has served as a Vernon music teacher for three decades and has taught at the elementary, middle, and high school level so he understands the direct impact elimination of the 5th grade instrumental music program will have. He also noted that Superintendent Paskiewicz has been a tremendous supporter of the band program over the past few years.

Mr. Davis informed the Board that 50% of 5th grade students currently participate in the band program. In addition to performing at their home schools, the 5th grade band students also participate in an inter-elementary band concert at the end of the school year. Mr. Davis also noted that the current 6th grade program is working well and stressed the difficulties of starting students in band in the 6th grade; including, lack of interest and the many challenges students face when entering middle school. He also stated that Vernon is already a bit behind other Towns since we do not offer ‘strings’ and many other Towns begin their instrumental programs in fourth grade. Mr. Davis informed the Board of the many achievements of the RHS band and indicated his feeling that removing any part of the program would be detrimental. He called the Vernon band program a gem and hoped the Board would polish that gem.

Kristen Chepeleff, 41 Lily Lane, addressed the Board. Ms. Chepeleff was proud to introduce herself as a former LSS, VCMS, and RHS student, and a former member of the RHS Band. She is now a 4th grade teacher at NES and was worried that the next generation of Vernon students would not have the same school pride as she did. Ms. Chepeleff advised the Board that if they take the reduction recommendations of the Mayor, they will be failing the children of Vernon.

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She asked Board members to support what the school system needs. In closing, she asked the Board to at least try – as that is what we ask of our kids.

Michele Martinez, 32 Christopher Drive, addressed the Board representing the RHS Marching Ram Band Booster Club. Ms. Martinez informed the Board of many aspects of the band program and the various opportunities it offers for the children of Vernon. She stressed that without the grade school program, the future of the VCMS and RHS programs would be in jeopardy. Ms. Martinez outlined the skills the band program helps to foster; including, team building, conflict resolution, and the ability to learn to come together for a common goal. She noted that the RHS band members participate in fundraising events and many band friendships began back in the 5th grade. Ms. Martinez asked Board members to consider their decision carefully as music is about culture, beauty, and opportunity and without the 5th grade program, the opportunity will diminish.

Matt Chepeleff, 41 Lily Lane, reiterated the sentiments of his wife and urged the Board to ensure absolutely everything is being done to address the driving force of the budget increase, health insurance premium, prior to making cuts. He asked for clarification of why the Board is looking to cut \$1.5 million. He compared the budget to the cutting down of a really big tree and stressed the importance of submitting the right budget to the Town.

Dianne Perrone, 97 Vernwood Drive, and her two sons Kevin and Christopher addressed the Board as members of the CRS school community. Kevin Perrone spoke in support of the 5th grade band and chorus programs and informed the Board that he had collected 142 signatures of people who believe the program should continue. Kevin explained that the program provides a way for kids to express their feelings in a creative way. It also offers an opportunity to have fun and socialize.

Dianne Perrone read a letter to the Board written by her daughter Andrea who is a sophomore studying music education at Ithaca College. The letter explained Andrea's personal experience with the Vernon band program and the benefits she experienced. Ms. Perrone concluded by her belief that the 5th grade instrumental band program is one of the most influential programs offered in Town.

Laura Whitehead, 5 Ridgewood Drive, addressed the Board as a parent, taxpayer, and employee of Vernon. She described the role music has played in her two children's lives and the benefits

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of the music program. She stressed her view that she has seen kids change positively because of the influence of the music program. The program currently offers an excellent opportunity for kids of a lower economic status to concentrate on something positive. Ms. Whitehead urged the Board to keep the program intact.

Ms. Whitehead also addressed the possible elimination of the German Language program at RHS and the GAAP program. She described the positive experience for her family when a German student came to live with their family and the fact that her daughter had the opportunity to go to Germany as part of the program. She also detailed the bond between her daughter and the exchange student and stated that eliminating the GAAP program would impact both RHS students and German students. It would also negatively impact student college applications. She urged the Board to not eliminate the program from the curriculum and concluded by noting that sometimes people have to pay in order to keep programs intact.

Chris Lewis, a West Hartford resident and World Language teacher at RHS, addressed the Board about the fact that the German Language program has a target on it. He noted that it is a small program that has a big impact. He described the benefits of the program and asked the Board to do all in their power to save programs.

Howard Daniel, 131 Meadowlark Road, addressed the Board about the benefits of the World Language programs at VCMS and RHS. He addressed the Board in three different languages and informed them of the benefits of learning a foreign language. He asked the Board to consider carefully before making any cuts to the World Language programs.

RHS students Nicky Bieniarz, 60-153 Old Town Road, and Anne Whitehead, 5 Ridgewood Drive, addressed the Board about their experiences with the German Exchange program. Both Ms. Bieniarz and Ms. Whitehead described their experiences and indicated it was one of the best experiences of their lives. Both students believe that the program helps to make kids more cultural and creates worldwide friendships.

Emily Martinez, 32 Christopher Drive, addressed the Board on behalf of the band program. She explained that she moved to Vernon in 9th grade and spoke of the benefits the RHS band program offered her. The program helped her learn about family and fostered self-confidence in herself. When she felt she was not good enough in math or science, she always felt she was good enough in music.

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Penny Kemp, 305 Vernon Avenue, addressed the Board as a resident of Vernon, a taxpayer, and an employee of Vernon Schools. She asked the Board to reconsider the possible reduction of a secretary at Center Road School. There are currently 506 students enrolled at CRS plus close to 100 staff members. It is a very busy school. Mrs. Kemp noted that the school has endured one cut after another and it is all starting to have an impact on the school. She stressed that Vernon Schools provided a top notch education for her children and feels that the kids will be paying the price for additional budget cuts. She concluded by asking the Board to reconsider the budget cuts, send the budget to the Town as is because the schools are worth an increase in taxes.

Denise Seney, 63 Gerald Drive, addressed the Board. Ms. Seney's son graduated from RHS last year but she was in attendance in support of the music program. She thanked Mr. Paskiewicz for all his past support of the program as her son benefited greatly from it. Ms. Seney 'googled' the benefits of playing an instrument and read a number of the results to the Board. She stressed that if the Board votes to cut the 5th grade program, things will change dramatically and proposed that instead of looking to cut the 5th grade program, the Board should be looking to start instrumental band in 4th grade. She pleaded with the Board to look at all the research and to not make any cuts to the band program.

Anne Timbrell, 74 Danny Trail, addressed the Board as a mother of a RHS freshman and a RHS graduate, as a 1st grade teacher at NES, and as a taxpayer. Ms. Timbrell indicated her understanding of the difficult position the Board is in but was concerned about the impact of the cuts on Vernon students, particularly the potential for larger elementary class sizes. She thought that increased class sizes may increase Vernon's transient population and impact student's CMT test scores. She asked the Board to consider keeping class sizes small so that teachers can continue to teach children in small groups and stressed that towns are only as good as the education system in that town.

Sue Vorchheimer, 124 Grand Avenue, addressed the Board noting the huge impact the Vernon School's music program had on her children. She commented that most kids involved in the music program continue on to a secondary school and asked the Board to support the children in Town.

Marian Murphy, a Tolland resident and kindergarten teacher in Vernon, addressed the Board about the difficulties of teaching kindergarten. The large class sizes, goals of the program, and

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the fact that both the new math and reading programs are designed for full-day programs makes the job of the kindergarten teachers very difficult. She explained that kindergarten has transitioned from a goal of social development to a goal of academic development. She noted the benefits of full-day kindergarten, informed the Board of the difficulties for the teachers of having two, large kindergarten classes and remarked on the importance of paraprofessional support. In conclusion, Ms. Murphy noted that kindergarten has become 1st grade but the program is only set up for a half-day schedule. She inquired whether the Maple Street School extended day model could be utilized for all the Vernon elementary schools.

Joy Parker Fitzgerald, RHS library/media specialist, addressed the Board regarding the potential for library/media specialist cuts. She stated that as compared to other school districts, Vernon is very low on library staffing and additional cuts will hurt both the teachers and students. Ms. Fitzgerald also noted that there could be union and accreditation issues if a library manager is eliminated. She urged the Board to think before they make additional cuts to the program as it has already taken a number of cuts over the years and Vernon has the lowest level of library staff in the region.

Karen Siriani, 148 Tallwood Drive, addressed the Board as a parent of a Lake Street School 4th grader. Her child has been looking forward to playing the drums in the 5th grade band for some time and she urged the Board to not take away that opportunity.

RHS student Nathan Ouellette, 57 Hany Lane, addressed the Board regarding the impact the band program has had on his life. He stated his worries that the program would suffer without the proper foundation and urged the Board to not let the band program crumble and cease to exist.

Fifth grade instrumental band teacher Kelly Gansenberg addressed the Board. She explained how enthusiastic the students who are involved in this year's program have been. She reiterated that over 150 5th graders currently participate in the program and it truly helps to build their confidence. She voiced her concern that if the 5th grade program is eliminated, fewer students will join band in 6th grade. The overall impact on Vernon's band program will be devastating and asked the Board to consider the savings compared to the value of the program.

MSS music teacher Cassandra Perrett addressed the Board as a former Vernon student and band/chorus member. So noted her excitement at the opportunity to work in the Vernon school

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system and voiced her concern about the impact of budget cuts on the children of Vernon. She noted that the only time some students feel pride in themselves is when they are participating as a band member or in a band function. Ms. Perrett also addressed the potential elimination of the GAAP German Language program at RHS. She participated in the program as a RHS student and the experience greatly helped her in college.

RHS senior Jamie Ehrenfeld, 46 Evergreen Road, addressed the Board. Ms. Ehrenfeld has participated in the music program in the Vernon Schools since 4th grade and the experience has helped to shape who she is. She will be going to college for music education and hopes to give back to a community like Vernon as a teacher. Ms. Ehrenfeld also mentored a 5th grade band student and noted how much joy the program brings to students. She hoped the Board would carefully consider any elimination that would greatly hinder the music department goals.

RHS senior Timothy Watt, 25 Cottage Street, addressed the Board and provided the Board with a personal story of how the 5th grade band program impacted him. He expressed his feeling that he does not believe he would have participated in the program if it was first offered in 6th grade. He hoped the Board would understand the importance of offering band to students in elementary school.

Peggy Chaffee, 9 Summit Road, addressed the Board as a taxpayer and parent of children in the fourth and eighth grades. Ms. Chaffee commented that the possible cuts directly affect her family and explained how the band program has helped to develop her son. She noted her agreement with many of the points made by the other parents and teachers tonight and indicated that the perception appears to be that the Board does not consider the music and language programs to be important. She asked the Board to think about what they really want for the children of Vernon and to make decisions that will help make them well-rounded kids.

Town Council member Mike Winkler, 20 Gottier Drive, addressed the Board. Mr. Winkler questioned the motive behind the \$1.5 million reduction and inquired whether it was in the nature of a thought experiment or if it was a real number? He inquired as to why the Board was thinking a 5% increase was too high and urged them to present a budget to the Town Council that supports education. It is the Town Council's job to decide whether they can support the increase. Mr. Winkler concluded by expressing his feeling that the Board was committing financial suicide when they were not asked for reductions.

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Dionne Silver, 62 Talcott Avenue, addressed the Board as a taxpayer, parent of four children, and Vernon employee. Ms. Silver commented to the Board that she has always bragged about the education her children have received in Vernon but was worried the Board could not properly educate her children with the recommended cuts and the increasing class sizes. If Vernon Schools are already \$300 per pupil in the hole, what will these additional reductions do?

RHS student Lauren Kidd, 21 Glenstone Avenue, expressed her concerns about the possibility of cutting the creative writing program at RHS. She noted that the class is an outlet for many students and has been a great experience for her. It is an award winning program and its elimination will hinder the creative ideas of many.

Mrs. Fischer thanked everyone for attending the meeting and thanked all who spoke.

Mr. Houle moved to take a five minute recess at 8:30 p.m. The motion was seconded by Mr. Percy and passed unanimously.

2010-2011 Proposed Budget Review

Mr. Houle asked for clarification on the assumptions for the budget for the following accounts in light of funds expended year to date and projected expenditures:

54110 – Utility Services: Electric
54120 – Utility Services: Natural Gas
54130 – Utility Services: Water
54140 – Utility Services: Sewer Use
53339 – Other Prof & Tech Services

Mr. Houle also inquired as to the thought process for the budget for account 58400 – Future Negotiation based on the contracts up for renewal in 2010-11.

Mr. Apel thanked the public for their interest in the Vernon Schools and the budget process and indicated his belief that the school system is the community. He clarified that the Mayor did not force any reductions on the Board and that they were trying to be proactive based on the unknown of State grant funding for the next school year. The Board asked Administration to inform them of the impact of a \$1.5 million reduction in the 2010-11 budget. This information

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provides the Board with intelligent information from which they can make informed decisions, if required. Mr. Apel noted his understanding of the public concerns and encouraged people to contact BOE members directly.

Mr. Apel went on to explain that 80% of the budget is for salaries and benefits and that the BOE and Town have worked together to obtain quotes for consolidated health insurance. Additionally, the Board sent letters to all the union bargaining units asking them to open their contracts for renegotiation. The unions have refused this request.

Mr. Apel, along with Mr. Barry Grant, Director of Technology, discussed the potential for energy savings associated with the shutting down of computers and monitors. Mr. Grant informed the Board that all of the Vernon Schools 2,000 computer systems use Energy star and the protocol is for monitors to be shut down at the end of the day. Mr. Grant noted that additional savings could be realized via the purchase of a power management system. A proposal for this system will be brought to the Board for review.

Mr. Apel asked for clarification on the rationale for the 2010-2011 budget for a number of accounts. He also asked for visibility of what has been spent for the applicable accounts this year as well as in previous years.

Mrs. Rispoli thanked the public for coming to the workshop and thanked BOE members and Administration for their hard work on the budget. She pointed out the struggle over the years to get people to vote and pass budget increases. Mrs. Rispoli moved to send the 2010-2011 budget as originally proposed by the Superintendent to the Town. The motion was seconded by Mr. Percy.

Mr. Percy commented that based on information provided on the per pupil expenditure spreadsheet prepared by Mr. Paskiewicz, the average year over year budget increase is 2.93%. The increase for the 2009-2010 budget was only .3%. Mr. Percy continued that the Board needs to support public education or magnet school tuition will continue to increase.

Mr. Stansel noted that the Board's job is to advocate for public education for the children. He commented that if the proposed reductions were approved, he would have a hard time looking parents in the eye and advising them to not send their kids to a magnet school.

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Mr. Apel stated that he cannot support the motion because he has too many questions on the underlying numbers. Additionally, he does not think the budget is truthful because it ignores magnet school tuition – potentially a \$175,000 exposure for next school year. He would like to have his questions answered prior to voting on the proposed budget. Mr. Apel also remarked that he would never support the elimination of the elementary music program.

Mr. Paskiewicz agreed with Mr. Apel that it is premature to vote on the budget tonight and suggested the Board take action at the next BOE meeting on Monday, February 8, 2010.

Mr. Houle added that he agreed with the motion but not the timing and that the Board needs to complete their due diligence of the budget.

Mrs. Bush pointed out her worry that the Board is looking at cutting the needs of the students versus fine tuning the budget. She stressed that the Board needs to focus on the kids and not cut any programs.

Mrs. Rispoli moved to table her motion until the Monday, February 8, 2010 BOE meeting. The motion was seconded by Mrs. Bush and passed with Mr. Percy voting no.

Mr. Apel moved to enter into Executive Session at 9:26 p.m., inviting Mr. Paskiewicz to attend. The motion was seconded by Mr. Percy and passed unanimously.

Mr. Apel moved to come out of Executive Session at 9:52 p.m. The motion was seconded by Mr. Houle and passed unanimously.

Mr. Apel moved to adjourn at 9:53 p.m. The motion was seconded by Mr. Houle and passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Secretary