

Grade 5 Transition Subcommittee
Thursday, October 25, 2018
7:00 a.m. – Rye Junior High

Members Present: Chair Paula Tsetsilas, Co-Chair Marie Soucy, Salvatore Petralia, Eric Ross, Sarah Harrington, Andrea Papoutsy, Celeste Christo, Suzanne Lull, Sharon Scott and Scott Marion (sitting for Jeanne Moynahan).

I. Call to Order

Chair Tsetsilas called the meeting to order at 7:02 a.m.

II. Review and approval of October 5th meeting minutes

Motion by Celeste Christo to approve the minutes of October 5, 2018 as presented.

Seconded by Sarah Harrington.

Vote: 9-0-1 Abstained: Scott Marion

III. Questions from Berwick visit report – Celeste Christo & Marie Soucy

Member Christo gave an overview of her and Marie Soucy's recent visit to Berwick Academy.

Highlights:

- Similar in size to Rye with 24 students in 5th grade.
- Two classes of 12 students in each class with a 2-person teaching model.
- Teaching teams and class sizes fluctuate based on enrollment.
- The lower, middle and upper schools are in separate buildings; however, K through 12 are all on one campus. The students leave their main classroom building for unified arts, which are held in different buildings from the classrooms. Students are not escorted by a teacher to those classes.
- The school is working on the flex block time. Currently, homeroom time in the morning is a short period of time. The school is working to expand homeroom time to work into the model for next year. This will allow additional time for morning meeting and for teachers to work with students who need additional help.
- There is a lot of interaction with the students in the 5th grade and the other population.
- One hour a week is held for school wide activities that involve all students at the school.
- Transition plans include teachers from the middle school meeting with the students and a student buddy system.

- The 5th and 6th graders have activities together. The 5th and 6th grade students eat lunch together in one area of the lunchroom. The 5th through 8th grades will often do field trips and socials together.
- The students are excited about transitioning from 4th to 5th grade. A key to that is bringing the students over gradually and having them get integrated with the school.
- 5th grade has no self-contained classes. Extra instruction is offered to students who need additional help.

IV. Discussion of parent feedback from working sessions – Marie Soucy

Chair Tssetsilas stated that the sub-committee received parent feedback in two different forms. One was through working sessions that were held on October 18th. The parents evaluated the pros and cons of the four proposed teaching models. Parent feedback was also received online through email. Parent input was received on a variety of topics, such as the proposed teaching models, outlining a transition process for students and playground equipment. She would like the sub-committee to discuss the feedback that came from the teacher configuration. It was very insightful to get parent feedback.

Co-Chair Soucy reviewed the parent feedback that was received during the two work sessions that were held on October 18th. Four teaching models were presented to the parent community at these work sessions to give them an opportunity to give feedback.

Highlights of the parent feedback from working sessions:

Option 1: 2-person teaching team for grade 5 - (6th through 8th would remain unchanged as a 3-person teaching team)

Pros:

- Transition between elementary to middle school with a smaller teaching team. Students can experience switching classes but on a smaller scale.
- Students will feel like part of the community.
- Provides flexibility for scheduling.
- Gradual adjustment from the self-contained to the 2-person teaching team and then to the 3-person team.
- Leaves 6th through 8th uninterrupted.

Cons:

- Unsure if this will allow for long-term sustainability for larger classes in future years.
- Puts the students in three different models in three different years.

Option 2: 3-person teaching team as the current 6th through 8th grades

Pros:

- Consistency through the school.
- Students stay in the same model for three years.
- Smaller student-teacher ratio.
- Different teachers – Prepares the students for the high school transition.
- Teachers have more expertise in a particular subject area and have dedicated classes.

- More excitement to move to the junior high.
- Allows for cross-curriculum
- More transitions through the day – Connection to more teachers
- Common planning time for the teachers and curricular grouping for staff is easier.

Cons:

- Maybe 5th grade is not ready to move between three classes.
This model was tested at the elementary school. The school went back to the self-contained classroom. There can be a lack of focus when students are moving around and disorganization for younger students.

It was noted that the reason the elementary school went back to the single classroom was not because the students couldn't handle the changing of classrooms. It was due to the building not being able to support that type of teaching model (lack of lockers, etc.)

Member Tsetsilas noted that two of her children went through the elementary school during that model to varying degrees of success. Both of her children were successful in that model. In her daughter's grade, there seemed to be no issues. Her son's grade (now current 7th graders), was a very high energy class and it proved to be more difficult. That is when it reverted back to single classrooms. It goes back to the structures that are in place in trying to have a middle school model in an elementary school setting. She pointed out that during that time period both of her children had 20 children in the class.

Option 3: 2-person teaching team – 3 teachers for 5th grade with 1 self-contained classroom

Cons:

- Flexible model – Provides for students who need an extra year in a self-contained classroom.
- Smaller class sizes
- Nurturing different levels of development and needs for students.

Pros:

- The perception of the self-contained students not being equal or being different.
- Not being exposed to other teaching styles.
- Limits grade level opportunities.
- Hard for those students to integrate into the whole school environment.
- The transition to a 3-person team in 6th grade may be more difficult.
- May create “teacher shopping” from some of the parents.
- Inequities among teaching structures between 2-person and self-contained.
Will the programs align? Will the teachers have time to meet?
- Student placement becomes complicated.
- Limited model for more mature students.

Option 4: 5 teachers within 5th and 6th grades with 1 teacher shared for 1 subject (science is the subject that makes the most sense)

Pros:

- Smaller class sizes for language arts and math.
- Science teacher will have 2 years with the students, which may provide benefits of “looping”
- Creates separation between 5/6 and 7/8.
- Social Studies and Science would have larger classes, which allows for more diverse learning opportunities.
- Allows for flexibility for transition growth.
- 5th to 6th grade transition would be easier because of the connection with the science teacher.

Cons:

- Larger classes could potentially increase behavioral issues.
- If there is a personality clash with the looping teacher that is a disadvantage.

V. Discussion of parent feedback from online portal – Paula Tsetsilas

Chair Tsetsilas noted that she submitted a few documents to the sub-committee. She has presented an abbreviated version of some of the feedback that came back on the teaching models. She took a look at teaching model option 2, which is the current model extended to 5th graders, as well as the 5-person teacher team. The other two options seemed to weigh lowest in terms of Ms. Soucy’s recommendation and what was heard from the parent groups.

She continued that she wants the sub-committee to be aware of the class size guidelines that was developed by the School Board about four years ago. When the current 9th graders were moving into 4th grade, there was a decision to eliminate one teacher and have three teachers for a class size of 60. There was a lot of parent concern that the class size was too large. However, the professional teaching staff assured the community that they could instruct students at this class level. To ease parents’ concerns, the result was creating a recommended class size (class cap).

- K – 2: 15 to 18 students
- 3 – 5: 17 to 20 students
- 6 – 8: 18 to 22 students

She noted that this is not a policy. It is simply a guideline for consideration. As the next five years are looked at in terms of the projected population, this should be considered because there is a model that would take the school above the recommended class size.

Member Marion stated that the class size guideline came about for lots of reasons. There was a lot of angst about classes overflowing. He noted that there is no research to support these class sizes. It is all based on how people feel. It is about the quality of the teacher in the class, not about the size of the class.

Superintendent Petralia stated that he appreciates the Board's decision back in 2014 to create these guidelines. The most important sentence in the guidelines is at the bottom in bold; "**These ranges are guidelines and not requirements**". He thinks these guidelines are in conformity with any of the models that would be put forth.

Member Sharon Scott stated that even if the class size research that supports smaller class sizes was not considered, a lot of the students are choosing private schools with class sizes of 10 and 12. She has talked to a lot of parents that have said that they moved to Rye to have that private school class size in a public school setting. She agrees that there is no "magic" number for the class size. However, she has seen a lot of research on the fact that smaller class sizes promote positive learning environments.

Member Marion stated there is no empirical research. There are people talking about what they like.

Member Christo stated that perception is huge. People leave the school district for various reasons. One of the reasons is the perception that the class sizes could be much higher under one of these models. This is something that needs to be taken seriously when a decision is made. She agrees that any of the models that were looked at, the two that are in the forefront, would fall in the range that parents feel would be an acceptable class size. The right model is going to be what model works for the community and the schools. Rye is very fortunate to have very high-quality teachers that can handle the fluctuation between class sizes.

The sub-committee reviewed the document addressing the online feedback from parents.

Referring to the two teaching models that are the forerunners, Member Christo asked what the class sizes would look like for each.

Chair Tsetsilas stated that for the option with the 3-person team the smallest class size would have 11 students per class and the largest class would have 17 students per class (looking at the student population over the next five years). This assumes a 10% deflection rate from 5th to 6th grade. It has been more in past years so these numbers are conservative. For the other model, the smaller classes (math and ELA) had 11 students. For science and social studies, the range was up to 26 students. This was for one of the years that had 51 students.

VI. Group evaluation of and recommendation for teaching model

Chair Tsetsilas stated that she spoke with the Planning Board to see what kind of development is in town. Right now, there are 40 units planned for Airfield Drive. Some of the units will be affordable housing which will draw families. There are 11 new homes approved for South Road. Conceptually, there are another 20 units at the end of Washington Road. The sub-committee has established as a goal to develop a model that is sustainable for five years so they will need to keep in mind that Rye is in growth mode. The School Board has been discussing the possibility of tuitioning students in from other towns, which should also be part of the factor. The other issue that needs to be considered is the impact on staffing. The model that extends the current model to 5th grade (3-person team) would require an additional staff member. The 5-person team

model would need no additional fulltime equivalence. She asked Ms. Soucy if there are any models that are off the table at this point.

Co-Chair Soucy stated that she would not recommend the 2-person team at all. She would also not recommend the 3-person team with one self-contained classroom for several reasons.

Member Christo noted that the schools they visited that used the 2-person team for 5th grade said that transition was harder for students from 5th to 6th grade than it was from 4th to 5th grade. Students going from a self-contained classroom to a 2-person team didn't experience very much angst. When they were then required to increase it to a 3-person team, the students had a harder transition. She continued that York Middle School had the model with one self-contained classroom. She asked if this is why it was put into the mix? She noted that this model was not a pro. Parents had some concern that some students might need the self-contained classroom so it was looked at as an option. Also, one of the other schools used it so it was looked at as an option. She does not think that in any discussions it was something that the sub-committee was advocating for.

Co-Chair Soucy stated that she put the model forth because she has seen it work well in other schools. She also heard the concern about 5th graders having to transition between teachers. She thought this might be a good option for students who may not necessarily be ready.

Chair Tsetsilas stated that this speaks to the evolution of this process. The intention was to visit the other schools with an open mind and to weed it out as the sub-committee learned more. The idea was that the information gathering piece would guide the sub-committee in the right direction, along with the experience and expertise of the staff.

Member Christo asked if there is one model that stands out, from a scheduling perspective, with the goals of common planning time and having the teacher team stay intact from year to year.

Co-Chair Soucy stated that the 3-person team is much easier to schedule around and gives the teams a sense of identity. If the 5-person team was used, the science teacher would basically be the "odd man out". They would be splitting their time between two grades and planning time would be difficult.

Member Marion stated that the School Board does not need a defined model for the budget. All they need is the number of teachers. If it is clear that people want a certain number of teachers, if that budget is successful then the town has that budget. If the budget is not successful, the default budget stays in place with the current number of teachers, which will require another plan. He is hesitant to rush to a defined answer at this meeting on the teaching model.

Member Ross stated that he appreciates the confidence and the recognition of the quality of the teachers in Rye. If the teachers were asked, he thinks they would say there is a benefit to having fewer students. More than test scores, it has to do with the connection that teachers make every single day throughout the day with their students. There is a lot to having smaller class sizes. Human connections play a great deal into how students get along, how they feel about their school and themselves.

Member Soucy stated that it can be looked at two different ways. In being fiscally responsible, they could go with the 5-person team model. Not worrying about the money and adding the extra person, she would definitely say the 3-person team. The more teachers the district has, the more that can be offered to the students.

Superintendent Petralia stated that the budget and the budget process should not guide this sub-committee. The sub-committee's goal is to provide the best model for children and families. The Board will hopefully support the decision of the administration moving forward. That is the administration's role. That is the School Board level role. He noted that the community of Rye has been very supportive of each of the budgets that have been put forward in the last five years. The administration has been responsible in their recommendations and will continue to do so.

Speaking to Ms. Soucy, Chair Tsetsilas asked if there is any reason why students could not be moved across grade level in a 3-person team model.

Co-Chair Soucy replied not at all. One of the benefits would be the looping of a teacher.

Chair Tsetsilas opened to the public for comments.

Jessica Moran, 635 Long John Road, stated that there has been strong opposition to this whole plan. She would appreciate the committee thinking long and hard about what the community is saying. She appreciates the fact that there is no concrete data about smaller class sizes resulting in better grades and outcomes; however, she feels the community is saying that if this is going to be done, they really want the 3-person team. It is a way to keep the class sizes down, give the students more attention and the opportunity to learn more. She continued that there is no idea who the teachers are going to be for next year. The teachers who are going to be teaching the 5th grade students really do matter to the parents. She is not sure what that process is; however, the sooner the parents know, the more the edge will be taken off. She is also curious as to the budget process.

Member Marion explained that the School Board works line by line through the budget at an all-day budget session. A lot of those decisions are made on that day.

Superintendent Petralia stated that the budget process actually begins in August. A budget timeline is rolled out to the administrators. The principals meet with their teachers and departments to get their requests. The principal then meets with Superintendent and Business Administrator to go over the requests. At that meeting, things will get adjusted. The Board is going to see the preliminary budget at the all-day work session. That day is for vetting the preliminary budget line by line and department by department. Once the Board has vetted the preliminary budget, it then goes to the Budget Committee. There is also a public hearing held on the School Budget. This is a time for parents to express views on anything to do with the budget.

Member Marion noted that November 9th is the all-day budget work session. The public hearing will be held on January 9th with the Budget Committee.

In regards to teacher recommendations, Chair Tsetsilas explained that the School Board has asked that this happen in February so parents can understand the staffing levels at the various grade levels. Typically it happens in March.

Mrs. Moran stated that the parents would like the students' current teachers to have some input and recommendation on the model.

Member Marion pointed out that Suzanne Lull, Andrea Papoutsy and Eric Ross are on the sub-committee for that reason.

Member Lull stated that she has talked to all 4th grade and 5th grade teachers.

Superintendent Petralia explained there are contractual obligations with the association. In terms of the personnel side, once the model is selected, the school district will advertise internally to the existing staff the available positions that will result based on the recommended model. Anyone with a professional teaching license, within the Rye School District, is able to apply through the internal process. What will result is whether the district needs to advertise outside for an additional vacancy or two.

Kim Piela, 25 Mountainview Terrace, stated that she is also strongly in favor of the 3-person team. She appreciates Mr. Ross's comments. As a parent, it is nice to hear what a teacher thinks and what Ms. Soucy would like. She continued that the whole process has felt rushed, especially to the parents. The parents have questions so that they can help to ease the transition for their child. If this is going to be implemented in less than a year from now, as a parent she would like as many answers as she can get, sooner rather than later. One question she has, is how soon can the 4th graders get a tour of the middle school? Even if there are still unanswered questions, she would still like to see them get into the building.

Chair Tsetsilas stated that she does not feel like the process has been rushed. They have had full vetting of the process. She is not sure what else the sub-committee would look at. Speaking to Ms. Soucy, she asked if there is anything else that would be looked at if time was extended.

Ms. Soucy replied no.

In regards to having exposure to the schools and tours, Chair Tsetsilas stated that she and Ms. Soucy have been talking about moving up the timeline. It was initially thought that a spring open house would be done; however, the parents' concerns have been heard. She understands that they want to get into the building and have a tour and that is a fair request.

Superintendent Petralia asked if additional days could be scheduled during the winter and spring for the 4th and 5th graders to spend time with a current 6th grader. Another idea would be to run a day with just 4th graders at the beginning of the year with another day for just the 5th graders. This could be done for an entire day without other students in the school.

Co-Chair Soucy noted that a 5th grade step-up day and parent night is planned to be held before Christmas. They were planning on waiting on the 4th graders until they knew the teachers and structure; however, they can certainly look at doing that sooner.

Member Christo noted that the sub-committee is working on a comprehensive document addressing frequently asked questions. The sub-committee has received materials from other schools about questions their parents had. That document will answer a lot of the basic questions.

Kerry Labovitz, 44 Birchwood, thanked the committee for allowing a lot of parental input and involvement throughout the process. In regards to class size, she stated that it is about the expectations in the community. The expectation is that there would be the same type of class size that the town has always had. The parents are all supportive of having a 3-person team. She is hearing that from a teacher's perspective a 3-person team would be a benefit. The administration is saying that a 3-person team would also benefit the school. She thinks the only concern would be the budget for having a 3-person team; however, that should not be driving the decision for this committee. The best interests of the students and the expectations of the community should be focused on and then the budget can be worked out once it is decided what is best.

Superintendent Petralia explained that the sub-committee will make a recommendation on the model to Ms. Soucy. She will then take the recommendation to the School Board who takes a vote on the recommended model. Once the model is established and approved by the Board, that will help facilitate the advertisement that needs to go internally to the association.

Chair Tssetsilas asked the sub-committee members if anyone opposed to a 3-person team teaching model. She stated that she thought long and hard between the 5 and the 3-person team. She thinks there are a lot of positive classroom experiences that can come out of the 5-person team. However, she thinks there are just as many undesired consequences that can come from it. Rye is in growth mode and recruiting young families to town, they are at a point where there is an aging community and real estate will become available to families. The town should be prepared for growth in preparing a five-year plan. Change year over year causes angst in a community. If the town can say they found a structure that is in place for five years, while the community looks to expand and grow, then the 3-person model lends itself best to that.

Other members of the sub-committee expressed their thoughts and support for the 3-person teaching team. After reviewing the parent, teacher and administration feedback, the sub-committee unanimously agreed to recommend the 3-person teaching team for the 5th grade school structure.

VII. Review of timeline – Paula Tssetsilas

Chair Tsetsilas reviewed the initial timeline and reported that items on the transition checklist are on track.

VIII. Update from Rye Recreation – Paula Tsetsilas

Chair Tsetsilas gave a brief update on Rye Recreation, who has formed a sub-committee to explore opportunities for school programming and use of the available elementary school space.

IX. Logistics for November 8th meeting

Chair Tsetsilas confirmed time (6p) and place (RJH cafeteria) for Transition Committee Readout and Panel. All members are invited to be part of the panel. Chair Tsetsilas will work with Administration to prepare the presentation.

No further business was brought before the sub-committee. The work of the sub-committee concluded.

Adjournment

Respectfully Submitted,
Dyana F. Ledger