

DEDHAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS
School Committee Meeting
August 8, 2023

MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Victor Hebert
Stephen Acosta
Mayanne Briggs
Dr. Leah Flynn Gallant
Cailen McCormick
Christopher Polito
Laurie Twomey

MEMBERS OF THE ADMINISTRATION PRESENT:

Nan Murphy, Superintendent
Matthew Wells, Assistant Superintendent of Business and Finance

Meeting Location:

O'Brien Meeting Room

School Committee Meeting commenced at 7:00 pm.

Pledge of Allegiance

Open Meeting

Mr. Victor Hebert, Chair, called the meeting to order. He introduced Nan Murphy, the new Superintendent of Dedham Public Schools and Laurie Twomey, the newly appointed School Committee member.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Andrew Czazasty, 118 Sprague St. asked for more clarity on the redistricting process for the new school. He thinks that citizens of Dedham should know about the redistricting process before they vote on the new school.

Superintendent Update

Superintendent Nan Murphy summarized her activities from her first five weeks as superintendent:

- Meet and greets with parents and educators
- Attended two community events

- Holding an online Zoom community forum tomorrow night at 7 pm
- Developed avenues for communication by establishing a district wide community newsletter that will be sent out monthly to DPS families
- Participated in leadership planning meetings with district and school leaders
- Participated in two Retreats with the School Committee about goal setting
- Leadership team and Directors will meet at Curry College over a three day period next week.

Reports/Updates/Requests

Update from Vertex – School Building Project Owner’s Project Manager

Vertex Project Manager update will be tabled to the next School Committee meeting on August 22, 2023.

SBRC Option Selection Recommendation for New School – Superintendent Murphy and Principal Hermesch

Mr. Hebert said last night at the SBRC meeting that a decision was made about the final design project. Superintendent Murphy shared information about the Greenlodge property. Greenlodge will not be sold and the property would be repurposed for student-centered and community use.

Supt. Murphy and Principal Hermesch discussed the design of the new school.

Superintendent Murphy reviewed highlights of new design:

- Inclusive setting that can accommodate diverse needs
- Disability accessibility
- Regulated climate control
- Advanced security
- Open area in vestibule
- Interactive technology
- Amplified speaker system throughout school
- Cafeteria -- neither Greenlodge or Oakdale had one before
- Flex space -- can modify classrooms for different needs
- STEM room with project-based application tools
- Classes designed for creativity with separate age-appropriate equipment
- ADA compliant outdoor space
- Arts and media dedicated space
- Outdoor classroom space
- Spaces outfitted for community events.

Principal Hermesch from the Oakdale School came to the podium to further discuss the new design:

- Visioning team that was convened in January was composed of diverse community members.
- The goal was to arrive at a design that could meet proscribed goals. Principal Hermesch worked closely with Principal McGowan from Greenlodge to arrive at the optimal design.
- One reason that Option D was chosen is because the curvature of the building is away from the street. This allows for field space in the back of the school and is conducive to contributing to grade level cohesion.
- After doing site visits to new schools in abutting towns, Option D presented itself as the best design for professional and student academic growth.
- She and Principal McGowan made a suggestion to the SBRC to shift the gym closer to Cedar Street. They thought that the shift would help with safety and more accessibility. They are waiting to hear feedback from the SBRC about their suggestion.

COMMENTS FROM SCHOOL COMMITTEE:

Leah Flynn Gallant said that parents have been asking about the number of windows in the building. They feel that the amount of glass windows could contribute to exposure and distraction to students and could be a security risk.

Dr. Flynn Gallant also said that parents asked how the Riverdale School could be enhanced to produce a more equitable situation with other elementary schools.

Mayanne Briggs replied that the windows are very secure and are not a security risk. She reminded people that the current design is still at a conceptual level and could change. In regards to the Riverdale school experience, Ms. Briggs said the Master Plan includes plans to upgrade all the elementary schools and Riverdale is in line for an upgrade in the near future.

Principal Hermesch talked about the selection of the Design Option and that much careful thought went into the decision about where the windows would be placed in the new building.

Ms. Murphy talked about how the standardization of academic and professional experience in the district will allow all students to have the same academic options no matter which school they attend.

Ms. McCormick said she voted for the 550-student enrollment option even though the small school is the usual plan in Dedham because it was the best option for academic growth.

Principal Hermesch addressed the size of the new school. She said the benefits to having more professionals together far outweighs the benefits of the smaller classes. Interventionists and specialist educators can be brought together to provide customized instruction. Communication with families will be the primary focus.

Superintendent Murphy said there are strategic moves that can be established to make a large school feel smaller.

Laurie Twomey noted that student assimilation when changing from elementary to middle school should be a smoother process from a large elementary school.

Superintendent Murphy addressed the grade level combinations. She is confident that there will be events that bring all students together.

Principal Hermesch talked about programs that are currently in place to integrate students from all the elementary schools. She feels that these programs will be enhanced.

Mr. Polito asked how the larger school concept contributes to a better educational environment? He said when they were discussing the new ECEC, there was talk about isolating similar grades.

Ms. Briggs responded that isolating grades makes transition to Middle School more difficult.

Ms. McCormick feels that the Education Plan that was developed by the Administration at the request of the MSBA already addressed this issue in a comprehensive manner.

Superintendent Murphy said merging grades is good for students and educators. It helps to develop cohesion and familiarity.

Principal Hermesch noted that they are currently being forced in some of the elementary schools to redistrict a number of students because of the inability to meet their needs. She feels it will be better to accommodate all student needs and keep the districts intact.

Update from SBRC meeting

Mr. Acosta provided updates from last night's SBRC meeting.

Highlights from the SBRC August 7th meeting:

- Final MSBA approval of design will be February 2024.
- Communications and Outreach Committee was established to engage with the community at large.

- Paul Munchbach, Town Clerk, talked about timelines on the votes. The new project needs 2/3 vote at Town Meeting and then a town wide vote on the debt exclusion.
- Looking at adding ex officio members with relevant experience to the SBRC subcommittee.
- Voted unanimously for Option D last night for the Preferred Schematics Design.

Ms. Briggs announced that the next meeting of the SBRC is August 21st when SBRC will be voting on the submission to the MSBA. The School Committee meeting is planned for August 22nd so that the School Committee can vote on the MSBA submission.

John Tocci, SBRC Chair, reported that there is an SBRC subcommittee that has been established to answer community questions within 72 hours. He asked that the School Committee and administration forward any questions about the project to the SBRC.

Mr. Polito asked about the details of what they will be approving on August 22nd. Ms. Briggs and Mr. Hebert said that the School Committee would be approving the submission to the MSBA that was approved by SBRC. Vertex and Jon Levi architects will put together all the information to be submitted for this round. The final submission to MSBA is due at the end of December.

Mr. Acosta said that the SBRC is responsible for the removal or demolition of district buildings unless they defer, and then the decision falls on the Town control.

Mr. Polito asked if all the aspects of the design presented tonight are included in the current budget. It was confirmed that the Option D design does not exceed the current budget.

Mr. Polito asked what if the 550-student plan isn't large enough to accommodate all new students. He is concerned due to anticipated new housing projects in Dedham. He suggested that they leave the Greenlodge as a school based building so it could function as a school again in case the student population increases beyond the capacity of the district elementary schools.

John Tocci explained that the MSBA approved the 550-student plan with more classrooms than originally allowed because Dedham pushed to keep the 18 students per class level. Ms. Briggs reported that there is capacity to hold up to 22 students per class. There are currently 520 students enrolled in Greenlodge and Oakdale. Mr. Acosta said he would raise the question about capacity again at the next SBRC meeting.

Dr. Flynn Gallant feels that we need to be more transparent and clear on the subject of redistricting, especially prior to the Town Meeting vote.

Mr. Hebert said that we are not prepared to talk about redistricting right now but when we get the information, all the facts will be communicated to the full community. The current information about redistricting is on the website.

Mr. Polito asked for a general timeline of redistricting decisions Ms. Briggs said the Avery redistricting was finalized the year leading up to the opening.

Superintendent Murphy said that her experience from her prior district was that redistricting information was not conveyed to the community until the third year into the project.

Mr. Hebert said one of the main reasons that redistricting numbers cannot be disclosed early on in the project is because the Town population will change.

Ms. Twomey asked if they could develop a timeline that will help the School Committee members identify their roles through the next 3-5 years of the project. It would be helpful to get a rough idea of School Committee engagement and the level of engagement required during the phases of the project.

Mr. Hebert agreed that an additional timeline that reflected the types and degrees of School Committee engagement throughout the process would be beneficial.

Proposed Inclusive Name for SBRC Building Project – Superintendent Murphy

Mr. Hebert talked about the name of the project. It was previously called the Oakdale project but that no longer reflects the full scope of the project. Ms. Murphy said the community would like a name that is either more inclusive or more general. She noted that the decision about the name of the new school will come later. This name will be used to reflect the building project, not the school itself.

Mr. Acosta said he would like a name that includes the Oakdale and Greenlodge name. He thinks making the project name too general is not a good idea.

Ms. McCormick agreed that an inclusive name is better than a very general name.

Mr. Polito said Oakdale and Greenlodge are most affected but other students could be redistricted to the new school. He doesn't think that changing the name of the project using the Oakdale and Greenlodge names is the right decision.

Mr. Hebert said we could revisit this once feedback from the community is received. If Greenlodge feels left out, then we need to try to bring people together and to involve them. Ms. Briggs said we can petition the state to change the name they use as well.

Old and New Business

Mr. Wells showed slides and reported that there is mold at Greenlodge in the classrooms that are near the woods. He reported that remediation is going well. During inspection it was determined that the building has deficiencies and has sunk a few inches. It is not an immediate structural issue, but the back side of the school shows cement deterioration and steel rusting. He showed slides to illustrate the problem. Caulking is being done to strengthen the steel. Work should be finished in time for the start of school. Moisture from July affected the mold. Superintendent Murphy said that carpets and teacher paper materials were discarded, but textbooks have been salvaged.

Ms. Briggs asked about immediate budgetary concerns. Mr. Wells said they will assess the financial damages, but the costs should not be significant enough to require re-budgeting.

Approval of meeting minutes

Meeting minutes from previous meetings will be approved at the August 22, 2023 School Committee meeting.

Acknowledgements and Announcements

Ms. Briggs announced that there are volunteer possibilities for the Needham St. mural being erected near the Riverdale School.

Ms. McCormick reported that the summer programs have been going well and applauded the collaboration with Parks and Rec. She thanked Alyssa Freda for her amazing work. Mr. Hebert said they will have Alyssa at one of their next meetings.

Superintendent Murphy acknowledged Principal Hermes and McGowan's commitment to the Oakdale project process.

Mr. Polito gave acknowledgement to the custodians for the cleanliness of the DHS cafeteria.

Dr. Flynn Gallant thanked the SBRC members for all their dedication and work.

Motion was made to adjourn the School Committee Meeting. Motion was approved by a unanimous vote of 7-0.

Submitted by

Virginia Quinn

Recording Secretary