

REDDING & EASTON BOARDS OF EDUCATION
Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) Meeting
December 9, 2014
JBHS Career Center

I. Call to Order:

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 pm by Redding LRPC Chairperson Kimberly Ajavananda

II. Public Comment:

None

III. Discussion and Possible Action III. Discussion and Possible Action

A. Presentation/Discussion by Jonathan Costa of Education Connection

- After introductions, Jonathan Costa provided some back perspective to declining enrollment in general (economics, families with fewer children, fewer families buying into these communities).
- Of the 31 communities his agency covers, there is declining enrollment in 29 of them (Danbury and New Milford the exceptions, just barely). Significant issue across the region and largely beyond the town's control and things that can be done run counter to what attracts people to the communities in the first place.
- As pool of students shrink, programs get constrained. Smaller pools of students, sometimes a single class per grade in small communities, leads to lack of options. Efficiencies run out and there is an upward spiral for per pupil cost. Costs and educational impact
- Options/Paths discussed: Could try to bring more kids to district. Enticing but difficult option to pursue. On the plus side of the equation, we have a very highly regarded high school. It was noted that the percentage of students attending private schools is remarkably consistent – doesn't matter what you would do. Asked about the percentage attending private school, in the NW corner it is 7-9%, probably the same in Fairfield County.
- Specialized Programs/International Exchange – In this case, there is an upfront investment with no guarantee, and runs counter to controlling student costs.
- Other school districts are as focused on keeping students as we are in getting them.
- Attracting more families discussed. This mostly deals with affordability of housing, but Easton in Redding in the ten for median costs. So a young family faces a high bar. This is also beyond Board of Education control. Needs a community-wide effort.
- How does bringing in a family with kids paying the same property tax help the situation? It was noted that the math doesn't always work. It goes beyond economics to diversity. Marginal per pupil costs may not change much at certain levels.

- Typically in growing enrollment, infrastructure costs lag whereas in downward trending enrollment pressure to ratchet down costs equally, but programs etc., doesn't work that way.
- Building the base is a 10-year strategy. There is nothing we can do quickly. It is a long range plan to "bend the curve".
- What about attracting kids in Danbury? In Connecticut today, the money doesn't follow the child so Danbury won't give the money that goes with the children. Also, geography and transportation could be issues. Magnet and Charter schools are two cases where money does follow the student, but that comes with restrictions/strings attached. Would need to draw kids from Bridgeport, Norwalk and Danbury to have the diversity that would be looked at seriously by the state.
- Internally controlled options – Mr. Costa discussed his involvement in working with Colebrook and Norfolk with respect to regionalization at the elementary level as well as discussions between Litchfield and Region 6 – whose high schools are one mile apart and yet each has the capacity for the combined high school population.
- Two pathways were noted:
 - a. Cooperative Arrangements – completely under the control of the Board of Education. Does not change governance at all. The issue here can be that there is a maximum legal commitment of one year. This makes cooperative arrangements the easiest to get into and easiest to get out of. If closing a school is involved, once a school is closed, the costs to re-open it as a school are dramatic. Must meet "construct from new" safety codes rather than retrofit building codes. New construction codes are much more stringent. Has this happened due to enrollment fluctuation? Yes - Example: Fairfield Andrew Ward. It has happened; however, the economics are much different today. Hard to imagine the change that would bring the flood of enrollment back and reverse the trend. In the Colebrook-Norfolk example, combined elementary enrollment would be 200 in a school with a capacity of 375. It is a possibility, but the trends are pretty clear. Can shut wings down without having to meet new codes. Repurposing part of a school (for town offices for example) should also be OK as well, but may want to check that with a building inspector. Zoning issue mentioned with respect to repurposing in general.
 - b. Regionalization/New Region – In this case, it would not be new but an expanded Region 9. Laws written in a time of population expansion and regionalization was often incentivized through the building of a high school. Build to contain growth. Now in a time of contraction, legislation makes it hard – Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR). In the Colebrook-Norfolk example, their financial plan will save 20% per year, but this violates MBR. The MBR was designed to protect towns from balancing budgets on the back of the schools, but merging of schools was not considered. Merger may be better financially and educationally, but illegal due to MBR. Any change in the regional structure that has a high school must be voted on positively by all impacted communities twice. Once to create the committee to create the regionalization plan which is submitted to the commissioner for approval and

then the towns vote again to accept it – two affirmative votes in both Redding and Easton to change the regional structure. Statute is a vague “substantive change” – but changing a grade, closing a school, or eliminating a board all certainly fall into that category. The regionalization committee would have a 2-year window to submit a plan (2-year extension possible). The Redding/Easton situation would not be that hard since Region 9 already exists and cooperation already in place.

- To bend the cost curve and improve the pool, it is all about buildings and staff. Regionalization is a lot of work and only if serious about one elementary, one middle school and one high school for the two towns should this be considered. Only way to bend the cost curve and change the dynamic. Otherwise towns are simply tinkering at the edges. The success of the Region 9 high school success shows what is possible at the other levels. From an outsider’s view – each should close one school.
- Due to demographics where elementary population is declining first, regionalization could have a phased in plan that reduces the number of schools over time. Best case 2-1/2 years away due to all the requirements, votes and reviews.
- Using a move of 7th and 8th graders to Barlow as an example, this could be done by a cooperative arrangement (where each board continues to have the same responsibility) or, if done through regionalization, where that responsibility is passed to Region 9 board, which would require the process that has been discussed.
- Has Mr. Costa seen cooperative arrangements work in the past? No. But until 4-years ago, cooperative arrangements and regionalization were not discussed. Under cooperative arrangements, since each board retains their authority, every decision can be an issue (Litchfield and Region 6, for example, have different schedules which needed to be unified). Because this discussion is done in an atmosphere of contraction, players tend to focus on what they are losing. Need to articulate what will be gained. Need people from the pool that want to save money and the pool of people that want to see the most educational benefits to be in the same pool and working together.
- Mr. Costa noted that the MBR is a short term and fixable issue through legislation. He believes the MBR formula will be change. Consolidating schools and reducing positions can dramatically change the cost curve and this is where you can run afoul of the MBR, and where it will need to be reset post consolidation. Resetting needs a special act of the legislature, but the request would be “We want to be more efficient, save money and provide a quality education, will you help us?” In a culture of encouraging towns to find efficiencies, he doesn’t see any barrier to a one time fix in the MBR.
- Strategies to be effective? Regionalization is, however, up to the towns. In the Colebrook-Norfolk example, both first selectman and both chairs of Boards of Finance were strongly in favor. One Board of Education was in favor, one not. Both towns voted in favor by wide margins. The exploratory committee recommended planning committee which was approved by both towns. Due to

differences in spending, although overall cost savings, one town's contributions would go up which is not legal and also requires special act of legislature.

- Does capacity precede change? All the numbers need to be run in advance. The state would supply a staff attorney to attend regional planning meetings. A built in progressive plan is novel – an interesting idea. A progressive or phased plan would need provide targets for voters (i.e. enrollment X results in plan Y). Also, the possible need to change Region 9 governance plan was mentioned. As Central Office is already combined, decision comes down to facilities and staffing plan.
- What happens to the vacated building is also a subject for discussion. This was a difficult discussion with respect to Colebrook-Norfolk. All these discussions are part of the process.
- Preliminary Planning Group - A proposal becomes their job. In the Colebrook-Norfolk example: Criteria set up – fair share, maximize impact of education program, and increase efficiencies to the towns. Solutions developed and each planning team member rates by the group criteria. Highest rated option was regionalization and it was recommended to the Selectmen that a referendum be held. Members included Board of Selectmen, Board of Finance, and Board of Education, as well as community members at large. Ten voting members. Superintendents acted ex-officio as resources.
- Enrollment projections - “Going down forever” discussed. No one can tell with certainty. For a population boom, however, a number of factors that must align that are less likely to happen than not to happen. Best guess flat or lower 20-years out.
- Qualitative reasons it would be advantageous? Litchfield/Region 6 – 40% of classes have less than 10 kids. While 20 students are great, eight are a challenge, especially at the elementary level. Example – Mr. Costa’s observation of a class with 5 boys and a girl. Three adults - Speech, 1-1, and a classroom teacher. Could be good, but diversity of experience plays a role in the quality of the educational programs. Mix of choices, social groups, ability to align teacher best for the students are important. Options and choices get reduced as the pool shrinks. The lower the numbers the greater the likelihood of disparate experiences (really good or really bad).
- While Redding/Easton are not at that level of students in a classroom, another example could be language programs. We provide one language teacher today. With fewer students could we afford a language teacher at all? Another example - Comparing Region 6 HS to Region 15 HS. At Region 15, the average teacher responsible for the education of 105 kids (2012-2013) at Region 6 it is 41 students. As numbers shrink, the number of choices and the number of things you can offer all get constrained.
- Certifications 7-12 noted - Allows for more efficient use of staff.
- Horizontal vs. vertical consolidation discussed. There are examples of both in Connecticut. Vertical consolidation doesn’t allow classes to be larger, but it would remove the geographical challenge Redding/Easton faces. In Region 6 – bought land on the HS campus.

- Potential options in Easton Redding case include 1) Creating a regional elementary, regional middle, and regional high school; 2) A K-8 school in each district. Second option lacks some of the benefits of larger class sizes previously noted but prevents the long bus ride to the other town.
- Issue of mixing ages. Can be addressed through separate wings, separate lunches, etc. Culture of school needs to be set up that way, and there are at least two dozen K-8 schools in CT. Concern, and attention paid to that, good discussions and important concerns.
- Cooperative arrangements vs. Regionalization. A concern was raised that cooperative arrangements circumvent populace, but Board of Education is elected. While there may be no limits on what Board can do with respect to a cooperative arrangement, there are practical limitations politically.
- How do you reconcile the value system of different towns and possible culture clash? Nothing surprises Mr. Costa. No matter how similar, there will be people in each town that refer to the others as “those people”. For this area, people live in these towns as they care about education and have some financial sense. Any rationale must be fiscally and educationally the best possible thing for our community.
- Grant money discussed – what would it get us and what could we use it for? State of CT allocated money for regional efficiencies in schools. Education Connection applied for some of the money, and put some money aside this year for Region 9. It could help pay for resources for this effort such as a facilitator, lawyer, or updated enrollment projections etc. Anything that has to do with regional efficiencies we can use that money.
- What are other schools doing – Wilton, Weston etc.? Internal/external choices. If you have 6 schools– redistrict and go to 5. High schools present the biggest challenge. All want robust programs, but it is difficult to do with 400 kids with per pupil cost moving north of \$30K.
- Where do we go from here? One of two things suggested: 1) Might consider bringing a group together to craft language to plan for a regional discussion. Group look at different options for a regionalization – could propose nothing or a regionalization plan or, 2) if that is too much too soon, form an “informal committee”. Form a group with the intent of identifying the most appropriate and saleable solution to address declining enrollment between the two towns and make a recommendation. A less formal committee that does the work would not preclude the establishment of the formal group at some point if that is the direction decided.
- It was noted that the politics of one or both of the towns is not excited about formal regionalization. Easton and Redding have two, separate informal groups now. Probably need to make a joint study committee to look at cooperation etc. Could look at preliminary sort of options - look at those via sub-committees – then come back to the joint group and determine potential future direction. The options will help determine the next steps.
- Declining enrollment and per pupil cost increases were mentioned. Mr. Costa noted a recent survey where respondents ranked their desire for a local school,

quality school, or efficiency – quality school was the highest ranked. But budget is a constraining force.

- ECS formula will likely be revised – a proposal to reduce the ECS amount based on how much above the average was spent was considered. Won't force regionalization on towns but won't provide incentives for towns that forego regional efficiencies.

IV. Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at 8:45 pm

Submitted by Kimberly Ajavananda