

Racine Unified Board of Education
Legislative Committee Dialogue Session
Wednesday, February 7, 2007
Central Office – 5:30 p.m.

The Board of Education Legislative Committee Dialogue Session was called to order at 5:35 p.m. by Chairperson, Dr. Gretchen Warner. Those present at the meeting from the Board and Cabinet were: Superintendent of Schools Dr. Thomas Hicks, Board of Education President Susan Kutz, Legislative Committee members Dr. Gretchen Warner (Chairperson), Dr. Russell Carlsen, and Brian Dey; and Board members Julie McKenna and Don Nielsen. Also present were the following municipal trustees: from Caledonia, Ron Coutts, Jonathan Delagrave, Wendy McCalvy, Howard Stacey, Kevin Wanggaard, and Lee Wishau; from Mt. Pleasant; Sonny Havn, John Hewitt, and Ed Potter; from Sturtevant, Daryl Lynaugh and Steven Jansen; and from Wind Point, William Schalk and William Bensman

Dr. Warner welcomed those present, and noted that this meeting was for the purpose of listening to concerns and suggestions from area municipalities and to determine avenues for further dialogue and connection. She indicated that the members of the board and administration were here to listen. She introduced the board and administration members present, and asked the trustees to introduce themselves. Dr. Hicks also welcomed the group, and stated his hope that this session would lead to further dialogue between the municipalities and the school district and that administration is always available to respond to suggestions and concerns from the community. He noted that there have been ongoing Board Listening Sessions and Administration Community Dialogue Sessions since early 2006, and that these opportunities are always available as requested. He stated that he appreciated the opportunity to meet with the municipalities this evening.

Trustees were then asked to respond to a series of questions (attached), and many comments and suggestions were made. These could be categorized into seven areas: academics; communication/community building; facilities/finances; parental support; redistricting/bussing, secession, and security/safety.

Academics/Image

- There has not been enough improvement in academics, and that keeps people from wanting to attend Racine Unified.
- Academics often takes a “back seat” to athletics and other extracurricular activities.
- In academics, we need to go “back to basics.”
- There are “awesome educators” in Racine Unified.
- We need a better explanation of what RUSD is doing in the area of academics.
- We need to require students to be involved.
- People used to come to Racine because of the schools and the jobs. Now the perception of the schools is very negative.
- It is hard to attract business to a community if the school district is not strong.
- The perception is that there are too many administrators. Administrators should be moved into teaching roles.

- An attitude adjustment is needed. We need to believe that all children can succeed.

Communication/Community Building

- There has been a lack of communication between RUSD and the villages for decades.
- We need more community building within the district.
- We need greater dialogue, especially regarding growth areas.
- Dialogue about issues should have started earlier.
- RUSD has an image problem, and people feel shut out from the planning. The perception is that RUSD will not work with us. For example, Caledonia needs a voice on the Board of Education.
- We need a sense of community throughout the entire district.
- There is a lack of communication between the Board of Education and the municipalities.
- Student engagement issues have improved dramatically in recent years. RUSD needs to brief municipal officials on the good news and provide more information. The municipalities also need to ask RUSD to be part of their planning.
- Municipal representatives need to be able to explain district initiatives to constituents. For example, when the SAGE program was moved out of Caledonia, RUSD should have let the trustees know the rationale for the move so they could explain it to their constituents.

Facilities/Finances

- Why are our facilities wearing out? Can't we maintain the facilities better?
- Where is the maintenance plan for facilities?
- Property taxes keep going up, and the district needs to live within its budget. For example, why did we pass a referendum and then find out that there are such large consulting fees?
- We need more dialogue, especially regarding growth areas, in facilities planning.
- Large housing developments are being built, and residents are saying that schools are key. We need greater engagement with the School District so that we can plan together.
- RUSD gets the largest chunk of the tax dollars, and there needs to be more accountability.
- The referenda are a problem.

Parental Support

- What is being done to encourage parents to take a more active role?
- Parents today have a limited amount of time, and the schools have been asked to take on a lot of the responsibilities that used to belong to parents.
- There needs to be more parental involvement in schools and more communication between schools and parents.
- The School District hasn't failed; parents have failed by not taking enough interest in their children's education.
- Private schools require parents to participate; why not public?

Redistricting/Bussing

- We need neighborhood schools. The bussing experiment has failed.
- Students are too divided by the schools they attend. A child can live across the street from another child and attend a different school. This breaks up community.
- Students in the Schulte area should be able to attend Schulte.
- People need to know about people who aren't like them, and learn to get along with others in an increasingly diverse society.
- Neighborhood schools are almost impossible in this district, because we don't have enough schools and because they are concentrated in the center of the city.
- Bussing is a problem. Some students ride the bus for an hour each way, and that is too long. Many want out of that system, and are now going to private schools, Oak Creek, etc.
- Students used to walk to school, but times have changed. People shouldn't engage in too much wishful thinking.
- People are just hoping to go back to the days of their childhoods through returning to neighborhood schools, but times are very different now.

Safety/Security

- Most people are satisfied with the education here, but safety and discipline issues are a very real concern for people. It is not going to be easy to overcome that.
- People want a good education with extracurricular activities, and a good record of safety.
- More has to be done about safety of students, and about the discipline of students who don't stay in line.
- The biggest issue we have with the schools is safety. People are moving away because of safety in Racine Unified.

Secession

- It would be better to fix Racine Unified than to create a new school district.
- The idea of an advisory referendum is intended to determine what people want.
- Philosophically, secession doesn't seem like a good idea.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE COLLABORATION AND CONNECTION?

Chairperson Warner asked the trustees how we can work together better to address the issues identified earlier. The trustees raised the following points:

- We all need to be on one team to promote Racine Unified.
- Smaller school districts are better, because of better connections.

- RUSD has tried to encourage staff to build relationships with external constituents. We also need to develop one-on-one relationships with individual trustees in the municipalities.
- We need to develop a committee to work on relationship-building.
- Trustees could be included in the Key Communicators group that meets regularly with the Superintendent.
- The opportunity to meet improves things. We need more communication, on a regular basis.
- We're all growing, and are concerned about the same issues (for example, facilities). Let's promote each other.
- We're all in this together. We need representation on each others' groups.
- The Pike River Project work with Gary Bishop (Director of Facilities Management) has been a wonderful example of collaboration between the district and city.
- We need more inter-governmental agreements and more communication.
- School District officials should work directly with the planning committees of the municipalities.
- Briefings and updates should come from RUSD directly to municipal officials on a regular basis.
- Create a committee/task force that focuses on one key issue (for example, security or facilities) and that meets at least twice each year.
- Create a coalition between Racine Unified, the Board of Education, and the municipalities.
- There is a need to get relevant statistical information out to officials so that the community's biggest concerns can be addressed.
- Communication is a two-way street; School Board and administration should meet with each municipality twice each year (fall and spring) to devise goals and to evaluate accomplishment of the goals.
- One School Board member could be assigned to a each municipality, or to a trustees from each municipality, in order to maintain regular, two-way communication.
- A protocol should be developed for communication between the municipalities and the district – could a task force composed of trustees who are in attendance at this meeting do this?
- Municipal representatives should be specifically invited to the Superintendent's State of the District Address to the community.

Comments of School Board Members

A trustee stated that while he appreciated the opportunity to air his thoughts, he would also like to hear some comments from Board of Education members. Board members shared the following:

- There is a perception problem that definitely needs to be dealt with. However, the district can do a thousand wonderful things and yet when one bad thing happens, RUSD is heavily criticized.
- We do need more dialogue and more connection. More interchange through more of these sorts of meetings would help.
- It would be great if a Board of Education member could be assigned as a contact person for each municipality.

- We also need to move beyond dialogue and make more things happen in terms of connecting.
- The State of the District Address by Dr. Hicks was an important initiative.
- The trustees need to understand that, while they set their own levy limits, the district no longer has that power since revenue caps were put in place. Our hands are tied in many ways in regard to the needs of the district.
- On February 19th, there will be a 5-year budget presentation during our Board meeting. All are invited to attend that meeting to see the extent to which we are getting our budget in order.
- The district needs to invite the trustees to more meetings, and the trustees need to invite board members to more of their meetings.
- It is important that we coordinate another effort to get together in about two months.
- It has been said that RUSD doesn't serve the municipalities well, and yet we feel we serve them in multiple ways with multiple programs.
- As far as operational efficiency, the district recently became ISO certified. We have a parent complaint process. We are resolving many issues.
- Trustees and others may contact any board member with issues or concerns. All Board of Education members serve on an at large basis, so all board members represent all municipalities.
- The Board of Education has hosted listening sessions since January, 2006 with various groups throughout the community. These groups brought up many of the same issues raised today, including safety, communication, facilities, parental support, respect for students, and a willingness to support the school district. What we heard tonight is consistent with what we heard from the rest of the community, and we are at a point where we can move forward through increased collaboration.

Dr. Warner announced that the district will send the minutes out to the participating trustees, and will determine starting points to address issues raised. At future meetings, the Board will extend the dialogue to all interested municipalities.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 7:30 p.m.