

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL BOARD MEETING
 HELD MONDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2009
 141 PARK STREET, GEORGE INNESS ANNEX

A. STATEMENTS

Let the minutes reflect that adequate notice of this meeting has been approved in the following manner:

1. On October 27, 2009, notice of this meeting was faxed to the Montclair Times, the Herald News, and the Star Ledger. The time, date, and location of this meeting were accurately set forth therein.
2. On this same date a copy of said notice was filed with the Township Clerk and was posted at the public bulletin board in the first floor main hall of the Board of Education Building, 22 Valley Road.
3. Copies have also been mailed to all persons who have requested same at no cost.

B. ROLL CALL

	Present	Absent
John Carlton	___x__	_____
Shirley Grill	___x__	_____
Robert Kautz	___x__	_____
Leslie Larson	___x__	_____
Shelly Lombard	___x__	_____
Ronald Riddick	___x__	_____
Carmen Taylor	___x__	_____

C. RESOLUTION FOR EXECUTIVE SESSION

At 5:35 p.m. John Carlton moved the following resolution:

WHEREAS, pursuant to N.J.S.A. 10:4-12(b), the Montclair Board of Education may exclude the public from that portion of a public meeting at which the Board discusses any of the matters described at N.J.S.A. 10:4-12(b) (1)-(9);

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Montclair Board of Education shall forthwith enter into closed session to discuss the following matters concerning: Personnel Matters.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that said discussion maybe disclosed to the public when the reasons for discussing and acting upon it in closed session no longer exist.

Seconded by Shirley Grill and approved by a vote of 7-0.

D. EXECUTIVE SESSION

E. RETURN TO OPEN SESSION

At 7:30 p.m. Robert Kautz moved that the Board shall return from executive session; seconded by Shirley Grill and approved by a vote of 7-0.

Discussion of New School

Dr. Frank Alvarez presented information on the plans for the New School. Dr. Alvarez stated that the Task Force met over the last nine months and made recommendations to the Board, which they believe are in the best interest of the district, long term. He stated that tonight's meeting was to give the Board an opportunity to hear public comments to help them make their decision. Dr. Alvarez noted that the original plan for the New School was revisited and that there were three main goals:

- Lower class size, particular in grades k-2
- Create more space so special education students could to return to district
- Find a permanent home for Renaissance School

Dr. Alvarez presented the following information:

- Principal at the New School will be announced soon.
- Lead teachers for Rand and Renaissance - district will appoint a lead teacher for each school to lend guidance to the curriculum.
- Moving of programs and staff – budgetary decisions may result in staff changes - some teachers may choose not to follow program.
- Rand and Renaissance programs – both schools have very strong programs and maintaining the integrity of each program is desirable. If program adjustments are made, they will not affect core curriculum and Dr. Alvarez stated that space can be shared because of the similarities between the two programs.
- Transition Plan – Dr. Alvarez stated that input and concerns from parents, staff members and community members will be considered so that a smooth transition can be made. Dr. Alvarez stated that both schools will fit in the new building – a combined population of approximately 600 students.
- Programs - they will be run somewhat separately which was a concern from many.
- Transportation – there will be two transportation runs - one K-5 and one 6-8 with staggered arrival and dismissal times – this will allow for some flexibility in educational programs. The Board will need to decide on the transportation policy; i.e., eligibility – will children be grandfathered.

- Freedom of Choice – district is committed to keeping Renaissance as a Freedom of Choice model and will continue to honor the sibling priority placement policy. The District will extend the Freedom of Choice period for middle school students, allowing parents extra time to make their decisions and to fully understand the programs.

- Naming the New School – a Community Task Force years ago made a recommendation for the name of the new school and that recommendation will be discussed at an upcoming meeting.

John Carlton thanked all groups for organizing meetings that were held at the different schools to discuss the new school and for the materials they distributed to the Board.

COMMENTS FROM PUBLIC:

Sarah Wolman, 117 Christopher Street, stated that she was representing the Rand parent community/PTA Association/School Action Team. Mrs. Wolman stated that a survey had been sent out when the Rand community was notified that the Task Force recommended Rand be moved to the new building and that 55% (154 out of 284 families) responded .

Mrs. Wolman noted that 64% of the reasons parents selected Rand were: curriculum and teacher philosophy, Dr. Weller's leadership, excellence of teachers and the true magnet theme.

Mrs. Wolman stated that if Rand moves to the new facility, it is important that current teachers, staff and programs are moved in tact, that Dr. Weller remain as Principal and that all students are guaranteed they will be allowed to move to the new facility. Mrs. Wolman noted that the Rand community wants to retain their teachers, teaching philosophy, social and emotional curriculum, and writing program.

Mrs. Wolman also noted that if Rand remains in their current location, the size of the classes are too large for the facility and that there is a lack of dedicated space for related arts; i.e. gym, art, music.

Mrs. Wolman advised that 68% of the Rand community prefer to move the current Rand program to the new building while 32% prefer to stay but would like space to be upgraded and new space provided for related art programs. Mrs. Wolman noted that parents feel they should not have to choose between staying in the facility or moving to the new school since their current facility is substandard. Mrs. Wolman stated that the community has serious concerns if Rand would have to share the new building with Renaissance and requested that the Board allow the Rand community to be involved in this transition plan so that there would be minimal disruption for the children.

Beth Wilensky, 5 Briar Hill Road, thanked Dr. Alvarez and the Board for allowing the community a chance to speak. Mrs. Wilensky stated that Renaissance also did a survey, held meetings for community input and stated that Renaissance School -

- Is a small middle school with admission open to all children in Montclair
- Has a seasoned staff with an integrated based curriculum they helped design
- Has grade level team teaching
- Has a magnet theme - longer days including block scheduling
- Has a stand alone Friday schedule which offers community service and enrichment courses

Todd Smith, 226 Park Street, a Renaissance Science Teacher and long time resident of Montclair wanted the Board to know that in his long , diversified professional career, he has found their Principal, Charles Cobb, extremely effective in keeping all staff working in the same direction without any fuss.

Mr. Smith stated that with regard to bringing special education children back into the district, he totally agrees. Mr. Smith advised that during his course of teaching, he had six children with significant disabilities in his classrooms – taught them the same curriculum and now those students are working in the community. He stated that by allowing these special education children in regular classrooms, it gave other students an opportunity to learn about them and a chance to interact with students who did not have disabilities.

Jill Stein, 115 South Fullerton Avenue, a parent of four public school children and a public school teacher in Hudson County, stated she felt the model we are proposing will be very confusing to children applying to a middle school or a K-8 school. Mrs. Stein questioned whether we were going to retain the middle school model.

Mrs. Stein stated that as a teacher, she feels it is very important to know how our children learn and noted that hands on active teaching by teachers who know the individual students, understand their age and understand the middle school concept is the most effective way children can learn. Mrs. Stein expressed her feelings that she would like to see a separate middle school.

Shirely Grill responded that the Board is listening and their intention is to keep the two entities separate in terms of scheduling and bussing and that every child would have opportunity to opt into Renaissance if they desired.

Susan Becker, 557 Upper Mountain Avenue, a Rand teacher, speaking on behalf of Rand faculty, stated that Rand School has –

- programs centered on the needs of students
- introduced Columbia University Teachers College writing workshop curriculum
- became a Teachers College Project School
- a great leader in Dr. Weller
- a great staff

Mrs. Becker noted that from the standpoint of programs, they felt there were benefits if Rand was moved to the new facility with Renaissance since both schools focused on students, both have a rich curriculum and both have a deep value of student engagement.

Charles Liu, 85 Edgemont Road, parent of Renaissance, stated that as parents they feel it is important that Renaissance be maintained as an independent 6-8 program keeping the current magnet intact. Mr. Liu stated that some values of Renaissance are block scheduling with extended learning periods, diversity of learning environment and the staff.

Mr. Liu noted that he understood the concerns of moving Renaissance to Rand but could also see some benefits that may occur. Mr. Liu urged the Board to make their decision concerning Renaissance in a way that it does not impact the program since Renaissance is special and a part of the vision of the Montclair Public Schools.

Michele Lowy, 147 North Mountain Avenue, a parent and teacher at Rand expressed her concern with sharing space between Renaissance and Rand. Mrs. Lowy stated that she is concerned with the Rand building and lack of dedicated space – every room is packed, some rooms cannot be used for children due to ventilation etc. Mrs. Lowy noted that work to the facility has not been done since the original plan was to move Rand to the new facility.

Susan Synnott, 58 Wildwood Avenue. Rand teacher and former Rand parent questioned what part leadership plays in the final decision. Mrs. Synnott suggested that if the new school would have one Principal, that would leave the other Principal without a job. She expressed her feelings that Dr. Weller was a great Principal and wondered if the staff would have a choice of going to the new school if Dr. Weller was not chosen as the Principal.

Michael Walker, 15 William Street, former Montclair student who moved to Georgia and then back to Montclair because of the education system, stated that Renaissance had changed his son's life. Mr. Walker stated that since his son enrolled in Renaissance, he has gone from a D student to an A/B student and he attributes this to the diversity of the programs and wants Renaissance to stay as it is.

Rachel Shatz, 53 Watchung Avenue, parent of a Renaissance student, commented that she appreciated the work of the Task Force, attended school meetings and heard suggestions but feels that it is unacceptable that the Task Force had eight months to make recommendations and Renaissance/Rand parents have only three weeks to digest and react to their suggestions. Mrs. Shatz questioned why the Task Force did not interview or hear suggestions from parents during those eight months so parents could have been provided with critical information. Mrs. Shatz stated that she felt a decision has already been made and comments that are being made tonight will not be considered.

Mrs. Shatz stated that they were told that moving Renaissance to Rand was dismissed since it would cost \$1.7 million to upgrade Rand to a middle school and only \$500,000 to make repairs and keep it as a K-5 schools. Mrs. Shatz questioned what upgrades/repairs are considered necessary.

Mrs. Shatz said it was noted that having Renaissance across from the High School, with an open campus, was not a good idea but stated that Renaissance is not an open campus school – students have off campus destinations and are chaperoned on those walks.

Mrs. Shatz questioned the statement made by the Task Force that three separate user groups would be sharing the same building and stated that no explanation was given as to how it would actually be executed – it was stated that there would be 12 classrooms on the top floor occupied by Renaissance, three additional classrooms for special education students who would not be integrated into other classes, and K-5 classes.

Mrs. Shatz noted that Renaissance has its own distinct identity due to its small size, off-site activities, Friday enhancement classes, longer school days and a dedicated teaching staff. Mrs. Shatz stated she feels moving Renaissance to the Rand facility, making modest upgrades, keeping the Principal and staff, would keep the Renaissance's identity and culture rather than moving to a new building with other tenants.

Dr. Alvarez responded that the Task Force looked at data for weeks and months – costs, transportation issues before making any recommendations and stated that their decision was not made in haste and that no decision has been made by the Board.

Leslie Larson questioned if Renaissance was moved to the current Rand building, would the numbers in terms of space change.

Dr. Alvarez responded that if Renaissance moved to Rand, space would increase.

Jan Hoffman, 193 Cooper Avenue, stated she was under the impression that the Board was going to hear their concerns and then make a decision and was wondering if this was true.

Mrs. Hoffman stated that she would like to see Renaissance maintained as a separate program and felt it is worth considering Rand as a possible home for Renaissance. Mrs. Hoffman asked that if the Board chooses to move Renaissance to a new building, that they preserve a distinct middle school, make it appealing for parents to opt for this school and maintain Freedom of Choice options.

Todd Smith/Hilary Susswein, stated on behalf of the Renaissance Staff, they want to maintain the interdisciplinary curriculum and project based learning. They stated that Renaissance provides for:

- Allowing team meetings daily when students leave the building,
- Wireless technology lab for students
- Writing workshops
- Community service from all town programs
- Extended days
- Monthly field trips
- Curriculum based on Montclair communities

George Prell, 17 Fairmount Avenue, a high school professor, stated that he disagrees with the Task Force suggestions. Mr. Prell noted that he feels the Board should keep Renaissance in place for an additional year giving the Board additional time to make a decision they can live with for the next ten to twenty years.

Ann Prato, 15 Undercliff Drive, a Renaissance parent, stated she was speaking on behalf of the PTA and School Review groups.

Mrs. Prato commented that the Renaissance community wants the Board to communicate with parents as to how and why decisions are made and wants them to be transparent with all their decisions. Mrs. Prato also stated that they would like to be included with all decisions and would like the same financial information the Board receives made available to them; i.e. staffing, costs.

Dana Calbi, 195 Park Street, a Renaissance French teacher/digital art teacher/parent expressed her concerns that she would not like to see related arts cut in order to save dollars. She noted that the teachers at Renaissance have block scheduling and would not want to see this lost.

Mrs. Calbi stated that the new building should have a dedicated technology coordinator, a lap top cart for every World Language Teacher, flat screen televisions etc. to put Montclair Public Schools into the 21st century and part of the global education system .

Debbie Villarreal Hadley, 179 Midland Avenue, a Renaissance parent, stated that she is aware we have to do more for our children with fewer dollars but is concerned about expending energy to keep programs separate. Mrs. Hadley expressed her concern that having two schools in one facility will cause problems that cannot now be anticipated.

Mrs. Haldley stated she would like to see Renaissance move out of their cramped quarters and expand as the way our children learn is very important as we think ahead toward their college education.

Mrs. Hadley encouraged the Board to take a look at what other districts have done or are doing in their K-8 schools and suggested that possibly a longer school year would be beneficial.

Martin Slon, 118 Elm Street, a Renaissance parent, stated that he was happy with the education his child is receiving at Renaissance and is not concerned with the change but with the process in which the change is decided upon. Mr. Slon noted that he felt two weeks to make a decision was not acceptable and questioned how a Principal could be named shortly if no decision had been made.

Mr. Slon questioned the Board's intent to preserve two separate schools and how this will be done.

Rich Goldberg, 236 Midland Avenue, a Renaissance parent, agrees the Renaissance facility is not the greatest but the staff and leadership at Renaissance is wonderful. Mr. Goldberg acknowledged that he realizes there will be a change but is concerned that something valuable will get lost and hopes that the concerns of the public would be taken into account.

Melissa Polaner, 192 Christopher Street, questioned what a lead teacher's function would be and stated that she felt having one Principal will be a problem.

Dr. Frank Alvarez responded that a lead teacher would be someone who teaches full time and shares responsibility for curriculum pieces that go along with a particular school or program. Dr. Alvarez stated that instead of having assistant principals you would have lead teachers, one k-5 and one 6-8 to guide curriculum connections that the Renaissance staff has taught, the programming pieces at Rand – things Principals are intimately involved in now but in a larger school would not be able to -the lead teachers would carry on those responsibilities as a curriculum person.

Bianca Bator, 131 Clarewill Avenue, stated that if the original plan was upheld, both schools would be happy – Rand moving to the new facility and Renaissance to the Rand building, retaining Principals and staff in both schools.

Mrs. Bator noted that the plan is devastating for parents - block scheduling, mixing middle and elementary students – all puts the Renaissance model in jeopardy and would like to see the discussions re-opened.

Shirell Benders, 23 Wheeler Street, questioned how a decision can be made without answers to:

- Has Montclair designed a program that shows two separate programs effective with one principal?
- What would programs look like with 2 different curriculums existing in one place ?
- Since a Principal is a visionary, how can he or she be effective in overseeing two very different programs
- What data or research supports k-8 schools or programs that it works? What proof do you have that this will work for Montclair school districts - has student achievement been considered at all.
- Is Montclair considering some ideas from Abbott school districts and will they work in Montclair?

Emer McGuire-Pool, 24 Cleveland Road, a Renaissance parent and former educator, questioned the rationale for the decision of having one Principal in the new school – is there a budgetary allowance to retain two principals.

Mrs. McGuire-Pool stated that teachers feed the programs but look to their principals to keep the programs going. She added that she felt a lead teacher would not be sufficient since there are different requirements for a principal and a lead teacher. Mrs. McGuire-Pool also stated she feels that two principals cannot work in the same building and that in time, there would not be two separate schools but one new school in Montclair.

Ms. Calabrese, 26 Wellesley Road, parent of a child with learning disabilities attending Renaissance, stated that her child's experience at Renaissance was great. Ms. Calabrese noted that the long class periods, diversity of students, exciting and interesting curriculum etc. makes Renaissance a great school and that the assets of a school cannot be measured by dollars.

Monica Bartlett, 33 Aubrey Road, parent of two children at Rand, expressed her concern that Rand would only be allowed two classes per grade if both Rand and Renaissance were to move to the new school. Mrs. Bartlett stated that she was told there will be twenty-four class rooms in new school and since Rand presently has 15 classes and Renaissance has 12, where would the additional three classrooms fit in. Mrs. Bartlett stated that she feels three or four classes per grade would be ideal and that two classes per grade would be problematic.

Mrs. Bartlett stated that many parents would be happy by moving Renaissance to Rand and Rand to the new facility, which would allow an expansion of the Rand program.

Dr. Alvarez responded that the new building actually has 27 classroom – 14 are dedicated to Rand and 12 to Renaissance, therefore leaving three classrooms for special education students.

Dr. Alvarez stated that :

- they have listened and tried to address all concerns
- the Task Force Committee included parents and staff of both Rand and Renaissance schools
- curriculum issues have to be worked out when and if the Board makes their decision and this will involve staff and principals and promises that they want to keep programs in tact
- Board will appoint Principal since it was listed as very important by many parents and will address this issue as soon as possible
- Board is not looking at the new school as K-8 model but as 2 distinct communities coming together

Shirley Grill stated that the Board wants to keep parents happy and she was glad to see so many community members in attendance. She noted that the Board wants to understand the essential natures of schools and likes hearing consistently that teachers focus on children and classrooms are a valuable place. Mrs. Grill stated there are questions and hard decisions to be made, such as - Can we justify spending \$1.5 million to upgrade Rand for a middle school by maintaining the essence of Rand in better facility and essence of Renaissance in a new space?

Ms. Grill thanked everyone for their input and attendance.

Ronald Riddick thanked everyone for attending the meeting and stated that no decisions have been made. Mr. Riddick stated that we have a new building and now must talk about

getting our children out of unhealthy environments into healthy environments and how we will move programs now in Rand and Renaissance to the new building.

Carmen Taylor commented that the Board has a difficult decision to make and they will do their best to make the right decision. Mrs. Taylor noted that they want to keep programs that are working and will continue discussions so the right decisions will be made.

Leslie Larson reiterated that no decisions have been made. Ms. Larson commended that – statements made by Dr. Alvarez were based on recommendations made by the Task force. Ms. Larson stated that the Board has heard concerns about maintaining programs and that both schools want to preserve two separate communities.

Shelley Lombard stated that the Board has not made any decisions and the purpose of this meeting was to get feedback from the community. Mrs. Lombard noted that Dr. Alvarez attempted to answer questions and clarify issues brought up at prior meetings.

Mrs. Lombard commented that the Task force recommendations were based on thinking that Renaissance parents would be happy to move to new school but the response was split - 52% want to move to Rand and 48% want to go to the new school but will consider all input.

Dr. Alvarez stated that the Task Force did not make a recommendation regarding the principals and that this decision would be made once a decision on a model is decided.

Robert Kautz commented that no one thought that this decision would be as difficult as it is. Mr. Kautz stated that the idea of new school was a positive one and the idea is to reduce class size.

Mr. Kautz stated that the Task Force took so long was because they did a very thorough job and their goal was to do this in a most budgetary efficient way. He noted that they tried to move two schools into one building, retaining the integrity of each school rather than retrofitting Rand, since it would be very expensive and is a school designed for small children.

John Carlton, thanked the Task Force for all their hard work and the public for attending and sharing their concerns. Mr. Carlton stated that this will be a very difficult budget year and there are many small details yet to be worked out with regard to the transition plan for the new school.

F. ADJOURNMENT

At 10:30 p.m., Shelly Lombard moved to adjourn the meeting; seconded by Shirley Grill and approved by a vote of 7-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Dana Sullivan
Board Secretary