

JOINT SCHOOL BOARDS MEETING

*Nekoosa School District
Port Edwards School District
Wisconsin Rapids School District*

**Joint School Boards Meeting
March 3, 2008
7:00 p.m.
John Edwards High School Gymnasium
Port Edwards, Wisconsin**

Port Edwards School Board Chair, Joe Clark called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Roll call was taken by perspective Board secretaries.

Present:

Wisconsin Rapids School District: Board members Sandra Hett, Mary Rayome, Michelle Bean, Gregory Swank, Jennifer Pfefferkorn, Anne Lee and John Krings. Superintendent Dr. Robert Crist.

Port Edwards School District: Board members Joe Clark, Dana Duncan, John Daven, Jr., Leo Thomsgard, and Sheldon Ferkey. Superintendent Dean Ryerson

Nekoosa School District: Board members Steven Bechard, Cory Gerzmehle, Darin Olson, Daniel Koble and Wayne Freeman. Superintendent Dr. Wayne Johnson.

Media Present: Adam Wise, The Daily Tribune, Teani Gildenzoph, River Cities Community Access.

Joe Clark introduced Irma Tyler-Wood, the facilitator for tonight's meeting from Ki ThoughtBridge. Ms. Tyler-Wood stated the purpose of this joint meeting tonight is to agree on a process for how the three Boards might work together to continue to provide a quality public education to the students of the South Wood County area. Ms. Tyler-Wood addressed her role in this collaborative effort and the ground rules for conducting business. These included respect for one another, open and honest dialogue, acknowledging the expertise of each member, understanding before disagreeing, and recognizing if there is an "elephant" (a long-standing, hot topic that everyone is avoiding) in the room. Ms. Tyler-Wood stated that even though there is a process in place, anyone can interject and public comment will be welcome during the general session as well as during the caucuses.

Ms. Tyler-Wood reviewed the meeting agenda, stating that the Boards have gathered to identify, explore and discuss current and future collaboration efforts and explore options that would be mutually beneficial to all school districts. Board members were encouraged to avoid certain caveats in working through a process (what are our options), into the substance (can they be realized) and then to a decision (will we commit?).

At this time the superintendents presented data from their school districts on the history of enrollment trends and resulting staffing changes, affect of revenue caps and the Qualified Economic Offer (QEO) put into place in 1993, tax rates and property evaluations, spending per pupil, facility conditions, recent referenda, student achievement, budget reductions due to economic changes, course offerings for students, declining enrollment and reduced funding at the state and federal level. Superintendent's reviewed the challenges that school districts face in providing modern curriculum, acceptable class sizes, transportation, technology and quality teachers with the above limitations in funding. A long-standing rivalry between Port Edwards and Nekoosa school districts was referenced as "the elephant in the room." Collaboration efforts in place between the three districts were addressed; such as shared special education services, athletic programs, shared teacher mentor program, River Cities High School and special class offerings for students from other districts – all in the effort of doing what's right for students.

Board members addressed the public on the following:

- The public's desire to see changes in how education is offered to students, citing virtual schools, charter schools and through technology.
- The cry of the public to contain costs and the resulting revenue caps and QEO in 1993.
- Districts either continue offering education in the same manner or step off the track and explore what could be.
- Why the school calendar is as it is – is that still necessary?
- This community is no longer insulated from state and national economic struggles. We must face this and talk about what school could be.
- Why are we here and where will this dialogue lead?
- We are all one big community, working and living within the South Wood County area. Therefore we need to think about a common mission and purpose.
- Districts are under more and more pressure to provide a better education to students.
- With a state shortfall of \$652 million, and education being a large portion of the state budget, we will be directly affected.
- School districts, as well as the community, need to break down the barriers and make further headway in educating students, in looking for other opportunities in economic growth, in retaining our students.
- School Boards do the best they can with limited resources.
- Possible need for second and third language education to make students more marketable in a very competitive and diverse cultural world.
- The future of education and working together outside the box to provide new and alternative opportunities for our students.

At 7:40 p.m. Boards went into caucuses. This was an opportunity for individual boards to listen to public comment on the feasibility of collaboration and/or consolidation of services and discuss what action they would like to take in relation to this continued effort.

Wisconsin Rapids Public Schools Board of Education met in the Band Room at the high school. Comments from the public and board members were as follows:

1. What are the top two areas you can gain financial savings by collaborating?
2. What curriculum advantages will we have with collaborating?
3. With regard to annual contracts, is there a way to get past the “elephant” (NEA, unions)?
4. Would we be looking at a possible change in boundaries?
5. Is it possible, with collaboration, to have more specialization?
6. Is the perception still true that Port Edwards and Nekoosa don't want to work together? If so, can we get past that?
7. How is it going to be determined which facilities will be used?
8. The advertising of one district in other districts – How to deal with this “elephant”?
9. If schools combine, would there be more extra-curricular activities and field trips?
10. How can we maximize our learning experience for all students within reasonable fiscal parameters?
11. How would we deal with different philosophies across districts, i.e. math wars? Would we resolve them or allow parental choice?
12. How do we ensure true collaboration so one district doesn't get harmed and one reap more benefits?
13. If an “elephant” turns into a mammoth, how would we take care of it?
14. How important is it that each district keeps its own identity?
15. How is Wisconsin Rapids going to be perceived in this, i.e. one large district, 2 smaller districts?
16. How do you get three different communities to open up, to bridge, to communicate together while maintaining what they have?
17. How can we come together to collaborate, to be a model to the rest of the country, state, to offer a school of the future?
18. Are charter schools and vouchers tools that become part of the collaboration?
19. How would the collaboration affect classroom sizes?

20. What part would virtual learning have in collaboration?
21. Collaboration doesn't mean consolidation. How to communicate that.
22. Do we need to start to explore different education philosophies as other countries? American culture currently is to education everyone.
23. How can technology progress in schools over the next few years?
24. Utilizing technology, we could be doing a lot more through distance learning at minimal cost.

Discussion was held on taking the next steps, keeping the public informed as we move forward in collaborative efforts and keeping the message clear as to the intent and mission. Board members addressed state budget concerns, the part education plays as a big ticket item within that budget and the economics of our community right now. Education issues centered around thinking outside the box, how to maintain schools and improve school programs, working together and sharing resources. The regional movement was brought forth – are other districts going through this, what are they doing about it, why have efforts failed and what is the good and bad of the regional concept? Board members stated they felt the challenges of educating students is really a community issue. The possibility of involving community leaders in discussions as they relate to the economics of the community and state was suggested.

Further discussion was held on the topic of maintaining versus improving, types of collaboration, enrollment trends and where we are on the enrollment pendulum.

Board members agreed that while they are unsure of the next steps, this district should be a part of the process, being cautious of the caveats as we all move forward.

The caucuses concluded at 9:40 p.m.

The Boards reassembled in the gymnasium. All three Boards agreed that they need to continue the process of collaborating. Discussion was held on the next steps in relation to this collaboration. These included the use of an outside facilitator to help put past obstacles aside, how often meetings should occur, should the whole boards meet or representatives, what are the expectations, what time frame are we looking at.

It was agreed that each district should choose a board representative along with the superintendent to meet sometime in May, 2008, to begin studying the issues and establishing goals. In the interim, boards can work on getting information to their representatives for work in this small committee. Board members present encouraged continued dialogue and routine meetings to ensure that this effort does not stall.

Motion by Michelle Bean, seconded by Jennifer Pfefferkorn to adjourn at 10:00 p.m.

Sandra Hett – President

Gregory Swank – Clerk

Gail Liepitz - Secretary

The meeting adjourned at 8:20 p.m.

Gail Liepitz
Secretary