

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION

School Board

February 23, 2006 – 6:30 p.m.

Council Chambers

City Council Present: Mayor Marchand, Assistant Mayor Ferrini, Councilors Grasso, Dwyer, Reynolds, Pantelakos, Whitehouse, Smith and Hynes

Officials Present: John P. Bohenko, City Manager; Dr. Robert Lister, Superintendent of Schools; Nancy Clayburgh, John Lyons, Raimond Bowles, Kent LaPage, Sheri Ham Garrity, Brendan Ristaino, Mitchell Shuldman, Carson Smith, Ann Walker, School Board Members; Stephen Zdravec, Assistant Superintendent; Stephen Bartlett, Business Administrator; Paulette Hoeflick, Student Services Director; Patricia Laska, School Nutrition Director; Joanne Simons, Reading/Title 1 Director; George Shea, Principal New Franklin Elementary School; Robin Burdick, Principal Little Harbour Elementary School; Jill LeMay, Principal Mary C. Dondero Elementary School; John Stokel, Principal Portsmouth Middle School; Forrest Ransdell, Principal Portsmouth High School and Dianne M. Kirby, Deputy City Clerk

I. Call to Order

At 6:40 p.m., Mayor Marchand called the work session to order and thanked everyone for coming. He stated that he hoped to have a good discussion with a lot of educational information as to the goals and priorities for this year and upcoming years involving our public education system. He started the meeting off by having everyone around the table introduce themselves. He then turned the meeting over to Kent LaPage, School Board Chair.

II. Introduction

Kent LaPage advised the City Council and members of the public that there are 2,52 students in the public school system and tomorrow that number could swing either way by 23 or 24 because of the high transient rate. He stated that Portsmouth is blessed to have a dedicated School Board that truly cares for our children. He went on to state that the Portsmouth School system produces the highest possible quality education for the money the taxpayers put into the system. He stated that this is evident in a very prestigious program that is, if not the best in New Hampshire, the best in the county. He stated that we have an outstanding Culinary Arts program and a Vo-Tech program that is probably the best in the nation. He stated that we are very fortunate that the City of Portsmouth has had three students win competitions in the last three years in the Culinary Arts program. He stated that tonight we have Jack Hogan and his instructor Diane Pinkham here with us. He stated that Jack Hogan, through our school system, has won a full four-year scholarship to Johnson & Wales University, which is the Oxford of cooking schools in the world. He stated that he wanted to thank Jack for taking the time to be here tonight to explain that he is what our school system is all about.

Jack Hogan stated that he is proud to be in the Portsmouth Culinary Arts program and applauded the teachers and staff of the Portsmouth School system for their support and assistance throughout his educational development.

Kent LaPage turned the meeting over to Superintendent Dr. Robert Lister for the presentation.

III. Presentation

Dr. Lister handed out copies of his presentation to the Council and everyone attending the meeting. He stated that anyone at home that would like a copy could contact a member of the School Board or see him.

Dr. Lister started his presentation by stating that the purpose of the Portsmouth Schools is to educate all students by challenging them to become thinking, responsible, contributing citizens who continue to learn throughout their lives. He stated that his introductory talking points would include

- Student population is 2,572 students in grade pre-K – grade 12
- There are 297 teachers: 76% who hold a Masters Degree or above, with 82 living in Portsmouth
- 34% of students at the High School reside in Newington, Greenland, New Castle and Rye
- In fiscal year 2005, work was completed on a new high school, which at \$40 million was the largest building project in the City of Portsmouth
- The percentage of free and reduced lunches is 20% -- down from 40% when Pease Air Force Base was in full operation
- There is a formal mentoring program for teachers
- There is a total of 635,918 square feet in seven buildings
- There are 492 School Department employees, that includes teachers, administrators, clerical, paraprofessionals, food service, custodians and maintenance (does not include substitutes, coaches or extra-curricular)
- 14% of the students pre-K – 12 receive Special Education services
- All schools have teaching and learning teams

Dr. Lister explained the Portsmouth Early Education Program (PEEP) and its goals of providing early childhood special education services to Portsmouth children 3-5 years of age who are identified as educationally disabled. He outlined other programs with the Portsmouth School system such as:

- Portsmouth Community Education Program, which offers a wide variety of non-credit workshops and courses
- Veterans' Diploma Program, which offers diplomas to Veterans who left Portsmouth High School to enlist or were drafted into the military and did not complete high school
- Exchange City – New England, which provides an opportunity for students to experience how basic economic concepts are used in the real world
- After School Programs, which promotes student involvement with interesting courses and activities that engage students in learning outside the classroom
- Portsmouth Plus, which is an after-school homework club
- FUTURES, which is an educational alliance of the business community, the Portsmouth School Department, parents and students

- Aspirations, where students, teachers and parents are exposed to sharing positive ways to build a positive culture in the schools through student involvement, parent involvement and professional development for teachers
- FRIENDS Project, where parents, staff and community members assist young people with disabilities who are frustrated over their lack of friendships and positive relationships, which causes isolation and depression

Dr. Lister reviewed the successes and challenges the school systems have dealt with, as well as on-going and future issues they will encounter.

Dr. Lister went over the different test scores and assessment testing that Portsmouth operate under, as well as where Portsmouth students rate against other schools in the area. He discussed how mobility rates, class sizes and special education have played a part in these scores.

Dr. Lister went into detail concerning the Special Education needs of Portsmouth School students, the programs for these children and the staff it takes to run the programs and care for the students.

Dr. Lister ended his presentation with discussion on the upcoming 2005-2006 School Department General Fund Budget. He defined the cost per student averages, discussed our teacher's salaries with comparison to other local towns, teacher retirements projected over the next three years and the school nutrition program.

IV. Questions and Discussion

Councilor Dwyer stated that in reviewing the achievement data in reference to reading, she noticed that all but one school tends to do better than our schools. She stated that she does not understand this. She stated that Portsmouth has very good demographics, our class sizes are very small and we spend 1/3 more per student. She requested to know what the missing piece was and why our reading achievement scores are so low.

Dr. Lister stated that he does not want to imply that low class size is just about achievement. He stated that the School Department believes that the smaller class size allows more quality of education to happen in the classroom and the more resources that can be provided. That is one of the reasons Portsmouth has a higher per student cost. He stated that Portsmouth has a lot of special services, which requires a lot of support staff. He went on to state that Portsmouth applies for and receives a lot of grant money for the school.

Councilor Dwyer stated that her main concern is that when she looked at some of the other districts, that do not have as favorable demographics as we have in terms of education and parents, etc., the cost is about 1/3 less even though they perform better. She stated that we have a very low student/teacher ratio, which does not seem to be showing itself in the outcome.

Kent LaPage stated that our demographics are not that great. He stated that our mobility is second in the state. He stated that when we look at cost per student, if you deduct grants and outside funding it actually brings it down to the state average or slightly above by a couple

hundred dollars. Mayor Marchand stated that the implication would be that we do a significantly better job than the typical school district in the state at acquiring grant and donation money. Dr. Lister stated that is correct. He stated that the taxpayer is only paying the state average per student cost, the rest of this per student cost is made up by grants and donations. Mayor Marchand stated that with due respect, the money is still green regardless of its source and the questions the Council generally have focus around the maximum utility per dollar regardless of its source.

Steve Zadavec, Assistant Superintendent stated that the School Department has been looking at assessments in a broader picture. He stated that there are other different assessments that represent what the School Department values in student learning.

Mitchell Shuldman, School Board member stated that he was concerned about class size himself and did some research. He stated that one thing that's clear is that small class size in K-4 is essential. Some studies indicate a higher graduation rate for students who remain in small class sizes on a continuing basis. Mr. Shuldman stated that some studies suggest that when you look at mobility vs. class size, mobility has a higher impact on student achievement and high school graduates. He stated that parents and teachers do not put much weight on achievement tests.

Mayor Marchand requested when we say small, what are we talking about in numbers, mid teens, high teens etc. He further stated that Councilor Dwyer's concern was not small vs. large, but small vs. very small.

Mitchell Shuldman stated that most of the studies he looked at were 17-18 and 21-22 students per class.

Dr. Lister stated that Portsmouth Schools class size is between 16-19, with the high school having a few more. He stated that what they consider reasonable is less than 20.

John Lyons, School Board member stated that another thing that is critical with regard to class size is the issue of Special Education students. He stated that small class size is critical. He went on to state that the School Board members are elected and the parents in this City want small class sizes.

Nancy Clayburgh, School Board member stated that Councilor Dwyer mentioned elementary school scores. She stated that in the middle and high schools Portsmouth has always been in the top 5. She stated that the other schools in the top 5 were from high-income areas. She stated that Portsmouth is not a high-income City. She went on to state that when you look at the elementary school you see that there is a high percentage of English as second language and that is what affects the scores.

Councilor Pantelakos stated that according to the handout, there are 182 teachers and 137 support staff in the Portsmouth School System. New Franklin school has 38 support staff is that correct and what do they support.

Dr. Lister stated that yes there are 38 support staff in the New Franklin school. These staff members support the Special Education programs.

George Shea, New Franklin Principal stated that the New Franklin school has 14 teachers and 38 support staff. This number includes maintenance, cafeteria staff, office staff, as well as part-time workers.

Kent LaPage stated that by State standards, school nurses and guidance councilors are listed as teachers. Councilor Pantelakos asked Mr. LaPage if the State tells them to list all these people, who are not teachers, as teachers. Kent LaPage replied affirmatively.

Mayor Marchand stated that one thing that might be beneficial for the Councilors and the public would be to receive a class by class listing of the number of teachers, aids and students for each individual class.

Councilor Pantelakos stated that there has been a lot of talk in the newspapers lately concerning illegal immigrants. She stated that Dr. Lister has said that there are 17 different languages spoken within the school system. She asked if all these students are naturalized and legal. Dr. Lister stated that all students that move into the area are allowed to enter Portsmouth schools. Councilor Pantelakos requested to know if the school has any procedures to ensure that these children are legal. Dr. Lister stated that each student has their residence checked to ensure they are, in fact, a resident of Portsmouth.

John Lyons, School Board member stated that having the number of teachers and aids in a classroom would tell you nothing. He stated that if a student is identified under the IDEA program then, by law the school is required to provide certain aids for that student. He stated that you might have a classroom of 18 students and no aids and a classroom of 13 students with 3 aids. He stated that unless you know the number of special education students in a classroom you would get a distorted picture.

Mayor Marchand stated that there are weaknesses and strengths simply looking at an average number. He stated that what the Council does best when it tries to create public policy is to get the spectrum of kids overall in an entire school and not make a perfect piece of data the enemy of the pretty good piece of data, but take a combination of data. He stated that is why the Council would like to see this information.

Councilor Whitehouse stated that 52% of the students in our schools are from the rental community. Is this correct? Dr. Lister stated that 52% of housing in Portsmouth is rental. Our mobility rate runs between 10-14%. Councilor Whitehouse requested that Dr. Lister explain the term mobility. Dr. Lister stated that mobility pertains to the children that move in to the community in a rental capacity. They usually come into the system with more learning needs requiring more independent assistance and then they move out.

Councilor Dwyer stated that it would be interesting to see what value we do add to students who stay in the system. Unfortunately we do not have any assessments that would allow us to see that added value.

Councilor Reynolds stated that he appreciates the data received at this work session and hopes this is the beginning and will become standard procedure for informing the public. He

stated that he looks forward to being able to compare our schools to similar schools in other areas, as new data becomes available.

Councilor Whitehouse suggested combining our schools Athletic Director with our Recreation Director. City Manager Bohenko stated that there is a meeting scheduled for March 7, 2006, in the Central Office Board Room with Dr. Lister and Chairman LaPage to discuss this matter. He stated that all Councilor's are invited to attend. Kent LaPage stated that there is a lot of excitement by all involved as to this project. Councilor Pantelakos stated that discussions at the Recreation Board meeting were very creative and she feels this action would be good for Portsmouth. Mayor Marchand stated that he has heard strong opinions on both sides. He stated the meeting on March 7th should be very informative.

Raimond Bowles, School Board member, stated that at the present we do not have any Donor Town contributions to make. He pointed out that page 34 of the handout shows a good list of things the school system has had to do without when we were paying Donor Town contributions. He suggested that the Council might see some of these items again in their budget sessions. He stated that our children have had to cope with these kinds of reductions long enough.

Councilor Dwyer stated that the Council cannot make intelligent decisions on staffing until they have the positions and caseload listing that Mayor Marchand asked for. Kent LaPage stated that when it comes to the budget, the School Board would provide the Council with the best information they have. If the Council decides that is too much, they have the right to lower their request. Beyond that the Council has no authority to tell the School Board what to do. The School Board makes those decisions.

Mayor Marchand stated that the bottom line is certainly all the Council votes on at the end of the day, but the bottom line is a collection of many lines. He speaks for all the Councilors when he says that it is critically important that the Council has as much information as possible to reach an educated decision. He stated that he feels more educated after this meeting and hopes to do the same with other departments. He stated that people of Portsmouth want results. They want value for their money and they want the Council and Boards to work towards that goal. He stated that work sessions like this one are a step in the right direction.

Mayor Marchand thanked the staff for the presentation and the residents that attended this work session.

V. Adjournment

At 9:00 p.m., Mayor Marchand closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by:

Dianne M. Kirby, Deputy City Clerk