

Brief summary of Special Board Meeting - June 28, 2010

The meeting did not start until 6:25 p.m. instead of the advertised time of 6:00 p.m. I assume the Board's closed session, which was supposed to start at 5:00 p.m., lasted longer than planned. The meeting was audio recorded only as there were no TV cameras for the special meeting. The audience consisted of only two support staff members, myself and a reporter who left 45-50 minutes after the meeting started in addition to eight administrators who were not seated at the Board table,

The superintendent started the meeting with a report on the history of Long Range Planning at New Trier dating back to 1906 with the North Central evaluation when the goal was to standardize the college prep program. In the 1960s North Central began the process of onsite visits including a self-study followed by a report from the visiting team. The early part of this decade saw the birth of state and federal accountability programs with emphasis placed on reading and math; the "No Child Left Behind" legislation was the impetus.

New Trier engaged in Strategic Planning starting in 1995. The most recent Strategic Plan was adopted in 2005 and was to run through 2010. There is a planned assessment of the 2005-10 Strategic Plan that the superintendent said is to be completed by this November.

The superintendent briefly discussed her goals that were primarily in two areas: strategic planning and academic achievement.

The superintendent then explained that each administrator was asked to write two pages relating to their issues and priorities. From those reports, which had been apparently forwarded to the Board, she gleaned the following topics:

- >Innovation and creativity of the staff
- >Foster conditions for positive student experiences
- >Economic conditions
- >Professional learning communities
- >Social and emotional development
- >Facilities
- >Professional development
- >Communications
- >Succession and planning
- >School climate

There was some discussion and definition of each category. A significant amount of time was taken with the topic of 'Economic conditions.' A board member expressed concern about the talk of pension funding and its impact on the economic conditions. One administrator said that almost all conversations asked if 'we' can afford this and will we be able to afford it in the future. Some Board members questioned whether the North Central process is worth the time, effort and money. The superintendent reported that NC is trying to cut back and keep schools in the association. Another board member said that we know the revenue picture is not good and that the expense side of the ledger is driven by labor costs, which account for about 80% of our expenses. It was mentioned that any new long-range plan must include the next referendum. (I assume they were talking about an educational rate referendum and not a capital referendum?)

This was followed by a fairly lengthy discussion around the costs of special education. They mentioned new legislation referred to as RTI – Response to Intervention, which is an attempt to put better controls on who receives full blown special education services. Basically, prior to placement in special education the question that must be answered is, “what regular education interventions have been tried before considering special education placement?” The idea is to offer services needed, but not within the strict purview of special ed that requires a significant amount of paper work. The idea is to get help for students without being classified as special education.

It was reported that 17% of the students in the township have IEPs (Individual Education Plans), which is a part of formal placement in special ed. It was reported that our high percentage is a result of doing a better job of identifying students and then offering a good program and thus attracting families seeking this special attention for their children. Autism and social/emotional problems comprise the major problems being dealt with in special ed. Schools can only do so much for a child and cannot control what goes on outside of the school day that exacerbates or ameliorates the problems. One board member asked why all students cannot have untimed testing? The administrators reported that more teachers are using other types of assessment tools and not relying completely on timed tests that appeal to various learning styles. It was emphasized that it is important to build teachers’ competencies needed for today’s students who have different learning styles than in previous generations.

There were also questions about the relevancy of today’s curriculum. A few of the administrators assured the Board that there are not only new courses in today’s curriculum but that teaching methods have also changed as have methods of assessment.

The Board then began a discussion on Long Range Planning. The question facing the Board was whether they wanted to undertake a full blown strategic planning process or modify the current 2005-10 plan as the staff feels many of the goals in that plan were worthy of continued pursuit. It was noted that the last strategic plan did not include the physical facilities and some of the Board members felt strongly about that area needing to be included in any new or revised plan. It was suggested that the Board wait until they get the report on the recent 2005-10 Strategic Plan before deciding the direction for the future.

The next topic of discussion dealt with board governance and committee structure. One member suggested to make more committees ‘committees of whole’ to increase Board involvement and enhance communications among the Board members. It was pointed out by others that the additional time commitment that this would require would be a burden that may have negative effects. Some suggested to make the current committees more open to public scrutiny with minutes available to the other Board members as well as the public.

At the very end the Board voted to approve the Personnel Report without any comment.

The meeting was adjourned about 8:45 p.m.

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