

Warwick School Committee Minutes  
Meeting of March 25, 2008  
Open Session

The Warwick School Committee met in Open Session at Veterans Memorial High School on Tuesday, March 25, 2008. Chairman Friel called the meeting to order at 6:12 p.m. with the following in attendance:

COMMITTEE

Christopher Friel, Chairperson  
Lucille Mota-Costa, Vice Chair  
Bethany Furtado, Clerk  
Joyce L. Andrade  
Paul Cannistra

ADMINISTRATION

Peter P. Horoschak, Superintendent  
Rosemary Healey, Esq., Director of Compliance & Human Resources  
David E. Small, Director of Buildings and Grounds

MOTION 2008-57: Moved by Ms. Furtado, seconded by Mrs. Andrade, to go into closed session for discussion and/or action regarding those items of business exempt from open meetings under General Laws of Rhode Island 42-46-5(a)(1) and (a)(2).

MOTION PASSES (4-0)

Christopher Friel - Aye      Lucille Mota-Costa – not present for vote  
Joyce L. Andrade – Aye      Bethany Furtado – Aye  
Paul Cannistra - Aye

Meeting reconvened at 7:10 p.m. with the following in attendance in addition to those listed above:

Victor Mercurio, Director of Secondary Education  
Robert T. Bushell, Director of Elementary Education  
Richard D'Agostino, Director Special Services  
Leonard Flood, Director of Business Affairs

Chairman Friel announced that in executive session, the School Committee voted 5-0 to uphold the recommendation of the Superintendent.

**New Business: Vote on school closures: Potowomut, Rhodes & Drum Rock:**

The following comments were made by the School Committee Members:

**Joyce Andrade:** I don't take disrupting school families and school communities lightly. A tremendous amount of time and effort has gone into this process and many of you have taken the opportunity to voice your opinion. There is no good answer unfortunately. There are a number of issues – effect on students, school capacity, effect on teachers and staff. The process has been criticized. I've looked at all the data and information presented to the School Committee, as well as concerns raised on the public forum on the school department's website. Although the Redistricting Committee was formed in July, the criticism is that it did not meet prior to December. There was information gathering and data gathering which started in August. It was decided to break down into subcommittees and look at three districts within the school department.

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I think we should make this decision once and we should do it right. We know what the airport has taken and the impact, but we still don't know where that is going. The budget crisis is real. If someone is aware of an area that is over funded or mismanaged, show it to us. In light of the new information and concerns raised since the Redistricting and Consolidation Advisory Committee presented its recommendation to the School Committee, I ask if the vote on school closures could be postponed for six to eight weeks to allow the advisory committee more time to examine the new information. I cannot support the recommendation at this time, based on the information. I believe the school consolidation does need to take place, but I'm concerned about the process. I know the Superintendent and administration put in countless hours and recommendations. I know they feel the right way to do it.

**Lucille Mota-Costa:** This decision that comes before us tonight is the beginning of a series of difficult but important decisions this committee will have to make with limited funds for next several years. I can't stress enough that we have an ongoing serious crisis. I have witnessed our City Council and the Mayor through the budget process repeatedly deny School Committee's request to put aside millions of dollars needed to fund a potential contractual settlement with out teachers. Money that we dedicated was taken out of our budget and placed in city surplus. With this money unavailable we still need to find over \$4 million to address this obligation with no power to tax. The State of Rhode Island continues to ignore its obligation to contribute. The federal government for 8 long years has devastated the public school system in this country and our city by burdening us with unfunded expensive inconclusive testing of our children and dramatic cuts when it comes to paying their fair share of Medicaid costs. As your representative, I believe consolidation and redistricting is a responsible and necessary part of this assurance. During this long discussion, I refused to close any school without reviewing all our schools citywide. This redistricting/consolidation committee, in my opinion, achieved this goal. After hearing the recommendation and before I made my decision, I reviewed extensive criteria for every elementary school citywide along with information made available by the Department of Ed, our Administration, City Planning, Dept. of Environmental Management, RI State Dept. of Health and information/recommendations by involved citizens of Warwick. I also weighed very closely the ease of transition with minimal impact to the educational learning environment for our general and special needs students; health and safety risk regarding airport location/expansion, Title I negative impact, neighborhood population decline (past, present and future); and affective cost savings based on annual average utility, maintenance and security costs and future structural improvements and maintenance repair. Many of you have said I don't envy you your position. It is difficult to be an agent of change, but I believe I have done my do diligence. Whatever the outcome tonight I am sure we will all, as responsible adults, work together to transition our students with an optimistic perspective. I believe this redistricting/consolidation decision is the beginning of many educational strategic plans that will enable us to better serve our students with the quality of education they deserve.

**Bethany Furtado:** I do not have a prepared statement, I am not comfortable speaking in front of a large group, but I will talk from my heart. I believe the Redistricting Committee did the job put before them. I believe in change. I believe School Department is being run efficiently. That is why I am on the School Committee. I believe what you say and do should speak volumes for people and my vote tonight will reflect the values of the people I represent in District 3.

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**Paul Cannistra:** Thank you for coming tonight and for coming to the last two public sessions. I want to thank the people who participated in redistricting. We can't afford to look at this in the here and now. I'm trying to look over the horizon because these decisions will have long-range impact for years to come. Teachers and staff expect that they'll have the proper materials and supplies for their students. Parents expect that their children will be in clean, safe and efficient buildings. Taxpayers that don't have children in the schools expect that any city department will run its operations in the best manner possible. When students receive a diploma, it is the Warwick School System's written guarantee that those students completed the necessary tasks and possess the necessary tools to go to college or get a job. I want to make sure that every kid has every available opportunity to be the best they can be and I want to live up to that written guarantee. I want to make sure that every kid has every available opportunity to be the best they can be and I want to live up to that written guarantee.

**Chairman Christopher E. Friel**

I. Acknowledgements

The most difficult issue that any school committee member faces is that of school consolidation. This is particularly true in a community such as Warwick, which has long prided itself on its neighborhood elementary schools. It is not with any pleasure that the Warwick School Committee addresses this issue here this evening. No one on the committee sought election to this position with the desire to close any of our fine public schools.

Before I render my opinion and set forth my rationale on this subject, I would like to take a moment to thank the following individuals who spent their valuable time serving upon the Warwick Schools Redistricting/Consolidation Advisory Committee. So, not in any particular order, I thank Warwick Council PTA President Connie Jaquith, parents Jillian Sates and Gina Morgan, WISE Union President Cherie Nickerson, Teacher Assistant Linda Sheehan, Warwick Teacher's Union President Sam Holtzman, teachers Jeannie Petit and Donna Murgo, Principals Frank Ricci, Ron Areglado and William Sangster, Directors Robert Bushell, Victor Mercurio and Richard D'Agostino, and finally Superintendent Peter Horoschak who chaired the advisory committee. Of all the committees that exist, this must have been the most difficult to serve upon, knowing that whatever recommendation made would be unpopular.

I also want to acknowledge some other individuals, who, while not serving upon the advisory committee, were involved in the process through their participation on the web forum established to discuss this issue. These include Jonathan Lautieri, Mrs. Sharon Oliver, Mr. Tom Daniels, and Mrs. Tina Dean. There are many others who actively participated on the forum whose names I do not know, and I thank them as well for being part of the process. I frequently visited the forum and believe that it was a valuable tool and method for people to discuss the process and ultimately the proposal of the advisory committee. Finally, I would like to express my thanks to the Warwick Council PTO/PTA, the PTAs and PTOs of Drum Rock, John Greene, Christopher Rhodes, Potowomut, and Wyman, for inviting the Superintendent and I to address the parents of those school communities and attempt to explain the reasons why this issue was being broached. From the onset we wanted this process to be as open and transparent as possible, and so I thank you for helping us make that desire a reality.

II. Background

In July of 2007 the Warwick School Committee created an advisory committee, the School Redistricting/Consolidation advisory committee, which was charged with studying enrollment in our district, and to make a report and recommendations concerning redistricting and/or consolidation of the

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district's schools to the School Committee in March 2008. The rationale behind creating this committee was two-fold: (1) the district has witnessed a steady decline in enrollment over the past ten years, a trend which is predicted to continue for at least the next five years (the period of time for which data is available); and (2) the district faces a projected budget deficit in fiscal year 2008-09 between approximately \$6,000,000 and \$9,000,000.

As it pertains to the issue of student enrollment, in 2002 the student population of the Warwick School system stood at 12,206. Currently, 11,150 students attend Warwick's public schools. According to the most recent data available, student enrollment is expected to continue to decline to approximately 10,442 in 2012. The city's elementary schools alone have seen a 14.3% decline in enrollment from 1999 to the present. To put this into further perspective, the same facilities which we currently maintain, that being 20 elementary schools, three junior high schools, and three high schools, at one time serviced approximately 19,000 students.

This decline in enrollment means that the average elementary school building is operating at slightly more than one-half, or 54%, student capacity. This range goes from a high of 74% student capacity at Drum Rock elementary school, to a low of 36% student capacity at Potowomut elementary school. The optimum capacity in which to operate a school is 90%.

This translates into higher per pupil costs. In 2006, the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) studied the Warwick School system and found that "Warwick had the highest per pupil expenditure for facilities, spending \$1,082 per pupil in [fiscal year] 2005. This outpaced all of the other peer school districts, with Warwick being 20.2 percent higher than the next highest school district." RIPEC further went on to state that "Warwick has about 164 square feet per student, the lowest density among the peers. However, the district has the second highest expenditures among the peers with \$6.84 per square feet."

Warwick, while not alone, faces serious financial issues next year. As previously mentioned, if no action is taken by the school committee, and all schools, programs, and staffing remain at their current levels, the district is projecting a deficit ranging from six million to nine million dollars this upcoming fiscal year, utilizing a best-case worst-case realistic scenario. This figure would increase should the State of Rhode Island cut state aid to education and/or the City of Warwick not provide to the school department a 5% increase over last year's allocation, the maximum a school department can request under existing state law.

No one budgetary item is responsible for the creation of a projected deficit of this magnitude. Instead, it can be attributed to a combination of factors. The State of Rhode Island level funded state aid to education this current fiscal year, and, according to the Governor's recently revealed 2008-09 proposed budget, the same can be expected next year as well. The federal government has reduced Medicaid reimbursements to local school districts; this has resulted in an anticipated loss of \$1,050,000 in revenue to the Warwick School Department from 2006-07 to 2008-09.

Aside from stagnant and declining revenue streams, there are also increases in numerous expenditure areas. The largest single expenditure increase for fiscal year 2009 is in the form of a retroactive payment due Warwick's teachers from the 2005-06 school year in the amount of \$4.8 million. Health insurance and pension costs continue to rise, and these increases are projected to cost the district an additional \$2.7 million next year. Salary increases for fiscal year 2009 will increase by approximately \$3.4 million over this current year. Finally, all other budgetary line items, including materials, supplies, and purchased services, are projected to increase \$575,000, or 3% over this current year.

With the above in mind, the Warwick School Committee wanted to be fully apprised of any and all areas where efficiencies could be realized, including in the area of school consolidation. At the public hearings and on the internet forum, numerous suggestions were made at other potential cost saving measures. Some suggestions were made as an alternative to school closings, while others in conjunction with.

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III. Recommendations Being Considered and/or Implemented

Knowing that school consolidation alone would not bridge a financial gap of this magnitude, the school department administration and Warwick School Committee have explored other potential savings. I will address what other options are being studied, and also address suggestions made at the public hearing, on the school department website forum, and via electronic communications.

*A. Personnel Reductions at All Levels*

The largest single expenditure area of the school system is personnel. As personnel expenses make up 84% of the school department budget, it is the only area where the school committee can realize significant savings.

In FY2003-04 the school department spent \$118,268,718 on Salaries and Fringe Benefits, that figure increased to \$138,486,960 in FY2007-08. Thus, between FY2003-04 and FY2007-08 Salaries and Fringe Benefits increased \$20,218,242. The total budgetary expenditure increased during that same time from \$143,843,697 to \$164,761,781, an increase of \$20,918,084, or 14.5% over 5 years (an average of 2.9% per year). Therefore, salary and benefit increases comprised 97% of the total budget increase between the years 2003-04 and 2007-08. Please note that these figures reflect the costs for all school department personnel, including administration, teachers, and support staff.

What has the school administration and Warwick School Committee done to control costs in the area of personnel? At the beginning of the 2003-04 school year, the district employed 1133 certified teachers. The number of certified teachers employed by the district at the start of this current school year was 1088, a reduction of 45 full-time certified teaching positions, or a 4% teacher workforce reduction since 2003. The total number of full time employees in administration and middle management during that same time period has been reduced by 5%, from 80 in 2003-04 to 76 at the start of the current school year. Last year alone, the school committee eliminated the equivalent of 12 full-time support staff positions, these are members of the Warwick Independent School Employees (WISE) bargaining unit. I am not proud of this fact, for each of these "numbers" represents a person whose livelihood was affected by our decisions. Rather, I offer this information in the attempt to show that the Warwick School Committee has been making difficult decisions for some years now.

Let's now look ahead to next year, FY2008-09. The school department's anticipated revenue increase is \$5,653,241 for next year. The assumption is that the City of Warwick will allocate a 5% increase over this current year's allocation, the maximum the School Committee can request pursuant to state law. I fear that the school department will not be allocated the entire five percent increase. This fear was heightened when Councilman Bruce Place spoke at the public hearing and indicated that, in his opinion, a five percent allocation increase "was not in the cards." Every percentage point of allocation equals \$1,180,500. Thus, if the City allocates the school department a four percent increase over last year, our projected deficit increases from \$5.9 million to over \$7 million next year.

In FY2008-09, without any changes in personnel, salaries and benefits alone are projected to increase \$6,219,349. This does not include the retroactive payment due to the members of the Warwick Teacher's Union in the amount of \$4,800,000. Retroactive payment aside, the salary and benefit increase exceeds even the maximum additional allocation of \$5,903,241, the school department could receive from the City.

Personnel reductions at all levels will take place. The School Committee has already authorized the mailing of 40 lay-off notices, the maximum allowed per contract, to certified teachers. We anticipate the elimination of 20 teaching positions, again the most allowed per contract. The Superintendent has already publicly stated that he will be restructuring central administration and middle management. Towards that end, he caused ten lay-off notices to go out in these areas. Furthermore, the Superintendent has indicated that he will not be filling a soon-to-be-vacant supervisor position. Members of the WISE Union should likewise expect cuts in personnel.

Despite the above-outlined cuts in personnel, the school department has reached the point where over 100% of the new money coming into the system from the City of Warwick is going strictly to pay for

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salary and benefit increases. Complicating the matter further is the fact that the State of Rhode Island has provided no increase in state aid to education last year, and Federal funds are decreasing in terms of Medicaid reimbursements.

The School Committee is in the position of having to cut personnel in order to fund the remaining employees' salary and benefit increases. This cannibalistic approach is unsustainable.

*B. Request a Supplemental Tax from the City of Warwick*

It has been suggested that the School Committee request additional funding from the City of Warwick by calling for a supplemental tax. In order to respond to this suggestion, some additional background information is necessary. I have often referred to "state law" or "Senate 3050" when discussing the ability of the school department to request an allocation from the city, or the ability of the City of Warwick to raise tax revenue. Senate 3050 was codified into Rhode Island General Laws section 44-5-2. This section of the law sets a maximum amount by which any given town or city can raise taxes over the previous year. For example, in fiscal year 2007, the law states that "a city or town may levy a tax in an amount not more than five and one-half percent (5.5%) in excess of the amount levied" in the prior year. In 2008, the current fiscal year, that percent decreased to five and one-quarter (5.25%) percent. Next year, fiscal year 2009, it once again decreases to five (5%) percent. The maximum tax levy continues to decrease in one-quarter percent intervals to 2013, whereupon the levy increase cannot exceed four (4%) percent.

Assuming that the city reaches the maximum tax increase this upcoming year, it is for this reason why the Mayor and City Council cannot authorize a supplemental tax. Should the city not tax to the maximum amount allowable under law, the school department may have a claim for additional funding under the Caruolo Act.

The Caruolo Act provides a mechanism by which school departments may seek to force cities or towns to provide additional funding for education. One of the requirements, however, is that the school system not be able to meet the basic educational requirements set forth by state law. The Rhode Island Supreme Court has not yet decided what impact Senate 3050 has upon the Caruolo Act. It is my opinion, and admittedly I am not an expert in this area of the law, that an action pursuant to Caruolo would only be successful if the city or town had not met the maximum allowable tax levy increase and then, the school department could only be awarded additional funding up to that amount. In any case, such litigation would be a costly and time-consuming venture.

The only other alternative would be a draw-down in the City of Warwick cumulative surplus.

*C. Combining Functions with the City of Warwick Municipal Government*

The City of Warwick and the Warwick Public Schools have already been studying the feasibility of consolidation of functions between the municipality and the schools. This has been looked at through the creation of the RIPEC study committee. This study committee consists of the Mayor, three members of the City Council, two members of the school committee (myself and Mr. Cannistra), the Superintendent, as well as the city's Director of Personnel and Director of Finance.

The first initiative that will yield savings is in the area of trash collection. Commencing July 1, the City of Warwick will be taking over trash collection from the school department. Previously, the school department contracted with outside vendors for this service. While the initial cost to begin this process stands at approximately \$80,000 for the necessary bins, we anticipate savings of at least \$56,000 per year going forward. Not only is this fiscally sound, but also environmentally sound, as the schools will be participating in the city's exemplary recycling program.

Discussions have already taken place concerning combining other duplicative functions with the city, including merging the school department's groundskeepers with their counterparts employed by the City of Warwick, combining information and technology departments, and other areas as well. These discussions continue to take place at the regularly scheduled RIPEC study committee meetings.

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*D. Privatization of Functions*

Another cost saving measure suggested was the outsourcing of the district's janitorial and custodian responsibilities. Currently, this is not an option as there exists language within the Warwick Independent School Employee's collective bargaining agreement prohibiting the subcontracting out of any of the duties and responsibilities of the Warwick Independent School Employees union membership.

This same language precludes the school department from privatizing other such functions as well. One area that has been explored by the administration and discussed during contract negotiations is that of special education busing. The vast majority of cities and towns in the State of Rhode Island contract with busing companies to provide transportation for all of their students. Currently, a company called First Student provides bus transportation for all but the special needs population here in Warwick. For the special needs population, the school department maintains a fleet of 32 buses, together with an equal number of drivers and monitors. Preliminary estimates show that the school department could save approximately \$2.5 million dollars per year by contracting with First Student, or another such company, to provide bus transportation to our special needs population as well.

This option is still being pursued by the school committee. The Warwick School Committee and the WISE Union have not been able to reach agreement on a successor agreement to that which expired on August 31, 2006. Negotiations are ongoing.

*E. Reduce Out-of-District Placements*

This suggestion has already been implemented to a large extent by the school administration and Warwick School Committee. The Director of Special Education, Dr. D'Agostino, has been very active in pursuing savings in this area. Dr. D'Agostino presented to the school committee, two years ago, a plan to service, in house, certain programs and students previously sent to out-of-district placements.

Prior to this fiscal year, the School Department paid outside preschool programs to educate some of our preschool students. Since the School Department already employed the teachers at the outside programs, we only needed to hire some teacher assistants to realize significant savings in servicing these children in-house.

This year also marked the first year of an Alternate Learning Program (ALP) located at Warwick Veterans Memorial High School. Housing this program at the high school saved approximately \$400,000 in this year's budget.

Dr. D'Agostino and his staff are carefully screening all of our out-of-district placements to ascertain whether the school department can provide the same level of service in-house for less money. His proposal was implemented by the school committee, and, as a result of his efforts, the district's out-of-district tuition expenditures has decreased from \$8,200,000 in fiscal year 2006-07 to \$6,346,726 in fiscal year 2007-08.

*F. Redistricting*

It has been suggested on numerous occasions that an entire city-wide redistricting is in order. Redistricting is simply the process of altering school attendance zone boundaries. I am at a loss as to why that would be necessary or beneficial to the district as a whole.

Let us assume, for example, that the average elementary school building capacity stands at 54%. Let us further assume that the redistricting/advisory committee sat down and re-drew all of the school attendance zone boundaries. Children from Cedar Hill would go to Potowomut, children from Scott would go to Drum Rock, children from Drum Rock would go to Greenwood, children from Rhodes would go to Holliman, so on and so forth. Not a single school's attendance boundaries would be unaltered from this year to next. When the process is complete, the average elementary school building capacity remains at 54%, no savings are realized, and many more students are displaced from their current school setting. I feel that a complete redistricting, without consolidation, causes maximum disruption with no positive results. It simply redistributes an already sparse student population.

Consolidation, on the other hand, is the process by which facilities are closed, thus realizing cost savings and utilizing the existing facilities in a more efficient manner. Redistricting is intrinsically woven

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into the consolidation process. As a school closes, the boundary lines of the surrounding schools must be altered to incorporate the displaced student population.

*G. Offer Teachers and Early Retirement Incentive*

It has recently been suggested by Warwick Teacher's Union President Sam Holtzman that the district could avoid school closures by offering an incentive for top-step teachers to retire, thus resulting in significant savings to the School Department. While I commend Mr. Holtzman for forwarding an idea which may, if implemented, result in some savings to the district, it does not appear that the savings would be so significant so as to bridge the financial gap the district faces. That is not to say that the retirement incentive is not something that should be further studied. Even if the School Committee accepts the proposal on school consolidation, there will remain a projected \$3.2 million deficit which will need to be addressed. The School Committee and School Department will continue to investigate this proposal in order to determine whether or not such a plan is fiscally sound.

IV. Proposal

The proposal currently before the Warwick School Committee is to close Potowomut Elementary, Drum Rock Elementary, and Christopher Rhodes Elementary Schools. There is a further recommendation to create an Early Childhood Learning Center at Drum Rock Elementary School.

V. Considerations

In analyzing the proposal, I utilized a two-pronged approach, the first prong is to determine whether or not there is a need for school consolidation at this point in time. If the answer is affirmative, then the second-prong is to determine whether or not there exists a rational basis for the selection of Potowomut, Drum Rock, and Christopher Rhodes for closure.

Additionally, in conducting my analysis, I composed a list of factors which I felt were important to take into consideration when reviewing the proposal made by the Redistricting/Consolidation Advisory Committee. Those factors can be broken down into the following categories: (1) Educational; (2) Fiscal; and (3) Geographic.

A. Educational Factors

1. Resulting classroom size
2. Impact of proposal on special education population
3. Ability to continue to provide quality education to all Warwick's student population.
4. Impact of proposal on receiver schools
5. Ability to maintain programs and classes above and beyond the basic educational requirements

B. Financial Factors

1. Cost savings to be realized by proposal
2. Cost avoidance to be realized by proposal
3. Alternate areas to realize cost savings should school facilities not be consolidated

C. Geographic Factors

1. Location of school facilities subject to consolidation
2. Airport expansion/Route 37 extension
3. Contiguousness of school attendance zone boundaries
4. Neighborhood continuity
5. Student population parity between districts

VI. Discussion

- A. *Is consolidation of elementary schools is appropriate at this time?*

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The Warwick School Department's financial situation aside, based upon the continuous decline in student enrollment, school consolidation is appropriate at this time. It was very telling that, when asked this same question, the city planner indicated that school closures should have taken place ten years ago. Combining the district's decline in student enrollment with the projected financial deficit the School Department faces next year, only serves to make consolidation imperative at this time.

The contention that school consolidation should take place in the district is largely undisputed. With that in mind, and in the attempt to preserve our neighborhood elementary schools, in January of this year I proposed that school consolidation take place at the junior high school level. Under my proposal, the system's elementary schools would house kindergarten through eighth grade classes. This would have increased the student population at the district's twenty elementary schools, thus increasing their operating capacity and making them more cost efficient.

Consolidation at the junior high school level proved not to be feasible at the current time for varying reasons, including the fact that the junior high school curriculum could not be implemented in the elementary schools economically. A second reason was that there was insufficient classroom space, even if the music, science, and other such classrooms were utilized, to house the necessary seventh and eighth grade classrooms at each of the elementary schools.

Ruling out consolidation at the junior high school level leaves consolidation at the elementary level as the only viable option.

*B. Was there a rational basis for the selection of the Potowomut, Drum Rock, and Christopher Rhodes elementary schools?*

The School Committee, to some extent, must give deference to the report and recommendation of the Redistricting/Advisory Committee. We did, after all, create this committee to investigate whether or not there were any efficiencies which could be realized through the consolidation and/or redistricting of our public school system. This committee had the ability to access or request documentation to aid them in their decision. It is also important to note that the advisory committee was comprised of various stakeholders in the community, including teachers, support staff, and parents in addition to members of the administration. Purposefully omitted from the advisory committee were members of the Warwick School Committee. This was done so as effectuate an unbiased study of the school system as well as to not have individual school committee members lobbying against the closure of schools in his or her district.

The process of identifying potential schools to close is not an exact science, nor is it an easy process. Certain schools can be ruled out after only a preliminary review. Following are the schools which fit into this category.

- (1) Greenwood – with only two contiguous schools, Greenwood's 271 students could not be accommodated at Drum Rock and Wickes;
- (2) Hoxie – Hoxie's population of 305 students could not fit into the three contiguous schools without changes in the junior high-high school feeder pattern;
- (3) Norwood – Norwood's 231 students cannot fit into the two contiguous schools of Holliman and Rhodes;
- (4) Oakland Beach – Oakland Beaches 340 students can not fit into other neighboring schools;
- (5) Park – has only one contiguous school, consolidation would require a change in the junior high-high school feeder pattern;
- (6) Robertson – Robertson's population of 224 students would necessitate a change in the junior high-high school feeder pattern if consolidated;
- (7) Scott – has only two contiguous schools, Cedar Hill and Drum Rock, and if Potowomut is closed, Scott's students cannot be accommodated at Cedar Hill;
- (8) Wyman – Wyman's student population would not fit into the neighboring schools of Francis and Rhodes;

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(9) Cedar Hill – large student population cannot fit into contiguous schools.

In reviewing the Redistricting/Consolidation Advisory Committee minutes, and from listening to the presentation, two common themes permeated the selection process: the maintenance of the same junior high – high school feeder patterns, and also, the minimizing the “bumping process.” Both of these factors appear to have been intended to minimize the disruption to the school system as a whole. In addition, maintaining the same feeder patterns also serves to maintain the student population parity at the junior high and high school level.

In addition to those listed above, other schools, such as Holden and Wickes, if consolidated, would result in a change to the feeder pattern currently in place. Finally, it appears as if the advisory committee refrained from recommending Greene, Sherman, and Warwick Neck due to the fact that there exists a possibility of new housing in the Warwick Neck area of the city, the only area that presents itself to this possibility.

While student population is one reason why consolidation is appropriate at the current time, the financial situation the School Department faces next year cannot be ignored. Savings realized through school consolidation are essential to the formation of next fiscal years budget. It is estimated that the district will save approximately \$2.7 million dollars under the proposal. While not completely solving the budgetary dilemma, this does make up a large portion of the projected deficit.

*1. Potowomut Elementary School*

Potowomut Elementary School is unlike any other elementary school in the district. Its location, isolated from the rest of the city, poses unique issues for this school. For years, Potowomut has been the sole school recommended to the School Committee for consolidation. Each time the recommendation has been rejected. Were it not for its location, the school would most likely have been closed some time ago.

Student population is the primary reason why Potowomut has time and time again been selected for consolidation. With an enrollment of approximately 110 students, the school’s student population can, in its entirety, be merged with Cedar Hill Elementary School. There have been calls by members of the Potowomut community for a redistricting of Cedar Hill students to Potowomut. I have taken this into consideration, and find it impractical for two reasons. First, in order to do so, classes at Cedar Hill Elementary School would have to be divided, and a certain number of students bused to Potowomut. Contrast this with the proposal currently before the School Committee, whereby all Potowomut students will be attending Cedar Hill, thus students will still have the opportunity to be with their friends, the class will remain intact, albeit at a different facility. Second, enrollment at Potowomut is such that, in order to increase the efficiency of the facility, more students would actually have to be transported there than currently attend the school.

I further realize that at some point in time, some students currently attending Cedar Hill were slated to attend Potowomut. That instead, an addition was added to Cedar Hill to ensure sufficient space at that facility. While I was not involved in that decision making process, in retrospect it does appear questionable. My role is not, however, to look at what should have been done in the past, but instead to make a decision which I feel best suits the school district as a whole now and in the future.

In terms of class size, the consolidation and redistricting of Potowomut’s students to Cedar Hill will have a negligible effect. Currently, the Cedar Hill average 1-6 class-size is 21.66 students. Under the proposal, that would actually decrease to an average class size of 20.58 students. This is due to the fact that Cedar Hill will realize three or four additional teachers according to the proposal. Furthermore, the weighted average will likewise decrease, from current 1-6 weighted class size average of 20.78 to 19.38 under the proposal if implemented.

Arguments to keep Potowomut open center largely upon its location as well as its status as center of the community. I understand the neighborhood attachment to the school, and the purpose it serves within the Potowomut community. The same, however, can be said by any number of the district’s elementary schools. I further understand and acknowledge the fact that there is currently pending an application with the Rhode Island Department of Education, whereby some Potowomut parents seek to

turn the facility into a charter school. I wish them well in their application process, but I cannot, however, let that control my decision here this evening.

### *2. Drum Rock Elementary School*

Drum Rock Elementary School is currently operating at between 74 and 90 percent capacity, depending upon the formula utilized to compute such a figure. Either way, it is operating at the highest percentage of capacity within the entire district. This begs an answer to the question often posed by Drum Rock supporters, why close the school with the highest operating capacity? The answer lies with the fact that operational capacity is just one of the factors considered in the selection process, and by no means the determining issue.

The proposal is not to consolidate Drum Rock in the traditional sense of the word, but instead to redistrict the Drum Rock students to four schools, each within the Winman-Tollgate feeder pattern, and utilize the facility as an Early Childhood Learning Center. What makes this possible is the following. First, Drum Rock is the only school where all of its students are bused to and from school. Second, there are four separate and distinct neighborhoods which comprise the school attendance zone. Third, Drum Rock is also the newest facility in our district, complete with air-conditioning and handicap accessibility, this allows for its use as the aforementioned Early Childhood Learning Center. And fourth, Drum Rock's location within its attendance zone allows for the redistricting of some students to schools which are actually closer to their homes than Drum Rock is currently.

Under the proposal, Drum Rock's students would be apportioned among Greenwood, Robertson, Scott, and Wickes. The affect upon the recipient school's class size varies. Greenwood would see its 1-6 average class size increase slightly, from 19.44 to 19.75 under the proposal. At the other end of the spectrum, Robertson would see its average 1-6 class size increase from 16.36 to 22.50 if the School Committee accepts the proposal. Scott and Wickes' new average 1-6 class sizes would be 20.57 and 22.00 respectively. As it pertains to class size, the proposal's results, if approved, fall well within the widely accepted class size range in terms of both educational soundness and teacher's contractual language.

Part and parcel of the recommendation to consolidate Drum Rock, is the proposal from the School Department administration to create an Early Childhood Learning Center at that facility. If implemented, the facility would serve the entire City of Warwick, and would house the preschool programs currently offered at Cedar Hill and Robertson, a special kindergarten program, an Occupational and Physical Therapists office, VOWS office, and Child Outreach. Additionally, the facility would continue to house the Extended School Year program that has resided at Drum Rock for the past 15 years.

### *3. Christopher Rhodes Elementary School*

Christopher Rhodes Elementary School posed a particularly difficult quandary for me. Not only did I attend this school, but I believed that if any elementary school was to be consolidated in the northern portion of the city, then Holliman seemed to be the most obvious and logical choice.

T.F. Green Airport, by all accounts, appears to be poised to expand in a northerly direction across Airport Road. With any northerly expansion of the airport, would come a closure of Airport Road, which connects Post Road and Warwick Avenue. The current airport expansion proposals include an extension of Route 37, which currently terminates at Post Road, to continue to Warwick Avenue. There are two possible termination points on Warwick Avenue. The more southerly termination point, in the vicinity of where Squantum Drive meets Warwick Avenue, would result in the loss of a number of residences which currently sit north of the airport. The more northern termination point, in the vicinity of where Namquid Drive meets Warwick Avenue, would have a much more drastic impact on the residences which are currently located in the neighborhood known as Masasoit Terrace. This neighborhood falls within the Holliman Elementary School attendance zone. When the Rhode Island Airport Corporation (RIAC) representative and the City of Warwick Planner appeared before the advisory committee, they indicated that the more northerly Route 37 option could mean the loss of between 300 and 450 homes. With that

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information in mind, I questioned the selection of Rhodes over Holliman as the school recommended for consolidation in the northern part of the city.

It is important to note that any currently discussed airport expansion proposals would not require the closing of any schools within the city. Certainly, there would be a substantial loss of student enrollment north of the airport should the airport expand in that direction, but no school facility would fall within the airport boundary.

Rhodes and Holliman appear to have very similar facilities. Both contain approximately the same square footage. According to the Bond Cost Analysis, Holliman requires \$568,796 in fire code compliance changes, Rhodes, on the other hand, requires \$448,892 in fire code compliance changes. Additionally, Rhodes needs a new boiler at the estimated cost of \$39,496. Also according to the Construction Cost Estimate Summary dated November 8, 2005, Holliman was selected for a roof replacement costing approximately \$673,785. The total construction cost estimate for Holliman is \$1,306,784, compared with Rhodes at \$501,188. Thus, in terms of cost avoidance, Holliman appears to be the more prudent choice.

The advisory committee, however, did not base its decision on cost avoidance alone. Other factors must also be taken into consideration. First and foremost is the feasibility of redistricting the existing student population into surrounding schools. The advisory committee determined that Rhodes student population of 259 students could be absorbed into the adjacent schools of Francis, Holliman, Norwood and Wyman, more readily than Holliman's student population of 315 students. The special education population also weighed upon the advisory committee's recommendation. Holliman currently houses five special education programs, versus the three that are housed in Rhodes. Holliman currently acts as an early childhood center in the northern part of the city.

Finally, Holliman's centralized location in northern Warwick is a benefit as well. Being centrally located, and located between Post Road and Warwick Avenue, opens up additional opportunities for the school and provides the School Department with more options and flexibility in the future. Furthermore, access to a centrally situated school proves less of a burden in terms of transportation.

The affect upon the received schools following a potential Rhodes consolidation must also be looked at. Under the proposal, Rhodes' existing student population will be divided among four other elementary schools, all situated within the same Aldrich-Pilgrim feeder pattern, those being Francis, Holliman, Norwood, and Wyman. In terms of class size, Francis now has an average 1-6 class size of 21 children, which would increase to 22.62 under the proposal. Holliman has an average 1-6 class size of 20.33 children, which would increase to 22.58 pursuant to the proposal. Norwood's current 1-6 class size stands at 19.25, that would increase to 20.75 should the proposal be accepted. Finally, Wyman's average 1-6 class size is currently 19.75, that would increase to 22.29 under the proposal. While each school will realize an increase in the average class size, none appear so dramatic so as to be detrimental to the educational process. Also, all weighted class sizes appear to be within the limit of 28 as called for in the Warwick Teacher's Union contract.

I am satisfied that the advisory committee has a rational basis for the selection of Christopher Rhodes Elementary School for consolidation in the northern portion of Warwick.

#### IV. Conclusion

From the onset I knew that consolidation of any schools, let alone elementary schools, would not be an easy process. Students, parents, teachers and staff all have an emotional attachment to their local neighborhood elementary school, and with good reason. Warwick's elementary schools are high performing; this is a tribute to the hard work of the principals, teachers and staff of those schools.

In my appearances before the various school PTAs and PTOs I have often asked the question: What is more important, the location of your child's school or the quality of education your child receives within the classroom? I feel that a quality education, regardless of where it takes place, is the most important service that the School Department can deliver. In supporting the proposal to consolidate

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Potowomut, Drum Rock and Rhodes, I do so with the intention of preserving the ability of the Warwick School Department to continue to provide a quality education to all of the city's students.

### **VOTE ON SCHOOL CLOSURES: POTOWOMUT, RHODES & DRUM ROCK:**

Chairman Friel called for a vote to approve the recommendation by the Redistricting and Consolidation Advisory Committee to close **Potowomut School**.

Ms. Andrade: Moved to amend the motion to **table** the decision for 8 weeks to close Potowomut School, allowing the Redistricting and Consolidation Advisory Committee more time to examine and consider additional information raised, which they have not had the opportunity to consider yet.

#### **Lack of second - Motion fails**

MOTION 2008-58: Moved by Ms. Mota-Costa, seconded by Mr. Cannistra, to approve the recommendation to **close Potowomut School**.

MOTION PASSES (3 ayes 2 nays)

Christopher Friel - Aye	Lucille Mota-Costa - Aye
Joyce L. Andrade - Nay	Bethany Furtado - Nay
Paul Cannistra - Aye	

Chairman Friel called for a vote to approve the recommendation by the Redistricting and Consolidation Advisory Committee which relates to the closure of **Christopher Rhodes School**.

Ms. Andrade: Moved to amend the motion to **table** the decision for 8 weeks to close Christopher Rhodes School, allowing the Redistricting and Consolidation Advisory Committee more time to examine and consider additional information raised, which they have not had the opportunity to consider yet.

#### **Lack of second - Motion fails**

MOTION 2008-59: Moved by Ms. Mota-Costa, seconded by Mr. Cannistra, to approve the recommendation of the Advisory Committee to **close Christopher Rhodes School**.

MOTION PASSES (4 ayes 1 nay)

Christopher Friel - Aye	Lucille Mota-Costa - Aye
Joyce L. Andrade - Nay	Bethany Furtado - Aye
Paul Cannistra - Aye	

Chairman Friel called for a motion to accept the recommendation of the Redistricting and Consolidation Advisory Committee which relates to the closure of **Drum Rock School**.

Ms. Andrade: Moved to amend the motion to **table** the decision for 8 weeks to close Drum Rock School, allowing the Redistricting and Consolidation Advisory Committee more time to examine and consider additional information raised, which they have not had the opportunity to consider yet.

#### **Lack of second – motion fails**

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MOTION 2008-60: Moved by Ms. Mota-Costa, seconded by Mr. Cannistra, to approve the recommendation of the Advisory Committee to **close Drum Rock School**.

**MOTION PASSES (3 ayes 2 nays)**

Christopher Friel - Aye      Lucille Mota-Costa - Aye  
Joyce L. Andrade - Nay      Bethany Furtado - Nay  
Paul Cannistra - Aye

MOTION 2008-61: Moved by Ms. Mota-Costa, seconded by Mr. Cannistra, to adjourn the meeting.

**MOTION PASSES (5-0)**

Christopher Friel - Aye      Lucille Mota-Costa - Aye  
Joyce L. Andrade - Aye      Bethany Furtado - Aye  
Paul Cannistra - Aye

**Meeting adjourned at 8:15 p.m.**

Bethany Furtado, Clerk  
Betsey Snipes, Secretary