

**WOONSOCKET SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2012
5:45 PM – OPEN MINUTES
WOONSOCKET MIDDLE SCHOOL
HAMLET BUILDING - 60 FLORENCE DRIVE
WOONSOCKET, RI 02895**

Meeting Called to order by Chairman Forcier at 5:45PM

Pledge

Chairman: Call to Order:

Roll Call: Dr. Donoyan

Chairwoman Forcier	Present
Vice Chair Phongsavanh	Present
Mr. Donlon	Present
Ms. Nadeau	Present
Mr. Roberts	Present

New Business:

1. Discussion/Vote to Issue Layoff Notices – A. Forcier, G. Donoyan

Dr. Donoyan stated that given the uncertainty of our state and local funding appropriation for the Fiscal Year 2013 budget, the purposes coupled with the March 1st teacher notification date, it is with regret that the Woonsocket Education Department finds it necessary to notify all tenured and non-tenured teachers of non-renewals or dismissals for the 2012 -13 school year. This action is out of an abundance of caution. I recognized that this is a very stressful time for everyone here. I do not want to break your contract. My intension is for all the teachers to come back, if there positions exist and they will come back. They will not have to bid for any positions. We have an abundance of wonderful, valuable, dedicated teachers. My hope is that all of them will be recalled. If there is enough money, then everyone will be recalled. Remember this is out of an abundance of caution. Thank you Madam Chair.

Ms. Forcier stated that these lay-off notices are not about job performance. This is about leaving our options open for a cash strapped city and school department. These notices do not mean that they are laying off all teachers and staff, but it does give the School Committee the opportunity to review and/or restructure any area of the school department that they feel necessary to cut costs. The reason that we are sending notices to everyone is because in previous negotiations with the union, it was agreed that all lay-off notices were to be distributed by March 1st. We do not have time to review cost cutting options before March 1st deadline, so we are sending notices to everyone to keep our options open. As Dr. Donoyan said, we have 6,000 students that have to have a teacher in front of them, so not everyone will be loosing their job. To be honest, for the last six year we have cut, and cut, and cut. Ms Forcier stated that she is not even sure if they are meeting the basic education plan. However, we need to leave our options open so when we have another performance audit, they can come in and if they find any areas that can be re-structured and re-visit, we will have the option to do this. However, with 6000 students a large majority will be returning to your jobs. That is all.

Ms. Forcier asked for a motion.

Mr. Roberts: Motion to send a non-renewal letters to non-tenured staff and a dismissal letter to tenured staff prior to March 1st to be in compliance with RI General Laws.

Second: Ms. Phongsavanh

Ms. Forcier asked for any further discussion. Ms. Forcier ask the President of the Woonsocket Teachers' Guild if he would like to make a statement.

Mr. Partington state that, we stand before you tonight on the verge of a mass layoff that we consider to be unwarranted and poorly planned. We all know the new business manager has not been able to provide a deficit number, but I do not expect that that number is in excess of the total school budget for the year that would mean all teachers, para's, clerks, and custodians need to be terminated.

This is a revenue problem, not a cost problem. The teachers, paras, clerks and custodians have renegotiated contracts and suffered massive layoffs to giveback millions to the city, and the well is dry. If your plan is to mobilize this group before you tonight to fight for additional funding from the State of Rhode Island, then this is a brilliant political strategy. However, again, I do not see any resolutions on the agenda tonight calling on the General Assembly to raise revenue; I only see an action where you expect those here tonight to solve all of your problems by cost cuts. There are many other alternatives to this scorched earth policy that you are adopting tonight, including estimating a wild deficit number, then notifying that number of teachers. Two hundred eighty teachers were notified two years ago, about one-half of the teachers at that time, and it barely caused a ripple in the media because the rules were followed and everyone understood that there was a big problem. Madam Chair, with all due respect, I anticipate that you will vote for your plan tonight in tacked. I understand that you are unwilling to go back on decisions that were made public. What is not stated publicly, although the Superintendent alluded to this, is that you intend to honor the contracts that were signed with various unions represented here tonight, by following the rules by calling back based on seniority. A statement like this will go a very long way in mending the now broken relationship that you have with the teachers, paras, custodians and clerks with the Education Department of Woonsocket. Thank you Madam Chairwoman.

Ms. Forcier stated that Mr. Partington was 100% correct. This is a revenue problem, not a cost problem. The urban districts need additional funding. I agree with this and have stated this publicly for years. Unfortunately, when we had a chance to fight for a fair funding formula for the urban communities, there wasn't much interest or support and a funding formula was passed that is not fair for the urban communities like Woonsocket.

Unfortunately, a School Committee cannot generate revenue, as we all know, so know we are in a situation where we are not going to get additional revenue, so we need to look at cutting costs. I understand the concerns of everyone here tonight. I would not want to go to work and receive a pink slip and would like to avoid all of this in the future. That is why I am urging all of you to take this passionate enthusiasm that I see here tonight and call and send letters to your State representatives and Senators to fund the urban's fairly. We are not asking for more than we deserve, we only want our fair share. This is a funding formula that they created and they are shorting Woonsocket eight million dollars a year. Are we going to tolerate this? That is up to us? We are a School Committee and we cannot generate revenue. We have been begging for money. We should continue to fight and we are meeting with many different communities such as Cumberland, North Smithfield, Providence on March 23rd and 24th for a two day seminar to work towards getting different state

representatives to submit resolutions and legislation to make the fair funding formula not take ten years to be achieved what Woonsocket deserves. We want to make this happen faster. This should have happened years ago, however, now they want us to wait ten years before we are properly funded and we cannot tolerate this. Woonsocket fell off a financial cliff. It is obvious. Mr. Partington, you are right, it is not a revenue issue, however, now we are stuck with cost cutting to try to solve this on our end. Thank you.

Ms. Forcier asked if there was any further discussion:

Ms. Phongsavanh stated that she wanted to thank the teachers' for their e-mails and letters and phone calls. This makes the decision tonight so much harder. I have met with the Union representatives and they know that I regret to make this decision since Friday. We also know that we have very different roles and responsibilities within the school department. We must respect one another and work together to get through this disaster. Next to eliminating all day kindergarten and block scheduling, this is one of the hardest moves I have had to make with my service on the school committee. I understand that it may seem unfair what we are doing tonight and I get very emotional. Please understand that we are doing this to ensure that we put ourselves in a position to provide a fair and adequate education for all students. I have been told that there are other options out there, and after analyzing this, we could do what we did last year, but as we all know now, that would put us into a 2.7 million dollar hole. We have to do something different this year and we have to offer ourselves options. We have to be honest with the media about where we stand. At this point in time, I am making my decision on what is best for our students because State Law requires that I do, and State Laws also require that we have a balanced budget. What I was thinking right now, as far as Administration, is to get a tax letter and to provide us with a realistic budget. This is the first step in doing this. We need to have a clear idea as to where our budget stands and what type of structural changes we have to make to get through next year's budget. Today is proof that Woonsocket is in trouble. We have reached a point in which we have to rely, once again, on our teachers to make up for our City's mistakes. The City has no plan and no vision for the future. The City has proven that it doesn't believe in our education department and it led us to this decision that we have to make tonight. We have underfunded our education department for decades and we are all surprised that this is happening. I would like to hear what our City and State leaders have to say about this. Have they advocated for education for our students and have they advocated enough. As the Union President, Mr. Partington said, this is not a cost problem, it's a revenue problem. All the decisions that should have been made in the past have been passed onto us now and are in our laps. The questions are, where is our economic development in the City; what is our plan for the City; what is our plan for our students. We have left education behind in the City. When you look around at these issues, simply put, there is no hidden agenda behind this recommendation tonight. The reason why I am voting for this is because this option puts us in a good place to put our budget together. I am almost certain that there isn't much left to cut. This will offer us the opportunities to be creative with our budget. To be clear, if your position does exist next year, you will have a job next year in accordance with your contract. Unlike Central Falls and Providence this movement is not based on performance, it's based on financial issues. I will vote to support tonight's recommendation because I believe that our Administration needs every option possible to put an impossible budget together. Thank you Madam Chairwoman.

Ms. Forcier asked if there was any further discussion.

Mr. Donlon said that he thought about this now for about a week since we were notified, and I cannot support laying off the entire teachers union. If this was a number of maybe 200 or 300, then I would support this. But there is no reason to layoff everyone. I feel that the teachers will not perform up to their capabilities for the rest of the school year knowing that they are going to be laid off. They might be called back and they might not. The children are going to suffer. The teachers are dedicated, but are they really going to put 100% into it for the rest of the school year. (Audience answered yes.) He is glad to hear that they will. I cannot support this the way it is presented this evening. Thank you Madam Chairwoman.

Ms. Forcier asked if there was any further discussion.

Ms. Nadeau stated that she too will not be supporting this. In my tenure of over ten years on the School Committee, there have been some really tough times. I have never seen this happen. What the normal procedure is, a discussion takes place, and there is a line drawn in the sand where you have to cut to allow you to have the cushioning that you need. This did not happen. I unlike Ms. Phongsavanh think that there is a hidden agenda and I don't know what it is. This is way beyond any rational and any place that I can go to so I will not support this.

Ms. Forcier asked if there was any further discussion.
No further discussion.

Ms. Forcier stated that there was a motion on the table to send letters to non-renewal letters to non-tenured staff and dismissal letters to tenured staff prior to the March 1st deadline as to comply with RI General Laws.

**ROLL CALL: Chairwoman Forcier; Ms. Phongsavanh, Mr. Roberts – Yes
Mr. Donlon; Ms. Nadeau – No**

Motion Passed: 3- 2

**Motion to adjourn: Ms. Phongsavanh
All in Favor: All Yes.**

Seconded by: Mr. Roberts

Adjournment

Respectfully submitted

Dorothy DeRemer
Recording Secretary