

Newport County Unified High School  
Exploratory Committee  
Minutes  
6:00 -7:40 PM – March 24, 2014

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## Attendees

**Present:** Marco T. Camacho, Newport City Council; Kellie E. DiPalma, Middletown School Committee; Justin S. McLaughlin, Newport City Council, Vice Chair; Naomi L. Neville, Newport City Council; William R. O’Connell, Middletown School Committee; Robert B. Power, Newport School Committee; Barbara A. VonVillas, Middletown Town Council, Chair

**Not Present:** Richard P. Adams, Middletown Town Council; Sandra J. Flowers, Newport School Committee

## Discussion

Mr. McLaughlin opened discussion by inviting questions and/or comments from the public.

Mr. John Bagwill drew the committee’s attention to the copies of a letter he had submitted that made recommendations related to committee action and public engagement. Ms. Carmella Geer suggested slowing down, identifying stakeholders, and soliciting public input. Mr. Camacho suggested the committee should “take the temperature of the communities.”

The committee questioned how to collect feedback. It agreed that more than a simple for/against question was needed for respondents to convey an informed decision.

Ms. Neville suggested the need for a “white paper” that summarized “what is on the table.”

It was suggested that the Superintendents be asked to provide information that includes the graduation rate, enrollment over the last 10 years, sports teams, strengths of each district, program losses and other results of reductions, etc., and ask that to identify what they would be able to do if there were a critical mass of students.

The committee agreed that it was time to reach out to community groups, e.g., civic organizations, faculty or parent meetings, etc., to solicit questions that people would ask if faced with a legislative mandate for regionalization. Ms. VonVillas is to develop a framework statement and a question to be used on the municipal web sites.

## Approval of Minutes

Minutes of the March 10, 2014 meeting of the Exploratory Committee were reviewed and unanimously approved.

## Updates

Mr. McLaughlin informed the committee regarding a recent meeting with Mr. Adams and Ms. VonVillas at the Rhode Island Foundation where it appeared that there was likely to be financial support for an informational campaign.

Ms. VonVillas informed the committee of discussions with the League of Women Voters that indicated a willingness to sponsor a public meeting at an appropriate time.

## Next Meeting

The committee will look forward to discussing feedback which might be collected before the next meeting on Thursday, April 17, 2014 at 6:00 PM at the Newport Public Library. Consideration will be given to a site in Middletown depending on availability.

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**Proposed Meetings Calendar**

The Committee agreed to meet as follows.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Place</b>
Thursday, April 17 <sup>th</sup>	6 – 8 PM	Newport Public Library
Tuesday April 29 <sup>th</sup>	6 – 8 PM	Newport Public Library

**Agenda Items**

Committee members are asked to submit agenda items by April 14, 2014.

**Agreed Items**

<b>Item</b>	<b>To Do</b>	<b>By Whom?</b>	<b>When?</b>
Public Input	Provide feedback collected from public meetings	All Members	Inputs by 4/14/2014

Respectfully Submitted,



Richard Adams

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*Newport Daily News*

March 25,

2014

## **Input sought from public on unified high school**

**By Matt Sheley**

Staff writer

NEWPORT — The Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee is hitting the reset button on combining high schools — or school systems — in Newport and Middletown.

Rather than taking a topdown approach where the exploratory committee is driving the dialogue, the group said Monday night it's time to shift the playing field so the communities and their residents and business people shape the discussion instead. Committee members agreed during a session at the Newport Public Library to post a question during the next week or two on each municipality's website asking for input about the idea of joining schools together. Committee members also said they would solicit feedback from teachers unions and other employee pools, parent groups, civic organizations, athletic boosters and other bodies in smaller, informal settings.

The goal of the outreach, committee members said, is to get a true measure of what people in the two communities think about the issue, what might work and potential pitfalls to avoid should Newport and Middletown opt to pursue a unified high school or some more ambitious plan.

At the same time, committee members said it is unlikely a binding question would appear on the Election Day ballot because of the time involved in the reformatted approach, which could add months to the group's projected deadlines.

"It's going to be a chance for people to speak freely about their ideas and what we could and should do," said Marco T. Camacho, a Newport City Councilman and member of the exploratory committee. "We've been putting a lot of ideas out there, some of them controversial, but this will be a chance for people to tell us what they think because after all, it's up to the people of Middletown and Newport to decide what we should do, if anything."

Last summer, Middletown council members Barbara A. VonVillas and Richard P. Adams revived talk of combining school services among Newport County communities, both to save money and to offer more educational opportunities. Newport was the lone municipality to accept the invitation.

A Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council report from June 2009 indicated Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth stood to save close to \$13 million by fiscal 2013 by combining high schools. Since the beginning of the year, the exploratory committee has met to see if there was common ground to merge high schools. Most of that work has focused on crafting enabling legislation intended to go to the General Assembly to allow the question to be placed on the Nov. 4 ballot.

At the last session earlier this month, Newport officials — led by City Councilman Justin S. McLaughlin — suggested those efforts expand to include kindergarten through 12th grade, an idea that generated significant buzz in both communities.

During a meeting last week, several residents approached the Middletown Town Council, questioning the idea of combining the systems and saying Middletown schools were doing just fine and the town didn't need to take on the city's problems. A number of city officials and residents responded that Newport had a lot to offer and

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their critics to the north might want to rethink their positions.

On Monday night, there was little discussion of the simmering feud, but committee Chairwoman VonVillas said it was nice to see people were starting to pay more attention.

“I really am quite excited about the fact that we’re getting a lot of noise, even if it’s negative noise,” VonVillas said. “I don’t care because we’ve not had any noise before.”

At Monday night’s meeting, committee members agreed to work on fine tuning the question to go before the public. Based on the discussion, it appeared it would be along the lines of: “If you learned tomorrow that Newport and Middletown had to regionalize school systems, what questions would you have?”

Then, committee members agreed to work on scheduling with community groups and report their progress at the board’s next meeting, slated for April 17 at 6 p.m., tentatively at the Newport Public Library.

Robert Power, Newport school board and exploratory committee member, said if Aquidneck Island were a blank canvas, the answers would be much more straightforward, but that is not the case.

“If you took Aquidneck Island and there was nobody living here and you dropped all the people that are here today on this island and said, ‘OK, what are you going to do?’” Power said, “we’d have one fire department, we’d have one police department, we’d have one council, one school department. There wouldn’t be any problem. But because we developed as Portsmouth got settled and then Newport got settled and somehow Middletown got in the middle, we have three communities.”