

Newport County Unified High School  
Exploratory Committee  
Minutes  
6:00 -7:30 PM – April 17, 2014

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## Attendees

**Present:** ; **Kellie E. DiPalma**, Middletown School Committee; **Justin S. McLaughlin**, Newport City Council, Vice Chair;; **William R. O’Connell**, Middletown School Committee; **Robert B. Power**, Newport School Committee; **Barbara A. VonVillas**, Middletown Town Council, Chair; **Richard P. Adams**, Middletown Town Council

**Not Present:** **Marco T. Camacho**, Newport City Council; **Naomi L. Neville**, Newport City Council; **Sandra J. Flowers**, Newport School Committee

## Approval of Minutes

The minutes of March 24, 2014 were reviewed and unanimously approved.

## Discussion

### *Middletown School Facilities Survey Results*

Mr. Adams reviewed the results of the recently completed “push” survey of public opinion related to Middletown school facilities. He noted the limitation of a “push” survey is that it is answered only by those who choose to do so, which may create a bias toward those with strong opinions.

However, Mr. Adams noted that there were a significant number of comments in the survey related to unification (regionalization). The comments ranged from strongly opposed to strongly in favor and in between. A copy of some of the comments obtained from the survey was distributed to Committee members for review as well as comments shared with individual members. The material provided to the Committee is attached.

### *Unification Overview*

Mr. Powers provided his view of unification or regionalization. He noted that however defined, regionalization of Middletown and Newport schools is essentially unification of the high schools.

Newport has one new elementary school while Middletown has two older elementary schools, which may or may not be consolidated in the future. Mr. Powers pointed out that the elementary level would not be altered by a change in administration.

Mr. Power also noted that Newport has a recently constructed Middle School while Middletown has a Middle School that is probably in need of refurbishment. It was similarly stated that neither of the Middle Schools would be substantially changed by consolidating administrations.

Thus it is clear that the high schools are, and should be, the focus of any unification/regionalization initiatives. Both Rogers HS and Middletown HS are in need of significant improvements and will require significant capital investments. Both schools are too small to support the range and depth of college-preparatory, career and technical education that would serve all the students.

Mr. Powers emphasized that the existing situation of the high schools is not a result of inadequate planning, effort or work by teachers, administrators and school committees. The inadequacies of the existing high schools result from shrinking student populations and the age and design of the buildings. He said that the high schools demand attention and maintaining the status quo is not a satisfactory solution.

Following Mr. Power’s remarks a general discussion was held of the realities of high school unification.

## What to Do Next?

### *The Public’s Questions, Public Information and Debate in the “Public Square”*

The Committee generally agreed that questions from the public need to be solicited in order to formulate responses which address these real concerns. It was noted that the Committee had only recently begun the process of asking

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for public input with posting on city/town websites. Response so far has been limited but it is hoped that, as public awareness grows of the issues, so will questions.

The Committee also discussed how community institutions such as colleges and other non-profit organizations might be asked to help with soliciting questions and providing facts regarding what unification/regionalization would mean and how it might be implemented. The Committee also noted that a clear rationale for unification must be provided to the public. Specifically what are the problems which high school unification will address, how such a change will address those problems, and what would be the likely outcome?

Mr. Adams emphasized the importance of creating and sustaining a robust debate in the “Public Square” of the issues related to school unification.

Mr. Power emphasized that unless costs of unification are reasonably well known as well as how unification will affect the tax burden, it will be impossible to make a rational case for unification.

***A “White Paper” on High School Unification***

To allow the Committee to systematically address the questions outlined above related to unification, it was agreed that a “White Paper” or plan should be drafted and provided to the Committee for review and discussion. Ms. Vonvillas offered specific questions that the paper must address; 1) a realistic description of what a unified high school or “Aquidneck System School” would look like; 2) The costs involved; and 3) the educational programs offered at every level.

It was also suggested that the paper must address how to use exiting specialized facilities such as the Newport Career & Technical Center and the RHS auditorium and how special classes could be aligned for collaboration. Mr. Adams agreed to draft the paper at the outline level and have it available at the next Committee meeting.

The Committee then discussed various aspects of RI Department of Education approvals and incentive funding opportunities.

***Middletown High School 1989 to 2014 Staffing Changes***

A table of changes in Middletown High School staffing was presented for discussion. A summary of the data is below. The table was derived from published school directories from 1989 and 2014. The Committee noted that there has been a total reduction of 23.5 staff members over this period, and an increase of 6.0 in Special Education for a net reduction of 17.5 staff. The Committee also observed that, in general, tested subject areas such as math and science have been protected from reductions while career and technical offerings and Social Studies courses have been reduced significantly.

The Committee agreed that, given declining student populations, the data presented a picture of teachers, school administration and School Committee successfully focusing on and preserving core studies in a period of reduced resources and increasing mandates.

<b>Area of Study</b>	<b>Total Change in Number of Teachers</b>	<b>Academics</b>	<b>Career &amp; Technical</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Art</b>	2.0	2.0		
<b>Business Education</b>	-5.0		-5.0	
<b>Child Development</b>	-1.0		-1.0	
<b>Computer Education</b>				
<b>Home Economics</b>	-1.0		-1.0	
<b>Industrial Arts</b>	-4.0		-4.0	
<b>English</b>	-3.0	-3.0		
<b>Guidance</b>	-2.0			-2.0
<b>Math</b>	-2.5	-2.5		

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Area of Study	Total Change in Number of Teachers	Academics	Career & Technical	Other
<b>Music</b>				
<b>Physical Education</b>				
<b>Science</b>				
<b>Social Studies</b>	-7.0	-7.0		
<b>Special Education</b>	6.0			6.0
<b>Languages</b>				
<b>Total Change 1989 to 2014</b>	<b>-17.5</b>	<b>-10.5</b>	<b>-11.0</b>	<b>4.0</b>

### Next Meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on April 29, 2014 at 6:00 PM at the Middletown Public Library.

### Attachments

1. Comments on unification from Middletown school facilities survey
2. Newport Daily News article reporting on this Committee meeting
3. Newport Daily News op-ed related to comprehensive programming

### Proposed Meetings Calendar

The Committee agreed to meet as follows.

Date	Time	Place
Tuesday April 29 <sup>th</sup>	6 – 8 PM	Middletown Public Library
Wednesday, May 7 <sup>th</sup>	TBD	
Thursday, May 29 <sup>th</sup>	TBD	

Respectfully Submitted,



Richard Adams

# Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee Minutes

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## Survey - Unified High School Exploratory Committee - Your Concerns & Questions

**Q1 The Unified High School Exploratory Committee wishes to learn Middletown and Newport residents' concerns and questions regarding Middletown and Newport school consolidation at any level—from Pre-K through Grade 12. Relevant areas include implementation issues, student and education program changes, financial impacts, and any other topics that you believe are pertinent. As unification of the Newport and Middletown high schools and/or school systems requires approval of both Councils and that of the voters, this Committee needs to hear your questions, which will lead to a full and open discussion at future informational meetings. Please enter your questions and/or comments in the space provided below.**

Answered: 6 Skipped: 0

#	Responses	Date
1	As a Middletown voter and taxpayer I am strongly opposed to the idea of unifying the school districts. Middletown has a strong, successful school system that needs to be properly supported. And no, it is not about the small stuff like mascots, the alumni identity. The fact that Portsmouth quickly backed away from the idea should have been an indication that this is not what the residents want in this town either.	4/9/2014 4:23 PM
2	1. How will governance and budget decisions be made so that each community pays an affordable fair share? Who will the governance board be? What roles and obligations will the Middletown and Newport councils have? Who has the final say on budgets? Will a joint governance board have more power and authority over spending than the respective councils? Who will adjudicate disputes on cost, curriculum, and policies? 2. Will the town with fewer students pay a smaller amount? 3. What is the timeframe for this plan? Are we talking about K-12 or 3-12 or 6-12? What is the cost of each of these alternatives? 4. Have you done a business case analysis with cost, program, and outcome pros and con for your proposal? 5. Who will bear the cost of facilities? Which facilities will you use? 6. What is the organization chart for the unified district? 7. How many administration positions will we reduce with a combined district? What is the expected cost of administration of the unified district, compared to the total administration costs of each district now? How many teacher positions will you eliminate? Janitors? Support Staff? What is the framework for a staffing plan? 8. Will my children have a choice of schools? 9. If Middletown builds a new high school, Newport should be a co-borrower on the bond. Middletown taxpayers should not bear the cost for a new unified school. Newport will get the benefit of a new high school facility with no cost to their taxpayers. 10. How will you handle inter-town transportation for extracurricular activities?	4/9/2014 8:58 AM
3	What does Middletown gain from unification? Newport's educational status is below par, why do we want to take that on?	4/8/2014 9:32 AM

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**Survey - Unified High School Exploratory Committee - Your Concerns & Questions**

4	<p>I am involved with three communities in NY, MA and RI. NY has regional school systems and they work and afford children more options. They have been in place for over 50 years where I have a home/grow up. My siblings that have gone through this regional system are a RN, a Director/CPA for one of the big 4 accounting firms, a director for a Pharmaceutical company, and a manager of fleet services for a large car Dealership. The taxes on the home there (and on other homes in other areas of NY that I have lived) are split between Town taxes and School Taxes and budgets are voted on separately - the school budgets by the tax payers. In MA, the area is similar in Aquinneck Island and there is no way that the area could afford anything other than regional schools. I have a bigger house on a larger piece of land in MA and my taxes are roughly 50% less than that of Middletown and I still support a Town Police and Fire Department. The tax base was dwindling because the cost of homes was going up as well as taxes and the young families were leaving. It is still not back in balance between older and younger families, but the plans are there to make effective change. RI, especially Aquinneck and Conanicut Islands cannot afford to support Individual Town Schools. Conanicut is aligned with North Kingstown, maybe it should come back in alignment with Aquidneck Island? Newport has consolidated all its lower grades to the Pell School. RI is behind. Our students are learning a year behind foreign students. Foreign students that come here are repeating material they have already learned and must go back to their countries and take special courses so that they do not fall behind. Yes, regionalize! All Towns and the management of those Towns should realize that the tax payers cannot afford it. Younger families will not settle here and reliance on Navy/government contracts and tourism cannot be justified to keep this area going. I applaud the efforts of Barbara Von Villas and Richard Adams and hope that their efforts are not for naught!</p>	4/7/2014 11:35 AM
5	<p>I am strongly opposed to this idea. Please stop wasting valuable time and resources on this and concentrate on improving the Middletown Public Schools.</p>	4/7/2014 10:35 AM
6	<p>1. The scope is too broad..... you need to do small projects, first. 2. The perception that I hear in the communities continue stating that one person is driving the committee. 3. We need to look at small projects, one step at a time and do share services correctly. 4. The superintendents are the ones driving and accomplishing the shared services..... It goes further that Newport and Middletown. 5. One needs to know about State and local programs, RIDE concerns, Governor's and Assembly's direction in funding of education, etc. Education has changed with Technology and new rules and regulations. 7. In part, this committee was not formed as information gathering and has the perception of an agenda. 6. There are other ways to do share services that are cost effective, revenue generating, and more opportunities for academic and career readiness. Let's start slow and be creative, innovative, and look at costs. New ways to accomplish better academic and career needs for all students..... This committee should discuss innovative ways for the future of education of all students.....PK-16 pipeline into the workforce. Let's stop an older way of thinking and move into the 21st century educational way of learning.</p>	4/7/2014 9:06 AM

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**Additional Comments Solicited and Collected by Members of the Committee**

**Personal Contact: Responses to Survey Question (Newport):**

*School Employee:* I welcome this opportunity to voice my opinion on school unification. As a Newport property owner/tax payer and school employee, I support unification at the high school level only so that programming for arts, sports, STEAM, AP classes as well as trade career training opportunities can increase. I think this will be a long process and to move forward in a positive way it would have to fiscally benefit both towns thus an audit might need to be considered.

*RHS Teacher:* I'm against this idea. Newport needs to invest in its own future and not surrender it's autonomy to another district. We will be blamed for everything that ever goes wrong in the unified school. Money will not be saved, mark my words. However, this dragging out the process is hurting Rogers as people are less likely to invest in our schools while this debate rages. So I say, let's vote and move on, either way. I feel manipulated by some of the politicians on this committee. (At least you have been honest and forthright). The idea of a unified Newport /Middletown bureaucracy is terrifying.

*Parent:* No questions but sounds like a great idea! I hope this will happen in my kids' time!

*Parent:* If it improves the educational experience for all as I hope it will, I am for it.

*Parent:* I think it's a good idea to unify ALL island schools... Newport, Middletown, AND PORTSMOUTH! However, one giant school is daunting. [Note: this comment was redacted as some parts pertained to an issue that was not related to the exploratory committee's focus.]

*Retired Newport teacher:* I want to know the educational benefit to all students. Will more courses be offered at the high school level? Will there be shared resources like media, courses, teachers? Where will this school be situated? I will NOT support another school bond issue for a new school. We, in Newport, have all our schools in good shape. I do not want to take on the burden of fixing up old schools from another community.

**Personal Contact: Responses to Survey Question (Middletown):**

1. To what extent would a unified school impact the library?
2. How will it impact my child (at a particular school)?
3. What is the financial impact?
4. What would be each town's contribution?
5. How would traffic patterns be affected? Would there be greater safety hazards?
6. What would the hierarchy look like?
7. What performance data would it be intended to address? Would it be a wash or better?
8. How would it improve the graduation rate?
9. How will the learning conditions impact learning?
10. How will it address staffing issues, particularly cronyism? "Don't hire for academics to get athletic coaching" "Fill vacancies 'by the book'"
11. Are there good models of high-performing organizations?
12. Great fear of the unknown
13. What are the goals to be accomplished?

**Personal Contact: Individual Response from member of civic organization**

If my children were still in school these would be MY concerns:

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1) Transportation 2) Class sizes 3) Access to teachers 4) Teacher Ratings and Retention 5) After School Activities/programs (Band, sports, clubs, etc.) 6) Harmony 7) Expected Savings - if we are going to move forward, need to realize significant cost savings.

**E-mail Response from a Portsmouth Resident:**

Please consider the following as part of your exploratory process.

1. Please do not fall in love with the numbers from the 2009 RIPEC report that says we could save \$13 million.
  - a. That is possible, however:
  - b. That would be \$4.3 million per town: Newport, Middletown, Portsmouth.
  - c. Don't forget that the law of unintended consequences will cost money.
  - d. There will be adjustment and implementation costs. Assume \$1 million for each town in costs to adjust and implement due to changes in busing, teachers, logistics, supplies, books, technology.
  - e. Then that would be \$3 million net savings to each town.
  - f. That savings would be gone in two to three years tops due to inflation, rising costs, pension plan catch up.
  - g. All of us will be back here in five years after regionalization looking for new money.
2. Invite the folks from Bristol-Warren to give testimony on their experience.
  - a. If they are still around, find the folks that got the two towns to merge in the first place. Get their input.
  - b. Warren recently got some bad news saying they owed the district about \$440,000.
  - c. Ask the current folks how things are going.
  - d. What are their ratings and test scores compared to other school districts?
  - e. If they had to do it over again, how would they do it? Would they do it?
3. Where is the money going?
  - a. An analysis of local town budgets show the following:
  - b. 60-70% of town budgets go to salary and benefits for all town employees.
  - c. Town payroll numbers active and retired typically are 5-10% of the town population.
  - d. So for a typical taxpayer, 2/3 of their property tax is going to support the salary and benefits of 10% of the towns' population. That is a bad return on investment ratio.
  - e. The problem is salary and benefit costs.
  - f. Regionalization does not directly address this problem.
4. Regionalization:
  - a. Is a band-aid attempt at a larger problem.
  - b. Does not address the real underlying problems with cost of education.
  - c. Is a short term solution that provides short lived relief.
5. Many folks would argue that the quality of education would suffer.
  - a. The problem with education today is not money, testing, standards, or style.
  - b. It is discipline.
  - c. Put discipline back in the hands of the teachers and support them.
6. Not all students are Einstein's.

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- a. Look at how Germany does their school system.
- b. If a young person their does not show great academic aptitude at an early age, they test that person and determine where their skills and interests lie.
- c. Then they are schooled and sent to specialty schools that cultivate their interests and skills.
- d. They don't force the kids to all become as smart as each other.

One additional point, if I may, is to go back to basics, keep it simple. The quality of our students will improve if we reduce the micro management of the system, re-empower the teachers, and move any cost savings to programs that develop the kids' skills as they exist in the kids, not what we think they should become.

If a regional high school had a system where less-academically gifted kids could learn voc-tech skills instead of requiring them to take courses that would not help them, I would support that effort.

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*Newport Daily News*

April 8, 2014

**Impacts of school unification discussed**

**By Matt Sheley**

Staff writer

Newport and Middletown could gain \$200 million in property values with a new, combined super-achieving high school, an advocate of school unification told the Middletown Town Council on Monday night.

Newport resident and Rhode Island STEAM Academy Director Mike Cullen said that while improving education should be the main driver to combine high schools, there are other impacts to consider of such a move.

Based on rough calculations, Cullen said, should both communities see their property values appreciate 5 percent as a result of the improved school, that would mean another \$80 million in new equity into the homes in Middletown and about \$120 million in Newport.

Local leaders fielded a number of comments from the public about the unification issue, which is evolving into one of the bigger items facing the Town Council, next to the proposed fiscal 2015 budget (see related story, Page [A1](#)).

“Our schools aren’t graduating sufficiently talented graduates and too many parents, both in Newport and in Middletown, are really in denial about academic achievement levels,” said Cullen, who said he wasn’t representing the STEAM Academy. “We have to give them a reality check.”

A June 2009 report from the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council indicated Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth could save close to \$13 million by merging high schools.

Since the beginning of the year, Newport and Middletown officials have been meeting as the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee to see if common ground could be found on the hot-button issue.

At the last Town Council meeting, local leaders heard from parents who expressed concerns about teaming up with Newport schools, saying they chose to live in Middletown for a reason.

Out of those comments and other feedback, the exploratory committee opted to restart the process and get input from residents and business people about what they’d like to see before going any further. The exploratory committee’s next meeting is planned for Thursday, April 17, at 6 p.m., tentatively at the Newport Public Library.

Speaking from the audience, former Rogers High School teacher Brian Sullivan said one of the unfortunate cuts from school budgets these days is some of the “electives” not deemed vital as part of the core curriculum.

Reflecting on his experiences as a 1976 graduate of Middletown High School, Sullivan said one of those electives — a film class — got him interested in writing more than any other he’d taken.

“I couldn’t write. I was terrible and I said, ‘What a great English class. All you get to do is watch movies,’” Sullivan said. “I wrote more in that class than I wrote in four years of college and it was just a savior for me, and those electives are disappearing in more places.”

Council members said they’d heard quite a bit about the exploratory committee’s work from residents and business people, but there is little agreement about what should happen next.

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For Councilman Bruce J. Long and others, the message from the people is the exploratory committee needs to do more exploring and less dictating. On several occasions, it appeared that those who had their doubts about the effort were

nearly ready to back out of the process with Newport, but that move never came.

“I really want this committee to continue, but I want it to hone in and focus, not on unification, not on regionalization, but on how the districts of Newport County can collaborate,” Long said.

Councilman Paul M. Rodrigues added: “I hate to say it, but I think the committee and the direction they went in — and again, it’s not a knock on them and I applaud them for their efforts — it scared the heck out of most people in Middletown, in my opinion, the ones I talked to.”

On the flip side, others including Councilman Richard P. Adams — a member of the exploratory committee — said things have to change, both for the students and the communities as a whole.

“Our expenses will not be going down. We will have increasing difficulty maintaining our existing physical plant and, folks, we can’t tax our way out of this,” Adams said. “There has to be some other way than the way we’re proceeding. The status quo is not good enough.”

## *Newport Daily News*

April 12-13, 2014

**GUEST VIEW**

### **Unified school could provide so much more**

**By Barbara A. VonVillas**

I am a member of the Unified High School Exploratory Committee, but I am not speaking for the committee nor as a member of the Middletown Town Council. I am speaking for myself. I am passionate about education. Public education is not about favoring what we call “the best and the brightest.”

It is about our responsibility to provide the education that will enable all students to gain the knowledge that has the most potential to bring them success.

In the past eight months, I have repeatedly been told that the only chance for high school unification is the development of an “outstanding program.” With that in mind, and based on 43 years as an educator in three states, I offer the following as an example of what I would regard as “an outstanding program”:

- ◆ A program that meets the needs of 100 percent of the students: high achievers, college-bound, students unable or unwilling to seek further education, hands-on learners, the economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, disinterested students, etc.
- ◆ A program deep enough to provide a solid foundation for post-secondary learning and/or training for post-graduate employment.
- ◆ A program broad enough to encourage disengaged students to stay in school to acquire useful job and personal skills.
- ◆ Instruction by teachers skilled in promoting critical thinking and committed to writing in every discipline.
- ◆ In-house certification for entry-level positions as well as connections with post-secondary institutions for dual or advanced credit.
- ◆ Relationships with businesses and industry that offer internships beyond the Senior Project/Capstone.
- ◆ Opportunities for academic and personal growth such as the International Baccalaureate, Academic Decathlon and ROTC.
- ◆ A variety of Advanced Placement courses with sufficient enrollment to ensure scheduling.
- ◆ More than two foreign languages and American Sign Language.
- ◆ Writing classes that promote critical thinking, including analysis and evaluation. (Writing is thinking.)

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- ◆ Literature classes based on discussion of texts challenging enough to stimulate higher-order thinking skills.
- ◆ A journalism program that produces a frequently scheduled school newspaper and a literary magazine.
- ◆ A communications program that includes speech, debate, presentation skills, group dynamics and team building.
- ◆ A math program that provides an increasingly difficult sequence of courses as well as an integrated program that meets the learning-style needs of all students.
- ◆ A science program that offers not only a traditional sequence of increasingly specialized courses but also includes science applications as well as contemporary interests such as forensics.
- ◆ A social studies program that provides the traditional historical perspective but also promotes engagement with national, state and local government through civics, law and economics as well as a knowledge of contemporary international issues.
- ◆ An art program that includes not only drawing and painting but also sculpture, graphics, video and other art forms.
- ◆ A music program that includes multiple performance groups: concert, marching and symphonic bands; jazz ensemble; male, female and mixed choruses; and chamber singers as well as opportunities for individual instruction.
- ◆ A business program that includes business software, office practice, marketing, market analysis, management, accounting and finance as well as home budgeting.
- ◆ A practical arts program with preparatory-level courses in carpentry, auto, manufacturing, landscaping, plumbing, electrical circuitry and the skills of other trades.
- ◆ Specialized programs: child care that includes parenting classes and a day-care nursery; a culinary program that teaches students about nutrition and the way to prepare meals; and a health fields program that includes home and elderly care.
- ◆ An engineering program that includes CAD, CADD, architectural engineering, graphic design and robotics.
- ◆ Specialized credited multiyear programs in fashion design, tourism, criminal justice, cosmetology, auto technology and other career fields appropriate to the local economy.

The taxpayers will ask, "What is this going to cost?" and I will say, "It depends."

If we even try to reproduce much of the above — which we used to have — we will not be able to afford it. But if we join together and pool our resources, together we can make it happen at a cost similar to the current funding.

I have seen the differences in local economies whose students have had the widest range of opportunities and those whose students have had more limited experience. Economic growth, too, is limited.

These are our children, and they all deserve the best education we can afford so that when they become the voters and the taxpayers, they will support us and our economy.

If we don't, we will all pay the price later.