

**Farmington River Regional School District
Otis/Sandisfield
555 Main Road, Otis MA 01253
School Committee Meeting #395
January 4, 2021 7:00PM
Via Zoom**

Meeting called at 7:04 PM

Community Participation: None

Guests: list attached

Absent: None

1. **Approval of minutes #394.** Deb Fogel made a motion to accept minutes #394, Arlene Tolopko seconded the motion. The vote was unanimous to accept minutes #394.
2. **Principal/Superintendent updates.** To kick off the Professional Day coming back from Winter Break, the Administration cooked and provided breakfast for all staff. This was to show the Administration's gratitude and appreciation to everyone.

Then the teachers and paraprofessionals started their training. There was a ZOOM meeting with the literacy consultant Laurie Casseau. This is to improve literacy scores. Then in the afternoon, Mike Saporito went over remote planning and required information from the Title 1 audit that needs to be covered.

Department of Education was in contact with Tom to let us know that we either met or exceeded the time required for remote learning. This was good news. The state also mandated that all students regardless of remote, hybrid, or in person learning must get a flu shot by December 31, 2020. The state moved the date back to February 28, 2021.

Tom wanted feedback from the Committee concerning a request to bring in a student teacher from Westfield State. As much as Tom would love to give the opportunity for the student teacher to come into Farmington, he feels this would be a risk to bring in new staff members at this point. We have been lucky up to this point with keeping COVID out of the school. Jess feels that this should be put off until the teachers receive their vaccine shots. Arlene feels the same way. The overall recommendation is to hold off at this point and not continue until further notice.

Students come back tomorrow, January 5th. Carol asked how many students are in school at this point. The number is in the high 80s. Approximately 87 students in school.

Tom and Mike are looking to ramp up the remote learning. Some students are struggling and some that are not doing any work at all. Mike and Laurie are going to look at scheduling changes to help with more online services. Jess wanted to make sure parents are aware that if the work is not done, the students will stay behind. Tom reassured Jess that the parents were told several times the students will be graded this year on work completed. Billie wanted to know if the parents are aware that DCF can be notified that this is a “failure to send” on the parent’s side. Tom does not want to go down that road and create animosity with the parents.

3. Financial update and Budget expenditures. Eric Jesner started off by saying the E&D was certified. It is just under 199,000 dollars.

Eric reminded everyone that this is just the draft of the expenditures for the FY22 budget. The revenue portion of the budget will be presented next month. Eric began by reviewing each account and department numbers for FY22. Roger Brown, chair of the Sandisfield Finance Committee, spoke up and asked about the School’s audit. Why it costs \$30,000. Eric replied that is the cost of the yearly audit that is required every year by a third-party auditor. OPEB must be audited every year. Every other year is a full audit. The year off a partial audit needs to be done. Then an auditor comes in and balances the end of the school year making sure the numbers are correct. Eric also mentioned that the auditors are not there 2-3 days, they are working 2-3 months. Roger Brown stated that Sandisfield pays \$17,000 for their audits. Roger asked Eric if he could provide not only the breakdown, but the requirements for the audits by the state. Eric has no issue doing so for Roger.

Eric continued to go down the list of accounts. Roger Brown had some questions about the number of fulltime employees and parttime employee count in Business Office and the Principal’s Office accounts. Eric explained that there is 1.7 FTE in the Business Office, a Business Manager and Assistant. There is 1.3 FTE in the Principal’s Office, the Principal, one office staff and the .3 to the Business Manager. There is overlap between the two offices.

There is one teacher with column movement, which will increase the salaries for teachers. But Eric is going to take monies from School Choice to off balance the increase.

Roger Brown asked Eric to break down the Paraprofessional pay. Some are paid by grants and by special needs. Roger would like the number of Paraprofessionals and how they are paid. Eric will get that information to Roger as requested.

Classroom curriculum is down because Eric is using School Choice monies to offset that number.

Roger Brown asked where the tuition fees are for the PK programming. Eric explained this is on the Revenue section of the budget which he will be going over next month.

There will be an increase in transportation. This year we budgeted down from 5 buses to 4 buses. We are functioning on 5 buses this year. Eric will increase the transportation for next year back to 5 buses.

The money put in for paving needs to be transferred into a separate account according to Roger Brown. This is due to the paving being a capital expense. Eric will investigate this and make the appropriate changes. Jess Drenga asked why this must be in a separate account. Roger explained that it is in the regional agreement that must be followed, and that any capital projects/expenses must be separated. Also, when there is a capital project, depreciation needs to be on a schedule for how long the improvement lasts.

Roger Brown asked about the \$40,000 in the stabilization fund. Is this only for maintenance? The answer is yes, it is used for maintenance and grounds maintenance.

Workmen's Compensation is decreasing. Eric was advised by our insurance representative that we are at a low rate of usage of Workmen's Compensation, and the decrease should be a good number to budget with.

Out of district tuition will be going down a bit due to one high cost out of district student that no longer needs services.

Eric moved to School Choice. He explained that School Choice is a revolving account that is limited to what expenses can be paid by this account. All money spent needs to go to benefit the students. Examples would be teachers' pay, nature's classroom, and curriculum. The account is high right now because we were not able to spend the money in FY20 due to the circumstances that have occurred this past year. Eric did use money to lower the teachers' salaries in the budget for FY22. Roger Kohler brought up that the money was applied to the teachers' salaries in the first part of the budget. Roger Brown wanted to know if this is standard practice by not showing teachers' individual salaries. There is a net amount and then the reconciliation by school choice. Eric stated that this is how it has always been done and the state and auditors did not have an issue with this. Eric does not have a problem making changes to clarify the budget better if the auditors and the state are happy or accept the changes. Tom Nadolny asked what benefit would come of knowing what every teacher makes. Roger stated that to track the expenses that go along with the teachers, you have to go through several different things to figure it out. Roger does not think this is transparent enough. Eric agrees with Roger and can do this for the budget. This will show an actual cost across the years. Eric said he does not mind making the change on our budget for better communication.

Jennifer Hibbins brought up the auditors. Do we have to go out to bid for them? Eric said no. We have two companies to choose from in the area. Eric was willing to reach out and see what the other auditor would estimate for working on our books.

Roger Kohler informed Eric that some of his totals did not match the columns. Eric appreciated the feedback. He did not realize the totals did not match. Roger Brown mentioned that the draft has no integrity because the numbers do not match. Eric will go back and check the draft and correct the numbers.

Roger Brown asked Eric what is the number of students that we expect to have in the elementary school next year. Eric does not know at this time the estimated number of students that will be attending school next year. Roger then stated that the budget is not based on a per student figure and that the cost per student is well over the average of the cost per student in other districts in the state. Eric tried to explain that the cost per student here is not just a flat rate. There are other factors that go into the cost that is not shown at face value. An example would be the middle and high school students and transportation for all district students are on the backs of the elementary students cost. Roger Brown argued that it does not matter. Even if the extra costs were to be taken out, we would still be higher than any other elementary school in Massachusetts. Roger then stated that he wanted to be transparent and continued by letting the School Committee and Administration know his recommendation to the Sandisfield Select Board is to ask for alternatives for Sandisfield to continue to participate in Farmington River School District. Sandisfield is not a prosperous town and they are spending their money on a very expensive model and he is not hearing any interest in changing the model. Eric feels that a discussion should be scheduled in an open forum to discuss and explain all the reasons behind the costs. Eric feels it is important that people understand where the numbers are coming from. Roger Brown was not interested in that. Roger feels as if the model does not work. It is a flawed model and Sandisfield should not participate in a flawed model. Roger feels the School Committee and the Administration are not doing anything to make changes. Terry Gould spoke up and suggested that if Sandisfield does not like the model then they should think about coming up with a model that they feel does work. All Sandisfield does is accuse the Administration and School Committee for cheating them. Roger Brown strongly stated that doing so is not his responsibility; it is the School Committee's responsibility and he has never said the Town of Sandisfield feels they are being cheated. Roger Brown again stated that his recommendation to the Select board is that this model is too expensive. Roger continued to respond it is up to the Select board to take care of the political situation which could be a situation to see what their options are about withdrawing from the agreement. That is what Roger recommends but he does not know if the Select board will support that decision. Roger also went on to say that the Administration and School Committee are not looking at the flawed model seriously. Arlene Tolopko asked Roger Brown what areas can be modified or reduced. Roger replied by stating that people are not spending money recklessly, but he believes that you can not support the class size to support the infrastructure for a full-fledged elementary school. He

also went on to state that the rating is not high on the school so students are not getting quality associated with the expense. Roger went on to say that the cost of sending our high school students to school is far less costly than the average elementary per student cost. Eric responded by saying that is what he is trying to explain to everyone. The cost per elementary student is inflated to begin with because all district transportation is added to the elementary students' costs. This deflates the cost of tuitioned high school students. This is just one example as to why the elementary costs are higher. Roger states that if the transportation were to be taken out, numbers would not change. The percentage the average cost would be over the state average per student. Roger stated again that Sandisfield would be better off looking at different options and getting a better deal. In Roger's opinion, there seems to be no interest from the Otis Finance Committee, the school's Administration nor the School Committee to review the model. Teresa DellaGiustina responded that she disagreed with Roger as far as reviewing and looking into the model. Eric has agreed to look into everything that Roger has suggested, even at this present meeting. Roger responded that he wished that were true, but for three years now no one has taken the budget seriously. Sandisfield Finance and Select Board has been turning down the school's budget for the past three years, so this should not be a mystery. Roger went on to say that the School Committee has not tried to change their meetings to accommodate the Selectmen considering the meetings are on the same night. Jennifer Hibbins spoke up and stated that is an untrue statement. The Selectmen did come to one meeting that was scheduled earlier so they could attend. Also, last year the Selectmen and the School Committee agreed to set up a meeting that would work for both groups. Jen did comment that she has tried to set up meetings to accommodate the Selectmen. Roger responded that he is not here to stick up for the Selectmen on this issue. It was stated that Roger was making false statements and Roger's response was this is only his opinion. Jennifer then stated that in the November School Committee meeting she suggested different options such as consolidation with other schools and changing the formula for assessment. Jen did not like the transportation aspect. It would be a long ride for younger children. As it is, some children ride for 45 minutes to an hour on the bus right now. Also, joining another district there are more towns involved which gives Sandisfield even less of a voice in budget decisions. Roger is going to recommend forming a group of people to research different avenues to see what is best for the school. That is all he wants to do at this time. It is not Roger's decision; the Selectmen are the ones who decide on what to do. Arlene Tolopko suggested Roger and Eric sit down and discussion the budget line by line to understand what goes into the numbers. It may help in seeing where each other is coming from. Arlene (a retired teacher) then stated children who are taught in smaller classes rather than larger classes get a better education. Roger then interjected and stated that is not the case with Farmington River. The School is at a B-. Farmington is not getting the results of better education from smaller classes. Jess Drenga responded that with small classes, one or two students that do not do well can throw off the average for the school's report card. Jess feels that it is unfair to assume that the education of the school is not adequate. Roger responded by stating he is only getting the statistics from the state website and all he is looking at is the financial aspect of the reports. Jess replied that he is now bringing

in the education aspect which is not appropriate for this meeting. The meeting is about the budget, other aspects should not be brought in. Arlene stated that she has never heard complaints about the education in the 30 years that she has lived in Otis. She feels that the school is valuable to the students. Arlene resents the comment of being a B- school when Jess just explained why our numbers are the way they are. Many students have gone on to make honor roll which means they have a good basis to start with. Roger stated that the information is on the state's website. He is not making any of the reporting up. It is out there to see. Roger believes in supporting the educational system, and he did not want to sound cheap, but Sandisfield is spending half their budget, which they cannot afford to pay, on the school. Roger also stated there is no real value to spending the money on the school. It is a huge amount that keeps going up and Sandisfield can not support it. Roger did state that he is willing to spend a lot of time with Eric to talk about the budget.

Jenn Hibbins asked Eric if the next meeting should be a budget meeting? Eric replied that the draft of the budget should be ready next month for the School Committee to look at. At the March meeting, the budget should be ready for voting and passing. If adjustments need to be made, there will be time to make those changes by the end of April to present the final budget to the towns. Jennifer then brought up February's meeting date. This is the month that the School Committee and the Sandisfield Select Board decided to have a meeting more accommodatable to Sandisfield. February's meeting will be Wednesday February 6, 2021 at 6 PM.

4. **Adjournment:** Jess Drenga asked for a motion to adjourn. Carol Lombardo motioned to adjourn; Arlene Tolopko seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 8:24 PM

Respectfully Submitted by,

Teresa DellaGiustina, School Committee Secretary

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