

Long Range Planning Committee Minutes

June 28, 2017

Present: Deirdre d'Albertis, Diane Lyons, Laura Schulkind; Tom Burnell, Joe Phelan and Brett King.

The committee continues its fact-finding work in this preliminary stage since its formation. Members discussed the importance of holding a series of "listening sessions" with the community and with teachers early in the fall (after circulating one or more preparatory surveys this summer).

Brett King visited to talk with us about the challenges to be presented by declining enrollments at CLS. He outlined the current organization of the elementary school, future enrollment trends, and what he sees ahead for the next five years.

When he started, the school was in the process of moving down to four K classes per grade level; now it is at three. When a cohort comes in at 53 or 54, there is a natural fit with three sections. If the group is larger, however, say in the 60s or 70s, it is much more difficult to plan for that number. Currently he has 54 students moving up to 1st grade and 58 to 2nd grade. Classes entering grades 3-5 are still larger. To be clear, every time we lose a section, we reduce the elementary teaching staff by one teacher. With retirements and leaves, he has worked carefully to deploy staff in response to changing needs in the elementary school.

Even as overall numbers are trending down, Brett shared his own perception that special ed numbers are holding steady or in fact going up. He has retained special ed staff and aides to meet this emerging need. As many as a couple of families a month tour the building with him; frequently he is asked about service for high needs and special ed children. He reminded us that the process of classification is rigorous and builds in regular reassessment. The State mandates a number of decision points that make this possible. So there is no question that this is a trend that is real: the necessity of retaining skilled staff and non-instructs to support all of our students in the early school years is undeniable.

Specials (music, art, gym, etc) remain a crucial part of our students' school experience. Every time CLS reduces by a section, we still have an imperative to enrich each child's learning. This is especially true as class size goes up. No matter the class size, we will still have six grades to support. Brett has introduced "intramurals during recess," offering organized activities and instruction for children outside of regularly scheduled classes. One to two grades each day enjoy these additional opportunities during the 30 minute recess period; every student gets to do this a couple of times a week. He talked with us about the impact of bringing any of these staff members down to a .84 appointment as well as the impact of consolidating classes. He cautioned that a diminution of quality would result with a shift in these areas to less than full time appointments.

So these are the two largest challenges from Brett's perspective: steady or rising numbers of incoming students with high needs will mean we must hold on the Special Ed staff and lower enrollments may negatively impact our specials team in their high impact practices with all students. Is there such a thing as schools receiving additional aid for special ed if the percentages reach a certain level? Apparently not, although in large urban areas there are de facto magnet schools that operate in that way. For districts such as ours, there are no such options: in any case, as Tom pointed out, special ed and high needs students are increasing not only at Rhinebeck but in all school districts. This is a demographic trend. Self-contained environments (a 12 to 1 to 1 model) are promising: CLS will be working with such

a model for the rising 4th and 5th grade classes for part of the day. Integrated co-teaching environments are quite successful with elementary school students. Moving to combined grades within the general classroom, however, is difficult to do well. Brett also shared the current thinking on promotion and retention of children based on a whole host of factors; the school works with families in individual cases to determine what is best for each child in terms of his or her social, emotional, and academic development.

The committee discussed the importance of articulating a vision of our schools as inclusive and appreciative of each student's unique gifts. Our approach to special education has been and continues to be grounded in the research that supports such a vision. The school district and board is committed to understanding our specific community as we think through the challenge of declining enrollments in a tax cap era, learning from surrounding districts about their strategies for dealing with the same constraints. We see it as our challenge, also, to articulate our philosophy of inclusion, to explain the reasoning behind best practices for class size especially in K-2. Brett will share data about the incoming classes he has been seeing, providing nuance to the numbers as we continue our study. Meanwhile, he is working with his staff to adapt to the larger class sizes we may reasonable expect in the future, offering professional development opportunities to empower teachers in their interactions with all students. He is exploring different schedule plans to give specials more time with students; partnering with teachers in the building he hopes to implement one of these plans in the near future.

What impact would moving to a K-6 building have in Rhinebeck? Brett and John Kemnitzer have already had some conversation about this. Could there be a different instructional model for grades 5-6 on the CLS campus? There would be significant organizational challenges—and the budget implications would need to be examined closely—but this is certainly a district-level initiative worth discussing at the very least.

Additional notes: The group talked about Aides and Teaching Assistants at CLS. At this point, there is a fair amount of flexibility in how Brett is able to use his aides. He is able to flex their time somewhat based on student need. Teaching Assistants who "float" typically take over in an integrated, co-teaching environment after the Sp. Ed teacher moves to a different classroom. There are no state mandates on having 2 teachers in an integrated classroom but guidelines that speak to having 2 adults in the room "when necessary."

Tom is working on an organizational chart for the entire District, so we have a sense of who is deployed where and what their responsibilities are. We finished out by setting some parameters for our "statistical neighbors." Tom will generate a comparison specifically for Dutchess, but the more valuable comparison will be in the schools who are "similar" to Rhinebeck. Tom will set the ranges between 800-1200 students and a CWR of 1.5-2.5. With over 700 school districts in NYS, we'll catch many more than 10 (our target number), so Joe suggested we overlay that comparison with an SED comparison of testing performance/demographics. If there are other reports that show "similar" school districts by some alternate measure, we can overlay those as well in order to get stronger comparison data.
Respectfully submitted,

Deirdre d'Albertis