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Board of Education Special Meeting

Minutes

April 9, 1998

Vice-Chairperson Crutchfield called the meeting to order at 6:10 pm. The following were in attendance:

Members of the Board of Education Present:

Ms. Patricia Crutchfield, Southwick, Vice-Chairperson
Dr. Edwin J. Delattre, Boston
Mr. William Irwin, Wilmington
Dr. Stanley Z. Koplik, Boston
Mr. James Peyser, Dorchester
Dr. Roberta Schaefer, Worcester
Mr. Micah Silver, New Salem
Dr. Abigail Thernstrom, Lexington
Frank W. Haydu III, Commissioner of Education ad interim

Member of the Board of Education Absent:

Dr. John Silber, Brookline, Chairman

Department of Education Staff Present:

David P. Driscoll, Deputy Commissioner of Education
Jeff Nellhaus, State Testing Director
Carol Gilbert
Scott Hamilton
Robin McCaffery
Greg Nadeau
Tom Noonan
Alan P. G. Safran
Rhoda E. Schneider
Carole S. Thomson
Susan Wheltle
Mark White

Also in Attendance:

Representative Harold Lane, Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Education, Arts & Humanities
Sylvia Smith, Aide to Senator Robert Antonioni

Commissioner Haydu welcomed the Board to the first special meeting since he became Commissioner ad interim. He said that he hoped the Board would find it informative. He then turned over the meeting to Deputy Commissioner David Driscoll and State Testing Director Jeff Nellhaus.

1. Student Assessment

Dr. Driscoll and Mr. Nellhaus presented information on four issues: the History/Social Science question try-out this spring; the process for setting student performance standards; the future of the grade 3 reading test; and the amount of time allotted for testing this year.

Dr. Driscoll stated that the Commissioner would propose that the Board delay administering the History/ Social Science try-out in grades 4 and 10 scheduled for this spring. Mr. Nellhaus said the tests are ready, but the question is whether the students have been taught the material that is included in the test. He explained that the History/ Social Science framework was adopted by the Board in August of 1997, and it calls for a major curriculum realignment in schools, particularly at grades 4 and 10. He said schools have not yet had sufficient time to cover the material adequately.

Mr. Nellhaus went on to show some sample test questions for grades 4, 8 and 10. He explained that the questions often cover several strands at the same time. For instance, a geography question may be wrapped in a historical context, testing knowledge in both areas at once. Scorers of the open-response questions use a rubric to determine the score on a particular question. In answer to questions from Dr. Koplik and Dr. Schaefer, Mr. Nellhaus explained that everyone who scores the tests has been trained on each of the various types of answers. He said that scorers also have to pass a test before they are allowed to score the tests. In response to a question from Dr. Schaefer, Mr. Nellhaus explained that if one scorer is not familiar with a certain answer or if s/he has any question about a particular answer, the question is then reviewed by a second person.

Mr. Nellhaus explained that a one-year delay in the 4th and 10th grade History/Social Science try-out would give schools more time to align their curriculum with the state frameworks, and would not prevent the Board from implementing the 10th grade test as a graduation prerequisite in 2001, for the class of 2003.

Mr. Silver suggested giving the tests to the schools ahead of time to determine whether or not that material has been taught. Mr. Nellhaus said that is possible but not ideal. Mr. Silver also expressed concern that postponing the test administration would be seen as the state backing away from an important initiative. Commissioner Haydu responded that the feedback he has received on this proposal from people in the field has been favorable.

Dr. Delattre expressed interest in postponing the 4th grade try-out but said he was reluctant to delay the 10th grade try-out. He warned against making a decision based on fear of public embarrassment. He said that parents would not be distressed because no scores would be reported, since this is simply a question try-out. Dr. Delattre added that the purpose of the try-out is not just to validate the questions but to see whether there is a need to change the local curriculum. Mr. Nellhaus responded that even though parents and students will not see any scores, the students may go home and tell their parents that they were tested on subject matter that they were not taught. Dr. Delattre answered that that is the purpose of the test - to find out what students have and have not been taught.

Mr. Peyser said that since the 10th grade test is the high stakes test, the students should be given every opportunity to take the test. He added that he is interested in seeing the results. Dr. Delattre said that he does not want to delay any longer than absolutely necessary. Mr. Peyser said he would like to see what areas are covered in the tests, as well as the results. Mr. Nellhaus commented that content areas could be phased into the tests.

Dr. Driscoll and Mr. Nellhaus then led the Board in a discussion about the process and schedule for setting specific performance standards and threshold scores for the MCAS tests. Dr. Driscoll said that a steering committee will be appointed this spring to prepare recommendations for the Board on the content-specific performance standards and threshold scores for grades 4, 8 and 10. Mr. Nellhaus suggested that members of the legislature and others in the field should be asked to recommend steering committee members. He explained that in addition to the steering committee, panels of about 10 to 12 people will be formed to determine threshold scores for each of the content areas. Mr. Peyser expressed concern that establishing cut-scores should not be a political issue. He said that setting the performance standards is the most critical part of the entire process. Dr. Delattre expressed an interest in having much smaller committees. Mr. Nellhaus said that he believes 10-12 is the optimal number, based on his experience with similar national committees.

The next topic was the grade 3 reading test. Dr. Driscoll opened the discussion, which covered test security and the pros and cons of continuing to use the Iowa reading test after this year or substituting a different test, either one commercially available or one customized to the reading portion of the English language arts curriculum framework. Dr. Driscoll said this year's grade 3 Iowa reading test is form M, the same form that was used last year. All but 109 test booklets were collected after last year's administration. Mr. Nellhaus explained that anytime a commercial test is used for more than one year, security is an issue. He suggested that the Board explore all their options for next year. He said one option would be to continue to use the Iowa test but use a different form. The disadvantage is that the forms are not embargoed in different states and there are not many forms, so security would continue to be an issue. Two other options would be to use a different company's developed test or to have a customized test made. Dr. Thernstrom mentioned that a fourth option is not to administer the test at all.

Dr. Delattre said that test security is extremely important. He said the Department realized there was a problem when 109 booklets were not returned, and considered several options. A different form of the test could have been used, but it would have cost the state \$195,000 and that would have been wasteful. In addition, using a different form would have pushed the test into the first week of May, very close to the MCAS test. Another option to secure the integrity of the test would be to perform spot audits, costing the state \$25,000. Dr. Delattre advised against this, stating that he objects to using children to find out if adults cheated.

Mr. Peyser asked if another company's test would be subject to the same security issues. Mr. Nellhaus responded that after the first year of any off-the-shelf test, similar security problems would be likely to arise. He also said that there would be questions about whether the results of a different company's test would be comparable. Representative Lane said the Department of Education should have a mechanism to investigate any suspected breach of test security. Dr. Koplik said that any such mechanism should rely on clear evidence before an accusation is made, and the consequences of violations should be serious. Mr. Silver commented that he is not overly concerned about the possibility that some grade 3 reading test booklets were not returned, since this is a test of reading skills and if children cannot read, seeing the test beforehand is not going to help them.

Dr. Schaefer asked about the cost difference between an off-the-shelf test and a customized test. Mr. Nellhaus said the Iowa test costs about \$4 or \$5 per student and a customized test would cost about \$7 per student. The difference would be about \$200,000 a year. Mr. Nellhaus said that a customized test could be aligned with the frameworks, the Board could decide how to ask the questions, and the reporting of results could be aligned with tests such as the fourth grade test. Dr. Thernstrom said that the whole Board probably would agree to support a customized test for reading. Commissioner Haydu said the Board should think through all the trade-offs before a final decision is made.

The last topic for discussion was the amount of testing time. Mr. Nellhaus suggested some options for decreasing the testing time for next year. He said the Board could spread out the testing over the year, for instance, testing in March and May. Another option Mr. Nellhaus suggested was to spread out testing over several grades, for instance, in grades 3, 4 and 5. Dr. Thernstrom asked if the Board is locked into untimed tests. Mr. Nellhaus explained that having timed tests does not actually save much time. Dr. Koplik suggested lengthening the school year to 200 days in order to allow time for testing. Mr. Peyser commented that some time limits may be needed for fairness and consistency in testing. He suggested listing the time in which the average student will finish the test but allowing a certain amount of additional time as needed. Mr. Peyser added that redesigning the test instrument should also be an option. Mr. Nellhaus said the test this year includes more questions than necessary, in an effort to ensure reliability.

At the end of the meeting, Mr. Nellhaus and Dr. Driscoll summed up their presentation. Dr. Delattre observed that people often describe the 10th grade test as the only "high stakes" test, when in fact it is not. He said that the younger the child, the higher the stakes, because weaknesses that are not identified and addressed early in a child's education will impede the child's ability to meet academic standards in later grades. Consequently, the 10th grade test is not the only high stakes test. Commissioner Haydu expressed his agreement with Dr. Delattre's comments.

Commissioner Haydu thanked the Board for engaging in the discussion and thanked Jeff Nellhaus and David Driscoll for their presentation.

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was

VOTED: that the Board of Education adjourn the special meeting at 9:45 p.m. subject to the call of the Chairman.

The motion was made by Mr. Irwin and seconded by Dr. Schaefer. The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Frank W. Haydu III
Secretary to the Board

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