**Joint Committee of the City Council and School Committee**

Tuesday, November 30th, 2021

Video of meeting can be found at: https://youtu.be/gp9LRvYtDys

City Council members present: Chairwoman Gladys Lebron-Martinez, Vice Chairman Juan Anderson-Burgos, Terence Murphy

School Committee members present: Irene Feliciano-Sims, John Whelihan, Nyles Courchesne

Other councilors present: Libby Hernandez, Rebecca Lisi, Joseph McGiverin, Peter Tallman

Other School Committee members present: Mildred Lefebvre, William Collamore, Erin Brunelle

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM

Councilor Murphy made a motion to remove item 1 from the table. Councilor Anderson-Burgos seconded the motion.

Item 1: 4-6-21 MURPHY, GREANEY -- Ordered that the joint council/school committee meet with the receiver to discuss the potential benefits of providing cursive writing instruction in some of the early grades. Studies have demonstrated that learning cursive improves fine motor skills; increases brain activity in both the right and left hemisphere; is a helpful tool for those with learning disabilities; and improves hand-eye coordination.

---> Complied with, conditioned

Councilor Murphy stated that the order was filed due to reading studies on the significant impact on brain function, learning and creativity. Reading an excerpt from Governing Magazine, he stated that in the high-tech world, cursive was re-emerging as a necessary learning tool, excellent for honing motor skills in children. He added that writing in cursive stimulates brain activity in both hemispheres of the brain, and make it easier to convey themselves while writing, adding that it can’t be matched when printing or typing on a keyboard. He then stated that he understood that teachers were not prohibited from teaching cursive, but that local curriculum had grown away from it. He then suggested the schools should consider putting it back into the lower grades, adding that it would be a positive to learning using full brain functions.

School Committee Member Whelihan stated that cursive should be taught at a young age. He recalled learning cursive early in his own education, adding that it is a skill that should be taught. He stated that it shows professionalism to write cursive as opposed to printing. He suggested that it was an artform being lost, noting that writing many decades earlier had been a beautiful form of writing.

Councilor Lisi asked to clarify a baseline for when cursive was being taught in the schools.

Valerie Annear, Chief Instructional Office, reiterated that research shows handwriting and putting thought to paper was important for brain development. She also stated they would want for students to practice their penmanship. She stated that the focus on cursive writing started at grade 3, adding that the focus in the earlier grades was on formation of letters and printing legibly. She noted that there was a need to balance curriculum between writing and development of digital literacy. She then stated they while they did not have a specific resource for memorizing cursive writing, they were focused on task and purpose of writing to give students an opportunity to practice their fine motor skills. She recognized that they could provide more resources in the future to systematize the instruction.

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez asked who decided to remove a structured cursive curriculum.

Anthony Soto, Receiver/Superintendent, stated that there was no decision to remove it but that they were required to align to the standards of DESE (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education), adding that cursive only appears in the standards in the 3rd grade.

V. Annear added that it also appeared in the 4th and 5th grade. She also emphasized that the standards were the minimum, adding that they could go above the standard. She also stated that the standards required them to assure that students could at least write their name in cursive. She stated that the focus points of the standards were about being able to write with purpose, do argumentative writing, being able to literary analysis and with critical thinking. She then recognized that it could be improved upon while attending to the required foundational reading and writing skills.

School Committee Member Whelihan suggested that being able to write one’s name was a low bar. He suggested that writing in cursive could improve spelling and organizing thoughts.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos stated that not only was cursive important, it was also an identifier of a person’s artistic side, their personality, and an expression of their mood.

A. Soto clarified that writing one’s name was only the standard, adding that the students in Holyoke could be learning more than that. He then suggested that they could survey classrooms to find out what was actually being taught.

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez noted that she worked with youth over the summer and dealt with many who did not even know how to write their own names in cursive. She also noted that many could not read things written in cursive.

Councilor Hernandez emphasized the need for a balance in the future of education. She stated that students needed to be able to develop skills to write with a purpose, to be able to convey their thoughts and analyze in addition to being able to write in cursive.

V. Annear reiterated that writing one’s name was only the minimum standard. She then stated that she did not intent to misrepresent what was happening in schools. She then expressed an intent to understand better what was happening in schools and develop more systemization for practicing writing in schools. She also noted that in developing reading skills, students do get exposed to different fonts and scripts in the literature the read in schools.

Councilor Murphy reiterated that all of the literature he had seen on the topic suggested that the thought process is enhanced when writing in cursive as opposed to printing. He suggested that students should begin instruction as early as possible.

Councilor Murphy made a motion that the order has been complied with, with a request for a report at the end of the school year. School Committee Member Feliciano-Sims seconded the motion.

(32:05)

School Committee Member Feliciano-Sims made a motion to remove item 2 from the table.

Item 2: 4-20-21 LISI -- that in an effort to document and make transparent the work that the Holyoke Public Schools have done under receivership, the City Council invite in Anthony Soto, Interim Receiver, as well as any cabinet level members, and possibly a representative from DESE to go over the metrics by which our student achievement is being evaluated, an explanation of the progress we have made thus far, and the benchmarks that we need to meet in order to be released from receivership.

---> Complied with

A Soto stated that there was no benchmark from the state that would indicate when the city would come out of receivership. He added that they could present on annual measurable goals from the state. He noted that the current year did not have targets due to the pandemic. He then stated that the baseline data came out of the 14-15 school year.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos suggested allowing Lisa as the maker of the order to explain her intentions behind the order.

Councilor Lisi noted that the previous election year heard a lot of arguments about getting out of receivership, adding that there had been no solid suggestions for how to achieve that goal. She then emphasized that the community needed to be able to understand where there was any progress as a result of receivership.

A Soto noted that a report is provided to the School Committee as well as the state every quarter on the progress of the schools. He then stated that Education Commissioner had been reached out to for more guidance on what it would take for the schools to come out of receivership. He then stated that the School Committee expressed strong interest in getting local control back, and a desire to understand what needed to be done. He also noted that the Commissioner saw the local School Committee as well put together with a good relationship with the Receiver. He also emphasized that the city would need to understand and communicate how to avoid returning to receivership if the city was taken out. He also stated that the commissioner had not agreed to provide specific metrics but committed to a continued dialogue. He then presented a PowerPoint featuring data on local school performance. Of note, the presentation stated:
-- "Next Generation" MCAS was updated in 2017 for grades 3-8 and 2019 for high school. It focused on students' critical thinking abilities and application of knowledge. It gives a clearer signal of readiness for next grade level or college or career. "Next Generation" MCAS gives a clearer signal of readiness for next grade level or college or career and is taken on a computer.
-- Massachusetts redesigned its district and school accountability system in 2018. Highlights of the new system include: using additional indicators beyond student test scores, focusing on the performance of each school as a whole and of its lowest performing students, and categorizing schools based on the type of support the Department would provide to them.
-- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, accountability determinations were not made in 2020 or 2021. Although the MCAS was administered in 2021, students had less testing than in a typical year and the scores are not used for accountability purposes.
Slides included attendance rates for years going back to the 14-15 school year, noting that there had been slight annual increases until the impacts of the pandemic. He then stated that there had been a marked increase in chronic absenteeism among elementary students, defined as missing 10% ore more days, during the pandemic. He noted that the average had hovered between 21 and 18 percent in previous years.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos suggested that putting a child in front of a computer would be harder for them to maintain focus for long periods of time.

A. Soto recognized that there was an impact from asking people to stay home when they’re sick or going through the process of getting testing following contact. He emphasized that this would have an impact on attendance, leading to an impact on educational outcomes. He suggested that the same would be consistent across the state.

School Committee Member Whelihan asked if there were programs fir acknowledging perfect attendance.

A. Soto stated that every school has positive behavioral incentives. He then stated that it had been tough to engage when learning was remote. He also emphasized that the current year was difficult due to the added layer of in person learning, Covid measures, and requests for people to stay home when they feel sick.

School Committee Member Whelihan emphasized the compounding issues of students losing time and progress when they are not in school. He expressed a concern about losing many years of education outcomes due to the pandemic.

A. Soto presented metrics for high school chronic absenteeism. He noted that there were improvements happening but remained too high. He then stated that the out of school suspension rate had been declined prior to the pandemic, adding that it still remained much higher than the state average. He then

A. Soto noted that this was students on track to graduate. He noted there had been progress until the pandemic. He then showed the students on track for. He then discussed the teacher retention, noting it was alarming. He stated that the topic around retention, noting it was better in last couple of years, He stated that it was a problem, emphasizing the need to keep more staff, adding that they can go elsewhere and work fewer hours. He stated that on average. He then described falling trends on interpersonal incidents I schools, a target that the state looked at. He then described significant improvements that had been achieved in the dropout rate, adding that it remained higher than the state average. He followed by describing increases in the graduation rate, noting that there had been new opportunities for alternative programs for students who may struggle in a normal high school setting. He continued by describing an increase in students meeting MassCore requirements, adding that the metric was designed to suggest how successful a student would be in the workforce. He then went on to describe the pride felt in increasing percentages of students taking on advanced coursework classes, adding that these programs had seen noted improvements in diversity.

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez expressed her excitement to hear this news. She noted her own granddaughter took advantage of these programs. She commended the efforts of those involved in the program.

A. Soto noted there had been progress with freshman on track to graduate on time prior to the pandemic. He then stated that a middle school on track to graduate metric had remained below 50% and stagnant for several years. He then stated that teacher retention had improved from around 73% in 2015 to over 80% in 2021. He noted that the state average was over 90%. He suggested that the longer day with professional development built into the turnaround plan may have been a factor.

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez asked if there were exit interviews done, and if there issues with technical knowledge among teachers leaving.

A. Soto suggested that Holyoke was a hard place to work. He then stated that he had often heard that the district was asking for a lot from teachers, noting they had been used to getting out at certain times and were being expected to stay later.

Councilor Lisi noted that the previous Receiver had a focus on teacher retention, specifically the salary and compensation plan that rewarded teachers that stayed longer in order to benefit from their experience and skills. She suggested that plan should remain on the table. She also noted that the kind of group work that students benefited from the past had been impacted by the requirement for special distancing. She asked if that had impacted teacher retention. She also asked what kind of personal protective equipment (PPE) teachers had been provided.

A. Soto recognized that it had been a difficult year for teachers and other school staff. He also noted that there had been improvements in performance happening, adding that the COVID impacts were happening at a bad time and interrupting that progress. He emphasized that it had been a challenging year to implement new methods of instruction, noting there had been pushback from teachers who were dealing with students facing many crises from the pandemic. He then stated that they would be doing a salary study to understand what teachers being earning in surrounding communities. He then returned to his presentation highlighting increasing graduation rates across all demographics. He then described slipping scores in ELA (English Language Arts) scores. He also noted drops in progress for students that were not considered English language learners across all grades. He also noted improvements in students stating they feel safe in schools, as well as increases in students feeling their culture and native languages were respected. He then described an increase in teachers stating that they believed professional development had benefitted their instruction in the classroom.

Councilor Murphy noted that asthma and other health conditions had been a concerned problem prior to the pandemic. He then asked if those issues may have been contributing to absences.

A. Soto stated that while data did split absences between excuses, unexcused, and illnesses, the data did not provide that level of detail due to health privacy protections.

Councilor Murphy made a motion that the order had been complied with.

(1:19:10)

Councilor Anderson-Burgos made a motion to remove item 5 from the table. School Committee Member Feliciano-Sims seconded the motion.

Item 5: 10-19-21 MCGEE -- Ordered, That the City Council invite in the Middle School Building project to discuss City Council role, eligibility period, timing of meetings etc.

---> Complied with

School Committee Member Brunelle stated that many members of the School Building Committee were in attendance. She then stated the plan was to review the MSBA eligibility process, including voting the and authorization process. She stated that there needed to be a funding commitment by April 29, 2022. She then stated her intent to provide enough information to report back to the full City Council. She then suggested that while there was wide support for a new school during the failed vote the previous year, the funding mechanism did not have support. She noted that the City Council had already approved one step in the process, a statement of interest for pursuing one new school. She then recalled that the city’s bond counsel made clear that the city would be in the position to handle the debt of one new school with the debts planned to come off of the city’s schedule.

A. Soto described the city’s current spot in the eligibility period, noting different points with either an MSBA vote or an approval for funding by the City Council. He stated that one of the coming steps would be a vote of the City Council to fund a feasibility study. He followed by describing a timeline of steps in the eligibly timeline, including those that had already passed. Coming steps including an execution of the enrollment and certification in the process, local vote authorization, and feasibility study agreement. He went on to highlight the membership of the School Building Committee. He noted that several were graduates of HPS schools and/or had children or grandchildren current attending schools in the city. He noted that the meetings that had taken place so far had largely been informational meetings, adding that coming meetings would determine if the previous design and OPM would be utilized for this process. He emphasized that this would be one of the biggest steps they were to take. He then provided the language template of the local vote authorization. He then summarized possible costs of the study and project. He emphasized that the MSBA would not reimburse the city for the feasibility study as they had the previous time. He suggested that if starting from scratch, the cost of the study would be around $1 million, adding that if the previous work was leveraged, it could cost between $450,000 to $600,000. He clarified that it would be dependent on how clear cut the work would be, including focusing on Peck as the chosen location.

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez asked to clarify if Peck was where the school would be.

School Committee Member Brunelle stated that the statement of interest specified studying the Peck site.

A. Soto emphasized that asking the planners to study other sites, the costs would increase.

Councilor Lisi suggested that the committee could consider either of two schools, adding that she did not believe one site was the focus of the agreement the City Council approved. She then suggested that while she agreed it was likely, it could be conjecture to assume that the debt override funding mechanism was the reason the previous vote of the city did not pass. She suggested that it would be worthwhile to understand the reasons people voted against it.

School Committee Member Brunelle recalled that many of those who opposed the two school plan had stated they would have been in favor of one school. She also reiterated that the MSBA would not reimburse any costs of the study, noting that the reimbursement in the last process was likely looked at as a waste of money.

School Committee Member Whelihan, noting that the analysis showed the city could afford the bonding of one school, he asked if the city could afford two schools.

A. Soto stated that an analysis of two schools was not done. He also noted that the analysis made the assumption that there would be no other major investments. He stated that the current debt service was $4.8 million and would remain close to that with the debt scheduled to fall off.

School Committee Member Whelihan stated that one school should be the focus, emphasizing that two schools did not pass.

A. Soto stated that he did not believe the MSBA would even entertain the city proposing two schools.

School Committee Member Brunelle emphasized that the fact that the MSBA was considering Holyoke again highlighted the need of a new school in the city. She then emphasized that adherence to the MSBA timeline was important to follow for cost savings. She then described the deadlines for the city to follow to make it into the MSBA’s process. She then stated that the Finance Committee would need to discuss the financing of a study as the next step. She then stated that the School Building Committee meetings would be on the first Thursday every month at 6 p.m., and open to any member of the public.

Councilor Murphy asked if the next step of a vote from the City Council would involve a specific appropriation of $700,000 or just a vote to enter into the process. He then clarified that if there was to be a request for appropriation, the process would have to start with the mayor submitting a financial transfer or bond authorization to pay for it.

School Committee Member Brunelle stated that they planned to have an exact figure at their next committee meeting the following Thursday.

Councilor Murphy asked if there was consideration of renovations to Peck or consideration of another location.

School Committee Member Brunelle stated that the MSBA would not fund renovations to Peck and that such costs would be totally on the city to pay. She emphasized that Peck had many issues beyond simple maintenance issues. She also emphasized that there would be a cost savings of a new school due to increased energy efficiencies as well as the School Department assuring that they would pay $500,000 a year toward the repayment of a new school.

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez asked to clarify that the plan would be to demolish the current Peck School, that it could not be rehabbed.

A. Soto confirmed that was accurate.

Councilor McGiverin confirmed Councilor Murphy’s guidance that any financial appropriations would need to be initiated by the mayor. He also emphasized that the new City Council would have several new members and that the committees would need to be formed again before they could take anything up. He then noted a distinction between deb capacity and affordability, emphasizing that affordability was based on if the city had the revenue to pay for the borrowing. He stated that would come back to the reimbursement rate and what the budget would look like in the following year. He also noted that the projected enrollment of students would be a factor. Noting the projected enrollment of 1,100 students, he asked how many students would be accommodated by the new school and where would the rest be educated. He also noted that the elementary schools were in trouble. He also recalled that there was a plan to close 2 ½ schools with the two school plan, adding that this led to an open question that needed to be answered when the one school plan.

School Committee Member Brunelle stated that they would seek more information on any reimbursement of the feasibility study. She noted that they had been discussing whether or not middle schools would be grades 5-8 or 6-8. She stated that would help determine who would be going to the potential new school and which buildings would come offline. She added that there was the potential of 3 schools going offline with the building of the new school.

A. Soto emphasized that there were 13 buildings, not 13 school, noting that some schools were co-located. He then stated that the city needed to move to an elementary, middle, high school model. He suggested that the current model was a factor in the city’s schools going into receivership. He also suggested that the new middle schools would elevate the educational experience of students at all levels. He then suggested that it had been a decision to stretch dollars too thin when the K-8 model was created to save on transportation costs.

School Committee Member Brunelle asked that the order be referred to the Finance Committee so that the matter can get into that committee’s agenda to avoid delays in the approval process.

Councilor Murphy clarified that the Finance Committee could not take up a vote until the amount is known for a funding order to be referred to that committee.

School Committee Member Brunelle stated that the committee would have that number by the time the committee met.

Councilor Murphy further clarified that the committee would need the funding amount before an order could be initiated by the mayor for the City Council to refer it to the Finance Committee.

Councilor McGiverin stated that the mayor had to put forward an order with the funding amount.

School Committee Member Brunelle asked if the School Building Committee had the figure by that Thursday, if any city councilor could then vote to refer this order to the Finance Committee.

Councilor McGiverin clarified that an appropriation has to be signed by the mayor, which would then be filed as an order under the name of the Chair of the Finance Committee.

Councilor Murphy made a motion that the order has been complied with.

(2:08:00)

Councilor Murphy made a motion to suspend the necessary rules to remove items 3 and 4 from the table as a package.

Item 3: 5-18-21 COUNCILOR MURPHY -- Ordered that the joint committee of city council and school committee meet to discuss potentially transferring school property on the Dean campus at the intersection of St Vincent and Northampton St to the city for the potential purpose of constructing some homes, and making the streets and sidewalks safer for all, while producing some tax revenues.

---> Complied with

Item 4: 10-19-21 BARTLEY -- Order, Per the School Committee, refer to the Joint Committee of the City Council and School Committee an order to review proposed transfer of school committee land near Dean High School which abuts Ingleside St. and St. Vincent St. Ask that the Joint Committee review the City Engineer’s drawings and take a vote whether to recommend approval of the transfer.

---> Complied with

School Committee Member Feliciano-Sims stated that the School Committee had recently voted to transfer the property, adding that there had been a letter informing the City Councill that the School Committee transferred the property effective November 15th.

Councilor Murphy stated that the letter would be received by the City Council at their next meeting.

School Committee Member Whelihan stated that the School Board had been hopeful that they would be included in the process when the houses are built, and that some Dean Tech students could be hired for the work.

School Committee Member Brunelle stated that the School Committee had a number of conditions they wanted attached to the transfer. She then stated they were told that the conditions cannot be in writing until the property transfer was done. She then laid out the conditions for the record:
1. That the proceeds from the sale goes back to Dean for programming.
2. That Dean students would be hired for the building of the houses.
3. That they would see meeting minutes from the subcommittee that heard this.
She expressed concern that there was no way to guarantee that the conditions would be applied when the sale is done.

Councilor McGiverin commended the School Committee, noting that this would be a great help to the city. He stated that taking unneeded school property offline for development would be a benefit of the tax rolls. He expressed hope that additional properties could be considered in the future. He also suggested that the conditions could be considered. He noted that such sales had specific regulations according to Mass General Laws.

Councilor Murphy made a motion that items 5 and 6 had been complied with. Councilor Anderson-Burgos seconded the motion.

(2:14:45)

Item 6: 5-4-21 From Anthony Soto, Acting Superintendent/ Receiver, letter regarding verdict of Officer Derek Chauvin

---> Complied with

A. Soto stated that he wrote the letter at a time when there was a lot of unrest and racial divide. He stated that anyone who saw the video, saw that George Floyd’s neck was kneeled on for 8 minutes, it was traumatic. He stated that he wrote the letter because he felt a responsibility to make sure the public knew that he felt the verdict was a step in the right direction but that there was more work to do. He then asked what the committee was hoping to do with the letter.

Chairwoman Lebron-Martinez suggested that Greaney had filed an order.

Admin Asst Anderson-Burgos clarified that the communication was referred to the committee and that because it was in the jacket, it was added to the agenda as an opportunity for discussion.

School Committee Member Feliciano-Sims made a motion that item 6 was complied with.

Adjourned at 8:17 PM