

Town of Greenwich

Selectmen's Board of Education Charter Revision Committee

Meeting 18 October 2016

7:00 p.m.

Employee Lounge in Town Hall

MINUTES

1. The meeting was called to order at 7:08 p.m.

a. Attendance:

I. Committee members: Barry Rickert, William Finger, Peter von Braun, Brian Peldunas (Secretary)– Present. Joan Caldwell (Chair) – Absent

II. Board of Education Members in attendance: Laura Erickson, Peter Bernstein, Debbie Applebaum, Peter Sherr, Jennifer Dayton, Barbara O'Neil, Gaetene Francis.

III. Other attendees: Ken Borsuk, Irene , Chris Von Keyserling.

2. Minutes

Given the absence of Ms. Caldwell, approval of the minutes was held over to the next meeting.

3. Discussion with invited guests – current Board of Education members.

The committee had forwarded a series of questions (see below) to current Board of Education members. The attendees presented their views on the current workings of the board (question one), the potential impact of the proposed change (questions two and three), their views and ideas on voter choice (question four).

Question one: While there was not unanimity of opinion, a significant majority of BoE members present and expressing opinions felt the current structure was working well. Specific evidence offered included few tie votes, and progress on significant issues, often with split votes not reflecting party lines (e.g. school start time).

Question two: the BoE members generally agreed that four year terms and staggered terms were appropriate. Regarding number of members and the impact on the working of the board, ten was viewed as unwieldy, and six as too few. There were various opinions expressed on current workload and on how a larger board might impact time commitment. Concerns were raised whether 10 interested “qualified” candidates/members could be found.

Question three: Again, there was not unanimity of opinion. One member of the current BoE suggested that an unbalanced board could lead to parties purposefully nominating members who will oppose collaboration and encourage partisan divided. That member also suggested that a Republican majority cold lead to extreme curriculum changes such as exclusively teaching

creationism and not evolution. Several members raised concerns, if a politically unbalanced board was seated, that more decisions might be made in caucuses, and that there would be less collaboration across party lines.

Question four: there was an overall belief that unaffiliated candidacies should be encouraged, and that a non-partisan board could be considered. There was no consensus on either topic. There were different beliefs as to the likely endorsement scenarios in the case of an expanded board.

Question five (general comments): several members indicated, given the State statutes in place and current demographics, the political parties control of nominations was a concern, and that the parties should be encouraged to recruit and nominate more “qualified” potential candidates. A suggestion was made to involve the League of Women Voters to help educate the public on the election process for the BoE, including pathways for unaffiliated voters.

Follow up questions from the committee included whether any major initiatives had been avoided for fear of a deadlock vote (general belief was no, with disagreement), and what impact two successful petition candidates had on the number of endorsements by the parties (no general consensus).

The Committee has, at previous meetings, spent a considerable amount of time discussing adding unaffiliated members the BoE, and it seems to be something of major interest to certain members. In order to test the support for this possible change among the current BoE members at the meeting, Mr. von Braun asked the members of the BoE what they thought of adding unaffiliated members. Mr. von Braun then suggested that if adding unaffiliated members is going to remain on the table as a serious option, we should spend some time evaluating how adding unaffiliated members would improve the performance of the BOE in delivering steadily rising academic achievement on a cost effective basis.

4. Discussion of answers already received from Law Department (if received) and from Secretary of State (if received).

A response was received from the Secretary of State’s office. Given the absence of Ms. Caldwell, the committee decided to hold off discussing the answers.

5. Verify invitations for next meetings.

The committee decided to ask representatives from the DTC and RTC to attend the next meeting. The committee discussed using the planned 1 November public hearing date for more specific discussions, while still maintaining the 9 November public hearing. No final decision was made.

5. Review and discussion of documents.

No further discussions were held.

6. Adjournment

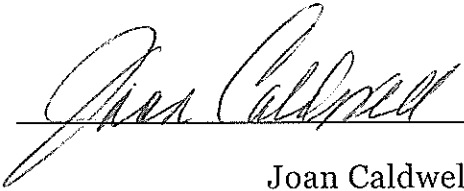
On a motion by Mr. von Braun, seconded by Mr. Finger, the meeting adjourned at 9:02 p.m.

The next committee meeting is planned for 25 October at Town Hall – Employee Lounge.

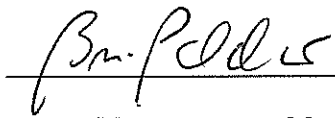
Questions used as a basis for discussion:

Included in the charge to the committee is making a recommendation on a possible change in the Town Charter to increase the number of BoE members from eight to ten, which could potentially lead to a politically unbalanced board. As part of our information gathering, we are interested in the impact this change might have on the workings of the Board of Education. We would like to hear your thoughts on how such a change might affect how the BoE operates and functions. For example:

1. Please describe the current dynamic/functionality of the current board with an equal number of democrats and republicans.
 - a. How is consensus reached on significant decisions?
 - b. How are ideological differences communicated and resolved?
 - c. How is work-load currently balanced among board members? Average monthly time commitment?
 - d. Would you describe the current board as non-political?
 - e. To what extent does party affiliation factor into how the board functions?
 - f. Relationship with superintendent/administrators/teachers/town officials/parents/students?
2. What, if any, changes to the board structure (number of members, length of terms, staggered terms, etc.) would you suggest? And if so, why?
3. If the number of board members increased to ten, would you anticipate any unintended consequences?
 - a. Unbalanced board?
 - b. Reduced collaboration?
 - c. Partisan politics?
 - d. General impact to the BoE furthering the mission of the Greenwich Public Schools?
 - e. Relationship with superintendent/administrators/teachers/town officials/parents/students?
4. View on competitive elections/voter choice?
 - a. Current incentive for political parties to have competitive elections?
 - b. Suggestions on how to encourage competitive elections?
5. Any other input that you would like to share with the committee?



Joan Caldwell, Chair



Prepared by Brian Peldunas, Secretary