

Advisory Committee
Schools Subcommittee
September 7, 2023

A hybrid public meeting was held via Zoom and in Room 111 of Town Hall. Present at Town Hall were Subcommittee members Cliff Brown, Perry Grossman and Stephen Reeders. Online attendees were Subcommittee members Ben Birnbaum and Carolyn Thall as well as members of the public Carla Benka, Ben Dubin and Selectboard Vice-Chair John VanScoyoc.

Cliff Brown opened the meeting and said the agenda for the evening was to discuss the views of Subcommittee members on potential areas of focus for the balance of the fiscal year. He then asked the members if anyone had any thoughts or suggestions on the topic.

Ben Birnbaum asked whether, given the existence of the School Committee and the relative inability of the Subcommittee to both obtain information and to ‘get to know’ key department personnel the way other Advisory Subcommittees do with Town departments, the Subcommittee should even exist. His view was that without good data to evaluate the Subcommittee is unable to do its work and it is therefore not a good use of anyone’s time/effort.

Stephen Reeders disagreed with the notion that the Subcommittee should not exist. His view is that there is a statutory requirement for the AC to be evaluating the Public Schools of Brookline (PSB) and their financial decisions. He emphasized the importance of that responsibility given the view that the School Committee as a whole and the School Finance Subcommittee specifically do a poor job watching over where and how the money provided to the PSB is spent and cited a few examples (world language, building utilities and the seeming ability for the schools—and the Town—to find/reallocate money during the course of a fiscal year outside of the normal budget process). He also discussed his view that the SC and its finance subcommittee do not, at least in public meetings, challenge the individuals who make presentations to them. Mr. Reeders acknowledged the difficulty in getting useful information from the PSB but said the group needs to keep pushing and raising the awareness of general questions and concerns and the lack of transparency and analysis undertaken by the School Committee to determine the effectiveness of their own financial decisions.

Carolyn Thall agreed with Mr. Reeder on the need to continue pressing the PSB for relevant data on a timely basis. She believes the public would be [upset, bothered, surprised?] by how little data there is. She mentioned several areas that the subcommittee could address or monitor including enrollment, class sizes, following the Driscoll project and discussing the role of school building committees particularly given the likely push for another large project. Like Mr. Reeder, she expressed confusion over the elimination of elementary world language this school year given that world language was a specific area that money was raised for in the recent operating override.

Perry Grossman commented that, being new to the AC that he was not fully clear on the responsibilities of the sub-committee vis-à-vis the School department and the school committee and indicated the group could investigate those roles and responsibilities to have a better shared understanding. He also said that while he was unclear on the rules for public entities, in the private sector his own experience was that movement of money during a fiscal year was a normal practice and represented an efficient use of resources.

Cliff Brown acknowledged the difficulty the group had in obtaining good data and reflected that he has, in past years, heard the same complaint from former school committee members. He discussed the general issue of transparency and the manner in which public meetings of the SC and its subcommittees are run, agreeing they are not focused on issues the AC/Subcommittee would prefer but also offering that the SC has a number of different constituencies they are playing to in their public meetings. He further stated that the subcommittee should focus on proposing metrics to the school committee, citing the fact that the AC has been asking for this for some time and that the topic will inevitably be raised again. He offered that an alternative would be to suggest to the school committee that they have a couple of members work with a couple of subcommittee members to try and address the matter, as the school committee has also acknowledged that appropriate metrics are important.

Carla Benka provided some insight into how appropriated but unused CIP money can find its way to other uses after the passage of time. She also discussed an upcoming warrant article that would allow for the transference of unused capacity for the Ridley School to be reallocated to another school project (Town Meeting has ultimate authority on such a matter). A conversation ensued about the possibility of the subcommittee working with the AC's Capital subcommittee (and

maybe others) to evaluate this issue as well as to look into the entire process of how non-MSBA mandated building committees are constructed.

Mr. Brown asked if anyone from the public had any comments. John VanScoyoc expressed the view that the subcommittee was needed and had an important oversight role even as he acknowledged the challenges in fulfilling that responsibility. He supported the notion of focusing, at a minimum, on publicly available and mandated data and publicly presented information. He specifically raised the issue of enrollment projections saying a preliminary number has generally been presented at the beginning of September but that it has not been this year. He also raised the issue of HVAC systems in the schools given the hot weather and lack of air conditioning in certain buildings.

Mr. Reeder offered the view that, based on his own discussions with parents of children currently attending the PSB, Brookline's approach to formal education is not adequately preparing k-8 students for high school and beyond. Acknowledging the limitation of using MCAS as the measurement, he stated that in the absence of other publicly available PSB metrics, MCAS data is all the public has to evaluate the school system. He specifically cited the MCAS performance of Black and Hispanic children as evidence of the failure of the PSB to provide an appropriate education to the entire student body. He stated his belief that the PSB goals (every student achieving, every student invested in learning, every student prepared for change and challenge and every educator growing professionally) are amorphous and without measurable criteria.

Mr. Birnbaum observed that the answering the questions raised required hard work, required data that he was not sure existed to be answered and once again raised the question of 'can we (the subcommittee) affect anything'? The suggestion was made that the members of the subcommittee should each come up with one or two ideas for what the group should focus on for the upcoming year. There was general agreement to that and each member agreed to forward their ideas to Mr. Brown who would collate and recirculate for a discussion at a future meeting.

Mr. Brown made a motion to adjourn the meeting, which was unanimously approved.