Concord School District
Joint Instructional and Finance Committees meeting

Date: October 5, 2016

Committee members present: Instructional – Jennifer Patterson, Acting Chair; Tom Croteau, Alana Kimball, Maureen Redmond-Scura; Finance – Jim Richards, Nathan Fennessy

Absent: Barb Higgins

Other Board members present: Clint Cogswell, Rusty Cofrin

Others in attendance: Terri Forsten, Superintendent; Donna Palley, Assistant Superintendent, Jack Dunn, Business Administrator

The meeting was called to order at 5:37 p.m. by Jennifer Patterson, who chaired the meeting. The meeting agenda was focused on a discussion of early childhood education.

Superintendent Forsten reviewed the findings of the Early Childhood Education Steering Committee. The Committee’s guiding question was “What are the best practices in kindergarten programming and how do these practices connect with early childhood programs in our school community?” Superintendent Forsten also summarized the Committee’s findings, which are detailed in a lengthy report. The report includes information about high-quality early childhood education programs and developmentally appropriate practices. The report recognizes scheduling and financial challenges for working parents with young children, and provides information about other districts in the state and region offering full-day kindergarten programs (including the neighboring districts of Bow, Hopkinton, Merrimack Valley and Pembroke.) The estimated cost to the District for full-day kindergarten would be approximately $1 million. She presented a brief overview regarding the range of early childhood programs currently offered by the District and by community providers. The full report is posted on the Board’s website at sau8.org.

Superintendent Forsten presented five options for consideration to expand the District’s early childhood programming, all responsive to the work done by the committee.

Option 1 – Kindergarten and Early Childhood Program: In this option, all Concord students would attend part-day kindergarten, with selected students attending an early childhood program that would serve both four- and five-year-olds together. Under this plan, about one-third of the District’s kindergarten students would receive a full-day program. Criteria for selection would include the specific learning needs of students. This program would impact about 90 kindergarteners and 90 four-year-olds. The program for four-year-olds would be open to the community, with some slots held
for students identified as “at risk” through District screenings. This would be an additional group of four-year-olds who are not currently being served in District preschool programs. This program option would require five additional teachers, at a cost of approximately $455,000.

Option 2 – Part-day Kindergarten and Part-Day Four-Year-Old Programs: All Concord students would receive a part-day program, and a new part-day four-year-old program would be created. This would impact approximately 180 four-year-olds and require five additional teachers, at a cost of approximately $455,000.

Option 3 – Combination Part-Day and Full-Day Kindergarten: This option would impact approximately 90 students who would receive a full-day program, or roughly one-third of the kindergarten population. Under this plan, some students would be selected to attend a full-day kindergarten program based on their needs, targeting students living in poverty and English-Language Learners. Other students could seek a spot in the full-day program based on a lottery system. Under this plan, Abbot-Downing, Christa McAuliffe and Beaver Meadow Schools would each offer one full-day kindergarten section, and Mill Brook School would offer two sections. This option would require 2.5 additional teachers, at a cost of $227,500.

Option 4 – Six-Hour Kindergarten, plus 45 minutes of Childcare provided by Community Providers: Under this option, all students would receive full-day kindergarten. The District would pay for childcare for the last 45 minutes of the day to provide kindergarten teachers with planning time. No specialists would be hired to work with students during this 45-minute period. Additional teachers and educational assistants would be required in addition to the childcare costs, with total personnel costs of approximately $1,100,950.

Option 5 – Full-day Kindergarten Program: Under this plan, all students would receive full-day kindergarten. The kindergarten curriculum would be aligned with developmentally appropriate practices, with a balance of programming for physical, social, intellectual and emotional skill development. This area would need more careful analysis; the PD time may need to be included in the PD/collaboration time. Additional teachers, assistants, furniture, supplies, and equipment would be needed, with an approximate cost of $912,065. This figure does not include the potential need for additional specialists to work with students while teachers have daily 45-minute planning periods.

It was noted that the District currently uses Title I grant funds to support extended kindergarten programming for some eligible students. If the District offered a full-day program, those funds could potentially be used to provide some preschool programming.

Superintendent Forsten described some positive aspects as well as challenges for each of the various options. She introduced several additional considerations, including charging tuition for full-day kindergarten, and creating options for kindergarten
‘specials.’ She noted that the cost of furniture, equipment and supplies for the various options could be as high as $210,000. The costs of additional educational assistants are somewhat unknown, and costs for transportation will need to be assessed depending on which option the Board selects.

Members of the community provided testimony to the Board on the topic of early childhood education.

Jennika Mannesto and Jaelyn Ortiz are students in the Concord Regional Technical Center Teacher Education Program. Jennika and Jaelyn are also Student Ambassadors for Save the Children Action Network. They spoke about the benefits of full-day kindergarten, noting that a longer day allows students more time to focus, learn and explore activities in depth. They noted that research has shown that students who attend high-quality preschool and kindergarten programs show lasting gains. These programs close achievement gaps for minority and low-income students. These students see high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten options as helping to break the cycle of poverty and representing a smart investment in children’s future.

Pam Wicks is the mother of three children in grades 1, 3 and 5, who attend Mill Brook and Broken Ground Schools, and is in support of full-day kindergarten despite not having a child who will benefit. She spoke about her experience at Mill Brook School, where she noted that the curriculum is designed for a full-day program. She said that she does not believe that 2.5 hours is enough time to cover kindergarten academics. Her child told her that he did not like kindergarten because he did not have time to play. She believes that the District needs to implement a full-day program in order to provide opportunities to meld academics with play activities. Some students have quick transitions to activities because of the shortened day. None of her children will benefit, but she is in full support of full-day kindergarten, to attract younger families to move to Concord, who otherwise would consider Bow or Hopkinton.

Karen Hicks is a small business owner and the parent of a seven-year-old. She believes that full-day kindergarten is an important investment, noting that there are volumes of evidence about the growing income inequality, and also an opportunity gap across the country. Now, more than hard work and grit, what determines opportunity is the location in which one lives. There is evidence that segregation not only by race and income, but also by parenting, impacts children. Many students are not experiencing strong parenting, and the community needs to invest in kindergarten and early childhood education. She said this makes sense for families and makes economic sense. Ms. Hicks noted that she pays $12,000 per year for full-time preschool and kindergarten, and believes that a full-day kindergarten program is important for the future of the work force. She asked the Board to give all students a chance to succeed by providing all-day kindergarten.

Courtney Jones is a physician at Concord Hospital and the parent of three children: a first grader, a three-year-old and a one-month-old. She noted that she supports full-day kindergarten for herself and also for the women with whom she works. She
pointed out that there are many barriers for families trying to access a full-day program for their kindergarten-age children: many do not have the money to pay private tuition, or cannot find transportation between programs. Parents currently have to expend resources for the remainder of the day after school. Full-day kindergarten especially benefits the most vulnerable students. She noted that kindergarten is too short as it is, with less than a half-day offered.

Betty Hoadley has been a Concord resident and taxpayer for 54 years. She is a great-grandmother, with a one-year old great-grandson who will attend Concord Schools. She said she does not have a specific position on this issue at this time, but had several questions and comments. She noted that she saw some discrepancies in the numbers associated with the costs of the various program options, and was pleased to see the variety of options and choices that have been presented at this meeting. She wondered how many options the Board members will carry forth to their November 7 meeting, noting that she would not like to see just one option brought forward. She also wondered what kinds of services would no longer be necessary under the various plans. She noted that the Board will be considering a number of other items that will potentially have budget implications, including the issue of steam to gas conversion for four schools, the need for new technology in most schools, increased retirement costs and facility needs. Ms. Hoadley said she hoped the Board will consider ways to reach out to all taxpayers, not just those who have children in the schools, and she said she does not believe there was enough of an effort to publicize this meeting.

Erin Stewart said she pays taxes on two houses in Concord, and is the parent of a four-year old and a middle school student. Part-day kindergarten was an inconvenience for her, but not a major issue. Her 7th grader went to private school for kindergarten and stayed at that school through 4th grade. She said she believes that Concord should offer full-day kindergarten because many families in Concord cannot afford to send their children to Woodside or other programs, and need full-day kindergarten. She said that adding preschool programming would be great, but was not sure if parents would be able to get their children to a part-day program, because they need childcare all day. She believes that the District will save money in the end by providing full-day kindergarten.

Jennifer Merrill is not a resident of Concord, but graduated from Concord High School and is the parent of three children ages ten, seven and four. She said she is shopping for a house but will not buy in Concord because there is no full-day kindergarten, and said she believes that families are staying out of Concord because of the lack of full-day kindergarten. She believes that the cost savings from not having to offer mid-day transportation for kindergarten students will be substantial.

Sara Greene thanked the Steering Committee for their work. She noted that she is the parent of two young students: her youngest attends kindergarten at St. John’s Regional School, and her 2nd grader attended full-day kindergarten at Woodside School. Her husband is a pilot, so she is like a single mother. She said her children are too old to
benefit from full-day kindergarten in the Concord schools, but as a parent and taxpayer, she believes that this would attract families with young children to come to the community. She notes that transitions are hard for her child; she didn’t want him to have to attend public school for a part-day program and then leave and go somewhere else for the remainder of the day. She said she appreciates the other early childhood options mentioned, but feels these are half measures. She would not want others to have to qualify through a lottery or hope that their children’s learning challenges would be enough to get a spot in a full-day program. She encouraged the Board to bite the bullet and join other communities that offer full-day kindergarten.

Laura Bailey is a resident of Concord, working in another school district as a Speech Pathologist. She asked for clarification about the tax rate increase that would come from implementing full-day kindergarten. Mr. Dunn noted that, on a $250,000 home, at the current rate of valuation, the cost would be an additional $86 per year. He noted that the full amount would be available before the coming year’s budget is voted on. He noted that the tax rate goes up 1% for every $526,000 that is needed to be raised. Ms. Bailey noted that the school where she works is in its first year of implementation of full-day kindergarten. Related service providers are finding this schedule a great relief as they look for time to deliver their services to kindergarteners; they now have more time to provide needed interventions. She noted that intervention at the early childhood level are needed 3-5 times per week in order to see improvement in the students. She believes the longer day would provide students with more opportunities, and, as a working parents, she currently has to piecemeal childcare together for her kindergarten-age child.

Michael Roundy is not a Concord resident, but he noted that he grew up in Concord, attended Rumford, Dame, Broken Ground and Concord High Schools. He currently lives in Canterbury, where that community is having a similar struggle to approve full-day kindergarten, with topics related to finances appearing there as well. In Concord, where there is a wide range of families of varied socio-economic backgrounds, there are many students who would benefit from full-day kindergarten. He noted that parents need time to work at their job and not have to give their paychecks over to a childcare facility. Mr. Roundy teaches at UMass in Lowell, and noted that his research suggests that by investing now in early childhood education, savings can be realized later on remedial education.

Caitlin Fennessy thanked the Board and committee for the work done over the past year, and noted that her husband Nathan is on the Board. She has followed the work related to early childhood education, but has not spoken previously. She shared a recent experience: her son’s kindergarten teacher invited parents for an orientation on the first day of school. The teacher spoke about what the students would be learning in reading and writing, including the standards that would be the focus of instruction, and also noted that she found it difficult to cover all the requirements in the kindergarten math standards. Ms. Fennessy indicated that she was concerned that this veteran teacher felt the need to apologize for this to the parents. She noted that the
Board should be giving teachers the time they need to teach and for students to learn. A few days ago, Ms. Fennessy asked the teacher for permission to tell this story. The teacher asked her to emphasize the fact that teachers struggle to find time to meet their students’ needs; they are looking for time for creative learning, for learning through play. Ms. Fennessy asked the Board to institute full-day kindergarten so teachers and students time to teach and learn.

Kristyn Van Ostern thanked the Board, noting that she appreciated the deliberative process that has taken place around this issue. She said her son attends first grade at Christa McAuliffe School but did not attend the school for kindergarten as he attended a private kindergarten. She noted that many people in Concord cannot afford to pay for full-day kindergarten, and asked that the Board offer a full day of kindergarten.

Seth Angeloro has a five-year-old daughter at Abbot-Downing School, and a two-year-old son. He can understand why some people want a full-day kindergarten program, but asked the Board to also offer a half-day option. He said he feels that time spent at home for a half day has been good for his children, and would like to see this option remain available. He noted that his child has done well at Abbot-Downing School.

Katie Robert is the parent of a five-year-old who attends a private full-day kindergarten, and a three-year-old daughter who is placed at a community preschool outreach site by the District. She is also board president for a public health organization, and noted that she wants to “level the playing field” for all students. Her questions about options for students with disabilities who need services in kindergarten included whether parents whose students may be in private kindergarten would have to pay for special education services, or would the District provide them.

Melissa Lemay has a stepdaughter in 7th grade, a three-year-old son, and works as a teacher at a local preschool. She is concerned that a half-day program does not provide enough time to meet the requirements of the Common Core Standards, noting that her child hated school and would pretend to be sick because she could not play in kindergarten; she missed being able to go outside and play at recess. Ms. Lemay said she believes that students need more time for learning and playing in kindergarten, and that a half day is not enough. She noted she is willing to pay higher taxes so that full day-kindergarten can be offered, noting that her child’s education and enjoyment of school would be worth the $86 in additional taxes.

Katie Vachon is the parent of a 3rd grader and a four-year-old, and teaches fourth grade in another district that has offered full-day kindergarten for eight or nine years. She said that others have mentioned that full-day kindergarten becomes “the new first grade,” but has not seen this happen in her district – students still have plenty of time to play. She did not live in Concord when her third grader was in kindergarten, but noted that she will have to pay for a full-day program for her younger child so that he will not have to be bussed to a different program in the middle of the day.
Those who spoke at the meeting were asked how they had heard about the meeting. Several responded that they had heard through email, from the newspaper, from a child’s teacher and from messages sent home from school.

Ms. Patterson thanked the group for coming and speaking to the members.

The committee voted 6-0 to adjourn at 6:58 p.m. (moved by Nathan Fennessy, seconded by Jim Richards).

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Patterson, Acting Chair
Donna Palley, Recorder