Concord School District
Instructional Committee Meeting Minutes

Date: October 28, 2015
Committee members present: Barbara Higgins, Chair; Jennifer Patterson, Alana Kimball, Tom Croteau
Other Board members present: Kass Ardinger, Nathan Fennessy
Administration: Terri Forsten, Superintendent; Donna Palley, Assistant Superintendent; Jack Dunn, Business Administrator

The agenda was to discuss a plan to review early childhood education in the district, with specific attention to our kindergarten programs.

Superintendent Forsten described the current status of the district’s early childhood education program. District preschool programs are situated at Mill Brook and Beaver Meadow Schools. Of the 97 three- and 4-year-olds who attend, 51% qualify for special education services. An additional 35 students, all identified with special education needs, are placed in five community-based private preschool programs and are served by District special educators and specialists. 50 families currently take advantage of the three family centers established in Concord through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant.

The district currently has 266 kindergarten students in 16 sessions of kindergarten, with class size between 15 and 18. There are 311 students in first grade in a total of 17 classrooms, with class size ranging from 16 to 22. There are 334 students in 18 second grade classrooms. Class size in second grade ranges from 16 to 21 students. We offer extended kindergarten days (generally 1 to 1.5 additional hours per day) for eligible Title I students. 36 students participated in this Title I program during the 2014-2015 school year. Some kindergarten students with IEPs have extended programs, with seven students participating currently.

Superintendent Forsten noted that several Concord residents have come to speak to the Board recently in support of full-day kindergarten. They’ve identified several reasons for supporting the full-day approach, including the benefit for students, the support for working parents, and equity with neighboring districts who currently offer this programming.

Superintendent Forsten suggested that the committee consider an essential question to help focus the discussion as we go forward: “What are the best practices in kindergarten program development and how does that connect with our school community.”
Forsten noted that issues surrounding early childhood education are complex, and the administration would want to make sure that adequate time is taken to consider many types of information through a steering committee process. Superintendent Forsten offered an outline of next steps, beginning with developing a steering committee that would:

- Gather information (research, economic data, surveys)
- Analyze the associated impacts (costs, space)
- Develop and assess options for our community
- Present findings and recommendations to the Board

Barbara Higgins spoke to the process of creating curriculum for a full-day kindergarten program, and suggested that the local private and public full-day kindergarten programs could share information about what they are currently doing, including in towns that have been doing this for some time.

Nathan Fennessy noted that we have more students coming to first grade who have not been with us for kindergarten. The administration will compile historical information on this issue.

Mr. Fennessy asked about the timeline for the steering committee process. Superintendent Forsten proposed that the first meeting be held on December 9 at 6 p.m. The committee will include parents, educators, community members, Board members and administrators.

Superintendent Forsten noted that she has received seven emails from parents in the last several weeks, with varying points of view about full-day kindergarten. Alana Kimball observed that when she hears from constituents, it is apparent there are feelings on both sides of the issue. It would be helpful to survey our community more broadly about their perspectives on this issue.

Kass Ardinger suggested that the Board hold public hearings on this issue. The Board or the Instructional Committee could host several public forums to hear from the community.

Ms. Kimball asked whether there is any change in the legislature around adequacy payments for kindergarten. Jennifer Patterson noted that, while there could be a bill in the next session, it would likely not bring funds in the short term. She noted that these types of issues are complicated, and the Board shouldn’t plan for additional funds from the state.

Ms. Higgins noted that several school districts nearby have new full-day kindergarten programs. The Bow Superintendent has offered his help, and has extended an invitation to visit Bow’s program. When a committee is formed, Ms. Higgins suggests that they accept help or assistance from other districts, and that the committee visit other town’s programs to see kindergarten teachers in action. The group can also learn
from other districts about the process they used as they considered and implemented full day kindergarten.

Ms. Ardinger noted that while it could be useful to see full-day kindergarten in other places, she would caution about making decisions based on other communities, as Concord is quite different in terms of our size and demographics.

Tom Croteau noted that the Board should focus on what is best for students and not have forces driving this work other than what is right for our young students. He expects that information will be gathered from many sources.

Ms. Patterson suggested that it is important to have the process be clear and thoughtful so that all members of the community feel that their views are taken into consideration. This mirrors what was done during the elementary school consolidation project. She found the process at that time to be very well-focused, as the participants were looking at consolidation in an educational context. She said this was very good for the community.

Several Board members spoke about the importance of keeping an open mind as they go about this work. Ms. Ardinger suggested that people should be optimistic about what the Board is embarking on as the process will highlight the type of education we want for our students at the early childhood level.

Concord resident Betty Hoadley spoke to the committee, making several suggestions to the group as they go forward with plans around studying early childhood education. She suggested that the steering committee be provided with some history about the consolidation project and the decisions that were made about the school building spaces. She suggested that the words ‘early childhood’ replace ‘kindergarten’ in the title of the steering committee and that the committee take a broader view by looking at a variety of options for early childhood education. She suggested that the committee not look at economic data too early in the process but, rather, focus instead on educational information. She encouraged them to consider other options beyond either full or half-day programs for kindergarten.

Ms. Hoadley suggested that the committee develop and assess several options for our community, including a consideration for partnering with existing private kindergartens. She noted that she does not believe that implementation of full-day kindergarten should be done to support parents’ need for childcare. She also suggested that the committee not be charged with bringing recommendations to the Board but, instead, present findings related to its investigations. Ms. Hoadley also noted the importance of creating a truly diverse committee, with open meetings. She recognized that there are a variety of cost factors related to implementing full-day kindergarten, including the cost of classroom teachers, specialists, and special education services.

Ms. Patterson agreed that it may be a good idea to not require the steering committee to make recommendations; instead the committee should share their findings through
a report. Once the report of findings is received, the Board should spend time reviewing it within the context of other Board initiatives and budget considerations.

Superintendent Forsten asked whether, in changing the name of the steering committee, the Instructional Committee would be requesting the administration to look at the whole range of early childhood programs, or at kindergarten within the context of early childhood programming. Members suggested that it would be important to consider kindergarten within the context of the continuum of early childhood education, from preschool through primary school.

Members suggested other aspects of the issue that should be considered, including class sizes in the primary grades; the types of preschool and kindergarten offerings in the community; the needs of students living in poverty, learning English and experiencing disabilities; as well as data about the educational outcomes of our current primary grade students. Mr. Fennessy and Mr. Croteau raised concerns about overloading the steering committee in terms of their task. Mr. Fennessy urged that the committee consider how to reach those children who most need support, and how we can maximize the benefits for all children who will ultimately be in our schools.

Ms. Patterson noted that previous research considered by the Board showed that there was a greater benefit for small class size in primary grades than for full-day kindergarten. More recent research should also be considered as the group goes forward.

Mr. Croteau noted that one of the Board’s greatest assets as the issues are studied will be the District’s current teachers.

In response to a question from Ms. Kimball about the process of implementing full-day kindergarten in Laconia, Superintendent Forsten replied that she had led this effort in Laconia. She believes that what would be most helpful in leading the steering committee would be to agree on an essential question that will guide the work.

After discussion, the group agreed to revise the essential question that will guide the steering committee as follows: What are best practices in kindergarten programming and how do these practices connect with early childhood programs within our school community.

Mr. Fennessy asked about the percentage of students in Concord who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Ms. Forsten indicated that approximately 40% are eligible. Mr. Fennessy noted that the number of students receiving extended day programming in kindergarten was a much smaller percentage.

The committee members discussed ways to reach out to the community to publicize this new steering committee. Suggestions included providing information through various media outlets, using email to connect with families with children already in the district, placing information on the website, and reaching out to day care and preschool providers in the city.
It was noted that this information will be shared with the full Board at its meeting on Monday, November 2. The date for the first steering committee meeting will be December 9th at 6 p.m.

The committee voted 4-0 to adjourn at 6:50 p.m. (moved by Ms. Patterson, seconded by Mr. Croteau).

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Higgins, Chair

Donna Palley, Recorder