

## Holland Elementary School Forum

October 12, 2015

Board members present:	Administration Present:	Facilitator:
Lincoln Petell, Chair	John Castle, Superintendent	Ernie Emmerson
Kim Champney	Kelli Dean, Principal	
Louise Campbell		

Press present:	Recording Secretary:
Jennifer Cleveland – Record	Nancy Griffith
Laura Carpenter – Newport Daily	

EMMERSON started the meeting at 6:09 p.m.

EMMERSON explained the goal/agenda for the evening was to have an informal discussion and that questions were welcomed.

PETELL spoke about his rationale for the evening, with his main focus being on explaining to the community ACT 46.

CASTLE presented the overview of ACT 46, the goal of which is to push individual schools into one overall district for PK-12, with a minimum of 900 students. Each town would have proportional representation on one board. PK-12 district has 4 different models.

ANDREW BOUCHARD asked if one unified board would separate out different grade levels. CASTLE indicated no, the board as a whole would be responsible for all grades. CASTLE shared that he is not a supporter of ACT 46.

VIC PETELL inquired whether CASTLE has heard of any upcoming changes in legislation due to negative feedback from school districts around Act 46 parameters. CASTLE has only heard of potential cost containment changes, but no expectation that they will change the entire law.

CASTLE reviewed the incentives available for mergers and how those incentives are funded.

CASTLE talked about how ACT 46 has penalties for excessive cost increases (threshold) within districts and explained the formula as to how that is calculated.

CASTLE talked about centralizing Special Educators due to ACT 153, as otherwise we would be penalized. We are moving forward with that for certified staff only.

DEAN talked about current staffing assignments this year. Grades K-3 is made up of 15 students, with 1.8 teachers and a para. Groupings have challenges, but also opportunities. Instruction is not done by grade levels, but by skill levels. An existing challenge is the 0.8

teacher that is not there all day with the other teacher. They minimize the impact by trying to have that other teacher absent during meetings, breaks, etc. Other configuration is grades 4-6 with 15 students, and 2 teachers. Instruction is again broken out by skill/ability. DEAN talked about sharing of Special Ed teacher with other schools as Special Ed student numbers dropped before school started. Behavior Specialist was also dropped down to 1 day a week due to school needs.

BRAD DURRELL asked if an overall ratio for staffing levels was used. He noted that Holland School appears to be 1:7, how does that compare to the State? CASTLE indicated it was low, average is 1:11.

RACHEL JOHNSON commented that she has two kids in the Holland School and they come home every day and tell her what they have done and learned. She is very pleased with what they are getting for education at Holland.

CASTLE reviewed tax rate and spending per equalized pupil comparisons. Holland is one of the lowest within NCSU for equalized student spending. CASTLE talked about the upcoming big drop in equalized pupil count (basis for funding) as it is based on a rolling two year average and enrollment this year is 35 students. Fund balances can be put in special tax anticipation offset account to help lower taxes.

CASTLE talked about tuitioning students out, and showed estimated impact on tax rate. The estimates did not show a huge savings.

BRAD DURRELL: How does tuition affect revenue sources? CASTLE indicated Small School Grant and other funding sources go away.

ANDREW BOUCHARD asked for further clarification in regards to CASTLE'S earlier comment about the Small School Grant changing over to a consolidation grant. CASTLE stated it only applies if all schools within SU merge by the expedited deadline incentives.

RICKIE DAGOSTINO commented that she had worked at the Jay Westfield School where those communities had an aging population with low school enrollment and all of a sudden they gained close to 30 kids. If those communities had elected to close the school and tuition the children out the towns would have been broke paying tuition bills, while still having building maintenance costs. She indicates that perhaps the same thing would occur in Holland. She believes Morgan is finding out that they are not saving money after closing their school. Holland's decision cannot be financial driven but student driven.

CASTLE re-iterated that this is really a hard decision. These are your children and your community. But we also have to consider costs. Ultimately it becomes the decision of the community.

EMMERSON. The school board needs to know your feelings and your thoughts about which path to move forward with and develop plans.

DAMION DESKINS asked if the chart that was distributed with estimated tax rate changes was based on the current enrollment of 35 students. CASTLE indicated it was based on current equalized pupil count. He had explained the formula for those figures previously.

BERT LETOURNEAU asked if the State has listened to any of the feedback about these changes. CASTLE indicates that the State's response is always about equity of opportunity. But it comes down to each town's values. What is important to one community in regards to education may not be important to another community. That is why we need to hear from Holland townspeople as to what they value for educational opportunities.

SPEEDO DESKINS worries about the cracks that kids can get lost in. There is a tendency to lose more students in larger schools.

BERT LETOURNEAU inquired if anyone had approached Morgan to see if Holland could merge with them? He also commented that his grandchildren are offered a more hands on learning approach here, and have more common sense. CASTLE indicated you can talk to the Morgan community as they are the ones that voted to designate Derby as their tuition school.

BRAD DURRELL wondered how many students Morgan has. CASTLE believes it hovers around 35. EMMERSON talked about his previous experience with the Morgan School Board. They were never interested in pursuing a merger. A few years ago they did talk but they wanted Holland to subsidize their students as well.

JENNIFER MARTIN shared that some families from other communities heard that they cannot tuition anyone into Holland and wondered why we would not welcome the tuition income. CASTLE pointed out that there is no school in our SU that has school choice to tuition for elementary school. So if a parent wants to send a child to another communities' elementary school the parent would pay the tuition, not their town's school district.

JESSICA REILLY wanted to know if there is a question that the school would close before the end of the current school year. CASTLE indicated there is no danger in closing the school before the end of this year. He envisions the Holland School staying viable over the next couple of years, but financial pressures will increase over time. The current birth rate is very low for Holland, so there is no current expectation of a drastic increase in enrollment.

RACHEL JOHNSON asked if there are other funding sources available. CASTLE explained that grants can be obtained, and are continuously researched, but they are for short durations. It is hard to sustain those on a yearly basis.

PATTI OVITT proposed opening a charter school. CASTLE stated they do not exist in the State of Vermont law. OVITT then proposed the possibility of an apartment building in Holland, something that would bring families in. EMMERSON: You would also need to offer other services to draw people (i.e. Post office).

KATIE SEARLES asked if we could consider keeping 7-8 graders here. CASTLE feels it would be challenging to run programming and services for that age group. EMMERSON talked about the transition being hard for kids to go from a K-8 to large High School.

ANDREW BOUCHARD wanted to share the unofficial, preliminary results of a question that was on the town planning committee's survey. The question read as follows: "Should the Town encourage the continuance of the Holland Elementary School?" The results were that 41% said yes, 33% said no and 25% were undecided.

EMMERSON polled the group as to how many came tonight with the thought that the school would close within a year or two? None. How many thought they would like it to close: two. Of those two, has this presentation/discussion changed your mind? One indicated she was willing to wait a couple more years. EMMERSON reiterated that tonight was important to open the discussion.

DAN MAPLE took a moment to thank Ernie Emmerson, the School Board, John Castle and Kelli for bringing this all together. Board members know that normally no one ever shows up. It is encouraging to see many people show up. Information is powerful.

EMMERSON adjourned the meeting at 7:27 p.m.