Rivendell Interstate School District – Board Meeting Minutes
Westshire Elementary School, West Fairlee, VT
May 29, 2007

Members Present: Allen Avery, Margaret Gladstone, Sandra Smith-Ordway (Fairlee); Doug Tifft (at-large); Juliette Bianco, Carol Sobetzer, Mel Emerson (Orford); Beverly Ash, Heather Fahy (West Fairlee), Harry Black, Trevor Law (Vershire)

Administrators and Staff Present: Noelle Vitt (Head of Schools), Bob Sampson (Head of High School), Paul Fassler (Head of Middle School)

Others Present: Cicely Richardson (Journal Opinion), Peter Jamison (Valley News), sign language interpreter, Cheryl Monroe, Kathy Young, Doug Sonsalla, Kara Ghio, Holly Austin, Katie Garduno, Chris Goodrich, Connie Goodrich, Michael Wood, Rebecca Wood, Laurie Barr, Danielle Sweet, Becky Dexter, Brian Emerson, Irene Otis, Lenny Garduno

I. Call Meeting: Carol Sobetzer called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

II. Approve Board Minutes of May 1, 2007: Motion was made to approve the minutes of May 1, 2007. Approved.

III. Public Input: Members of the public were present to express concern over the resignation of Mary Bronga. Noelle had been working with Mary Bronga to explore options, which would increase her time. Mary was granted a contract extension, but as of yet, the District had not yet identified where to increase her time at and was still waiting to hear about federal funding. Carol explained this extension would not have permitted Mary from exploring other options. Mary wants 100% time reinstated, without “soft money” (grants, non-administrative cost money). Carol opened the floor for comments. Allen introduced himself and members of the Finance Committee and explained the continuous drop in enrollment, along with the state mandated per pupil costs. He spoke of consolidating the two elementary schools, most likely at Samuel Morey because it is larger. Allen spoke about reduction of administration in last years’ budget number (this school year). Under no circumstances was Westshire to be left without full-time leadership. Allen said the Board is looking at the District as a whole and how best to serve all the students within the District. Allen spoke about other dilemmas that the Finance Committee is facing and said that it is not likely that the Westshire principal position will be 100% FTE when the Samuel Morey Principal has more students with 90% administrative coverage. The majority of Vermont schools exceed the standards of administrative leadership in school even though the law states without 10 teachers an administrator is not required. Kathy Young asked about how we going to be sure that the school maintains strong leadership and is concerned that this will be difficult position to fill at 80%. At this point, the position has not been posted. Mary’s resignation was officially received 5/21/07. Allen responded that it is always a difficult thing finding leadership positions within the state, but that we need to be innovative. Kathy asked if there was a backup plan if a principal cannot be found to fill the position and Allen assured her that there would be. Carol spoke about Rivendell’s model of leadership and how we expect administrators to work as a team. Rivendell is a K-12 district and that the experience and curriculum is consistent between Westshire and Samuel Morey and the District utilizes a team approach. Kathy asked about the difference in numbers between IEP and 504 plans between Samuel Morey and Westshire. Noelle reported that last year the numbers were even and that this year there was a little rise in the pre-k population, which is evenly split between the four towns within the District. In the earlier years there was a larger discrepancy and that special education caseloads are now almost identical among special educators. Danielle Sweet voiced concern that we will not be able to hire someone at 80% as qualified and that the school needs the consistency. She felt that after speaking with Mary she is willing to work something out and she encourages the Board to continue communicating with her. Becky Wood
inquired about why seeking additional time for Mary within guidance wasn’t being pursued. Noelle said that Mary explored guidance particularly in the Middle School, but in the end she would spend more time out of the building and the Middle School would have less guidance time than what was budgeted for them. This did not meet the goals of the District at all. They were considered consulting in guidance and were in the middle of discussing. She would have done some coaching and modeling, but as no money was budgeted for this, it would require federal funding. Mary felt this was uncertain and did not provide financial stability. Mel spoke about contract extensions and how opportunities continue to evaporate for both parties the longer contracts are extended. Laurie Barr asked about whether the structure was in place to share time with the Samuel Morey administrator whether it’s Mary or someone new. Noelle said that the Westshire principal reports to the Superintendent and would continue to. There were some questions about what every day logistics would look like (supervising teachers, staff meetings, 504’s, etc.) Noelle responded that it is a team approach and that the schedule needs to be predictable. Carol mentioned that the Board is hiring a strategic planning consultant (which was budgeted) to look at the District and where Rivendell wants to be in five years and the challenges to face. Laurie asked if the logistics of an 80% administrator have been worked out and was told that, yes, they are expanding on what was already happening this year. Danielle said she was at the meeting when the original reduction to 90% was approved, but was assured that further reductions would not be made. Westshire will always have lower numbers and she is concerned that reductions will continue to happen. Allen responded that the Finance Committee is very thoughtful of cuts they have made and do not continue to cut at one position just because it was cut once before and explained that some positions throughout the District have been eliminated entirely. The 80% reduction does not reflect unhappiness in Mary’s leadership; it is based on numbers only. Allen explained that it is not possible to predict yearly on how many students will be enrolled. Doug commented that the strategic plan is not a crystal ball, but hoping that the consultant will lead them through a framework to respond proactively. Becky Dexter wanted to know if Gail has been at Westshire for the 10% this year. Noelle responded yes with some overlap with Mary. Her concern is what if there was a problem and no administrator is in the building. Carol responded there are times in all the buildings when there is no administrator on campus and there is a process in place. Noelle responded that it fell to her and Gail this year and that all involved parties must know when the administrators will not be present. Noelle reported that we do use teacher leaders as backup at the Academy. Holly Austin spoke about how much help Mary has provided to her son and family and hopes the Board will find a way to keep her here. Leonard Garduno agreed and always felt his concerns were resolved and was concerned that Westshire was being targeted for cuts. Danielle agreed that Mary has made a personal effort and this is the first time they have had this in a principal. Allen responded that it is not just Westshire enrollment dropping, but it is happening throughout the northeast. Carol said that at the June 12 meeting this discussion could continue and wanted to be sure that all present had a chance to speak if desired. Doug Sonsalla asked if negotiations were ongoing or if they had stopped. Noelle said she had met with Mary today and would give her feedback from tonight’s meeting, but that Mary made it clear she is pursuing other options. Doug Sonsalla questioned whether the value of a great leader is worth it. Carol said Mary is a wonderful person and the Board was excited to have her come to Rivendell. Doug Sonsalla felt that those present for the meeting came for an answer. Noelle said she was shocked when she got Mary’s notice and is filled with extraordinary sadness. Noelle said that Mary was able to fill her commitment to the school and the community and this is about the hearts and minds of the community and a hard time for us. Doug Sonsalla commented that the enrollment issue plays hand in hand with more turn over of administration. Sandra said Rivendell can be whatever we want it to be and thanked those for coming out to support Mary, that we need to continue to improve on what we do well and market it and help to rebuild the communities. The Board is committed to making it a better place for everyone. Laurie questioned why the fund budgeted for strategic planning couldn’t be used to fill Mary’s 20%. Carol reported that the strategic planner is being hired for the entire District. Carol said that this is a difficult thing and that personnel issues are difficult. Carol said
the Board is not done trying to work this out, but it is critically important to understand that there is only a certain amount of money that people will fund for schools and what is the best way to spend it. Noelle spoke about the strategic plan and that the presence of the parents at the meeting is one of the largest that the Board has ever had. The strategic plan that the Board will engage in is exactly like this type of meeting and that the voice of the parents is critical. Mel thanked all that attended tonight and encouraged them to keep attending. There was discussion about how the public is notified about upcoming meetings. Becky Dexter commented that she does not receive the Westshire newsletter electronically and Noelle said all parents should receive both paper and electronic newsletters. Carol said that the Board will meet again on June 12 and that the full Board needs to look at all the information that has been presented to them tonight. She reiterated that Westshire has not been neglected and has always been treated equally and that equity across the District is what this Board is all about.

IV. Communications and Reports: A. Report of the Chair: Action: Motion made to move report of the Chair ahead of public input. Approved. Carol thanked Margaret for the trays of goodies delivered to each of the schools in appreciation of the faculty and staff. Carol mentioned a letter received by Laura Bradley regarding concerns about Mary Bronga’s resignation. B. Report of Head of Schools: Noelle submitted her report at the other full Board meeting in May and introduced Brian Emerson who works in Adult Basic Education. 1) Adult Basic Education Brian said that Rivendell is doing good things and explained how the AEL system and high school system bridged together. Brian reported he is in communication with Nancy Hall and Bob Sampson weekly. He distributed information outlining different programs for students, including, GED, Adult Diploma Program, ACT 176 and a Rivendell alternative diploma. The Rivendell Board still holds all authority, except for the GED, which is maintained through the Department of Education. Brian spoke about the differences in the credentials of each of these programs. Doug asked if these programs help catch students before they drop out and Brian responded that students are not classified as dropouts if they continue with one of these programs. With ACT 176 students must be a dropout to access this program. Noelle mentioned that ACT 176 is not the route of choice in terms of AYP (average yearly progress.) Bev spoke of the importance of having this program set in place so students can access it in the future. The program allows flexibility and more control over classroom dynamics. Doug asked if it always one-on-one tutoring. Brian says it is back and forth with communication with the schools. C. Reports of the Committee Chairs: 1) Finance: Next meeting is June 7, 6:00 p.m. to discuss the following issues: Food Service; not self-sustaining vans - currently, two vans are used for SPED and one used for transporting students on field trips off-site. The District will not be able to continue this practice in the 2007-2008 school year. All 10-passenger vans need to become school bus certified, which is not economically feasible. This will mean switching to seven or less passenger vans. Driver requirements (for school officials) for a 10-passenger van state that a person must hold a valid school bus endorsement on license. If a parent is driving a 15 passenger van it okay. Seats cannot be removed from our current vans to serve as a seven passenger; Pre-school exploration - In order to implement preschool at SME approximately $20,000 plus; and technical assessment for the Old Academy - $15,000 (request for funds). Also, Town of Orford: discrepancy between auditors report and our request for payment. Orford has reduced the amount of their payment. Westshire Principal issue 2) Negotiations: Mel reported that Ira Lobel is still pursuing a settlement. 3) District Technology: The committee met last Tuesday and is close to finalizing the executive summary. Plan to meet if the Board approves list of committee members on June 12. Next packet will not have the Technology Committee feedback, but will report at Board meeting. 4) Long-range planning: Doug sent out an email re: 5/10 conference call from Noelle’s office. Reported on the two finalists. The next meeting will be based on tonight’s decision of who to hire for the strategic planner. His email summarized the conversations. Important for the Board to think about the approach we want the consultant to take, where to lead the process and us; assessment is a huge piece and flexibility in hiring a new
superintendent. Felt Ray was looking at all aspects of what we are looking for and he is honest and gives a clear report on what he sees.

V. Business Requiring Discussion & Action: A. Personnel 1) Consultant for Strategic Planning Action: A motion was made to hire Ray Proulx as the District’s strategic planner. The floor was then opened to discussion. Allen asked what the Finance Committee would be receiving in mid-January as they are looking at 2008-2009 budget. Allen felt that this piece was critical in the planning process and to help avoid spending money foolishly. Noelle thought the goal was to have the Superintendent hired before the budget was approved. Administrative restructure questions need to happen immediately after the audit, which should occur in the fall.

Crafting an outline with whoever is hired to have that person give a clear statement of what, when, etc. needs to be accomplished. Ray seems to be quite open to this. The other approach is to give Ray part of it and give Herb the search piece of the strategic plan. Mel asked if there would be money for this. Juliette said there may be money at some point if we needed help within the structure of what was already in place —something specific, not the big picture. Margaret commented that she felt going into the second interview Herb that he was what we needed, but Ray filled a lot of the holes and came away feeling like the stronger candidate and she was pleased with him. Carol clarified the motion to hire Ray Proulx to do a full strategic plan with the District, including the superintendent search. Approved. 2) Staff Hiring B. Executive Session Noelle referred to resumes in packet and had held off in advertising the .8 principal position at Westshire. She was waiting for direction from the Board. Noelle reported that Hank Plaisted is applying outside the District and he has not signed his contract so Noelle will run an advertisement for his position. Orly Hasbani has submitted her letter of resignation. The school nurse is out on sick/medical leave, as suggested by her physician. Interviews for guidance and 6th grade math/science have begun with another interview tomorrow. Action: Motion was made to adjourn and move to executive session at 9:11 p.m. Approved.

Board came out of Executive Session at 10:20 p.m.

Action: Motion made to offer contracts to – Robert St. Pierre for Special Education Teacher (Life Skills), 1.0 FTE; Rachel (Scotty) Herron for Elementary Teacher (Kindergarten) at Samuel Morey Elementary, 1.0 FTE; and Kimberly Poulin for Special Education Teacher at Rivendell Academy, 1.0 FTE. Approved.

Board also directed Noelle Vitt, Head of Schools (Superintendent), to explore grant funds to support Mary Bronga staying at Rivendell.


VII. Adjourn: Action: Motion was made to adjourn. Approved. The meeting adjourned at 10:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Brenda Gray
Interim District Clerk/Treasurer