

Committees, Cabinets, Task Forces and Subcommittees

February 2010

There appears to be much confusion over the different “groups” that get the work done for the school department. The following lists the duties and composition of each group and its function.

Administrative meetings consist of general Cabinet Meetings, Task Force Meetings and Negotiations subcommittee meetings to name a few. These are generally held during the day and do not require public posting because they are administrative in nature.

Cabinet Meetings are top-level administration/management meetings. Membership includes the Superintendent, Asst Superintendent, the Business Manager, principals, and the Directors of Special Education, Technology, and Maintenance and Operations.

Task Force Meetings are held on specific topics to research or discuss a certain topic in depth. These are not School Committee meetings and do not require posting or minutes and are not open to the public. Example: Alternative School meetings all last year.

Task Force on School Start Time is currently underway following the first meeting in January, 2010. Meetings have been held on Monday afternoons at the high school. The charge is to study the feasibility of changing school start time for Sharon High School. This includes looking at sleep research studies and obstacles in the school schedule. Membership includes 19 members: 5 parents; 4 administrators (Director of Transportation, Director of Athletics, High School Principal, Superintendent); 6 teachers; 3 students; 1 SC member.

Task Force on Redistricting is currently being organized by Mr. Farmer. He is seeking people from School Councils and PTOs to serve on that committee. Its charge is to study the issues surrounding the assignment of students to schools based on geographical concerns. While this is seen as primarily an elementary school issue, the factors involved in projected building projects could suggest a larger scope as the Task Force does its work.

Negotiating “working subcommittees” These administrative “work committees” are administrative subgroups resulting from the larger STA Negotiations Subcommittee regarding the Teacher contract. They have been established for the purpose of working on specific topics identified during negotiations. (Because the larger STA Negotiations Committee is a subcommittee of the School Committee with 3 School Committee members serving on it, the larger committee requires posting based on Open Meeting laws.) These working committees are comprised solely of administration and STA members working on (1) evaluation issues, (2) coordinator workload, and (3) special education workload. These working subcommittees have been meeting regularly since January and will report back to the STA Negotiations Committee, hopefully by the end of March. There are no school committee members in these working groups but Superintendent is on all of them together with two other administrators and different teaching staff.

School Committee Subcommittees Subcommittees are identified and created by the School Committee for the purpose of streamlining data flow. The members are selected each June by School Committee vote. Because they are subcommittees of the School Committee, they are subject to Open Meeting Laws including posting of meetings and minutes. No votes, other than to approve meeting minutes, are taken or made in any of the subcommittee meetings. For fiscal year 2010, there are four subcommittees.

(1) STA Negotiations Subcommittee of the School Committee: This Committee is

comprised of the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, a Selectman and three School Committee members. The teachers also send members for their “side” of the table. This committee has been established to negotiate a successful contract with the Sharon Teachers Association (STA). Additional membership may include lawyers and negotiators on each side. While these meetings are posted, they are always conducted in Executive Session and the public may not attend. Meetings occur during the day and/or late afternoons or evening, based on the convenience of the members who attend. These meetings have been ongoing over the past year and a half. After the first year of meetings, the result was a one year contract for the current fiscal year 2010. Negotiations continue at the present time.

(2) The Budget and Operations Subcommittee This subcommittee is comprised of three members of the school committee. The Superintendent always attends and sometimes the Assistant Superintendent and/or Business Manager also attend these meetings. Meetings have been held both in the evening and during the day, based on the ability of members to schedule the meeting. The purpose of the committee is to consider in detail, budget questions that arise from time to time. Meetings usually last an hour or less. Topics, for example, include discussions on enrollment and its impact on class size, number of teachers needed, budget, etc. Discussion included expectations of state aid, special education circuit breaker funding, and local allocations resulting from Priorities meetings. More recently, when questions came up regarding fees for bus, activities and sports, this subcommittee began studying salaries and other costs that impact fees. This is a huge job that cannot take place in open sessions at night when office staff is not available to provide data. Some of these discussions have been taken to Executive Sessions School Committee meetings and resulted in further negotiations issues. If this was attempted in a School Committee meeting, it would consume the entire meeting and several of them as well, getting in the way of the business of the School Committee. The efforts of all the committees are intertwined.

Updates are given to the full School Committee at open meetings. As with all committees and task forces and administrative cabinet meetings, when recommendations are ready for presentation to the full School Committee, the superintendent brings forward the full report.

(3) The Public Community and Business Relations Subcommittee is comprised of three school committee members. The Superintendent always attends and sometimes the Assistant Superintendent will also attend these meetings. Meetings have been held both in the evening and during the day, based on the ability of members to schedule the meeting. Major topic for this committee has been work on the publicizing the Middle School Project and will soon include informal discussions on school start time and redistricting initiatives. Meetings usually last an hour or less. Updates are given to the full School Committee at open meetings. When recommendations are ready for presentation to the full School Committee, the superintendent brings forward the full report.

(4) The Health and Safety Subcommittee is comprised of three members appointed by the School Committee and three members appointed by the Sharon Teachers Association. Currently, one school committee, the Business Manager and the Maintenance and Operations Supervisor serve as School Committee representatives. Meetings are usually held after school at the convenience of the schedules of the members. Major topics have included air quality and safety issues, repairs needed, and other teacher concern. These meetings are posted per Open Meeting requirements. Because the membership is comprised primarily of employees, regular updates to the School Committee have not occurred and the committee has not posted minutes.

Summary

Subcommittee Concerns: Due to concerns expressed by some in the community, a secretary has been assigned to take minutes at all subcommittee meetings since the notes taken have been less than the regular standards of School Committee Meetings. Additionally, the average of the once-a-month meetings has made it difficult to get the minutes "voted" and then posted in a timely fashion. These issues are being addressed. The School Committee has determined to engage in a better effort as is evidenced by the recent decision to add secretarial support at these meetings.

There is a lot of work and discussion that goes on in various administrative meetings. Subcommittee work provides a conduit for that information to be shared in an informal and collaborative manner with elected officials who similarly share their views. With the Superintendent representing administration and the School Committee representing the Community, a collaborative communication results as the school district is moved forward. All information is then summarized and shared with the larger School Committee in the form of updates, budget forums, budget presentations and other agenda items.

For example, nearly all of the budget work is done in administrative cabinet (defined in the Superintendent's newsletter). The administrative cabinet adds input from teachers and coordinators. These ideas and concerns are discussed in budget subcommittee and then brought to open session in a summarized form to be voted or rejected. During the process, input is requested from all staff and received --sometimes via an anonymous electronic suggestion box. For the past several years, the budget and needed cuts and ideas for more efficient operations have been developed via this collaborative process that includes a public hearing to understand community concerns on a larger scale. The few who bother to participate in Open Forum, get to express their thoughts and are heard. This subcommittee arrangement allows more processing time for a complex budget and more input from constituents. Many districts successfully operate in this fashion in order to move forward. The summarized data presented and later voted at the School Committee table, is posted on the school website and considered by Finance Committee before going to Town Meeting.

This allows the process of suggesting specific cuts to staff and program to be done in subcommittee to avoid hurting people and morale in the district. Many years ago, these cuts were discussed openly at the School Committee table and morale in the district was very low as names dropped on and off the discussion. One year, the assistant principal at one of the schools hit the cut list publicly for about one week and was then removed as discussions continued. This resulted in that person seeking a job elsewhere and leaving the district. Cutting and creating efficiencies is a very difficult process and the staff needs protection from the budget problems so they can do their jobs and teach. From a humanitarian point of view, this makes sense. From the public point of view, it should be clear that the summarized important data is always taken to open session.