

SHUTESBURY SCHOOL COMMITTEE
Tuesday, October 25, 2022
Final Minutes

Present: Jen Taylor, Bethany Rose, Stephen Sullivan, Julie Martel, SSC members; Dan Hayes, SSC Chair; Jennifer Shiao, Margaret Stancer, Tessa Kawall, Peter Demling, Sarahbess Kenney, Craig Cohen, ARPSC members; Ben Harrington, ARPSC Chair; Jackie Mendonsa, Principal; Caitlin Sheridan, Director of Finance & Operations; Rupert Roy-Clark, Director of Facilities, ARPS; Jennifer Culkeen, U#28 Superintendent; Michael Morris, ARPS Superintendent; Public Guests

A. Call Meeting to Order - Regional School Committee:

Ben called the meeting to order at 6:31 P.M. with a roll call.

B. Call Meeting to Order - Shutesbury School Committee:

Dan called the meeting to order at 6:32 P.M. with a roll call.

C. Bus Arrival Times - Discussion and Possible Vote to Approve the Bus Arrival Times:

Michael explained the purpose of the joint meeting: to allow SSC members to engage in the topic of bus arrival times at the start. The main problem: the Shutesbury-routed buses are not consistently arriving on time at ARMS/ARHS. Things have improved a little recently thanks to some tinkering, but we can anticipate future delays as we head into winter, then mud season. We're trying to find a creative solution together tonight. He emphasized that we are close colleagues that often work together on a variety of shared interests and concerns. Jennifer Culkeen agreed.

He turned the meeting over to Rupert, who provided an overview of several options and their drawbacks. The solutions, whatever they are, are going to be complex. They might include hiring more drivers, purchasing more buses, retooling some of our routes, carrying Elementary students along with Middle School students, and others. Hiring qualified and trained drivers is proving difficult, and buses are on order. It's a tough situation all around. Low-cost solutions amount to longer riding times for students. We're seeing if we can modify routes to free up a bus driver, and we don't have a good answer there yet.

Jennifer Shiao noted that there's no public comment on the agenda before SSC adjourns; could we permit that? The Chairs of both SCs agreed to it.

Dan wondered whether we could do something in the morning, like have some kind of buffer before the students' first class. That already exists in the afternoon, allowing for earlier dismissal for athletics. Shutesbury has already made concessions to the bus schedule. Michael noted that the Region (not Amherst) changed the start times of the schools. Leverett and Shutesbury students were earliest to be picked up, so they were the worst affected by the earlier start time. We also can't make changes to our Contract with the teacher and staff union without going through a process, so changing start times this year doesn't seem to be an option.

Craig asked whether information presented to ARPSC would be presented tonight. There are a number of well-thought-out ideas with pros and cons already. Michael asked Rupert to share what he has; Rupert reviewed one route on the south side of Lake Wyola with about 25 Elementary and 25 Secondary students

on it. We could fit them all on a bus, drop off at Shutesbury, then continue to Amherst. A preliminary investigation suggests this route would be no longer for the High School kids than another extant route. We try to keep bus rides to under 1 hour. In our experience with K-12 routes, we haven't seen any great behavioral problems.

Julie questioned how much longer the route would actually be in terms of time, and voiced a serious concern about K-12 routes (a concern shared by a number of Shutesbury parents); how much experience do you have with such routes? Also, SES has its own Contract with its staff, so changing start times would have to go through a process there as well. Thanks for offering these suggestions, but the real solution might not be anything we've come up with so far. Shutesbury is always going to have long, problematic routes, so perhaps reworking other routes to free up more drivers for Shutesbury would be the answer. Rupert responded that there doesn't seem to be a lot of wiggle room so far in reworking other routes and clarified that the route would be around half an hour for Elementary students and an hour for Secondary students. Michael added that our summer program is a K-12 route, primarily for students with special needs and ELLs.

Jen Taylor stated that very long routes already suffer from behavioral problems due to the length of the ride. Also, previous experience showed her behavioral problems in a K-12 route, and doubling the number of kids on the bus will only exacerbate these problems. This is going to be present real problems for a number of parents.

Peter said adopting a problem-solving mentality is best. We know the status quo isn't acceptable, and no solution out of the six we have is optimal, so we just need to pick the best solution. Solutions 1 or 3 seem to be the best candidates. Jennifer Shiao noted she heard SSC members about the K-12 route concerns; could we possibly have a bus monitor on that bus as well? Rupert said a lot depends on the monitor.

Sarahbess agreed with Peter and suggested that whatever solution we choose could just be a "bus stop" on the way to something better in the future. In the meantime, we need something that will improve the status quo.

Jennifer Culkeen noted that we start at 8:15, and we've already agreed to start at 8:15 from 8:30; Jackie added we're trying to help by letting students off the bus at 8:10. These are concessions SES has made that effectively eliminate any solutions including an even earlier start time there.

Ben invited public comment.

A member of the public relayed via chat: SES starts at 8:15; they have concerns for students aged 4 or 5 being on the bus for 30+ minutes; their child is picked up on an SES route at 7:40 and is dropped off at SES at 8:15.

Another member of the public said they understand rural bussing and the K-12 model; they remember High Schoolers bringing alcohol on the bus and doing other inappropriate things. If the K-12 route is the only option, we would definitely need a monitor. Combining routes is preferable to this.

Another member of the public with a student who's getting to their Amherst school 20 minutes late notes that there's an equity issue as well, since students arriving late are missing out on free breakfast. Solutions 1-3 are the ones where Shutesbury has to make concessions, with 4-6 involving other towns making

concessions. They don't feel Shutesbury kids should have to be the ones to make the concessions just because of where they live.

Margaret noted that no actual cost of hiring a driver or getting another bus has been mentioned. Maybe we can start to work on that? Michael responded that the combination of another bus and driver would be approaching six digits.

Michael said that the density of bus population increases as you approach the center of town; there are more and more stops closer to the center. Our Transportation Department has already done a great deal of work breaking down town walls along routes, so this avenue has effectively been exhausted.

Julie responded to the six figures anticipated cost; it's significant. But perhaps this is the time to make that investment so that this issue isn't a continual emergency, and to address the problems of equity and access involved.

Michael expressed gratitude for collaboration with SSC but also voiced some frustration. We're scrambling to have enough bus drivers every single day, just like in every other district. A lack of drivers is the biggest problem right now, not the cost. Our Shutesbury and Leverett students are having a much more negative experience than their peers, and we need to address that. It's an urgent problem. We're here for the kids, and we need to fix this.

Tessa said changing the schedule at the Middle and High Schools seems to be a good idea; students need 15-20 minutes at the start of the day to relax and attend to their mental health. The Plus Period was designed to keep students engaged in school and give them places to go instead of hanging out in the bathroom. School is a lot, and if the students could have that break, it would solve all the problems.

Jen Taylor asked how many students can fit on a bus? Rupert: 50 Secondary students or 75 Elementary students. Jen went on to note that it's not realistic for the older students to get to school earlier with a combined bus since the behavioral problems are already there. She thanked everyone for the work they've done on the solutions.

Dan endorsed exploring Tessa's suggestion of looking at the ARMS/ARHS morning schedules; that seems to be the most creative and promising option. Barring that, Solution #2 seems to have the least pushback. Michael said #2 did receive some criticism, so it might be better to give more details about that in writing to both SCs. Dan appreciated a little more time looking at both Tessa's idea and Solution #2; it's better to avoid adopting a bad solution out of expediency.

D. Adjourn Shutesbury School Committee: Dan adjourned at 7:43 P.M.