

**SUMMARY OF MINUTES
Special Meeting for General Purposes
March 1, 2021**

Board President Joseph A. Caffrey called the meeting to order at 6:09 p.m.

Board Secretary Thomas F. Telesz called the roll

9 Members Present: Atherton, Evans, Harris, Patla, Quinn, Schiowitz, Thomas, Walker, Caffrey

President Caffrey began the meeting:

- The chair wishes to announce the Board held an Informational Meeting with the Facilities Transition Committee on February 24, 2021 to review the potential sale of the Meyers High School Property.
- The Board also held an Executive Session on Friday, February 26, 2021 from 12:05 to 2:20 p.m. and prior to the Special Meeting on March 1, 2021. The subject discussed in these executive sessions related solely to matters of employee relations, labor negotiations and/or threatened or actual litigation.

OLD BUSINESS

Ms. Thomas asked about the possible sale of the Grant Street property.

Atty. Wendolowski stated he would be in touch with the attorney representing the potential buyer of that property.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITIZENS

Atty. Wendolowski as was advertised in our notice for today's meeting, the Agenda was published on the School District website and members of the community were given the opportunity to submit questions and comments to the District by 2:00 p.m. this afternoon. We received comments from several citizens. Those comments were distributed to the Board and Administration.

Tammy Krueger

More Educators = More student opportunities.

Dr. Michael Komorek
Teacher – Resident – and - WBAEA President

Dear Members of the Board,

We are going through a difficult and bittersweet consolidation and it is my hope that we look back on this with pride, rather than with grief or disappointment. Our students deserve a new school and state of the art facilities at all grade levels. Our students deserve to feel safe. Our students deserve to be comfortable. Our students deserve the best education possible with the strongest K-12 curriculum. However, this new facility should not be an albatross around the necks of our faculty. We are the backbone of this new facility, the existing

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facilities, the classrooms, the cafeterias, the gymnasiums, and the communities. We are YOUR backbone...and proud of it! Adequate faculty and support of our quality educators will strengthen that backbone, not cripple it. This backbone is also strengthened with our support staff who have also faced reductions at the students' expense... and at a most unique and crucial time.

This past year has been a difficult time that has rattled our professionals to the core and will have unknown impacts on our students, and yet we have rewritten every facet of our lives to accomplish our goal of education. A furlough is not the reward for this dedication. A furlough will shroud all of the truly notable accomplishments of this Board and of our teachers in a dark cloud, ...but with your action, we can move forward responsibly. Allow this perceived excess staffing to be a benefit to our students, faculty, and District. It can enhance the positive changes coming to the District...accomplishing what we all want: SUCCESS and OPPORTUNITY.

We have met District targets through attrition. Since 2015, we have decreased by approximately 75 positions or about 12%. And yet we have been informed that another 40 positions may be lost through furlough; **that's 1 in every 12 professionals.**

If further staff reduction must be accomplished, it can be done through retirements of those willing. The WBAEA has proposed a retirement incentive. As you are aware, the District offered an Additional Retirement Incentive last year that 12 individuals utilized. As a result of COVID, the retirement incentive was offered in a second window, but later retracted. While very generous, there were problems that impacted its success. The window to apply for this incentive was shorter than the time it takes to get a retirement estimate from PSERS. This limited it to individuals that were already prepared for retirement. It also did not meet the needs of individuals, that though interested, had health insurance needs that prevented them from retiring. As you know, a retirement incentive is not a method to coerce retirements....In order to be effective, the District and the employee must both benefit. An effectively crafted incentive is ideal for our staff because we have a very diverse pool of eligible professionals, including both individuals with 30+ years of experience and professionals of retirement age that do not have the traditional number of years. But, ultimately, to be effective it must save the District money. The one we proposed can do just that.

Should an excess of professionals remain...they can serve as a benefit to the district. Secondary teachers can be fanned to create a true middle school concept, allowing other elementary certified teachers to be reallocated, thus reducing overly-crowded elementary classrooms. This will enhance the learning experience of elementary students. These students will benefit from increased interactions with highly qualified educators AND it will achieve your stated goal of elementary classroom size reduction. Furthermore, contracting services to a cyber school is expensive. Excess staff could create financial savings...use our teachers to staff cyber classes. Additionally, excess staffing can be used to help elevate students struggling due to the changes in their lives caused by COVID.

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Lastly, it is very early to upend the lives of teachers and their families. We do not yet know who is retiring, we do not know what staffing needs will exist in our new programs at the special education center and proposed business school, and our students have not had the opportunity to schedule for next year. Student interest is unknown and cannot be predicted from past experience because of reductions in courses during COVID and increased selections in the new high school.

In this case, preserving jobs is what is best for our students. For the equitable educational rights and opportunities of every student, in every building....We must put students first. A furlough will affect every teacher, grade level, and school, but most importantly every student. This would be a missed opportunity to improve our educational system!

I am a proud Alumni of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District. I am a taxpayer of the District and life-long resident of South Wilkes-Barre. I am a proud Wilkes-Barre Area teacher and owe my love of education to the teachers and students that inspired me and continue to inspire me in this District. I stand proudly with all faculty of the District, and I strongly urge you to consider other avenues that have been proposed to you. Stand against this furlough and stand with the equitable educational rights of every District student.

Thank you for this time.

Pamela Dixon
WBASD Title I, reading specialist
29 Park Ln N, Mountain Top, PA

The decision to furlough staff and professionals is always one that is difficult for all. It's certainly difficult for those who are furloughed, and I'm sure it is wrought with apprehension with the Board of Education and the Superintendent as well. I saw the angst from all sides during the last furlough in 2015. I truly believe that economic realities seem to tie hands and leave no alternatives.

I'd like to bring up some of the consequences that are not always on the top of one's mind.

Obvious to most, is the consequence that a reduction in staff severely limits the opportunities in education and course offerings. Less obvious is the mental health and well-being of our school community. School climate has often been described as the "quality and character of school life", including both social and physical aspects of the school, that can positively promote behaviour, school achievement, and the social and emotional development of students.

Our current year has taken a toll on the quality and character of our lives and we are all not only coping, but growing and helping our students thrive. It is "nothing short of remarkable" to quote our respected superintendent. However, it is not lost on most of us, that when our well-being and safety is insecure, our ability to perform to our utmost is thwarted.

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Next year, we have so much to look forward to - so many new beginnings and opportunities, however a furlough of a high percentage of our professionals will impact the mental health and well-being of our entire educational community.

Students thrive with more adults available and willing to contribute to all aspects of their educational experience, and not less. Faculty and staff thrive when they have team members and colleagues to work together with and they don't feel like they are going to "break" at any moment because they are stretched to their limits. Just because you can function with less staff doesn't mean we should. Just because it saves money doesn't mean it saves our schools.

The loss we will suffer will be more far-reaching than just the obvious. It will affect our abilities to be our very best and for every individual student to feel like THEY are a priority. Just because we can handle it, doesn't mean we should. We don't just want to be able to handle it, we want to be able to continue to be remarkable!

We need each and every staff member to positively promote behavior, school achievement, and the social and emotional development of students. We need to prioritize our school climate and the quality and character of our district. We need every single staff member to do this!

They say, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." We have been struggling with less staff, less supplies, less time for individual differentiation and attention and still doing it!! We can!! It has indeed made us stronger.....but how much more before it kills us? I don't subscribe to hyperbole when I say this, but stretching the remarkable professionals again, by reducing the numbers via furloughs will be too much! It will hurt in so many more ways than it will help. It's scary, alarming, and infuriating. This decision should be more than just an economical one.

We ask our students to think outside the box. To reach out and be creative. To be persistent even if they are frustrated and want to give up. We preach and teach that these qualities are what breeds success. We tell them if they are persistent and creative they can do anything they want in this life and be successful. I ask that the Board of Education be persistent and creative, thinking outside the box for another solution to the economic dilemmas they are facing. Be open to finding another solution! This one is much too detrimental and will weaken our Wolfpack that we want to be strong, flourish, and to not only be successful, but nothing short of remarkable!

Carol Hiscox
Heights Elementary Teacher

I ask you to reconsider furloughing teachers and support staff for the upcoming school year. Reducing the number of teachers reduces educational opportunities and choices for students. By increasing class sizes due to furloughs you decrease the educational impact we have on our students. More teachers means more opportunities for a meaningful student education.

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Thank you for being faithful to the district's Mission Statement: to educate, enlighten, and inspire each student to grow as a responsible and productive citizen. This mission is accomplished through a dynamic, comprehensive curriculum and collaboration among school, family and community members. This can only be achieved when there are more teachers and support staff to educate our students.

Alex Styczen
Plains, PA

The 2016 furloughs resulted in the loss of art, library, technical education, and home economics which led to a less robust and well balanced curriculum. The students lost a valuable opportunity to explore and learn some very basic and necessary skills. Will these furloughs have the same negative impacts on our students as the previous one?

Susan Augello Kuhl
Wilkes- Barre Area Educator
Wilkes- Barre EA Executive Board
Exeter, PA

Good Evening. My name is Susan Augello Kuhl, but to my students at Kistler Elementary, I am known as Mrs. AK. I love teaching my first-grade students for the last 14 years here at Wilkes- Barre Area. I live for my students, who greet me each day with a smile, eager to learn and grow. I'm a proud member of Team Kistler, but even prouder to say that I am a Wilkes- Barre Area Educator.

In 2016, programs were eliminated from our curriculum, causing the furlough of 34 of my fellow educators. Elementary students lost their beloved Art and Library programs and the teachers who were apart of their school community. Teachers who students may have gone to in times of need or teachers who brighten up their days with innovative lessons. They lost the opportunity of expressing their feelings, passions and developing a love for art. They lost the opportunity of taking out a library book to sharing them with their families after school. Our students, however hard it was for them, adapted.

Over the course of the next four years, I watched as my fellow educators retired and were not replaced. With each retirement, classrooms became more crowded, and more opportunities for our students dwindled. Less time was spent on individualized one-on-one or small group instruction; there was less time for students to engage actively in their learning or participate in group discussion or team building activities due to larger class sizes. It became harder for our students to build strong relations with their peers. It became increasingly hard for them to develop the independence and self-motivation needed to learn in large classroom settings. Although some students were able to adapt to the changes around them, many have not.

This year, I was given the unique opportunity to help our Option 3 students in K, 1, and 2 navigate Cyber learning in our Wilkes- Barre Cyber Academy. Over the course of this year,

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I have watched this program grow exponentially. I started with 91 students and am currently up to 185. Some of these students are those that chose this option. However, there is a percentage of my students who didn't thrive in the traditional school setting. Since making the transition over to cyber learning, many of these students express their love for cyber and wish to continue learning this way past this school year. This is a great opportunity we could offer our students, but we need educators to implement it effectively across our district.

I ask you to consider these questions when it is time to vote: how many opportunities will we take away from our students? How many times are we going to ask Wilkes- Barre Area students to adapt to fit their district needs? As educators, should we not be adapting to meet the needs of our students? As educators, should we not be looking to give our students every opportunity we can? When we are looking to add opportunities for our students to grow and learn through a new special education center, a business program, a new middle school model, and a cyber academy, is this the time that we should consider fewer educators to make these programs successful. More educators equal more student opportunities. Please vote no on Resolution 1.

Lisa Woodworth
Wilkes-Barre, PA

Good Afternoon,

As a parent of a Junior STEM student transitioning to the new school for his senior year, and is a member of the 1st graduating class of WBA STEM ACADEMY school, I have a few questions.

- (1) Some of the colleges/universities my son is looking at do not recognize WBA STEM ACADEMY-no matter which way (WBASD stem/ WBA stem academy, etc) he enters it. The reply is "school unknown". So, I don't know how this will affect his college/fasfa/scholarship-(etc) applications, especially when he's applying to out of state schools.
- (2) College applications open August 1, 2021 for 2022 graduates. (A) Who will his (any senior student for that matter) guidance counselor be? (B) Who does he (they) need to contact during the summer for transcripts, common application info and guidance, guidance recommendation letters, academic info, and any and all necessary information to be sent to the colleges? (C) Will he have his current guidance counselor that has known him since 7th grade? Will he be transferred to someone new? Someone who doesn't know him? (D) And after graduation, who will the graduates contact for "missing information" needed by the college of choice??

You may think I'm asking these questions early, but I do not want my son, or any other student, to be lost during the transition/ summer.

Thank you

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Sharon Detwiler

We can all agree this pandemic has taken a toll on our student's education. It may be one that will take some time to get our student's back on track.

Now both students and teachers have another obstacle to face, teacher furloughs.

Our mission was always to provide a quality education.

A quality education ensures that each student learns in an environment that is both physically and emotionally safe. Students should be actively engaged in learning. They should have access to personalized learning and be supported by qualified teachers and support staff.

Teachers prepare students for college, employment, and in general help their society prosper.

So, by furloughing teachers, are the students going to have the same support they have had in the past?

By closing buildings, we are creating empty classrooms that should be filled with children's voices and passionate teachers. Does this mean more students to a class? Is this really effective for our students and teachers?

Furloughs allow for lower morale for both students and teachers as well.

Kevin R. Sickle
2nd Vice President
Wilkes-Barre Area Education Association

The decision to furlough staff during this most difficult time in society, not to mention education, is not in the best interests of our students, teachers, support staff, their families, or our district. Cuts have been made to help meet the economic needs of the District, largely through attrition. The Wilkes-Barre Area Education Association has proposed a way for the District to save even more money through an early retirement incentive that has proven successful both in Wilkes-Barre Area and surrounding districts in recent years.

What was originally thought to be declining enrollment has proven to be the opposite, as we have more students in our district than the last time furloughs occurred. Our ever-increasing special education population and other related services that help meet the needs of our students shows that now is not the time for cutting of staff and increasing average class size.

It is with great urgency that we, the members of the Wilkes-Barre Area Education Association, urge the board to vote no to the furloughing of even more education professionals and reconsider other ways to meet the economic needs of the budget while still providing the education that our students need and deserve.

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Michael Cooney

Please consider a recourse of action that saves and protects ALL employees of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District.

Thank you for your consideration.

Annie Rood

Members of the Board,

For those of you who do not know me, I am Annie Rood. I wear many hats in my life but today I am here speaking to you as Annie, the teacher. I have been with this district since 1997 and currently teach at Coughlin High School. This year we have all been living life very differently than anyone of us could have ever imagined. I want to share with you a little bit about how it has been for teachers. When I was in a meeting with Brian and Bob in the summer months, I heard their ideas and the plan that was presented to us, and even though we all kicked ideas around... I got off the phone and literally cried....real tears....of fear. For those of you who do know me it takes quite a bit to bring to that emotional state. It wasn't fear of COVID, it was fear of HOW AM I GOING TO DO THIS? How are my fellow teachers going to do this? For me, I calmed myself down and told myself I am going to do this one bite at a time. I had to remember that the main goal was to keep the rigor and integrity of the education process for our students. We need to make sure that they are not sacrificed, that their education is NOT sacrificed in the process. So we, as teachers, ALL OF US, have worked really hard, from sun up to sun down making our lessons work digitally, to educate, simultaneously, to at-home and in-person learners at the SAME TIME. The tasks seemed monumental and out of reach. But, you know what? I dug deep, REAL DEEP, spent entire days figuring it out, changing technology, changing platforms, always taking it one bite at a time and keeping that goal in mind....THE EDUCATION PROCESS FOR THE STUDENTS.

Why am I telling you this? Because if you are not a teacher, teaching today, you DO NOT really get it. I need you to understand this. YOU, as school board members, HAVE A GOAL IN MIND. And now YOU need to dig deep, real deep, work from sun up to sun down, like so many of us already did, and continue to do. You need to remember what our (all of our) main goal is: The education process for the students. Please dig deeper, please work harder! Teachers are NOT the problem in this district and therefore we ARE NOT YOUR SOLUTION. The seams of the education process are stretched, really stretched? Teachers are stretched, really stretched? If you agree to cut 10% of us, YOU ARE GOING TO CRIPPLE THIS DISTRICT. YOU are going to break those seams of education, and the education to our students WILL BE CRIPPLED. WE CANNOT DO THIS WITH LESS OF US! Not only will the seams of education be broken, but also the seams holding us together mentally and physically will break. BY SACRIFICING TEACHERS YOU WILL SACRIFICE OUR STUDENTS, AND CLEARLY THIS GOAL IS DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED TO OUR MAIN GOAL; I have worked too hard AT MAINTAINING THE EDUCATION PROCESS AS MY GOAL, the teachers in this

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district have worked too hard AT MAINTAINING THE EDUCATION PROCESS AS THEIR GOAL TO WATCH IT Drastically diminish.

I am also a wife, mom of 3, daughter, sister and aunt. On behalf of all teachers, ALL OF US ARE SOMEBODY. We are NOT JUST A NAME ON A LIST. We are real people with real lives. OUR STUDENTS ARE NOT JUST NAMES ON A ROSTER! You cannot strike us BOTH OUT just because it seems the easiest way to reach your goal. We chose not to hurt our students to reach our goal and you need to CHOOSE NOT TO HURT OUR STUDENTS to reach your goal. I am ASKING YOU TO WORK HARDER. I AM ASKING YOU TO DIG DEEPER.

Samuel Conklin
E.L. Meyers High School Junior

I would like to submit a comment regarding the decision to lay off teachers in the district.

Laying off teachers right now would leave adverse effects on all of the schools in the district. On paper, it may seem like a decent idea to lay off teachers, as Meyers has a student-to-teacher ratio of 14.17 to 1, Coughlin has 15.56 to 1, GAR has 16.39 to 1, and the district as a whole has a ratio of 16 to 1. As I understand it, it should generally be below a 20 to 1 ratio. What these numbers don't show is how horribly unbalanced the student-to-teacher ratio is. In some of my required core classes, I'll have as low as 6 people in a class, while others will be as high as 40. While the extra attention in the low 6 person class is nice, the 40 person class becomes too much to handle for a single teacher. Additionally, there are very few specialized classes in the district. Languages and advanced mathematics are vital for the student's future, but there is only a hand full of teachers in the district that can teach it. At this point, a student is limited to what classes they can pick, leading to overcrowding. It should also be noted that it has been proven that lower class sizes are usually better for the student, and the district needs to keep a low student-to-teacher ratio in order to give the students a useful education.

Richard Holodick
Wilkes-Barre, PA

First a clarification, Rev. Walker disagreed at the last board meeting with my 600 students fleeing the district. He was correct as that stat was acquired off the PDE web site 2017, and it could well exceed 600 in 2020. It is a little disconcerting that a board member did not know this number when it is so costly for the taxpayers or know the reasons they left. District flight may double down with Bear Creek Charter planning an expansion of 200 more elementary children. Now we add perceived or real threat of the new high school on a clum bank, subsidence prone site, and extensive bussing. Add the state's new scholarship for students for underperforming schools and in the aggregate, there is a high probability of student flight this district can ill afford. I believe there was six underachieving WBA schools listed, have letters gone to parents if not why.

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I would appreciate knowing the procedures for “suspensions.” With pay and or benefits? Criteria for selection of employees to be suspended, will it be length of service or as the new law now allows by evaluations. Were the board members given this information prior to being requested to approve suspensions based on the superintendent, solicitor and business manager opinions? In the unlikely event evaluations are utilized will the principals be involved. I say unlikely because in a recent reduction in staff the board did a costly early retirement incentive for 20 employees when the new state law allowed for reduction of staff at zero cost when done by evaluations. What was the cost to the taxpayers for that retirement settlement for 20 employees?

I continue my crusade for curriculum and facility master planning based on the need for one now to proceed forward facing nearly a hundred million in renovations or replacement of Solomon, Flood, Dodson, Kistler, Heights Murray, and GAR middle school, as per the district’s Facility Study. The nearly hundred million will be two hundred million when interest is added, plus the now engaged quarter of a billion; can this district afford a half billion dollars?

I thank you for the opportunity to comment and ask questions and look forward to a response.

Sam Troy

I urge the board to table today’s resolution until more specifics can be revealed about this potential real estate transaction: what are the sizes of the parcel & why is the price so high on these parcels? Our solicitor may be competent at what he does but I’m skeptical of his ability to negotiate real estate. Or let’s put it this way: I think the negotiations should be more above board like all of the board’s decisions.

I am also requesting that the board resend the decision to go ahead with the sale of Meyers. This structure has been a cultural and academic icon for generations. To just sell it to some unscrupulous buyer would be a crime. Also the sale of the stadium to that same prospective buyer should not go forward. Why should the district and its taxpayers be worried about whether or not there’s parking at a new development on that school site? That stadium should be used to preclude the building of a new stadium in Plains. The sale of that structure should not go forward without a formal public hearing or referendum.

Dr. Costello, doesn’t academics trump athletics? From your preoccupation to build a new stadium on the site of the new school I would think that is not the case. What about arranging for taxpayers and others to call in the comments and thereby be able to open up a dialogue with the board?

Jeffrey Ney

Good Evening Wilkes-Barre Area School Board, Superintendent Costello and Solicitor Wendolowski. My name is Jeff Ney, a teacher at Solomon/Plains Elementary and the current

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Treasurer of the PA State Education Association representing 178,000 educators across Pennsylvania.

I was the President of the Wilkes-Barre Area Education Association during the last round of furloughs in 2016. That experience changed my mine and dozens of others lives and something I hoped would never happen again in WBA. But here we are about to repeat a history that some promised would never happen again.

Our students should be the number one priority of our school district. Yet over the last half dozen years WBA has made decisions that our in direct opposition to that priority. Along with the staffing cuts in 2016, which increased class sizes and lowered the time educators could work one on one with students this District also cut essential programs like music and art in certain grade levels. These programs cuts greatly impacted our students and lessened the education each of them deserves. We all know children learn differently and have strengths in a variety of areas. Schools should be providing all students with numerous avenues to explore, create and develop in those areas with diverse educators who provide a multitude of learning outcomes. Cutting staff and programs diminishes the opportunities our students should be exposed to.

As a community, we have an obligation to protect our children and to ensure they have every chance possible to become anything they want to be. Without the educators and programs, how will they know what they may be able to become in the future. Every educator in Wilkes-Barre Area adds to the educational opportunities for our students.

On top of this, over the past year during the pandemic, our teachers have risen to great levels to do everything in their power to educate, communicate, reassure and comfort our students. On-line teaching is not the best way to teach our kids. We all know that. Wilkes-Barre Area teachers have made herculean efforts to give students as normal of an experience as possible. All without any initial assistance from the District. Teachers had to build this plane will it was in the air, creating content and assignments the best way they knew how. Every teacher felt like it was their first day teaching all over again when the pandemic hit all of us. But they did it every day and now how is the District going to reward some of these hero's? Furlough them. How is that fair? The majority of our school board members are or were educators, so you should know how these people must feel. They work their hearts out putting hours above and beyond their normal work day and assist parents as they too struggle giving their children the education they need. At the end of the worst school year for students, parents, teachers what is their reward for giving of themselves mentally and physically? A pink slip. Not because they aren't great, but because the District's finances couldn't be balanced properly so cutting staff is the easiest way to do it.

If Wilkes-Barre Area votes to furlough even one educator after this year, shame on you. You should be voting to praise and acknowledge the efforts every one of them has given to their students. The finances of the District should not be balanced on the backs of those who have given everything to the students they serve. I strongly urge Board Members to think about

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the action they are about to take and the impact it could have, not only on the champions who have been leading their classrooms but to the students who love them and need them.

Dr. Costello:

I would like to address some of the comments made by our citizens and faculty.

First I want take a moment to say that I appreciate the faculty that have reached out today for public comment. You are all remarkable. There is no doubt about what you have accomplished this year and throughout previous years by working together. I appreciate all of that. I also appreciate having a student reach out and comment.

We have talked a lot about the Pathways to the Future and the Pathways to Success. I would like to give a brief summary of where we were and where we are at this point and where we are going.

I think it is important to understand what has happened over the last several years. We knew the condition of our buildings. In 2014 the District did a feasibility study. What this does is it looks at all the buildings, gives you the pro's and con's of each building, and comes up with options for the Board to consider what is in the best interest of the District moving forward.

In December 2014 we presented those options in a public meeting at Coughlin High School. The possibility of going to one school, renovating schools, etc. was presented with all the pro's and con's.

However, before we could look into any of those options, our team had to do an internal study to understand what the District could afford. What everyone should know our District is severely underfunded annually by \$30 million according to the Basic Education Formula that the State has created.

Being a district that is severely underfunded, what could we afford? In 2015 we came to the conclusion that if we stopped time and if everything was put on hold – meaning salaries, pensions, health care didn't increase – what would our District look like over the next couple of years? When we did that, the picture wasn't good. We were facing about a \$25 million deficit over the next couple of years. That was with time being stopped. Unfortunately, we all know we can't stop time. Contracts continue to move forward, pensions and health care continue to grow.

We contacted the Pennsylvania Department of Education in 2015 and asked for their assistance. We know the condition of our buildings, we know of the inconsistency of some of our programs and we now have a financial problem that needs attention.

In the fall of 2015 PDE contacted PFM to move forward and to provide us with information. At that time, they said we can't stop time. We have to allow for things to occur and we have to make assumptions about raising taxes and what we will possibly get with state

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revenue. When they did that, they came up with a grave number. They said in 2018-19 our district would be faced with a \$70 million deficit. In two years of us moving forward, the district would not be able to pay bills and employee salaries. We would basically be in a situation where even if the State came in to take us over we would not have been able to get out of without some sort of assistance from the Commonwealth of PA.

In April of 2016 District stakeholders came together and presented the Pathway to the Future. In that plan, we had a financial plan that would allow our District, if they followed four phases, to be able to take control of our finances.

Based on that plan, in 2018 the credit services, as we were moving forward with the consolidation process, also reviewed our plan. They realized if we do follow this Pathway to the Future, there is a way that our District would see brighter times and we would be able to provide an equitable education system that was fiscally responsible and provide opportunities for all of our students.

Following that information in August of 2018 the WBASD approved the final consolidation plan. Where we would have one 9-12 high school, two middle schools and realign our elementary schools to be K-5 centers.

In 2019 we secured a \$121 million dollar bond with a debt service payment of \$8.5 million. The Pathway to the Future also indicated that by consolidating our schools would provide us with the ability to be financially set. The consolidation with the new school would cost additional money. The \$8.5 million of debt service is about \$3.5 million more than what we are paying at this time. As we went through these plans, we had to make sure that the consolidation within our District most certainly allowed for us to have necessary employees to operate all those buildings and to provide all the opportunities that every school offers for our students and to generate additional savings to help pay for that debt service.

Finally, in 2019 we awarded construction contracts for the new high school. In 2020 the WBASD received a limited review by the Attorney General about our District consolidation plan.

In 2016 the Board passed a Resolution (9-0) that we would begin following a four-phased plan of the Pathway to the Future. Phase 1 was based on PFM indicating that we would be facing an \$8 million deficit next year if we did not make drastic changes. We acquired a loan for some debt service payment and we had to make district-wide cuts of \$4.5 million. Probably that hardest thing any of us had planned. Furloughs had to take place. The following year we continued to move forward with our plan and cut an additional \$2.5 million from our budget worksheets. We re-established our Capital Fund balance and we knew once we implemented Phase 2 that we would have a balanced budget with a minimal surplus for the 2017-18 school year. In Phase 3 we continued with consolidating as much as possible with minimal district wide cuts, we continued to preserve a Capital Fund balance of \$4 million, and we had a balanced budget with a positive fund balance.

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What did Phases 1, 2, and 3 do for us? In 2013, 2014, 2015 the fund balance was almost depleted. In 2016, if we did not stop that trend, we would have been facing an \$8 million deficit.

Phase 4 was created based on consolidation. We knew by having a new high school it unfortunately would require less people to operate. We knew that every projection we have done from every year from the start when we scheduled a new high school in 2016 we had to adjust when GAR came into the mix and decided to consolidate as a full 9-12 high school. We were getting to the same number from our historical data to our current data. We would offer all classes that we offer in our schools right now to be offered at the new high school with the right amount of faculty to continue to keep class sizes small and provide all opportunities for our students. Phase 4 gives almost \$4 million that would be saved with consolidation.

What does consolidation actually look like? The new law states the District has to use employee evaluations from the previous two years. We take those evaluations and separate them into four "buckets". Based on those buckets, everyone is then placed by their seniority. We then began scheduling the building, based on the idea we did not want more than 22 students in a class. We want to offer every single class the district now has at the new high school. There are certain classes in all three schools that are not offered among each other. The fact that we can now have, for example, an AP Physics class or a Holocaust class offered for all of our students is something we wanted to make available for all our students.

To do that, as we began scheduling, for English 2 we knew we would need a teacher certified in English to be able to teach those 6 sections of English 11 and not exceed 22 students. You will notice that we still have some classes with 7 students, 9 students, 14 students, 15 students but you won't see a class over 22 students. This is what we based consolidation on. We wanted to be sure there was no class that was over-sized. Having 22-24 students per class is the optimal size for discussion, collaboration and for students to learn.

I can also tell you, the Board and myself do not know the names of the employees that are part of these classes. I asked the team putting the schedules together to do it as correct and efficiently as possible. We don't want anything to cause change in our judgement. We have one opportunity to get our District right.

With that being said, our school consolidation inherently and unfortunately requires less employees. However by doing so it does not operate with reducing opportunities for our students, it increases the opportunities for our students.

These are very difficult times. We are doing everything we can to get our high school and junior high to optimal numbers so every student can achieve. We all do know that our elementary numbers are less favorable to a conducive environment that benefits all students. As we move forward from Phase 4, the next strategy in planning is how will we be able to decrease our elementary numbers. That won't happen through consolidation. That will happen if we receive additional funding from the State. Right now the State proposal is the WBASD will receive \$30 million. If the budget is approved by Gov. Wolf, we will be able to bring back

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our teachers that are unfortunately furloughed through this process. Every teacher who retires provides an opportunity for us to bring back a teacher that has been let go due to the consolidation.

As it pains me to recommend to the Board to follow through with this Resolution that was set. I understand that the process will allow us to have days ahead of us to begin to tackle the overcrowding of elementary buildings.

Dr. Costello presented Resolution #1

RESOLUTION #1

WHEREAS, the Board of School Directors of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District has previously voted to construct a new High School in Plains Township, Pennsylvania, and;

WHEREAS, the Board of School Directors of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District has previously voted to consolidate the three District High Schools into the new High School in Plains Township, Pennsylvania, and to consolidate the Junior High Schools and the 6th grade classes of elementary schools into two Middle Schools, and;

WHEREAS, the aforesaid consolidations of schools makes it unnecessary to retain the full staff of Professional Employees, Temporary Professional Employees, and Support Staff, and;

WHEREAS, the aforesaid consolidations of schools are to take effect for the tart of the 2021-2022 School Year,

NOW THEREFORE, this 1st day of March, 2021, be it resolved that the Board of School Directors hereby authorizes the District Superintendent, in consultation with the Solicitor and Business Manager, to take all steps required by law to suspend any and all Professional Employees and/or terminate Temporary Professional Employees and/or Support Staff, as determined by the Superintendent, so as to allow for efficient operation of the District. Be it further resolved that the District Superintendent, in consultation with the Solicitor and Business Manager, shall have full authority to recall suspended Professional Employees, Temporary Professional Employees, and/or Support Staff.

Motion by Rev. Walker, second by Ms. Thomas to approve this Resolution.

On the question:

Mr. Atherton – Dr. Costello how long did it take to get everyone back after the furloughs in 2016?

Dr. Costello response: It took approximately a year and a half to get everyone back. We did that through retirements, long term subs and sabbaticals.

Mr. Atherton – Approximately, how long do you think it will take to bring back the teachers from this round of furloughs?

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Dr. Costello response: In this scenario, in the secondary schools, we would bring back a teacher to replace a retiring teacher. We can also re-purpose our faculty. If someone retires in the elementary level, we would be able to utilize those teachers and get them certified to teach in the elementary level. We also understand that there is a proposal from the Governor that finally provides an equitable educational system for all school districts. As I stated before, the WBASD is under-funded \$30 million annually. That's the number created by the Basic Education Formula created by Gov. Wolf and his team. This year that's finally to behold within his budget proposal. If we were able to get the money moving forward, we would be able to bring back our furloughed employees and use them in the elementary level or any area that may need additional services. We usually have 8 to 10 retirees every year.

Mr. Atherton: Are there any jobs that we are adding during this consolidation?

Dr. Costello response: There are no jobs that we are adding. However, through attrition we have reached the optimal number of custodians. We actually might be one short as we move forward.

Mr. Atherton: Are there any programs or departments being cut?

Dr. Costello response: There aren't any programs being cut. In fact, with this consolidation there will be more course offered to our students.

Mr. Atherton: Is it correct that our fund balance is now around \$6 million?

Dr. Costello response: Yes, that is correct.

Mr. Atherton: What was our fund balance prior to "Pathways"?

Mr. Telesz response: Prior to "Pathways" we did not have a Capital Reserve Fund. This was established by the Board approximately 2-3 years ago.

Mr. Evans: There are happy days and sad days in our District. Today is a sad day. Nobody wants to furlough any teacher or staff member. I was furloughed twice but was brought back. I am hoping that is what we can do for these fine teachers. Our teachers always go above and beyond the call of duty.

Ms. Patla: Dr. Costello, the teacher's that are being furloughed will only be brought back if someone retires, is that correct? Is it also correct that we as a Board do not know the names of these teachers being furloughed? If the Resolution is passed, when will the furlough's begin? Are we just furloughing teachers?

Dr. Costello response: There will be an opportunity to bring them back as teacher's retire. If an elementary teacher retires, we can repurpose a teacher and bring them back as an elementary teacher. If a history teacher retired, and if a certified history teacher has been furloughed, they would be called back to replace the retiring teacher.

Because I know these people being furloughed, I have asked not to see the names. We scheduled the building using "teacher 1, teacher 2, etc." I have only seen PPID numbers and not the names. The number of teachers being furloughed appears to be 36-37.

If the Resolution passes, we will meet with the Union Representatives this week to review the list. I hope to see the list with names by the end of the week. I will reach out to the people affected.

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We will not be furloughing any secretaries or executive assistants. We have reached that goal through attrition. We are at the right number with our full time para-professionals. It is possible there are a small number of part time para-professionals that may be affected.

Mr. Quinn: Years ago in the 1930's there was no tenure. Plains Twp. and Old Forge fired all their teachers – this was commonplace in those days. This is very sad and heart-breaking. Following this Pathway is something that had to be done or we were looking at a deficit of \$70 million.

Mrs. Schiowitz: First, I would like to thank the people sending in comments. They were very poignant. I was touched by every single word they said. Second, I would like to remind the public that this Board has voted for no tax raise for the year. That is something that should be considered. In respect to the Resolution, as a School Board Director my primary focus is always in providing first rate, ultimate education for all students. The adjustments and incredible motivation that our educators have shown in rising above the terrible pandemic conditions that have faced is beyond amazing. It was always projected that if our school district proceeded with the secondary school consolidation a reduction in educators and ancillary staff would follow. As the District Board, educators and private citizens refused to pursue options opposed to consolidating now we are faced with making the difficult decision to follow the proposed economic pathway to a sound financial future. When attrition and retirement incentives were exhausted, the last remaining choice was furloughs. Those furloughed were chosen by an intense evaluation by administration, the business specialists, and the human resource department. Those chosen were vetted with directions by the PSEA that being a classification of the past two years performance evaluations with seniority as a secondary criteria. They were done with anonymous ID no names were listed. If nothing else, this process in my mind, can be called nothing but fair. On a personal note, in my 38-year career in medicine, I faced lay-offs twice. It was a difficult and heart-breaking experience. Those furloughs were not a fair process. The timing of the furloughs, as we are looking at today, will allow those affected to check out employment options for the 2021-2022 school year. I believe that we as a District had other avenues not been evaluated in depth that may have eliminated secondary consolidation. But here we are with a school that will be the “Disneyworld” of secondary schools on a site which I continue to question. Please excuse my rhetoric but it is time to make hard decisions to pay forward our debt and plan for the future. In the interest of the District financial solvency, regretfully I will vote yes.

Ms. Thomas: Dr. Costello this plan is designed for how many maximum students per class? What are we going to do about the elementary class sizes? What is the formula for furlough? I respectfully ask that we have a freeze on all administration hires and moves.

For the employees that are eligible to retire, I respectfully ask you to retire and allow our younger teachers to have a chance.

Dr. Costello response: This is designed to hold a maximum of 24 students per class. Our scheduling was done with 22 students per class. We do know the elementary class sizes need to decrease. With the sixth grade becoming part of the middle school, we will be able to utilize

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space in the elementary schools to decrease some of those class sizes. Using the Federal Program, we will be able to utilize those funds for class reduction teachers.

The last two years of evaluations from building Principals, Supervisors and Coordinators were reviewed. They were placed in four categories based on the evaluations and then listed by seniority. The purpose of the new law is to keep your best teachers and most senior teachers.

Rev. Walker: This has been a challenging seven or eight years. There were days the biggest argument we had was over a professional or non-professional hire. That abruptly changed in the Spring of 2014 when I was asked to go to Coughlin to observe some findings on the building. There was much discussion over the next few years as to what we would do to first provide a quality education to our students and also be responsible to the taxpayers of the District. I believe we have tried to professionally meet these challenges. Keeping in mind we wanted to turn the financial circumstances of our District around. At the same time increase the student achievement. We have been working diligently and have made progress in that regard as well. This evening brings us to another step we must take in order to move forward. I want to thank everybody that has participated in the education of our students and has given their absolute all to them and their profession. I am confident as we did this the last, this time we ultimately be able to bring them back in time. That does not take away the immediate hurt, heartache and pain that a furlough would cause as I just recently furloughed myself. I spend much of the 2019-2020 year unemployed in my profession of choice. I express my appreciation and gratitude to everyone as we proceed to move forward with this motion and subsequently take a vote.

The vote was as follows:

7 Ayes: Atherton, Evans, Quinn, Schiowitz, Thomas, Walker, Caffrey

2 Nays: Harris, Patla

New Business

Mrs. Schiowitz: Is there a possibility in the near future we will be able to go to Board meetings where there will be social distancing and the public will be able to engage with the board?

Mr. Caffrey response: It is the plan that the March 22 monthly meeting will be held at Solomon/Plains with the Board there and social distancing in place.

Communications from Solicitor

As part of the new High School process, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation required the Board to make some off-site improvements. One of which includes the addition of an additional off-ramp in Plains coming off the Cross-Valley Expressway heading into River Street. There will be constructed a new dedicated turning lane to allow traffic coming off that exit to not have to stop at the light itself but to continue off the lane to a yield sign. The design of that required the acquisition of real estate in Plains upon which sits two apartment buildings on one deed. We have had a long ongoing negotiation with the owners of those properties. I have a resolution tonight where the Board would authorize us to acquire that land that is

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required by deed and in lieu of eminent domain at a cost not to exceed \$195,000. In that cost we have an appraisal of the property we are acquiring that is \$175,000 and there is a provision in the eminent domain code where the party whose property is being acquired is entitled to their reasonable attorney fees. There is money in there for the attorney fees for the seller. We are also acquiring a small sliver of land that adjoins the WBASD property where the new High School is being constructed. The owners of that property had acquired in 2015 with the idea of doing development on that corner with parking in the rear. Our taking of their one property makes that property land locked. Under the eminent domain code, we would have to take that parcel as well. We are basically taking that parcel for the price they paid at \$12,000 with some costs built into it for a total of \$15,000.

Atty. Wendolowski presented Resolution #2

RESOLUTION #2

Resolution of the
Board of Directors of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District

A RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE INITIATION OF EMINENT DOMAIN
PROCEEDINGS TO ACQUIRE TITLE TO CERTAIN REAL PROPERTY LOCATED IN THE
TOWNSHIP OF PLAINS, COUNTY OF LUZERNE AND COMMONWEALTH OF
PENNSYLVANIA, FOR THE PUBLIC PURPOSE OF THE WIDENING OF A ROADWAY

The Board of Directors of and for the Wilkes-Barre Area School District, meeting in regular session, makes the following findings of fact;

WHEREAS, in order to satisfy the conditions imposed by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation with respect to the construction and development of the High School being erected in the Township of Plains, County of Luzerne and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for purposes of controlling the increase in anticipated traffic along the Cross Valley Expressway, there is a necessity to install a dedicated turning lane at the off ramp of the River Street Exit of the Cross Valley Expressway.

WHEREAS, the construction of the dedicated turning lane at the off ramp of the River Street Exit of the Cross Valley Expressway will facilitate the safety of students, their parents, and other drivers along River Street and Maffett Street;

WHEREAS, certain real property that is necessary for the installation of the dedicated turning lane at the offramp of the Cross Valley expressway is owned by Joseph Anthony Lispi and Albert Joseph Lispi; and

WHEREAS, the use of eminent domain by the Board of Directors of Wilkes-Barre Area School District, is necessary to obtain title to this property for the installation of the dedicated turning lane at the offramp of the River Street Exit of the Cross Valley Expressway and that this is a proper public purpose under the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

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NOW, THEREFORE, be it resolved by the Board of Directors of Wilkes-Barre Area School District, as follows:

Section 1. The Board of Directors of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District recognizes that the use of eminent domain for the installation of a dedicated turning lane at the offramp of the River Street Exit of the Cross Valley expressway, will provide a public benefit to the students, their parents, and other drivers along River Street and Maffett Street, and will service to make driving safer on River Street and Maffett Street.

Section 2. The Superintendent, Secretary and the Solicitor are authorized and directed to take all actions they determine to be appropriate to exercise the rights of the Board of Directors of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District in eminent domain pursuant to the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as to that real property identified in Exhibit "A", which is attached hereto and incorporated herein by this reference, to obtain fee simple absolute title to the subject real property at an acquisition cost not to exceed \$195,000, plus required costs for transfer of the real estate.

DULY RESOLVED by the Board of Directors of the Wilkes-Barre Area School District this 1st day of March, 2021.

Motion by Ms. Patla seconded by Rev. Walker to approve this Resolution

On the question:

Ms. Thomas: Is Maffett Street able to hold all the traffic? Will small businesses be affected once construction of the ramp improvements begin?

Atty. Wendolowski response: Traffic studies were performed by our Engineers and approved by Penn Dot. Based on these studies Penn Dot required us to make improvements at several areas along River Street to improve the traffic congestion. This will not have an impact on any small businesses in the area.

The vote was as follows:

6 Ayes: Atherton, Evans, Quinn, Thomas, Walker, Caffrey

3 Nays: Harris, Patla, Schiowitz

Motion to adjourn by Ms. Patla and seconded by Mrs. Schiowitz.

The meeting adjourned at 8:03 p.m.