

Dear Region 14 Parents and Community Members,

As many of you know, the Board of Education recently voted to adopt Superintendent Dr. Robert Cronin's reconfiguration proposal. As of September 2007, Bethlehem Elementary School will become Bethlehem Primary School housing all kindergarten, first and second grade students from Bethlehem and Woodbury. Likewise, Mitchell Elementary will become Mitchell Intermediate School with all of the district's third, fourth, and fifth graders attending.

The Board of Education's vote on Oct. 16th to reconfigure Region 14 was done hastily with very little insight provided as to the logistics of carrying out such a monumental task. On October 4th, Dr. Robert Cronin presented three options to the Board of Education (henceforth referred to as the BOE) outlined in an eight page document entitled, "Addressing Facility and Space Needs." Most of the document focuses on the troubled history of Region 14's attempts to deal with overcrowding and deteriorating facilities. Approximately one page consisting of seven sentences outlines the reconfiguration plan recently adopted by the BOE. According to our understanding after meeting with Dr. Cronin on October 25th, this is the extent of the information provided to the BOE prior to a unanimous vote that took place on the 16th. The plan adopted by the BOE has no proposed bus routes, architectural plans, or budgetary guidelines as to the renovations that will inevitably need to take place within both schools. In addition, the proposal is devoid of any discussion of possible negatives including long commutes and broken communities. The extent of the documented information that served as the impetus for the unanimous vote was the scant eight page document detailed above that can best be described as an outline.

The BOE decision is irresponsible in several regards. First and foremost, this matter was handled in a hasty manner that seems underhanded in its intent and negligent in application. A notice regarding the initial workshop on October 4th was notably not sent home to parents. Aside from the previously discussed outline, there is no documentation as to what was discussed at the workshop and no minutes provided on the region's Website. All we do know is that according to Dr. Cronin, the BOE did not at this time review any information regarding the implications of the newly proposed plan but merely relied on Dr. Cronin's fact gathering process. Following the workshop, parents were informed of the proposed reconfiguration on Friday, October 13th, approximately three days prior to a scheduled BOE "discussion" on Monday, October 16th. On the 16th, the BOE spent approximately two hours considering the comments of many self avowed uninformed parents before rashly voting to institute the proposal- a complete surprise to many since there was no previous mention of a vote.

Many residents have questioned the fairness of such a vote and do not understand why the proposal was not put to referendum. Besides advancing the principle of fairness, clearly there are practical reasons a referendum may have served both communities better. At this time, there is no clear indication of public support for the adopted proposal. Before embarking on a project that will undoubtedly exceed their budgetary expectations, it would have been wise and informative for the BOE to see if in fact public support exists for this proposal by conducting a referendum. In a district that seems to find itself routinely strapped for cash, foresight might have dictated an exploratory vote. Instead, we may find ourselves with a proposal that both towns have invested a great deal of time and effort into with no budget to support it.

Aside from the inherent procedural unfairness and lack of foresight that seems to have clouded these proceedings, also evident is a blatant disregard for the fact gathering process that should have guided the BOE's decision. The board exists as a body to enhance the school district's ability to represent the interests of the two communities and carefully formulate any policies that will impact our children. Clearly, eleven days and an eight page outline (with one page detailing reconfiguration) do not provide a sufficient basis to start dismantling two functioning elementary schools and busing small children across a region that encompasses almost sixty square miles.

In their haste to adopt this proposal without considering all of the factors, the BOE failed to consider a paramount issue. This plan, born of a desire to address facility and space needs, **fails to provide any real solutions**. Mitchell Elementary School is currently overcrowded and built to accommodate the needs of mid-twentieth century Woodbury. After the reconfiguration, MES will have approximately 15 fewer students in attendance. Bethlehem by contrast, will have actually increased by roughly thirty percent. How have we addressed the space issue? The touted benefit is that our fifth graders will be able to return to their substandard classrooms across the street. In return, we will take on the feat of busing roughly 400 students across town lines to facilities that may or may not accommodate them. As previously mentioned, the board looked at approximately one page of material relating to the potential shift that will need to occur in order to meet the adopted proposal's space needs. In essence, the plan involves knocking down a few walls and displacing several generalized class rooms, **including** the special education classroom in the new primary school. Another option, MORE portable classrooms! Why these changes could not be made to accommodate the fifth grade without reorganizing the entire school district remains to be seen or discussed.

In addition, the reconfiguration plan makes no mention of the detrimental impact this plan will have on our children. We have been assured, verbally, that students will not have bus rides that exceed an hour and a half round trip! This is a commute many adults would find taxing. Why would we subject our youngest students to this commute without exploring all the options available to us? The prospect of placing a five year old kindergartner from Woodbury on a bus for an hour and a half to attend a school day of roughly three hours is misguided to the point of being ludicrous. The same rationale applies to all of our students who may double their daily commute. One of the primary responsibilities of educators and administrators is to instill a love of learning in our children- it's difficult to see how incorporating an hour and a half commute into the average school day accomplishes such a task. Also, let us be mindful of the health and safety concerns the issue presents. Any additional time spent on windy, hilly roads during inclement weather conditions is potentially hazardous for our children who ride to and from school each day without seat belts.

In addition, research has suggested that longer bus rides negatively impact families with lower participation in extra curricular activities and all school activities by both parents and their children. Similarly, the ability of student to perform well is negatively impacted as well. One study found that with all variables remaining constant each hour spent riding a bus could be predicted to reduce achievement scores by up to four points (Spence, 2000). When we

consolidate schools and we talk about cost effectiveness and better use of resources, we fail to take into account the value of our children's time.

Finally, the heart of any small community is its children; when we ship those children out of town we have in essence failed as a community. Woodbury and Bethlehem have decidedly few obligations as towns. We are spared the blight of many larger communities, crime, poverty, homelessness, etc. We have one primary responsibility and that is to provide a safe and effective learning environment for our children. On October 16th, the Board of Education gave up on those principles. The adopted seven sentence plan fails to properly rehabilitate our buildings, fails to unify grades K-5, and furthermore dismantles our community-based schools. A good education is in part a function of a school's positive relationship with its community; a relationship that can only be enhanced when the school is actually located within the community.

In 2006 we failed to pass the renovation referendum on the count of **26 VOTES**. Isn't it likely that the budget could be tailored to attract the necessary additional votes? On October 16th the board failed to fully explore the options in this case, and we will have failed our children if we allow them to embark on this proposal without at least demanding that they take an honest look at the implications. We are currently working with a number of families from both towns that strongly object to the reconfiguration plan. If there are Bethlehem and Mitchell parents that feel similarly, we welcome your input. The Board of Education needs to be reminded who they are serving prior to the next board meeting at Nonnewaug High School on Monday, November 13th at 7:30 PM. Please email saveregion14elementary@yahoo.com or contact us at **203-228-4582** if you would like to be involved.

Sincerely,
William and Erica Barber, Mitchell parents
Families for Region 14 Elementary