**Present:** Beth McDonald, Russ Cumming, Carolyn Partridge, William Anton, Laurie Garland, Mickey Parker Jennings, Gail Wyman, Crystal Corriveau, Bridgette Blanchard, Betsey Huffman, Emily Goyette, Michael Pelton, Abigail Pelton, Sara Peck, Susan Persa, Meredith Tips-McLaine, Pat McLaine, Al McLaine, Eileen Widger, Erin Kehoe, Keith Gustafsson, Alexis Mialkowski, Erik Mialkowski, Sue Pare, Alan Partridge, Kord Scott, Kathy Scott, John Beagan, Jessica McGrath, Adrian May, Ronald Boslun, David Lewis (clerks note: there were additional attendees who came and left during the meeting for which there is no record--some in person and some on Zoom)

**Call to Order:**  6:01 PM

**Additions and Corrections to Agenda:**

Carolyn asked to add an item: Capitol Construction for Schools under new business.

**Correspondence:**

Carolyn asked to have a letter included as part of the official record. Beth advised there is an Art intern to the WSCU.

**Public Comments:**

Crystal Corriveau thought of bringing her kids to the meeting but decided against it due to the negative vibes community members are directing toward the supporters of the school choice option. She noted her opinion that expressing a preference for school choice did not mean someone is thoughtless or uncaring. Crystal expressed her view that supporters of school choice are treated badly and degraded by WES supporters for simply wanting a different choice in educating their children. Crystal related the concerns of a working mom such as trying to juggle transportation to extra-curricular activities with her work schedule. She pointed out that in Townshend there is a movie night and the kids get popcorn. She is questioning why something like that which could be promoted at the school isn’t being offered. She supports the idea that parents should fight for similar activities that other schools offer so Windham children have better access to extra-curricular activities. She also applauded the announcement that the Farm program will now have all its employees undergo a background check and fingerprinting before being allowed to work with school children.

Abigail Pelton states that COVID has made it difficult to get together with friends and family and having three 5 year olds has been a challenge. She supports Crystal’s idea of getting community support for children’s activities after school. She is also concerned about not sending her children to the same school her husband and his family have attended and how disappointed they may be if the school closes.

John Beagan spoke about teaching in the school back in the 1970’s and named a number of individuals who are adults and parents of children who have recently passed through the school. He pointed out that this is not the first petition to close the school. He pointed out that it is usually new families that request the change, those who do not have the institutional memory of the school’s history.

Erik Mialkowski states that he and other families moved to Windham in order to send their children to WES. He feels children should go to the local school. He states that his son is happy at the school.

Erin Kehoe states that she has been living in Windham for 9 years. She noted that her husband attended WES along with his brothers. Erin disclosed that her brothers-in-law moved out of town so their children would have school choice and not attend WES. She noted that other families also moved out of Windham so their children could go to a larger school. Erin stated that she and other parents want activities that are offered at other schools, either by the school or community-supported activities organized outside the school. Erin pointed out that pre-K students may go wherever their parents enroll them and would not be required to go to the Newfane School as John Beagan had implied. Erin indicated that children need to be 5 years old or older to ride the school bus.

Erin was making the point that Windham is not an isolated school district, at which point Carolyn interrupted Erin to say Windham was isolated. Russ Cumming, the clerk, interrupted Carolyn to state that he has email correspondence from March 2021 with a staff attorney at the AoE that clearly states that the AoE does not define or use the term “isolated” in any of their documents. He asked that Carolyn not continue to use the term “geographically isolated”. Beth restored order to the discussion and Erin finished her comments.

Meredith Tips-McLaine stated that her family has lived in Windham for 16 years and they have a child enrolled at the Mountain School in Winhall, and are paying tuition expense in addition to Windham education taxes. She disagrees with two of the previous speakers who expressed the nativist view that the school should exist simply because it has been here for 50+ years and a grandparent or parent went to the school. She also disagreed with the view that families should not move here if they don’t want their children to go to the school. Meredith feels she has as much right to an opinion as anyone else and should not be ridiculed for her view. She respects the views of others and hope they will respect hers as well.

Sue Paré noted that a relative moved down from Canada and purchased 200 acres, of which 100 acres were later sold to another relative. The relative’s wife stated that no way were her children going to WES. Family members have moved out of Windham into Londonderry so their children could go to Flood Brook School where there is more opportunity.

Michael Pelton expressed his appreciation for the participation at these meetings. He liked the input from parents concerning what other schools in the area are offering. He acknowledged that the small school has limited resources due to the small student count. If parents want more for their children, then they should ask the staff to provide it. He recognizes the financial burden of the school but feels the town has done its best to keep the costs low.

Kathy Scott feels that the community needs to step back and reconsider this option outside of a pandemic environment when there would be more time to consider all the additional options.

Russ Cumming stated that there are several families with school-aged children who would like school choice including families who have not been vocal due to concerns they or their children would be ostracized. He felt that was unacceptable. He related that the world has changed dramatically over the past 50, 30, even 20 years and the skill set needed to succeed in the 21st century has become much more technology oriented. He fells children need interactions with same-age peers for emotional development and acquisition of social skills. He feels that a school like Flood Brook could provide more opportunity for an in-depth education and extracurricular activities than is offered at WES.

Russ further clarified that the school tax for WES is only borne by the full time residents of Windham. The second home owners pay a set tax rate regardless of how many students are in the school. The key is the number of actual students in the school averaged over a two year cycle. He also stated that historically when a town moves to school choice, enrollment tends to increase slowly over a two to three year cycle. On the subject of transportation, the school board decides what to offer and where to transport the children. Carolyn has stated that the parents would need to transport their own children. That is incorrect, as the district owns the bus and has included funds in the non-operational budget for transportation. He pointed out that there are two bus routes that pass the country store on Rt. 30 and one on Rt. 11 at Horsenail Hill Road that feed area elementary schools. He expressed the view that reasonable individuals could look at the connecting bus schedules and come to a serviceable schedule. He also noted that there is a provision in the statutes for the school board to pay parents to transport their children to and from school. His view is that Carolyn’s position that there is no transportation is totally wrong. Transportation may be provided in many different forms and they just need to be worked out.

Erik Mialkowski spoke to dropping off students on a busy road. (Much of what he said was not clear in the recording.)

Emily Goyette spoke to the class sizes and her desire for more socialization for her kids with children their own age. (Much of what she said was also difficult to hear on the recording.)

David Lewis also was speaking but it is not clear what his comments were. There was some back and forth discussion among several attendees and Beth tried to get control of the rambling chatter.

An unidentified female speaker spoke of her family history in small schools and related some of her concerns about the class size at WES. Her concern was about the level of learning her children had received at WES.

Ronald Boslun reflected on his granddaughter attending WES. He understood the issue of class sizes and the number of total students and the funding issues we are dealing with at this time. He felt closing the school would create problems for some people especially with transportation.

Bridgette Blanchard spoke to her concerns about after school programs and coordinating transportation to or from the events. If there were more children participating, parents could share the responsibility. She felt that would not occur at WES because of the very small numbers of students.

Eileen Widger commented that it is very difficult to understand people speaking in the back of the room with their masks on. She requested that speakers remove their masks to be heard better.

Abigail Pelton related her personal experience in a Connecticut school with her brother. She related that even in CT, transportation was an issue. She pointed out that in rural Vermont there will always be transportation issues for after school programs so there is no easy solution that satisfies everyone.

Crystal expressed her concern about the facial expressions of Carolyn when supporters of the non-operational school were speaking. She spoke to the strong support for Mickey and the great job he and Sara were doing for our children and that wanting more opportunity is not a crime. She respects other parents’ choices but would also like to be respected for her opinions. If the school stays open, she will fight to get the services she feels her children deserve.

Carolyn responded to the letter sent out by the Windham residents who support school choice. She claims that some of the information is not correct. She feels some people do not really understand what is offered in the school currently. She addressed the recent report on the deficiencies at the school and assured everyone that the problems would be addressed. She also noted that many of the offerings at Flood Brook are offered by the community, not directly by the school. Carolyn also brought up the term “geographically isolated” and some mention of 15 miles from the nearest school being a concern. Carolyn mentioned that many students that had IEP’s on arrival at WES left without one and feels it is a tribute to how well the school educated students.

Russ addressed the statement by Carolyn about IEPs. He pointed out it is part of the education process to identify students with learning disabilities and to provide them with help as needed. It makes no difference where it is delivered (either at WES or one of the other qualified elementary schools). He noted that many of the area schools have between 5 to 7 or more special education professionals and para-educators to deliver those services. He noted that a larger school has more resources to deliver the special services than a small school like WES.

Russ then addressed Carolyn’s concern about capacity to receive Windham students. He pointed out that there are 5 fully qualified schools within 15 miles of Windham and there should be no concern about getting a child into any of the five schools. Russ also addressed the term “geographically isolated” as used by Carolyn and quoted from a March 2021 email from a staff attorney at the AoE that the term “geographically isolated “ is not defined in the statutes.

Emily Goyette addressed Carolyn’s comments about the letter she received from the group supporting a non-operational school. Emily stated that Carolyn hit the nail on the head in that the letter talks about what is available in the Flood Brook community, not directly from the school. She related that the services are available from a larger community that is not present in Windham and it is that opportunity she seeks for her children.

There was a four way discussion between Erik, Erin, Beth and Emily concerning transportation and choosing who may go where and how that would be provided. Erik continued to interrupt the discussion. Kathy Scott raised the issue of bussing small children down the same hill that the middle school and high school children went down just an hour before and how dangerous it was to consider.

Emily and Bridgette grew up in Andover where there was no school and they were educated in the Chester -Andover school system. They noted Andover is still sending students to Chester.

Carolyn related some of her experience of driving down Windham Hill Road in the winter and how she was concerned about black ice and road conditions. She pointed out, as Kathy Scott had previously indicated, that the section of Windham Hill Road from the Meadows Bee farm down to Route 30 is a steep and sometimes slippery road. Russ commented that Frank Seawright had researched V-Trans data and had documented that Windham Hill Road is not as dangerous as many have stated.

Russ then stated that if Windham Hill Road is so dangerous why not send our children down Rt. 121 to Flood Brook and avoid the risks of Windham Hill Road. After all, our town road crew plows from the Jamaica town line down to Rt. 11 every snow storm. The road crew starts by plowing and salting the main paved service roads first; they then plow the bus routes, and then the secondary roads.

Russ also commented that he has reviewed the minutes for Stratton and Winhall, two non-operational school towns, and has observed how those towns, over time, have adjusted to cope with unanticipated expenses. They have developed tuition and special education reserve funds. Windham should have bus replacement and operational reserve funds to stabilize the variances in the school tax rates. It is like running a business and anticipating issues in advance in order to avoid a possible crisis. He observed that WES has deferred needed repairs just to keep the school open and the taxes low.

Kathy Scott addressed Russ’s claim that we could go north to Londonderry instead of south to Townshend. Kathy asked if Russ had a magic wand to wave to fix the issue. Russ answered Kathy’s question that according to the statutes, Windham could request to move from the WCSU to the BRSU by a vote of the town. He pointed out that there are no 4th, 5th, or 6th grade students in the school right now. That allows a 2 to 3 year window to consider moving to the BRSU from the WCSU without impacting the number of middle school students attending the middle school in Townshend. Windham would still need to remove itself from the West River district by a vote of the towns in that district.

A comment was made re: assurances of employment for the current staff for the balance of the school year. The current staff has an employment contract through June 30, 2022.

**New business**:

Carolyn briefly reviewed the lack of state funding for school facilities and implied that was the reason for not implementing improvements to the WES building.

The meeting adjourned at 7:59 p.m.

Next meeting will be an informational meeting on Sat. Aug. 28th at 10 a.m. at the school.

The Town wide vote will be on Sept.7th from 10 am to 7 pm, and by absentee ballot.