

River Grove Elementary  
Board of Directors Meeting  
Thursday, April 27, 2023 6:30 pm  
River Grove Commons  
MINUTES

1.0 Call to Order. Chair Jessica Hansen called the meeting to order at 6:36pm.

1.1 Roll Call: Katie Bruns, Annie Beck, Angie Hong, Jessica Hansen, Greg Beaumont, Lisa Dochniak, Eric Olsen. Drew Goodson and Ele Anderson were also in attendance.

1.2 Mission Statement: Hansen read the River Grove mission statement.

1.3 Conflict of Interest Statement: Hansen read the conflict of interest statement and asked board members to verbally affirm that they have no conflicts of interest. All members confirmed they have no conflict of interest.

2.0 Approve Agenda: Motion to approve the agenda by Hong. Second by Beck. All members vote yes. Agenda approved.

3.0 Approve Minutes

3.1 March 31, 2023 Minutes Approval Motion by Bruns to approve. Second by Dochniak. All in favor. Minutes approved.

3.2 April 13, 2023 Minutes Approval Motion by Bruns to approve. Second by Beck. All in favor. Minutes approved.

4.0 Community Discussion

4.1 River Grove Community Updates

4.1.1 Authorizer Comments - Authorizer was not present. Hansen had a conversation with Jim Zacchini after our community meeting on April 13 and he shared how impressed he is with River Grove and Minnesota Guild's support for our school in this time of transition.

4.2 Community Comments:

- Laurie (grandson of a 3rd grader in River Grove) spoke and shared conversations she's had with families at the Marine hub. Parents are sad about losing the forest but still excited to stay with River Grove because of our teachers and board. It is also exciting to move to downtown Stillwater because there can be new opportunities. People are still loyal to River Grove. "A house is a house wherever you go."
- Hansen recognized and thanked Pat McCarthy for his service and volunteerism at River Grove. Sarah Godsave also thanked Pat.
- Pat spoke about his love for River Grove even though we are moving.

5.0 PTO Report - none

6.0 Finance Report & Actions - Bridget

6.1 March 2023 Financial Packet

- Things are mostly looking good. When we moved to a co-teaching model it increased our SpEd expenses. We get reimbursed from the state for these expenses but it is a longer hold-back period than we have for GenEd. It can be up to 18-months before we get reimbursed.
- Goodson is seeking a \$100k Propel loan to help us bridge the gap until we get reimbursed by the state. The bank was waiting for RG to settle our property concerns for next year before granting a loan. That can move forward now.
- Our legal expenses have been higher this year than anticipated due to property concerns we've had to navigate.

- Motion to approve the financial packet by Olsen. Second by Hong. All in favor. Financial report approved.

#### 7.0 Director's Report: Drew Goodson

- Last week, the school met with Zephyr, Manitou, MSR/Doresy and the City of Stillwater. The city is positive about the concept and will work hard with the timeline to get it done before the beginning of the school year. A CUP has been submitted. 60 days to approval. Will be meeting with the Stillwater Planning Commission tomorrow. Will also need to meet with the city's Heritage Committee.
- Goodson and Hansen, Maley (SPED coordinator) and Bruns met with MSR Design and toured the buildings; they are continuing to update and revise the draft design. Considering square footage difference in classroom size if 12 vs 13 classrooms. There are some creative ideas for outdoor classrooms, a garden, and a large deck space.
- Ele Anderson, Goodson and Hansen surveyed parents and shared a lengthy FAQ response document with our school community, based on questions and concerns about our move. Common concerns include safety, continuation of nature-based programming, and space/capacity issues.
- Manitou will be including a state-of-the-art security system. School staff will develop a safety plan.
- We are planning for River Grove's usage at the Warner Nature property. This could include bringing in yurts or other low-impact, temporary indoor spaces. Use of the Warner property will be a key component of River Grove's programming for the next two years.
- Moving logistics: Dumpster coming. Meeting with moving companies. Meeting and planning with staff. Goal to be off the current property by June 15.

#### Questions from the board:

- Beaumont - do we want/need to open enrollment to bring in additional students? Or do we have space constraints?
  - We want to make sure there is enough space for current students to return. Are not currently back-filling for students who are leaving. It would be a board decision, but there will be less available space, so it could be better to keep class sizes smaller.
- Numerous questions from teacher board members about space for other things - storage, admin, etc.
- Hansen - we are currently looking at relatively small class sizes of 15-17 students per class.
- There was also a staff meeting immediately prior to the board meeting with lots of conversation about the moving logistics.
- Hong - what is the plan for interim storage during the summer?
  - Olsen - this will be included in the cost for moving trucks. Likely materials will remain in the trucks during the summer.
  - Dochniak - where will the funds come from to cover moving expenses? Goodson - Manitou will pay for River Grove's moving and storage costs. Hong - that is a relief. It's very generous of Manitou to pay these costs for our school.

#### 7.1 Enrollment:

- Enrollment numbers are strong for all grades next year except for 6th, which only has 8 students wanting to return. 18 of 20 incoming kindergarteners have accepted enrollment offers. 38 are still on the waiting list. Board will have to decide whether to continue 6th grade for next year and whether to open a second section of kindergarten.

## 7.2 Staff Retention

- 11/13 general ed teachers are planning to return. 5/6 SpEd teachers are planning to return. About 80% of other staff are planning to return. It is comparable to staff retention for other years.
- Staff are sad to be leaving the forest but are sticking with River Grove. Goodson is very proud of the teachers and staff and all the extra work that they've put in this year.
- Hansen shared that teachers have been positive over the past two weeks, despite the transitions underway.
- Beck - once we got over the initial shock, it's been exciting to think about future possibilities.

## 8.0 New Business

8.1 Affiliated Building Company: After six years, charter schools in Minnesota can form an ABC if they're in good financial standing and meeting education standards. River Grove meets all of those criteria and is eligible to begin this process in June. We have always planned on forming an ABC in summer of 2023 (original intention was to buy our current property). An ABC would give us the ability to purchase property in the future if we ever need to. The process entails forming a separate board to run the ABC. In the future, the school could pay state lease aid toward the ABC that owns the school rather than a landlord. Goodson recommends that RG continue the process of forming an ABC.

- Hong supports this suggestion. We have a strong partnership with Manitou currently but should do this so we have security and self-sufficiency.
- Beaumont - there doesn't seem like any reason not to do this.

8.1.1 Articles of Incorporation: Olsen moves to form an affiliated building company as recommended. Second by Bruns. All members vote yes. Motion approved.

### 8.2 Building transition discussion

- Hong - will we be forming transition committees, as suggested?
  - Hansen - yes but it would be better to postpone the formation of those committees until May after more of the building logistics are figured out. Board members should volunteer for activities they want to provide leadership on. Admin will also talk with staff and teachers to determine how they want to be involved.

8.2.1 FAQ: Discussed during Director's Report

8.2.2 6th Grade section: Goodson shared information about 6th grade at River Grove. 18 students is the "break-even" point to run a class and fully pay for teachers and overhead costs. River Grove's current class size average is 17.9 but we have subsidized the costs with grant funds from Manitou and COVID relief funds. Only 8 students have expressed intent to return for 6th grade. We have always lost money on 6th grade and would lose even more money if we ran 6th grade in the coming year with only 8 kids. Traditionally we usually lose a few kids closer to the beginning of the school year, so that number could get even lower. Goodson recommends not offering 6th grade for 2023-24.

- Dochniak - how many incoming 5th graders are there? Could we consider a multi-grade 5/6 class?
  - There are 28-31 incoming 5th graders.
- Hong - we are sitting in a neither/nor place. Families have a hard time staying for 6th grade because then the kids start middle school in 7th grade once everyone else already knows each other. We need to either commit to K-8 or drop to k-5. It's always a hard decision for 5th grade families.
- Goodson - the move to Zephyr did affect 6th grade intent to return. We had 19-20 students, but that dropped to 8 after we decided to move.

- Olsen - can River Gove move some of its capstone experiences to 5th grade moving forward? Can 5th graders go to Camp Widgi?
- Dochniak - St. Paul Schools made that transition a few years ago and it has worked.
- Hong - it would be nice to offer a special experience for this year's 5th graders since they are River Grove's founding class. The fall canoe trip was canceled because of weather, so the kids already missed out on that.
- Olsen - May Township's rules for the conservancy district limit schools to k-6, but could we become a two-campus school in the future with k-5 in the forest and 6-8 at the Zephyr?
- Goodson - that is a long-term conversation but would take a couple of years to make it happen.
- Beaumont - could we hear from parents of the 8 kids that want to stay?
  - Steph Leonard spoke about her desire to stay. Her 5th grader is SpEd and is not ready for middle school. River Grove is currently the only school in the area that offers 6th grade as an elementary option. It will be an extreme hardship for her family to have to make this transition with so little notice.
    - Dochniak - would a multi-grade 5/6 option work for her son?
- Nik Ondrecek also spoke about their decision to transfer to River Grove in 4th grade. It was largely based on the fact that they'd have a 6th grade option at River Grove and a year delay in starting middle school.
  - Hansen expressed sympathy for these parents and the difficulties presented by this situation. She is personally saddened as this 5th grade class was her first group of kindergarteners at River Grove.
- Leonard - is the board considering opening enrollment to new 6th grade families who might want to enroll?
- Hong - how many of the 8 students would still want to return if it is a hybrid 5/6 class vs a fully 6th grade class?
- Beck - the kind of hands-on, project-based learning we do at River Grove doesn't work as well with a larger group of 28. She is not in favor of having a 5th grade class with 28 kids.
- Goodson - financially, we need to cut \$400k to make sure we can afford to keep on all of our staff for next year. Running 5th grade with a class size of 28 helps, but dividing that into one 5th grade and one 5/6th grade would create a financial hardship.
- Hansen - this year has been a challenging year at so many levels and this is one more difficult outcome resulting from our property tumult this year. It's a difficult decision but one that we unfortunately need to make.
- Goodson requested a board decision on whether to offer a dedicated 6th grade for next year. This would leave the possibility open for a combined 5/6 next year if the board wants to explore that option.
- Bruns - timing is already tight on the Zephyr redesign. Do we delay the process more if we wait to make a decision on one 5th grade section vs two?
- Hansen - recognizes that this is hard because it is so close to the end of the year and parents have so little time to plan and adjust.
- Motion from Bruns to not offer a dedicated 6th grade section next year. Second by Dochniak. All in favor. Motion passed.
- Request from Hong and Dochniak to explore the possibility of a multi-grade class for next year if those 8 families are interested. It might work if all 8 stayed on (28 + 8 = 2 classes of 18) but not if only some are interested.

- Hansen has concerns about the logistics and financial implications of offering a multi-grade class next year.
- Goodson doesn't think it is financially viable to consider. But we could reach out to the 8 families to see if they'd be interested in that option.
- Ele Anderson - there are a few 5th graders on the waiting list also.
- Hong - so if we offered two sections, one that is multi-grade, we could bring in a few new 5th graders to build up the class sizes of those two sections?
- Bruns - the current space at Zephyr is very tight so space is a consideration.
- Hong - are we also talking about whether or not to offer a second kindergarten section? That makes a big difference. If we only offered one kindergarten section that would cause a long-term decline in enrollment. Are we actually choosing between two 5th grade sections or 2 kindergarten sections?
- Hansen - if we offer two 5th grade sections, they'll be in the auditorium, divided by a curtain. Not in two classrooms.
- Bruns - will we need to add a second section to 5th grade in 2025-26 if the numbers stay the same?
  - The numbers would work for us to keep it as one large 5th grade class in that year too.
- Beck - there is also a financial consideration for teachers if they are teaching a multi-grade class or much larger class than other teachers.
- Hong - what happens if the four 4th grade families that haven't yet responded also decide to return? Would we have a 5th grade with 31 kids? That would be too big.
- Beck - teaching multi-grade isn't really that big of a deal. Most teachers are already teaching a range of grade-level content.
- Dochniak - has anyone talked with the 5th grade teacher for next year?
  - Yes. They are open to having a class as large as 31 but not to also multi-grading.
- Hong - would that mean we could potentially have 28-31 kids in 5th grade and all other classes only having 15-17 kids? That doesn't seem fair.
- Hansen - We have had other classes in K-2 larger than 25. 28 5th graders is large, but not beyond what would normally be found in other schools or even River Grove. The initial plan of RG was to have 25 students in all classes.
- Goodson - that teacher would get additional financial compensation.
- Beaumont doesn't feel like we have enough information to make a decision right now. Dochniak agrees.
- Hong - we need to be honest with 6th grade families and tell them we likely won't be offering 6th grade next year, but inquire their interest if combined 5/6 were offered. If we have 31 returning 5th + 8 returning 6th, that is 39 total and would create two full class sections.
- Dochniak suggested moving the May meeting up to the beginning of the month and making a decision then.
- Olsen - we committed to providing a space for everyone. We aren't even close to having enough kids to offer a 6th grade section but we should at least consider offering a multi-grade option for next year if it's viable. But we also need to think forward to the 24-25 school year and if this conversation will come up again.
- Hong - we need to pre-emptively decide not to offer 6th grade in 2024-25.
- Bruns - it would be ideal to offer two sections for 5th (one of which could be a 5th/6th) next year but the space and finances don't really allow.
- Anderson can call the 4 4th grade students' families that have not yet responded tomorrow to get their confirmation on leaving or returning.

- Hong has concerns about running a 5th grade class with 31 kids. But also doesn't like the idea of two sections divided by a curtain. That would be noisy and distracting.
  - Bruns - we are still offering unique and different experiences for students at River Grove compared with traditional district schools. Being in one larger class with all 5th graders together for their last year at Grove could be fun.
  - Goodson could look at the financial implications of offering two sections vs one for 5th grade.
  - Hong - so we've dropped from 13 classes to 12 but that would still mean two classes divided by a curtain? Is the goal actually to have 11 classes to fit the space?
  - Hansen- with 11 classes, 5th grade would be a large section but in a double-sized space and with three adults teaching - teacher, SpEd, and para. Could make it a special experience for their last year at River Grove.
  - Board members looked at schematics for the building and had a lengthy discussion about the current scenarios and options.
  - Beaumont and Hong suggested we should follow-up with the eight 6th grade families that want to return and the four 5th grade families that have not yet responded and then call a special meeting to vote early next week. Even if we know the likely decision, it's important to give the option consideration.
  - Hansen doesn't think multi-grading is a viable option and a realistic request to make of teachers, given our incredibly demanding circumstances and doesn't think we should present this as a possibility if it won't actually work.
  - The board had a continued lengthy discussion and with sadness and much emotion, agreed that a multi-grade 5/6 class option for next year would not make sense.
  - Olsen made a motion to discontinue any further consideration of a 5th/6th multi-grade option. Bruns seconded. All in favor. Motion passed.
- 8.2.3 Calendar consideration - postponed until next month.

9.0 Next Board of Directors Meetings: Monday, May 22, 2023

10.0 Meeting adjourned at 9:55pm.