
**OJAI UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
Minutes of the May 1, 2018 Special Open Session of the
Board of Education Regarding Sixth Grade Configuration**

Persons requesting interpreter services or with disabilities requiring special accommodations to attend this meeting should contact the Superintendent's office, 640-4300, ext. 1011, at least 48 hours prior to the meeting.

1. 6:30 p.m. The meeting was called to order; Pledge to the Flag

Attendance: Kevin Ruf, President
Michael Shanahan, Vice President
Shelly Griffen, Clerk
Thayne Whipple, Member
Jane Weil, Member

Administrators: Andrew Cantwell, Superintendent
Sherrill Knox, Assistant Superintendent

Minutes Secretary: Kathy Smith

2. Approval of the Agenda

- 2.1 Emergency Additions/Modifications to Agenda

There were no emergency additions or modifications to the agenda.

- 2.2 Approval of Agenda - Action

Member Whipple moved to approve the agenda as presented. Member Weil seconded the motion which carried with a vote of 5:0.

3. Special Presentation

- 3.1 Review of Rationale for Considering Change in Sixth Grade Configuration – Information

Mr. Cantwell provided an overview of two recent special board meetings and the materials presented, the 2002 committee and the 2014 Sixth Grade Committee review and the 17-3 decision supporting the implementation of the middle school concept of sixth - eighth grade at Matilija. He also touched on the financial conditions present in 2014 that halted the decision to move forward that time. He presented further information on enrollment factors and projected declines, staffing conditions and current fiscal conditions that at this time support the creation of a middle school. He also discussed the additional costs in 5th-6th grade combination classes for extra academic support due to curricular issues would be eliminated with the move of 6th graders from the elementary schools. A move to Matilija should provide a neutral financial result to the District overall compared with current staffing levels.

Dr. Knox presented information to the board and shared key concepts reviewing Common Core State Standards which generally divided K-5 and 6-8 components. She reviewed decades of research in support of the Middle School Concept, supporting an advisory period, balancing a

focus on student-oriented, cognitive development as well as social and emotional development instruction, experiential learning, block and flexible scheduling, California teacher credentialing systems, team teaching opportunities, and more access to electives and sport programs.

Dr. Knox shared steps already taken to alleviate parental concerns about the retention of fifth and sixth grade culminating year events. Best next steps to form transition committees at school sites and how these events are retained.

Board members shared their concerns and comments. Member Weil indicated that her concerns about the social and emotional consequences for students were alleviated when she spoke to current teachers. She said they unanimously agreed and that from their perspective fifth grade students are emotionally ready for a move to middle school and she was very happy with teacher consensus. Member Weil suggested the District consider a model to move students mid-year.

Member Ruf appreciated the fiscal neutrality was a positive factor to him. He asked for additional information regarding the viability of a standalone K-6 school to provide the option. Mr. Cantwell and Dr. Knox provided information on the pit falls of that type of campus within the Ojai Unified District. The challenge here would continue with curricular issues, combination classes with extra academic support, a lack of emotional and social support for students, further the inconsistency of planning for a sixth grade class year in and year out could provide instability in staffing.

Member Whipple indicated that he had mixed feelings and could relate to the overwhelming or scary feelings that have been expressed. The issues presented at the last board meeting provided detailed discussions and he now has some idea of the potential programs that would be very beneficial to our students. He indicated that Matilija is a very special school in the Ojai Valley. Because of various school options within our valley many students come together from both public and private schools into Matilija and this opportunity could allow us to make a good experience even better.

Member Ruf pointed out that if a decision is reached tonight in favor of a move, that this is only the starting point. Then the administration will begin to present a 1 ½ year process with the board and the community will kept abreast of the steps taken along the way. Mr. Cantwell confirmed that if the Board makes a change it would not occur until 2020 when our current fourth grade students become sixth graders. Over the next 1 ½ years there will be a number of meetings in which staff, faculty, parents are involved in making many decisions which will ultimately be presented to the general public.

Member Griffen expressed her concerns that the next curricular adoptions schedule are to the New Generation Science Standards NGSS and social studies adoptions. These curriculums will also be aligned for grades K-5 and 6-8, thereby requiring even additional funds be spent for academic support especially in 5th/6th grade combination classes. She asked for additional information regarding the student-oriented approach.

Dr. Knox confirmed that the advisory period approach would provide an even more student-oriented approach than already exists at Matilija. She expanded on the teacher/student bonds that occur when working directly with small groups over the course of the year and potentially all three-years of attendance at Matilija. Those type of small group activities create an environment where explicit discussion of social and emotional topics evolve. Teachers have the opportunity to

balance academics with the whole child while embracing their individual interests and provide valuable discussions.

Member Griffen raised concerns about early afternoon dismissals when students tend to be unsupervised. Mr. Cantwell detailed the survey he took of current afterschool care providers at local schools and the Ojai City Recreation Department. He found them to be under attended by 6th grade students currently. He added that Matilija could provide such a service and our goal is to identify what family needs exist. He also indicated that because of our recent purchase of three new buses, that the district will be reviewing potential additional services for after school transportation. Member Griffen also suggested that the advisory teacher hold parent/teacher conferences.

Member Whipple indicated that in the course of exploring new ideas we find that we are already implementing many of the ideas described in the middle school concepts. He also suggested the Board, administration and teachers be directly involved in addressing these social technology issues.

Member Shanahan shared his thought process and how it has evolved over the past four years regarding the subject of moving sixth grade students to Matilija. At first he was concerned with program viability and he now believes this to be a unique opportunity to that will benefit our students. He is very comfortable hearing that several strategies will be discussed to carefully reinvent and improve Matilija while revamping our approach to education. He affirmed that while the Board votes on policies it is the staff that make the changes that directly support our students. The more these concepts are discussed the more comfortable he is and believes this could be a very beneficial transition for the District.

4. Public Comments

Meiners Oaks teacher Sandra Hansen appreciated the deep thought the Board is putting into this idea. Because the district finds itself in a declining enrollment period she hopes that a move would actually enhance that fact and not exacerbate the situation. She indicated that parents have expressed the desire to keep a K-6 configuration at one of District schools. She believes that Matilija is a wonderful place to be and she feels that by mid-year students are ready to branch out to a larger setting. The sixth grade curriculum is so very dense and she feels that single-subject teachers and even a team teaching approach can provide such a rich academic experience. Her final concern is that there could create a negative elementary school environment and open the discussion of school closures again.

Mira Monte parent Sherilyn Wheaton discussed the fact that an additional year at Matilija could promote additional parent assistance than currently exists. The current two year enrollment creates such a transiently environment.

District parent Maggie Rogers her experience has proved that anytime a students go to middle school there are apprehensions. She would like to see after school classes including tutoring with a credentialed teacher involved.

Mira Monte parent Nikki Crawford indicated that she had questions about what fiscal impacts and cuts would occur at elementary schools. She also has concerns about the social environment students will be exposed to at an earlier age. Mr. Cantwell reiterated that he believes this will be a cost-neutral

decision and he doesn't believe that school closures will result from a move of sixth grade students to Matilija.

San Antonio teacher Kate Spiva thanked Mr. Cantwell, Dr. Knox and the Board for their thorough consideration on this topic. As a 5th/6th grade teacher she sees the huge gaps in teacher collaboration and the curriculum is vastly different in math and upcoming focus in the areas of science and social studies it's very clear there will be a huge academic gap. She sees the academic benefits of this scenario and she also sees a very unique social and emotional benefit.

Summit teacher Sheri Usher shared her own experience teaching in a middle school and found many benefits to advisory groups. She believes that children are more resilient than we give them credit for, it is usually the parent that has a difficulty with the adolescent transition. She feels that the mentorship opportunities are strong for our students.

Mira Monte parent Nick Smith asked for further detail on districts that have made this change in the past and wondered if there have been proven positive impacts at those schools. Member Weil recalled hearing about schools facing this very issue and that the middle school students were better served than in the K-8 scenario. Mr. Smith indicated that some of his concerns have been erased by the discussion this evening.

Topa Topa and Matilija parent Kelsey Zimmerman discussed the fact that when she followed this topic in 2014 she was originally opposed to the idea and now the academic and sport opportunities helped to ease her concerns. She is however uncomfortable with the social occurrences that students just should not be exposed to and the social media issues are concerning. Those experiences need to be dealt with by a committee.

Topa Topa and Matilija parent Alyssa Duclos shared her concern that students do not lose the culminating events such as Greek Day and other fun and exciting elementary school experiences. She also has concerns with exposure to middle school issues a whole new level of maturity, exposure to drug dogs, bullying peer pressure and social media concerns.

Topa Topa parent Amber Stogo expressed her concerns with social issues and shared her own junior high experiences.

Topa Topa parent Steve Sharp expressed concerns regarding challenging social issues and his concerns about increased homework issues. He also expressed his concerns with moving additional students to Matilija and reaching classroom capacity.

District parent Asli Ruf was thankful for the great discussion that is happening on this subject. Her students are now enrolled at Nordhoff, Matilija and Topa Topa and from her perspective have shifted over her experience at these schools. The sport opportunities, music and science enhancements in the Middle School model will be beneficial to our students. She also recommended additional career pathway classes be provided at Matilija. She would also like to address a focus on cyber, technology and social paradigms that are shifting and parents, students and teachers could benefit with a strong focus on these issues. She suggested a parent outreach, a discussion about checking in phones, giving students additional tools to handle these topics. She would like to form support groups to open these discussions. She shared the need for open library hours, peer tutoring, and include high school students, mentoring groups to continue on to the high school level. Mrs. Ruf also suggested the return

of parent/teacher conferences or even the option so that parents with interest could choose to meet with teachers.

Mira Monte principal Katherine White offered her perspective on the various maturity levels of students regardless of grade-level. She recognizes that a two-year school environment can be very challenging and hard for teacher/student connections to be significant. A three-year program should benefit all students' not just sixth graders. She was a member of the 2002 configuration committee and various types of configurations were considered but no changes were made at that time. Parent involvement does drop-off at Matilija and studies show that schools with more than two year enrollment traditionally promote additional involvement. She feels that adult/student connections are imperative and the middle school model as described with a home-room teacher for three years would an awesome opportunity for students. She also believes that performing arts experiences would be enhanced at the secondary level in ways that elementary students do not experience.

5. Governing Board/Superintendent

5.1 Board Discussion and Approval of Moving the Sixth Grade to Matilija Beginning in the 2019-20 School Year – Action

Following the extensive open discussion this evening Member Weil indicated that a lot of questions remain, and they will all be addressed and will continue to be addressed even after a vote is take. Member Ruf indicated that he expects continued conversation, many board reports and meetings as we go through this process. Member Whipple added a quick comment and said that tonight has made more clear that there are pros and cons to this process, and he believes that the best decision be made for our students overall.

Member Whipple moved to approve moving the sixth grade to Matilija effective beginning in the 2019-20 school year. Member Griffen seconded the motion which carried with a vote of 5:0.

6. Meeting adjourned.