

**MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE
BOARD OF EDUCATION, ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL
DISTRICT 126, LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS
TUESDAY, JUNE 25, 2024 – 6:00 P.M.
ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL
NORTH CAFETERIA**

The Board of Education of Zion-Benton Township High School District 126, Lake County, Illinois, met in regular session in the North Cafeteria, One Z-B Way, 3901 W. 21st Street, Zion, Illinois.

President Nordstrom presided.

ROLL CALL

Members present: President Nordstrom, Member Benitez, Member Champine, and Ms. Stephen

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

COMMUNICATION FROM STAFF, GUESTS, AND DISTRICT RESIDENTS

- Billy McKinney explained the efforts of the city and indicated that the school district didn't express appreciation for their efforts to obtain and advocate for the CEJA grant. He said the city administrator is the one who came up with the plan for the CEJA funding and it was a breach of trust among the Zion leaders. He was very disappointed. He stated that the superintendent needed to advocate for the proposed allocation by the city of Zion of which he agreed initially. He requested that the Board resolution be updated to reflect information provided by the city administrator.
- Dave Knabel spoke about the needed funds to support the community affected by the nuclear plant closure. He stated that the board of education did not include all the details and failed to include information about the city's proposed abatements. He indicated that he is always available and a lot of this could have been avoided. He stated that the city, along with elected officials, advocated and obtained the CEJA funds with the intent that tax relief be a priority for the funds.
- Representative Joyce Mason stated that she worked hard to negotiate the language and is proud of the work done to ensure tax relief for Zion. She also stated that she supported evidence-based funding for schools. She spoke about how she supported education and the idea of capital projects. As a co-sponsor of CEJA, it was one of her major achievements completed in the last five years. She spoke about people in our community losing homes and being unavailable to pay their mortgages and buy school supplies. Mason explained that the EJA money is coming from the state legislation and the intent from day one was to provide tax relief and additional funds for taxing bodies. She said that it is up to the state legislature how it's negotiated and it's not up for debate and she doesn't

appreciate the half truths, public rants, and unwarranted attacks. She stated that she supports the idea of tax relief and CEJA was intended for those efforts.

- Larry Stephen commented on the way the district is doing its levy's. He stated that the way in which the district is budgeting places the city of Zion in an uncomfortable place and that people can not afford taxes. He said the superintendent has not communicated with him about his concerns. Furthermore, he said that the board has been reluctant to ask questions and demand answers. The board of education has a problem standing firm and debating topics in the public instead of committees as committees don't have full board participation. He said that the board has a problem and is ultimately the boss of the superintendent.
- Roger Whitmore said tax relief is needed in Zion. He argued that the city of Zion is in an uncomfortable place to do business as taxes are too high. People can't afford taxes. He referenced that the district must look into decreasing taxes and examine a referendum. He showed concerns with the unaffordable taxes in the city of Zion. He also said the district needs to work in promoting economic development.
- Cory Klema discussed having food for all students during summer school. She mentioned that meals must be provided with equitable meals for students. Summer school is 8am to 12pm with math remediation classes and our students need a meal.
- Mike Bobiecke expressed strong support for reducing taxes and emphasized that this goal aligns with broader economic and residential development strategies. They acknowledged the efforts of various officials, including Senator John and Mr. McKinney, in tackling these issues. While critical of some recent decisions by the city regarding tax funding, they recognized the complexity and difficulty of these choices and commended the collaborative efforts to address both educational and public safety needs.
- Chris Szymanski: He thanked the school board for their service and emphasized their critical role in representing the community, adopting and enforcing rules, monitoring performance, and making strategic decisions. They highlighted the importance of transparency, noting that while the city has been criticized for lack of transparency in tax rebate negotiations, the school board also needs to improve by publishing meeting videos. The commenter urged the board to uphold high standards of governance and accountability, as their decisions significantly impact the community and students.

Nordstrom: He acknowledged the complexity and emotional nature of recent discussions about CEJA money and the associated activities. They emphasized that any negative impressions were unintended and expressed willingness to address concerns directly. The board member highlighted the district's commitment to tax abatements, noting that \$15.5 million has been allocated for

such purposes over the past eight years, with more expected. They thanked the community for their honest feedback and openness.

CONSENT AGENDA

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen, to approve the Consent Agenda. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present voting 6-0. Included in the Consent Agenda are the following:

President Nordstrom - A motion is needed to remove the minutes and take them up at the next meeting due to technical difficulties reflecting May's minutes at this meeting.
Motion by

Champine, second by Secretary Stephen. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present voting 6-0.

- Minutes for Prior Meeting- BOE Regular Meeting- May 28, 2024
- Minutes for Business, Bid, Finance Committee Meeting- May 21, 2024
- Minutes for Business, Bid, Finance Committee Meeting- April 16, 2024
- Minutes for Business, Bid, Finance Committee Meeting- March 11, 2024
- Treasurer's Report-May 2024 **EXHIBIT "A"**;
- Bills Payable- June 2024 **EXHIBIT "B"**;
- Activity Board Reports- May 2024 **EXHIBIT "C"**;
- Revenue & Expenditure Reports- May 2024 **EXHIBIT "D"**;
- Bills Paid- 2nd Half May, 1st Half June 2024 **EXHIBIT "E"**;
- Contractor Payout Requests **EXHIBIT "F"**;
- FOIA **EXHIBIT "G"**;
- Choir Overnights **EXHIBIT "H"**;
- Band Overnights **EXHIBIT "I"**;

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT

Dr. Rodriguez's report provided an overview of the district's performance and financial planning. Key points included:

1. **Preliminary Data:** The report included initial performance data with more comprehensive details expected next month.
2. **Enrollment Trends:** The district has seen a positive trend in student retention, with actual enrollment surpassing projections.
3. **Budget and Financial Management:** The district is focusing on maintaining cost neutrality despite additional state funding and rising costs. The budget process includes strategic planning with metrics to measure success. Key budget approvals include behavioral interventions, administrative staffing, and capital items, with some aspects deferred to future budgets.
4. **Program Funding:** The superintendent highlighted the district's commitment to social-emotional learning and the successful reallocation of funds previously supported by temporary federal grants.

5. **Grant Applications:** The district applied for 18 grants last year to support its programs and collective bargaining agreements.
6. **Transparency and Community Support:** The superintendent expressed commitment to transparent discussions and addressing community concerns about tax relief and financial management.

The report underscored ongoing efforts to enhance educational outcomes and manage finances effectively while remaining open to community feedback and discussion.

REPORTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Wilkinson updated the Energy Transition Community Grant allocation. His report provided details on the district's energy transition community grant and tax base management:

1. **Tax Abatement Efforts:** Since 2013, the district has abated over \$15.8 million in taxes, reducing the tax rate from \$5.30 in 2015 to \$3.40. This has been part of ongoing efforts to relieve tax burdens.
2. **Energy Transition Grant:** The district received a \$3.4 million grant aimed at enhancing services, infrastructure, tax relief, and collaboration among taxing bodies. Initial funds were allocated for the Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS) center and partial IMC renovation.
3. **Funding Allocation:** The first-year proposal allocated \$2 million from the district's Education Fund, \$1 million from the Operation and Maintenance Fund, and \$2 million from the site construction fund, totaling \$8.4 million for the project.
4. **Reimbursement and Planning:** Due to concerns over delayed reimbursements from past projects, the district initially chose not to use the grant for the first year. Moving forward, they plan to use between 10% and 30% of the grant for abatement, depending on funding levels.
5. **Current Status:** The district is seeking around \$1 million in abatement funding this year, supported by the grant. They have already received \$1.5 million in reimbursement from the CEJA grant and plan to submit invoices for additional reimbursement.

The report emphasized ongoing efforts to manage tax relief and financial planning effectively while utilizing available grants for district improvements.

Dr. Rodriguez emphasized the district's dedication to services, infrastructure, and tax relief, which has been communicated clearly in community meetings, including one on October 25, 2023. He expressed pride in the district's academic achievements, noting that the performance of students has exceeded expectations due to effective collaboration among teachers, staff, and the school district. Looking ahead, the superintendent anticipated sharing promising preliminary performance data, which reflects a positive trajectory in student outcomes. He expressed hope that the district's success would serve as a model for other districts across the state.

Dr. DiGangi highlighted several key areas of progress and future focus for the district in her report. She presented to the board notable advancements and future plans for the district. It highlighted improvements in student proficiency, with a preliminary 3% increase in English Language Arts and a 1.5% increase in mathematics. The district is preparing for a transition from the SAT to the ACT for state accountability, aligning curriculum and assessments accordingly. Significant progress was also reported in career readiness, with a 196% increase in industry certifications. The Seal of Biliteracy saw an 89% increase, showcasing students' proficiency in multiple languages. Additionally, 90% of students have post-secondary plans, reflecting the district's focus on diverse pathways to success. Looking ahead, the district will enhance its approach to high-impact instruction and real-time data use, ensuring continuous academic growth and student preparedness.

Dr. Rodriguez reiterated significant achievements and ongoing efforts within the district. Preliminary data shows impressive results, including over 90% of students having post-secondary plans and similar high rates for staff retention and freshman on-track status. The district's progress is attributed to effective systems for both staff and students, supported by technology and a strategic plan. He acknowledged the rigorous review process of the curriculum committee and encouraged participation in future discussions to continue enhancing educational quality. He expressed pride in the preliminary data and the collective efforts to maintain excellence in education.

BOARD COMMITTEE REPORT

Curriculum Committee

Secretary Stephen confirmed that DiGangi's report covers the curriculum report.

Business/Bid/Finance Committee

President Nordstrom reported that the Business, Bid, and Finance Committee recently met on June 18, 2024. They addressed several key topics. These include a public hearing on the amended 2023-2024 budget and discussion of the tentative budget for 2024-2025. They also reviewed capital requests, updates on clean school bus rebates, and staffing changes. Additionally, the meeting covered updates on capital improvements, tax abatements, and the CEJA grant. Each of these items will be discussed in detail as part of our action items.

NEW BUSINESS

- **Public Hearing Regarding Amended 23-24 Budget.**

Motion to open public hearing to discussion by Mr. Benitez, 2nd by Ms. Champine.
Passed 4-0

Dr. Wilkinson spoke to the Amended 23-24 Budget amended annually in June. He stated this year has been marked by significant financial achievements and successful budget management. Key accomplishments include the successful completion of contract negotiations with all unions, which have been incorporated into the amended budget. Additionally, a notable reduction in the tax rate has been achieved, decreasing from \$5.30 in 2015 to \$3.40. Financially, as of the end of May, revenues reached 94% of the budget, with expectations to approach 100% by June 30th. Expenditures were at 81% of the budget, anticipated to reach 90-92% by year-end. The amended budget, which reflects adjustments not accounted for in the original plan, is expected to increase the overall fund balance by approximately \$1.27 million. This budget will be filed with the county clerk's office and the Regional Office of Education by June 30th. Overall, the year is projected to end positively with solid revenues, controlled expenditures, and an estimated increase in fund balances.

Public comment:

Dave Knabel emphasized the complexity of property tax liens and cautioned against simplifying discussions about tax rate abatements. They noted that while the abatement amount is set to decrease by \$900,000, which appears as an increase from the previous year, it reflects a reduction from what could have been collected. This decrease is influenced by a 78% rise in property values, which means that the tax rate would have halved even without any specific actions. The reduction in the rate is due to the increased market value rather than an actual decrease in collected taxes. The speaker advised that discussions about tax rate reductions should also consider market values and actual tax collections to present a complete picture.

Representative Mason clarified that the abatements discussed in recent years are not traditional tax reductions where the organization voluntarily returns collected funds to taxpayers. Instead, these abatements come from state property tax relief grants, which are essentially state-funded assistance to reduce taxpayers' burdens. The speaker emphasized that this money is not from the organization's own funds but from state grants designed for property tax relief. Therefore, the organization is not sacrificing its own revenue but rather benefiting from state-provided funds to help taxpayers.

Larry Stephen expressed concerns about the district's financial and performance metrics. They criticized the proposed \$5.5 million budget increase, questioning how a nearly 7% rise in funding aligns with community benefits. They noted that funds are being shifted from educational purposes to capital projects and other areas, which they believe undermines the focus on student education. The speaker was troubled by discrepancies in reported student performance, such as high graduation rates paired with low proficiency in reading and mathematics. They also pointed out that changes in tax rates are not due to district efforts but are assigned by the county.

Motion to close and approve amendment by member Champine, second by Secretary Stephen passes 0-4.

Included and made part of these minutes:

EXHIBIT "J", Amended 23-24 Budget

- **Approval of Resolution to Amend 23-24 budget**

Motion to approve the resolution to amend the 23-24 budget, certification of board secretary and chief officer, including projected estimated revenues of the 24-25, and file the amended budget and certifications with county clerk and regional office of education by member Champine, second by member Benitez. 4-0 passes.

Included and made part of these minutes:

EXHIBIT "K", Resolution to Amend 23-24 budget

- **Approval of resolution of distribution 23-24 Corporate personal property replacement taxes**

Dr. Wilkinson presented a resolution regarding the distribution of corporate personal property replacement taxes within the budget. He confirmed that the distribution amounts have remained unchanged from the original budget presented in September: \$180,000 for the IMF Social Security Fund, \$1.5 million for the Education Fund, \$600,000 for the Operations Fund, and \$835,000 for Transportation. He noted that, due to inflated funding in recent years, there is an anticipated decrease in these funds for the next year.

Motion to approve the resolution of distribution to the 23-24 school year by member Champine, second by Secretary Stephen 4-0 pass

Included and made part of these minutes:

EXHIBIT "L", Resolution of distribution 23-24 Corporate personal property replacement taxes

- **Approval of 2024-25 Tentative Budget**

Dr. Wilkinson spoke regarding the 24-25 estimated budget. He outlined the process for finalizing the budget for the 2024-25 school year. The tentative budget will be adjusted throughout the summer as new information becomes available. The final budget will be presented for board approval on September 24th, with a public hearing scheduled. Key points include the continuation of a \$900,000 abatement program, planned instructional increases, and potential updates to the band and art rooms, pending the release of an energy grant application. Health insurance costs are expected to rise by 6.3%, the lowest increase in four years, with no additional costs due to adjustments in family insurance premiums. Overall, he highlighted positive financial outcomes for the current year, with revenues and expenditures tracking well, and expressed confidence in meeting the strategic planning goals.

Motion to approve the 2024-25 Tentative Budget as presented by Beneitez 2nd Champine 4-0 pass

Motion to approve the 2024-25 Tentative Budget as presented by member Benitez, second by member Champine, 4-0 pass

Questions: Member Champine asked what the sources of the 5 million increase in revenue are. What expenses have gone up 6 million dollars? How old was the oldest part of this facility? Champine clarified we haven't closed any buildings and refurbished an empty building to turn into the Career and Technical Center.

Wilkinson addressed several key financial questions. The projected \$5,000,000 increase in revenue mainly stems from state and federal grants, though these figures are tentative and subject to change based on grant approvals. The increase in expenses, about \$6,000,000, is primarily due to capital construction projects, such as upgrading outdated facilities to support 21st-century learning environments. The oldest part of the facility, built in 1973, is being updated to modern standards. Despite significant investment in improvements, no old buildings have been scrapped; instead, an empty building was repurposed into the Career and Technical Center.

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "M", 2024-25 Tentative Budget

- **Approval of 24-25 Dept Tentative Budget and Capital requests**

Dr. Wilkinson outlined the key elements of the approved 10th budget, which includes a \$4.4 million departmental budget—a 15% increase from the previous year. This budget covers various needs such as band instruments, technology, and food service equipment, alongside new technology and professional licensing services. It also addresses gaps left by the end of the COVID-related digital equity grant by increasing the technology budget. Additionally, there are increases in the Operation Maintenance and Transportation funds based on a capital needs assessment. The budget will be refined over the summer and presented for final approval on September 24th.

Motion to approve the Dept Tentative Budget and requisitions of purchase and inclusion for 24-25 budget as presented by member Champine, second by member Benitez, 4-0 pass

President Nordstrom asked if anything significant was deferred. Wilkinson stated some staff positions are waiting until grant funds.

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "N", 24-25 Dept Tentative Budget and Capital requests

- **Approval of 24-25 COTA Recommendations**

Dr. Carlson clarified COTA stands for the Certified Occupational Therapist Assistant with an oversight from an Occupational Therapist. By hiring a COTA, the district will save money. They have used COTA's successfully before.

Questions: Member Benitez asked if there are plans in the future to hire a full-time employee without going through the company. Carlson stated that the need and cost don't match up but can change based on student need.

(Moved the above paragraph so the motion/vote would be last)

Motion to approve the 24-25 COTA Recommendations for 24-25 budget presented by Secretary Stephen, second by member Champine, 4-0 pass

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "O", 24-25 COTA Recommendations

- **Approval of 24-25 SEDOL Contractual Service Recommendations**

Dr. Carlson spoke to the SEDOL contract for a part time hearing itinerant because our student need doesn't reflect the need for a full time staff member.

Motion to approve the SEDOL Contractual Service Recommendations for 24-25 budget presented by Secretary Stephen, second by member Benitez, 4-0 pass.

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "P", 24-25 SEDOL Contractual Service Recommendations

- **Approval of the Fee for Service Contract Agreement**

Dr. Carlson requested to enter into a contract with R&G Consulting as a 3rd party billing agency that assists with collecting Medicaid reimbursements.

Motion to approve the enter into a Service Contract with R&G consulting presented by member Champine, second by Secretary Stephen, 4-0 pass

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "Q", Fee for Service Contract Agreement

- **Approval of the Service Agreement for Psychological Services**

Dr. Carlson explained this is the 4th or 5th year they have had an open school psychologist position with 0 applicants. This contract will meet the needs of students and needs of the district.

Motion to approve the enter into contract for the Center of Special Education Services as presented by member Benitez, second by Secretary Stephen, 4-0 pass

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "R", Service Agreement for Psychological Services

- **Approval of the Student Mobile Device Policy**

Dr. Carlson, Dr. Pawelczyk, and Dr. Bridge have been working on updating the mobile device policy. The district wants to update its policy on student mobile device usage to better reflect the use of both iPads and Chromebooks. Key changes include replacing the previous \$5 daily charge for loaner devices with a full replacement cost, encouraging prompt return of these devices. The updated policy also limits the number of loaner devices issued per semester, with exceptions for repairs, and shifts from punitive disciplinary actions to corrective measures to support student responsibility. Additionally, the Acceptable Use Policy has been modernized to address current technology trends positively and includes updates on insurance and costs for replacement devices. The changes aim to foster a more supportive and accountable learning environment. Further collaboration with teachers and staff is planned to refine the implementation of these updates and ensure effective support

for students. Final approval of the revised policy will integrate these updates into the student handbook.

Secretary Stephen expressed concern about charges of fees if they don't bring technology. If not back by the end of the day, charge the entire amount. Pawelczyk stated they eliminated the charge of using a loaner.

Member Benitez asked what happens if a student doesn't bring back that device. Pawelczyk stated they reach out to families and students with the same process as textbooks. If not brought back, they are charged for the device.

Secretary Stephen had concerns that \$5 daily adds up. Pawelczyk stated they eliminated the fee of \$5 and if the loaner is lost, another device won't be issued until they work with the family.

(Moved the motion to the end of this item)

Motion to approve the Student Mobile Device Policy as presented by member Benitez, second by Secretary Stephen, 4-0 pass

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "S", Student Mobile Device Policy

- **Approval of the ZBTHS District 126 F24-25 Board of Education and Committee Meeting Schedule**

Motion to approve the ZBTHS District 126 F24-25 Board of Education and Committee Meeting Schedule, by Champine 2nd Stephen 4-0 pass

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "T", ZBTHS District 126 F24-25 Board of Education and Committee Meeting Schedule

OTHER BUSINESS

- **Capital Improvement Update**

Dr. Wilkinson provided an update on ongoing construction projects funded by approximately \$3.4 million in CEJA funds. The renovations include Phase Two of the MTS and partial IMC projects. Current work involves exterior facade updates, interior wall installations, ceiling tile placement, and finishing touches in various areas like the library and gym. Notable improvements in the gym include removing old bleachers, painting the space white with maroon accents, and installing new high-definition scoreboards. The gym will also feature banners honoring past basketball players. A tour and official opening of the renovated facilities are planned for August, with a celebration to follow. These upgrades aim to enhance both academic and athletic environments, improving overall student engagement and safety.

Included and made part of these minutes:
EXHIBIT "U", Capital Improvement Update

CLOSED SESSION

A motion was made by Member Benitez, seconded by Member Champine, to go into closed session at 8:40 p.m. for consideration of appointment, employment, compensation, discipline, performance, or dismissal of specific employees and collective negotiating matters between the public body and its employees or their representatives, or deliberations concerning salary schedules for one or more classes of employees. (5 ILCS 120/2(c)(1,2)). The motion was approved by a roll vote of members present, voting 4-0.

RECONVENE TO OPEN SESSION

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen to return to open session at 9:18 p.m. The Motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present voting 4-0.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned by President Nordstrom at 9:09 p.m.

Jerry Nordstrom, President

ATTEST:

Patricia Stephen, Secretary