

Saddle River Board of Education
Special Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, August 21, 2024, 7:30 PM, Cafeteria

A. Call to Order *The meeting was called to order by Mrs. Kaufman, Board President, at 7:30 PM.*

B. Opening Statement

Statement is hereby made that adequate notice of this meeting was given by:

- Posting written notice prominently on the bulletin board in the vestibule of Wandell School, 97 E. Allendale Road, Saddle River, New Jersey.
- The mailing and/or hand delivery of said notice to the designated newspapers, The Record, The Ridgewood News, and The Town Journal.
- Filing with the Clerk of Saddle River Borough.

C. Roll Call

	Present	Absent
Ms. Kaufman	<u>X</u>	
Ms. Elshami	X	
Ms. Nissirios	<u>X</u>	
Ms. Salazer	<u>X</u>	
Mr. Senger	<u>X</u>	
Richard Freedman, Interim Superintendent		
Kaitlyn Lawler, Business Administrator/Board Secretary		
Approximately 50 members of the Public		

D. Flag Salute

E. No Action At This Time

- Superintendent's Report
- Vice Principal's Report
- Business Administrator/Board Secretary's Report
- Board President's Report
- Committee Report(s)
- Liaison Report(s)
- Minutes
- Human Resources
- Education
- Finance

F. Open Public Meetings Act

Meetings of the Board are open to the public and all members of the community should feel free to participate:

- There are two portions of the meeting reserved for comments from the public; the first at the beginning of the meeting for agenda items only and the second at the end of the meeting for other items.
- If you wish to address the board, please provide your name and address and please limit your comments to 3 minutes.

- Issues raised by the public may or may not be responded to by the board, but all comments will be considered. The board requests that all members of the public be mindful of the rights of other individuals when speaking. Due to confidentiality and legal restrictions, the board is not permitted to comment on matters related to staff or students.

G. Questions or Comments from the Public on Action Items Only

Opened at 7:32PM. Closed at 8:24PM.

1. *Charles Todd, 29 Locust Lane, mentioned a previous statement made by town leaders regarding the possible increase/decrease on taxes and property values with returning the middle school to Saddle River. Mr. Todd asked if the Board had any data to support this, as well as a proposed budget for a possible middle school.*

Mrs. Kaufman responded that the Board has no evidence regarding the possible impact of returning a middle school to Saddle River on property values. Further, Mrs. Kaufman & Ms. Elshami stated the Board has not released any information pertaining to possible impacts on taxes/property values. Also, the Board is working on gathering more detailed information to educate residents.

2. *Jim Bush, 3 Pell Farm Rd., asked what is the problem the Board is trying to solve by exploring middle school options. Mr. Bush mentioned possible impacts on curriculum and instruction by returning the middle school to Saddle River. Mr. Bush referenced the May Board middle school exploration community meetings.*

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board is looking at more than one problem, such as how the new housing developments in the community will impact enrollment at all educational levels, including Wandell Elementary School. Ms. Kaufman said the Board was researching the financial sustainability of the district overtime with the current send/receive agreements, which is often discussed around the time of send/receive contract renewals (the Board is currently in process of renewing the contract with Ramsey). Also, the Board was evaluating curriculum and course offerings provided by Ramsey vs what could be offered at a Saddle River middle school. The education of students is the most important area being discussed.

3. *Jennifer Belthoff, 25 Overlook Rd., asked if the Board was planning to use eminent domain to purchase a property adjacent to the current Wandell School property, and if so, was there a budget & potential for a lawsuit? Ms. Belthoff inquired about the status of the environmental study the Board was engaging in, also if a financial and academic comparison of what Ramsey currently offers and what Saddle River could offer for middle school students was available. Additionally, Ms. Belthoff inquired about the influence of the Mayor & Council on the Board regarding this matter. Finally, Ms. Belthoff asked why the Board was putting a non-binding referendum question on the ballot if so many members of the community are against returning a middle school to Saddle River.*

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board has no plans to increase the current footprint of the Wandell School property lines. The Board has no need for additional land nor any plans for eminent domain. The environmental study was just completed this summer and the results will be posted on the Board website under the page with information pertaining to the feasibility study. The Board is working on a more detailed financial and capacity analysis with and has upcoming committee meetings to discuss. The Board will prepare more information for the public of comparisons of potential middle school offerings. Mrs. Kaufman reaffirmed that there is separation between the Mayor & Council and the Board of Education.

4. *Ruth Dugan, 35 Fox Hedge Rd., stated she is a former Board member who was involved when the decision was made to tear down the previous Saddle River middle school building and enter into the send/receive agreement with Ramsey for middle school. Ms. Dugan shared the Board's reasoning at the time for making this decision. Ms. Dugan commented on the current Wandell School fifth grade enrollment projections, the possible impacts on taxes/property values, and providing the best education to students.*

5. *Maria Harper, 2 Algonquin Trail, asked if the Board had any plans to educate the public on comparisons of a potential Saddle River middle school education with the current Ramsey and quad district middle schools. Ms. Harper mentioned her concerns about the social and academic effects on students.*
6. *Zafar Toor, 10 Eugene Dr., stated he is a parent of students currently attending Wandell, Ramsey Smith Middle School, and Northern Highlands. Mr. Toor further stated his family is satisfied with the current educational offerings provided by the district. Mr. Toor said he is unaware of any support for the return of a middle school to Saddle River and asked why the Board would want to change a system that is working.*

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board is not trying to change a system that is working but rather gain information. At this time the Board has no plans to change any aspect of the current system.

7. *Marilyn Goldfischer, 124 W. Saddle River Rd., inquired about the current negotiations of the renewal of the Ramsey send/receive contract.*

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Saddle River Board has been working with the Ramsey Board and is close to signing an agreement. The public will be notified.

8. *Nancy Bush, 3 Pell Farm Rd., asked when the Ramsey send/receive renewal agreement will be signed. Ms. Bush mentioned rumors of a 20% increase to the Ramsey student tuition costs. Ms. Bush inquired if the district would need to utilize capital reserve to fund returning the middle school to the Wandell campus. Also, does the Board have an accurate number of projected students expected to come into the district from the affordable housing developments and if the Board has engaged the district's architect of record to review the feasibility study.*

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board cannot provide details of the current send/receive contract negotiations, however, it is unrealistic that a Board would ask to increase student tuition costs at such a high percentage of 20%. Mrs. Kaufman stated that the Board has a meeting with the district's bond counsel as well as architect next week to discuss the funding and capacity of a potential middle school. The feasibility study assumed utilizing the district's capital reserve, however, the Board has no plans to do so since it could potentially put the district at financial risk. The demographer who was involved in the feasibility study is well-known for his trade and included the approved/potential housing developments in the Borough in the study.

9. *Laurene Todd, 29 Locust Lane, suggested the Board find better ways to communicate with the public. Also, Ms. Todd reiterated transparency and communication with the public from the Board has been mentioned as problematic at prior meetings. Ms. Todd asked why the Board is exploring middle school options now and what is the problem trying to be solved? Further, Ms. Todd stated there are rumors of backdoor politics in this matter. Mr. Todd interjected an additional question of whether or not the Board planned to use the same mailing company as previously in the future.*

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board plans to arrange town hall meetings and factual/informational mailers to be sent to the community. If information is not being stated/distributed by the Board, the Board cannot confirm the validity of the information.

10. *Chris Demase, 84 W. Saddle River Rd., continued Ms. Todd's statement asking for more information such as a Q&A session, pro/con list, etc.*
11. *Alan Marcus, 15 Glenwood Dr., inquired about an in depth analysis of the middle school options, and additional options such as merging with another district/regionalization. Mr. Marcus asked if the middle school exploration was a tactic to hedge against the education of potential students from the upcoming*

affordable housing units. Mr. Marcus encouraged the Board to look at alternatives and what the community wants.

- 12. Beatrice Burgis, 22 Fox Hedge Rd., mentioned her professional experience as a city planner analyzing demographic data. Ms. Burgis commented that Saddle River has a high population of older residents. Ms. Burgis encouraged the Board to look at the data from multiple angles.*

Mrs. Kaufman said that the demographer who contributed to the feasibility is an expert in his field and providing data for educational purposes.

- 13. Mike Yevchan, 1 Powderhill Rd., mentioned his concerns of placing a non-binding referendum question on the ballot.*

Mrs. Kaufman replied that the non-binding referendum vote has no financial commitment of the taxpayers at this time and is to gather data for the Board of community feedback. Ms. Lawler clarified that for the Board to move forward, the Board would need to file a petition with the NJ Commissioner of Education for approval to proceed, then another referendum question to fund a possible middle school expansion would be presented to the taxpayers at a potential future date. Ms. Elshami stated that before continuing on this path, the Board is trying to gather data from the community before proposing a binding referendum question to the taxpayers.

- 14. Corinne Kerner, 229 W. Saddle River Rd., mentioned the deadline to submit the non-binding referendum question to the Bergen County Clerk's office by Friday, August 23, 2024 to include it on the November ballot. Ms. Kerner stated her concerns of the wording of the question and any possible confusion for voters. Ms. Kerner also asked how far along the Board was in their financial analysis.*

Ms. Kaufman confirmed the deadline Ms. Kerner mentioned. Mrs. Kaufman and Ms. Elshami responded that the Board is trying to gather information at this time. Any changes to the current middle school send/receive agreement would take years to be implemented. Saddle River will continue with the send/receive agreement with Ramsey as is. Other send/receive options were originally concerned but the one potential district interested ended up not participating in the feasibility study. Additionally, Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board would take Ms. Kerner's concerns about the wording of the non-binding question into consideration.

- 15. Charles Todd, 29 Locust Lane, asked if the Board would reconsider voting on the resolution to submit the non-binding question to the County based on the current feedback. Also, has the Board evaluated the current capacity of the Wandell School building without expanding.*

Mrs. Kaufman responded the Board anticipated using the non-binding referendum question results for informational purposes of community interest.

- 16. Marilyn Goldfischer, 124 W. Saddle River Rd., asked what was the rush to put the non-binding referendum question on the upcoming November ballot. Ms. Goldfischer also commented on the current Wandell School enrollment numbers.*

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board was trying to gather data from the community from the non-binding referendum question results. Also, with the current send/receive negotiations, this is typically when the Board reevaluates the current educational options provided by the district.

- 17. Pooja Kumar, 129 W. Saddle River Rd., stated her family is happy with the current educational options provided by the district. Ms. Kumar also stated her opinion that bringing the middle school back to Saddle River would not be beneficial for taxpayers or students' education.*

Mrs. Kaufman thanked Ms. Kumar for her comment.

18. Jim Bush, 3 Pell Farm Rd., stated his opinion on the format of the meeting.

Ms. Kaufman stated the Board has to follow the format of the meeting per NJSBA guidelines and Board policy to conduct the Board's business. Also, Mrs. Kaufman encouraged members of the public to reach out to the Board following the meeting as well.

19. Cathy Shea, 35 Mohegan Trail, thanked Mrs. Kaufman for responding to her inquiries following the last Board meeting. Ms. Shea asked about the financials, timeline, and certain aspects of the facility (such as septic, wells, etc.) for possible building expansion. Also, Ms. Shea inquired about the Board's plan to encourage teachers to receive additional education. Ms. Shea welcomed Mr. Freedman to the district.

Mrs. Kaufman stated the environmental study evaluated multiple aspects of possible building expansion. Also, the Board will be meeting with the district architect next week to discuss. Ms. Elshami responded that some teachers have taken graduate courses recently. Additionally, over the past few years the Board has invested in professional development for staff in areas such as reading/phonics, math instruction, and in conjunction with staff at Ramsey.

20. Jim Barbaris, 139 W. Saddle River Rd., asked how a potential Saddle River middle school could compete with surrounding districts, what would be the impact on property values, and whether the Board has realistic anticipated costs of expansion of facilities/staff/Police presence/professional development. Mr. Barbaris also mentioned private schools closing in Bergen County due to low enrollment.

Mrs. Kaufman stated the Board cannot respond regarding the potential impact of property values. The feasibility study provided a financial analysis of different aspects of expansion. Currently, the district has a good working relationship with the SRPD. Also, private schools tuition based enrollment cannot be equally compared to a public school district.

21. Nancy Bush, 3 Pell Farm Rd., stated her family had positive experiences with the Ramsey school system. Ms. Bush stated the current send/receive relationship has been working well for the district. Ms. Bush also encouraged families to attend the upcoming October 1, 2024 Open House at Eric Smith Middle School to see the offerings available. Additionally, Ms. Bush stated she had received feedback that the transition process from Smith to Northern Highlands is a non-issue.

Ms. Kaufman stated that Ramsey provides an excellent education to students and Saddle River looks forward to continuing to work with Ramsey.

Mrs. Kaufman called for a recess at 9:07PM.

Motion: EK

Second: ES

Mrs. Kaufman reopened the meeting at 9:19PM & proceeded to respond to the public questions/comments.

Motion: EK

Second: YE

H. Executive Session Convened at: 9:44 PM Motion: YE Second: ES Vote: 5-0 Time: 9:44PM

WHEREAS, the Open Public Meetings Act, Chapter 231 of the Laws of 1975 provides that a public body may exclude the public from that portion of a meeting of which the public body discusses certain matters for which confidentiality is required as permitted in Section 7B of the act.

WHEREAS, the items that are permitted to be discussed in executive session are as follows:

1. a matter rendered confidential by federal or state law

2. a matter in which release of information would impair the right to receive government funds
3. material the disclosure of which constitutes an unwarranted invasion of individual privacy
4. a collective bargaining agreement and/or negotiations related to it
5. a matter involving the purchase, lease, or acquisition of real property with public funds
6. protection of public safety and property and/or investigations of possible violations or violations of law
7. pending or anticipated litigation or contract negotiations and/or matters of attorney-client privilege
8. specific prospective or current employees unless all who could be adversely affected request an open session
9. deliberation after a public hearing that could result in a civil penalty or other loss

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Board of Education will be discussing legal items and any other matters that require closed discussion. Action will (will not) take place on these items. The matters discussed in executive session shall be disclosed to the public when the need for confidentiality no longer exists.

Mrs. Kaufman reopened the meeting at 10:05PM.

Motion: ES

Second: HS

I. Administration

SA-24250801: Authorization of Non-Binding Public Question-November 2024

RESOLVED, that for the purpose of gaining insight into the electorate in accordance with N.J.S.A. 19:3-6 and N.J.S.A. 19:60-4, the Saddle River Board of Education authorizes a Non-Binding Public Question and Interpretive Statement to be placed on the November 5, 2024 General Election Ballot as follows:

Non-Binding Public Question

“Should the Saddle River Board of Education expand from providing a kindergarten to fifth grade elementary school to also providing a sixth grade to eighth grade middle school, which will require the hiring of additional personnel and may require a building expansion to accommodate the additional grades, **which building expansion shall require a separate binding referendum?**”

Interpretive Statement

“The possible expansion to include a sixth grade to eighth grade middle school, will require the hiring of additional certified personnel to support the three additional grade levels and may require additional school facilities. Should additional school facilities be required, a separate binding referendum question will be presented to the taxpayers for a vote at a future date. Should the additional staffing exceed the school district’s annual budget including the permitted two percent (2%) tax levy increase, a separate binding referendum question will be presented to the taxpayers for a vote to exceed the two percent (2%) tax levy increase at a future date.”

Motion to Modify: YE Second: ES Discussion: Ms. Nissirios reread Resolution #SA-24250801. Ms. Kaufman & Ms. Elshami explained that a potential second referendum question (in addition to the referendum question for building expansion) could be presented to the public to address personnel costs associated with returning the middle school to Saddle River.

Roll Call Vote ES: Y YE: Y EN: Y HS: Y EK: Y

Motion to Approve: YE Second: ES Discussion: N/A
Roll Call Vote ES: Y YE: Y EN: Y HS: Y EK: Y

All Motions Passed 5-0

J. Old Business *N/A*

K. New Business *N/A*

L. Questions or Comments from the Public on Other Items *Opened at 10:09PM. Closed at 10:27PM.*

- 1. Cathy Shea, 35 Mohegan Trail, asked how the Board will send out information via an email list or direct mail.*
- 2. Nancy Bush, 3 Pell Farm Rd., shared her opinion that the Board's analysis is incomplete at this time. Ms. Bush asked for transparency if the Board is being pressured into making the decision to add the non-binding referendum vote to the ballot.*
- 3. Vin Blehl, 33 E. Allendale Rd., stated his opinion that he respects the Board position that they do not cross the line to involve themselves in matters of the Mayor & Council, however, it appears the Mayor & Council has crossed the line to involving themselves in Board of Education matters.*
- 4. Rakesh Sharma, 8 Baldwin Rd., asked for transparency as to why Saddle River needs a middle school. Additionally, Mr. Sharma inquired if this was due to the upcoming affordable housing or influence from the Mayor.*
- 5. Alan Marcus, 15 Glenwood Dr., stated his opinion that proceeding with the non-binding referendum vote appears to be meaningless since there are no financial implications and narrows the Board's options. Mr. Marcus complimented the Board for engaging community discussion and encouraged the Board to make the right decision. Mr. Marcus also suggested the Board consider merging Wandell School with another district.*
- 6. Corinne Kerner, 229 W. Saddle River Rd., stated her opinion that this process feels rushed and premature. Ms. Kerner urged the Board to consider a revote on the resolution.*
- 7. Ravi Sachdev, 2 Adams Rd., prefaced he is speaking as a private citizen, not a member of the Town Council. Mr. Sachdev stated he had previously received requests for a choice for middle school options similar to the current high school choice options. At this time, Mr. Sachdev stated his opinion that the non-binding referendum question appears to be half baked and the Board may need more time to educate the public as well as evaluate if returning the middle school to Saddle River is necessary. Also, Mr. Sachdev stated he understands the prospect of affordable housing is a concern for the district.*
- 8. Laurene Todd, 29 Locust Lane, asked the Board to delay the non-binding referendum vote another year to gather more research and factual data. Ms. Todd also questioned the motives behind pushing this through.*

M. Board Member Comments

Mr. Senger stated the Board will await the results of the non-binding referendum question. The Board participated in four community meetings and is still analyzing information. The Board prioritizes providing a quality education for students. A second binding referendum vote would be required

Ms. Salazer stated the non-binding referendum question is a safe, fair way to get feedback from the entire community.

Mrs. Kaufman called for a recess at 10:35PM.

Motion: EK

Second: YE

*Mrs. Kaufman reopened the meeting at 10:46PM.
Motion: EK Second: ES*

*Motion to Reconsider Resolution #SA-24250801: EK Second: YE Discussion: N/A
Roll Call Vote ES: Y YE: Y EN: Y HS: Y EK: Y
Motion Passed 5-0*

SA-24250801: Authorization of Non-Binding Public Question-November 2024

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*Motion to Rescind Resolution# SA-24250801: EK Second: ES Discussion: N/A
Roll Call Vote ES: Y YE: Y EN: Y HS: Y EK: Y
Motion Passed 5-0*

N. Adjournment Motion: EK Second: ES Vote: 5-0 Time: 10:47PM