

# SHAKER BOARD ASKING VOTERS FOR UNIVERSAL PRE-K

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**BELMONT** — After a short presentation and at least an hour of discussion yesterday, the Shaker Regional School Board voted 4-to-2 to introduce with universal pre-school for all 4-year-olds and offer two classes of full-day kindergarten — one each at Canterbury Elementary School and Belmont Elementary School, with the attendees chosen by lottery.

With about 80 to 100 children expected to be kindergarten age in the next school year in Belmont and between 12 to 14 in Canterbury, the students for the 36 available all-day kindergarten spots — 18 maximum in each class — will be selected by a drawing. The remainder of the 5-year-old student population will continue to attend half-day kindergarten.

Board Chair Heidi Hutchinson of Canterbury said the final decision was a "great compromise" but it didn't come easily or without controversy.

The board was initially presented with five options but chose three for a vote regarding school year 2015-2016 — universal half-day preschool and half-day kindergarten; two sections of all day kindergarten and universal pre-k; or the elimination of universal pre-k and full-day kindergarten for all.

Until 2017-2018, Superintendent Maria Dreyer said there is not

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enough space to do all-day kindergarten and half-day universal pre-k without a modular unit in Belmont. She said yesterday she is very much against using modulars.

Option one — universal pre-kindergarten and half-day kindergarten — is already built in to the 2015-2016 budget and was the option favored by administrators, including the two elementary principals and Dreyer.

The option of eliminating universal pre-k entirely for 2015-2016 and adding full-day kindergarten would cost the district \$253,292 — without modulars.

The option selected by the board — universal pre-kindergarten and two sections of full-day kindergarten — will add \$93,666 to the budget.

Three board members — Robert Reed of Canterbury and Sean Embree and Gretta Olsen of Belmont — preferred eliminating universal pre-kindergarten and having all-day kindergarten.

Reed made a motion to that effect but it was supported by only Embree and Olsen. Three members voted against it — Donna Cilley and Richy Bryant of Belmont and Jill LaVallee of Canterbury. Forced to break the tie, Hutchinson voted against all-day kindergarten for all.

LaVallee made the motion to go with the winning plan and that move passed unanimously.

The last piece of the puzzle came when members decided how they would pay for two classes of kindergarten and how they would decide who would get to go.

Dreyer's initial option would have had each of the 36 students attending full-day kindergarten and paying a tuition of about \$300 per student per month. Two sessions of all-day kindergarten would add \$93,666 to the budget. The tuition would be in the form of a revenue offset and would lower the additional amount by about the same \$93,666.

Most of the board members were uncomfortable with charging tuition, fearing that some parents wouldn't even try for a spot if they were unable to pay for it.

"I'm very concerned with equity issues," said Embry.

Earlier in the discussion, Reed said he wouldn't support only two sessions of all-day kindergarten if there was a tuition component and Cilley said she was also very uncomfortable with charging a tuition fee that could lead to the elimination of many of the children who come from less affluent homes.

Bryant and LaVallee voted for charging tuition while the other four board members voted against charging. As chair, Hutchinson only votes if there is a tie.

Olsen said she wants to see the school board make the decision open and public and wants the administration to make sure the information about the lottery and the program is made known to the community and the parents of interested children as soon as possible.

All agreed that by school year 2017-2018, every effort should be made toward the implementation of full-day kindergarten.

In other board action, members voted down a proposal by a five-to-one margin to give support staff and specialists a 1.5-percent

pay increase for 2015-2016, as opposed to the 1-percent increase included in the proposed budget. Olsen voted for the higher number.

All agreed that next year, the district should look at equity issues in pay as compared to other school districts in the area but a vote to give more of a raise than 1 percent in 2015-2016 was premature.

The board also voted unanimously to put the demolition of the Gale School with the preservation of the bell and steeple on this year's warrant as a separate article at a cost of \$65,000.

Buildings and Grounds Manager Doug Ellis said he had done the asbestos remediation assessment with an expert but didn't have an exact dollar figure to bring to the board yesterday.

Ellis said the \$65,000 included \$42,500 for the demolition and bell and steeple removal, \$15,000 for asbestos remediation, and \$7,500 for contingency.

He said the Heritage Commission is not interested in the bell and steeple and he has still not heard back from the Historical Society.

Ellis also estimated the bell and steeple could be restored and put on a cement slab for about \$2,500 which is not included in the above \$65,000 unless the project comes in way under budget.

The board also voted to dedicate all of the \$282,000 left in last year's reserve account and carried forward to this year to lower the overall amount that will need to be collected in property taxes. All agreed there was no reason to save any of it because it will be replenished by money left over from this year's budget.

The final warrant article that asks for an appropriation is \$250,404 to fund the new teachers' collective bargaining agreement for 2015-2016.

If all of the warrant articles pass, the proposed total budget that will be presented at the public hearing will be \$21,235,694, which is up .21 percent from this year.

Because of a decrease in the overall value of taxable property in Belmont, the school budget effect on the property tax rate will be higher than it will be in Canterbury, which went through the property revaluation process last year.

The school district public hearings are in Canterbury on February 3 at the school and on February 4 at Belmont Middle School, in the cafeteria. The district meeting is March 6 at the Belmont High School.