



Red Bank Borough pulls together to push back charter expansion

By Kimberly Crane, NJEA communications consultant

Teamwork is key to organizing

When Red Bank Borough Education Association (RBBEA) President Carol Boehm checked her school email on the morning of Dec. 6, 2015, she was expecting the usual notifications and reminders. She didn't foresee opening a message from her superintendent that would shake the Red Bank Borough public school community to its core.

The email from Red Bank Superintendent Dr. Jared Rumage was a notification that the Red Bank Charter School had applied for an expansion to double its enrollment from 200 students to 400 students. The charter had filed its request on Dec. 1, the last day to apply. District officials and the RBB public school community perceived the action as a sneak attack by the charter, with which they had formerly enjoyed a relatively peaceful relationship.

It was hurtful to the public school community that a request for expansion would be filed by the charter without a conversation about the impact a massive shift in funds would have on the district's resources.

"The children of Red Bank need us today more than ever," Rumage wrote. "A crisis can also be viewed as an opportunity; I think that is exactly what this represents for us."

Rumage called the challenge a chance to showcase the steadfast commitment, compassion, and expert instructional skills of the staff at Red Bank Borough's primary and middle schools. He said it was "...a chance to reveal to this community our talented and resilient students who deserve equal access to educational resources."

"I believe that because he spoke from his heart about the expansion, members connected and knew we needed to work together without having to be persuaded," Boehm said. "He also met with instructional assistants. This was just one example of how administration and the association worked together."

In the subsequent months, teamwork would be the key to organizing an expansion pushback. The parents and community were angered by the lack of communication and transparency shown by the charter school officials. They sprang into action, and demanded answers.

The Red Bank Borough public school parent Facebook page was originally created to relay information on school closings and promote fundraisers. Overnight it became an informational hub where activists could obtain information about upcoming charter-focused rallies and meetings.

Parents met often with association and district leadership to share strategies and information on the expansion crisis. They participated in every aspect of the pushback and led many of the initiatives. NJEA UniServ Field Representative Lorraine Tesauro supported RBBEA involvement, bringing NJEA resources to bolster the local association's needs.

The PTO, administration, and the local association paid for lawn signs with the inspirational message "Dream Big - We'll help you get there," eliciting a positive reaction from the community. The signs proudly remained on display months after the conflict.

Members of RBBEA attended events in force and provided support to parent groups as well as creating and implementing association-led actions. On Dec. 17, only two weeks after the application for expansion was filed, over 50 RBBEA members showed up on short notice to a protest led by parents Wayne Woolley and Judy DeHaven. A campaign on Twitter ensued and a local news publication, *Red Bank Green*, provided extensive coverage of the rally and future events.

"Parental involvement and community involvement was paramount," said Boehm.

Red Bank Borough Education Association members and Red Bank parents, residents and students built a strong team to oppose the charter school's expansion at rallies and public meetings.

“We needed to be very careful about how many teachers were speaking, and how many teachers were out in the forefront. We didn’t want the political nature of this to be perceived as teachers just looking out for their jobs. We strategically placed members as a silent majority. Fifty to 100 members were present at parent run meetings as well as holding their own.”

The December parent meeting generated a petition just shy of 1,000 signatures that was later sent to New Jersey Commissioner of Education David Hespe. The document cited potential irreparable damage to the public schools if the expansion were to be approved, and encouraged the commissioner to deny the application.

“The charter school expansion approval would be an unmitigated disaster for the children of Red Bank and for its home and business owners,” Wooley said. “Homeowners and business owners would be crushed by a property tax increase that could exceed 10 percent as the school district would be forced to send every penny of its state aid to the Charter School as well as an estimated \$400,000 directly from its share of local school taxes.”

Wooley pointed out that the Red Bank public schools have made great strides in improving the educational outcomes and standardized test performance of a student body where 90 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

On Jan. 13, Boehm and her members helped organize a rally with police escorts to ensure the safety of participants crossing the busy intersections in town. Freezing temperatures did not prevent 300 association and community members from marching to borough hall, chanting “Charter expansion, what do we say? No way, we won’t pay.”

Mayor appoints blue ribbon panel

The growing discord captured the attention of Red Bank Mayor Pasquale Menna, who appointed a Blue Ribbon Panel to investigate the impact of the proposed expansion. The

group, which first convened on Jan. 18, represented a cross-section of the community, including educational professionals, attorneys, a journalist, a retired public works supervisor, community activists and parents. The panel had 30 days to gather information and prepare a report on its findings to the community.

The panel heard the public school’s testimony on Jan. 22. Ramage told the panel that 90 percent of the district’s 1,407 students are Hispanic or African-American. Of the charter school’s 200 students, only 48 percent were Hispanic or African-American. In addition, 88 percent of the district’s students are economically disadvantaged, compared to 40 percent of charter school students.

In an audio recording of a Red Bank Green interview of Red Bank Charter School leadership (bit.ly/2aPAvyk), one board of trustees member said, “Although the charter school is supposed to offer an alternative so that they will, as they said in this decision... ‘so as to mitigate the effect of white flight.’ Now how do you do that? You start a small public school which will offer an opportunity for those who otherwise would leave town or choose the parochial or other private school. It’s as simple as that. What else would you do? Offer an alternative.”

State Sen. Jennifer Beck, R-Monmouth, and Assemblyman Declan O’Scanlon, R-Monmouth, attended the panel meeting. Red Bank Charter School Principal Meredith Pennotti was not present. The charter would hold its own meeting on Feb. 2, after the panel had concluded its investigations and state comment on the expansion had closed.

In late January, the Blue Ribbon Panel reported its findings. The panel recommended that the commissioner of education deny the expansion proposal because of deficiencies in the charter school’s amendment request, including:

- **Impact on segregation:** “According to New Jersey Department of Education enrollment data, Red Bank Borough is home to the most segregated district in the state of New Jersey, with deep demographic disparity in the percentage of white students (52 percent charter, 7 percent public), Hispanic students (34 percent charter, 80 percent public), Limited English Proficient (4 percent charter, 44 percent public), and Economically Disadvantaged (40 percent charter, 88 percent public). Based on the stark differences in demographics between the two schools, there are serious questions as to whether the Red Bank Charter School is fulfilling this statutory requirement, and it appears that its outreach to the Hispanic community of Red Bank has not been successful.”
- **Financial Impact:** “While the Red Bank Charter School’s amendment request states that it has examined the impact that its proposed expansion will have on ‘the budget of the borough schools,’ and it realizes that ‘financial hardship will be incurred,’ it has not satisfactorily stated what the impact to the community would be. Dr. Ramage, the Red Bank Borough Superintendent, submitted three scenarios, concluding that the expansion would result in a shortfall of approximately \$2 million to the district, which is the equivalent of 25 teachers. These numbers were verified by Robert Allison (with the firm of Holman Frenia Allison), the current auditor of the Red Bank Borough Public Schools, with the Public Schools’ Business Administrator. Mr. Allison was also recently appointed the auditor for the Borough of Red Bank.

For more information on details of proposed expansion and community response

Red Bank Charter School expansion request application (from Red Bank Green) bit.ly/2b4gVPn

Letter from Sen. Jennifer Beck to Gov. Christie regarding Red Bank Charter School expansion application. bit.ly/2aJBpii

Report from Blue Ribbon Panel commissioned by Red Bank Mayor Pasquale Menna: (from Red Bank Green) bit.ly/2aDEN8Q

Red Bank Borough public school’s promotional videos:
Primary: bit.ly/2aXtOcW
Middle: bit.ly/2aJLpWh
Alumni: bit.ly/2aK081X

Jersey Jazzman blog post on Red Bank Charter. bit.ly/2aJKPHZ

Audio recording of a Red Bank Green interview of Red Bank Charter School leadership bit.ly/2aPAvyk
Direct link to quote vimeo.com/155288308

“In response to a request by Councilwoman Kathleen Horgan, Chair of the Blue Ribbon Commission, to clarify the financial impact on the Borough of Red Bank, Dr. Ramage said that the expansion would force the school district to use its tax levy ceiling of 5.23 percent as well as result in many of the budget cuts outlined in his presentation, including the loss of teachers, increased class sizes and the loss of sports, music, Chinese, band, strings, chorus, and instructional support programs such as Project Lead the Way, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Second Opportunity to Achieve Results (SOAR).”

Keeping up the pressure

RBBEA did not stand idle while the panel conducted its investigation. Each week brought a new action orchestrated or supported by Boehm and her members. The determined local invited Sen. Beck to tour its school and see for herself the high quality programing being facilitated by RBBEA's highly effective and versatile members.

During her visit, Beck observed a student choral performance, pre-K physical education classes, Chromebook/bilingual instruction, a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) lab lesson, and a presentation of the district's promotional YouTube videos, which highlight the rigorous and diverse educational climate of the borough's public schools.

Prior to the tour, the senator sent a letter addressing the Red Bank Charter's issue to Gov. Chris Christie.

“...if the expansion were approved without significant new funds, it would require Red Bank taxpayers to absorb an enormous tax increase and potentially leave public school students with less educational opportunities,” Beck wrote.

Charter officials speak

The charter school held a parents-only meeting on Jan. 20. At the meeting, Pennotti explained that they were requesting the expansion because of the opportunities created by the governor.

“We are taking advantage of his State of the State,” she said.

Pennotti was referring to Christie's comments on Jan. 12 where he called charter schools a resounding success for the state and said that he would “aggressively prioritize” regulatory relief for charter schools. Despite Pennotti's comments, the Red Bank Charter School application noted that political considerations should not be a factor in the consideration of its application.

Finally on Feb. 2, Red Bank Charter School officials held a press conference to address the community's concerns and allow for public comment. The conference went late into the night as the vast majority of speakers lashed out against the expansion. RBBEA members, Red Bank Borough parents and students, town officials, and even a few charter school parents spoke of the great harm that an expansion would cause to their thriving public school system. They urged Pennotti and the charter's board of trustees to withdraw their request.

The good news

The expansion was ultimately averted on Feb. 29 when Commissioner Hesper denied the charter's request in a letter to now former Board of Trustees President Janice Havey. Hesper wrote, “Based on my review of the school's request and review of public comments, the school's amendment request has been denied.” Boehm and her colleagues were elated at the news, as were Dr. Ramage, BOE members, and the entire RBB public school community.

Advice for locals fighting charter expansion

“Our success was really about teamwork and building trust,” Boehm said. “This has to happen not just when a charter threatens expansion. You have to have ongoing trust and an ongoing relationship with your administration and community. PRIDE events, YMCA involvement, our International Food Festival tent, student outreach—all of these were already in place. When a situation like this happens, you have to work together as a team. If you feel like a charter push-back may be needed, start laying the groundwork now.”

Boehm also credits the community.

“I observed the parents,” she said. “The comments that they made were not political in nature. They were truly focused on the benefits of our public schools. Parents felt offended by the division that was created by the charter school and the practices of the charter school's admissions policies. It was way too selective for their comfort.”

“There was a recognition by administration, as well as the membership, that the educational and financial integrity of the public school was being threatened,” Tesauro said. “The one thing that I found so impressive was the quick response that Carol orchestrated. Once she reached out, it just took off. Her efforts were not just geared toward her members. Her efforts were far reaching.”

While a financial catastrophe in the form of an expansion was averted this year for Red Bank Borough, the charter school will likely continue its appeal to the state to increase enrollment next year. RBBEA plans to increase its PRIDE events and will expand community outreach to include realtors and businesses in town. They continue to partner with administration, board members, and parents. If the threat of expansion looms again, they will be ready.

Not all charters are adversaries

It is important to note that all charter schools are not opponents of the public school system. Red Bank Borough public schools had a harmonious relationship with the Red Bank Charter School for a decade prior to the expansion battle. The controversy was caused by a lack of communication by the charter's leadership when it refused to consider the financial impact of an expansion on the surrounding public schools.

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