

The Regional District 13 Board of Education School Naming Committee met in special session on Wednesday, May 13, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Committee Members Present: Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Roraback, Ms. Kahnke, Mrs. Marteka, Mrs. Eddinger, and Mr. Moore

Committee Members Absent: Mrs. Longley, Ms. Lynch, Mr. Padilla, and Mrs. Schlicker

Board of Education Members Present: Mrs. Petrella (arrived at 5:40)

Administration Present: Dr. Leggett, Superintendent of Schools

Mrs. Cowan called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

Lori Helmedach, a Middlefield resident, reflected on previously feeling frustrated and uninformed regarding the process of renaming Memorial school; however, Ms. Helmedach has done extensive research and reflected that no one involved in the school naming process intended to hurt anyone and acknowledged the work of the school naming committee. Ms. Helmedach argued that a referendum question about the school name can legally be added to the budget referendum at no extra cost, and suggested this may be an important option given strong community sentiment. She believes Middlefield residents may resist approving the budget until the issue is addressed. To demonstrate that sentiment, Ms. Helmedach presented a petition with hundreds of verified signatures, mostly from Middlefield, Durham, and Rockfall, indicating significant support for reconsidering the decision. She emphasized the importance of integrity, respect, and listening to the community, noting that even some board members' families signed the petition. Ms. Helmedach also mentioned a community-proposed compromise (e.g., "Veterans Memorial School" with "Three Oaks Playground") as a possible path forward. Finally, Ms. Helmedach stressed that better communication could have prevented much of the current conflict. She encouraged the district to use local newsletters to clearly inform residents about decisions and options, especially if a referendum is pursued.

Russ Quick, a Durham resident and combat veteran, spoke emotionally about the school renaming process, emphasizing that the issue is deeply personal to him. Mr. Quick criticized the lack of accessibility and transparency in the process, pointing out that meetings were held at 4 p.m., with no recordings or Zoom participation, which effectively excluded many working residents. He argued this limited public input created the impression that the decision had already been made before meaningful community engagement. Mr. Quick highlighted that community participation was low and skewed, noting very few votes came from outside the schools, and suggested this was due to the limited ways people could participate. He also questioned why voting wasn't made more accessible online, given modern

technology. At the heart of his argument is a strong defense of the original name, Middlefield Memorial School, which he explained was chosen in 1967 to honor veterans of World Wars I and II. He believes changing the name erases an important historical and emotional connection for the community, including families like his own, who value continuity across generations. Mr. Quick stated that the original name was never even offered as an option in the process, a plaque or small memorial inside the building is not an adequate substitute for preserving that legacy, and the name still meaningfully honors both past and present veterans, especially in a time when fewer people have direct ties to military service. Mr. Quick also shared a personal anecdote from his daughter to illustrate how the name change affects families and their sense of connection to the school. Overall, Mr. Quick urged the board to reconsider, arguing that honoring tradition and embracing the future are not mutually exclusive, and expressed strong disappointment with both the process and the decision.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Cowan amended the agenda to remove the approval of the April 29, 2026 meeting minutes because the meeting minutes had not been received by the committee members for review. Instead, feedback from the community regarding the name was moved up to the #4 item on the agenda for review.

Mr. Roraback made a motion, seconded by Ms. Kahnke, to approve the amended agenda as presented.

All in favor of approving the amended agenda as presented: Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Roraback, Ms. Kahnke, Mrs. Marteka, Mrs. Eddinger, and Mr. Moore. Motion passed.

Feedback from Community Regarding Name

Mrs. Cowan provided a response to earlier public comments and outlined both legal constraints and a potential compromise solution regarding the school naming issue.

First, Mrs. Cowan clarified that a referendum on the school name is not feasible, based on guidance from the board's legal counsel. Referendums must be structured as a simple yes/no question, which makes it impractical to present multiple naming options for a public vote. Mrs. Cowan also noted that additional requirements, like a public hearing and timing constraints, further complicate this approach. In addition, the legal authority to name the school lies with the district.

Mrs. Cowan then described outreach to a community member, Carol Schilling, to explore possible compromises. Based on those discussions and broader community feedback, two hybrid naming options emerged: "Memorial Three Oaks" and "Three Oaks at Memorial School".

Mrs. Cowan indicated that "Three Oaks at Memorial" was seen by some as a strong compromise because it preserves the historical "Memorial" element while also embracing the new "Three Oaks" identity. However, Mr. Moore added that the superintendent raised practical concerns about that specific format ("Three Oaks at Memorial", specifically the word "at"), including potential complications with student use, legal naming conventions, data consistency, and administrative paperwork. As a result, simpler versions like "Memorial Three Oaks" may be more favorable.

Finally, Mrs. Cowan noted that feedback from the First Selectman of Middlefield suggested that the school name issue is unlikely to significantly impact the town's budget vote, based on his conversations with residents.

Ms. Kahnke supported a compromise name, "Three Oaks Memorial Elementary School," as a way to balance honoring tradition with the outcome of the vote, noting that it preserves both the "Three Oaks" identity and the historical "Memorial" significance while still allowing the school to be informally referred to as Memorial.

Mr. Roraback expressed confidence in the integrity of the process, emphasizing that prioritizing student voice is important in today's educational environment because it fosters engagement, critical thinking, and a sense of ownership, while acknowledging that taxpayer input also matters. Mr. Roraback appreciated the effort to incorporate community feedback into a workable solution and favored the compromise presented.

Mrs. Cowan also clarified that if "Memorial" is included in the official school name, it would eliminate the need to designate a separate space within the building with that name to avoid redundancy. Additionally, Mrs. Cowan iterated that the school's cornerstone will remain and was never in question of being removed.

The committee then discussed possible naming variations, such as "Three Oaks Memorial School" or "Three Oaks Memorial Elementary School" and their abbreviations to ensure none create awkward or inappropriate acronyms. Committee members noted that including "Elementary" in the name is not strictly required and may make the name feel overly long, though it's commonly used, and suggest it could be omitted for simplicity, especially for things like apparel. Overall, the committee members indicated openness to refining the name and revisiting it later if needed, potentially bringing one or two final options (with or without "Elementary") to the full board for consideration and a possible vote, which would require a formal amendment to the agenda.

Review Next Steps for Mascot

The committee discussed how to select a school mascot, emphasizing a student-centered approach similar to the naming process. They suggested gathering ideas directly from students, narrowing them down to a few top options, and then holding a vote. Mrs. Cowan expressed interest in making it a fun, engaging activity, possibly launching it at the start of the school year and even incorporating a student design contest for the mascot logo.

Mr. Roraback reflected on past experience at Middlefield Memorial School, noting that a previous mascot change (to the Vikings) was entirely student-driven, reinforcing the value of student involvement. The committee members acknowledged that mascots and school identities have evolved over time and should be age-appropriate and meaningful.

Committee members discussed holding one more meeting in early June before pausing for the summer. Mr. Roraback noted that the strategic planning survey already produced over 100 mascot suggestions, which, despite including some unusable entries, can serve as a starting point for narrowing down options for a future vote. The next meeting may focus on reviewing these mascot ideas.

Review Next Steps for Naming Large Spaces

Mrs. Cowan proposed inviting the architect to the next meeting to walk through the layout, highlighting preserved elements (like the Mustang mosaic), and show available spaces for future artwork or memorials. Mrs. Cowan recognized this would be helpful both for committee decision-making and for addressing community misconceptions, such as rumors that the library is being demolished, when it will actually remain largely unchanged.

Mr. Moore discussed potential naming of larger spaces within the school (e.g., areas honoring Brewster, Lyman, or Korn) and considered how the redesigned building, featuring updated spaces like a new gym, reconfigured cafeteria/auditorium, improved lighting, and separate entrances for events, offers opportunities for community use and recognition.

Dr. Leggett returned to the meeting and questioned the status of the school name compromise. Mrs. Cowan shared there was general agreement around the compromise name “Three Oaks Memorial School,” noting it wasn’t one of the original formal options but emerged from conversations with community members, as a reasonable middle ground that could satisfy different perspectives.

Before closing, Dr. Leggett shared positive news that the district has been awarded a grant to develop a makerspace in the new school, likely in a grades 3–5 tech classroom. This space will be designed as an innovation lab to support hands-on, project-based learning, with specialized features like customizable equipment and sound-absorbing elements. The design can also incorporate school identity elements, such as a future mascot. The committee reacted positively, recognizing both the value of the opportunity and the effort involved in securing grant funding.

Public Comment

Lori Helmedach, a Middlefield resident, expressed strong disagreement with the committee’s direction, arguing that they are ignoring the concerns of what she believes are about 400–475 residents who signed a petition opposing the name change. Ms. Helmedach criticized the process as having excluded meaningful public input before the decision was made and challenges the claim that a referendum could not include multiple school name options, suggesting instead a yes/no referendum format for each proposed name (for example, whether to adopt “Three Oaks,” “Wadsworth,” or “Veterans Memorial”). She urged the board to acknowledge and formally respond to the petition, arguing that the signatures represent legitimate community voices that should not be dismissed. While acknowledging that a compromise like “Three Oaks Memorial” may appeal to some, she said it does not reflect her view and emphasizes that disagreement remains strong within the community. Ms. Helmedach also expressed concern that the ongoing dispute over the school name could affect voter support for the budget in Middlefield, and concluded by reiterating frustration that she still has not received clear answers to her concerns.

Mrs. Cowan responded to concerns about the petition, stating that she does not believe the committee is ignoring community input. Mrs. Cowan acknowledged that several hundred signatures have been collected, but emphasized that the broader community includes thousands of residents, over a thousand students, and many staff members whose perspectives also matter. Mrs. Cowan argued that no decision

will satisfy everyone, but suggested that a compromise could at least provide some level of resolution or peace.

Ms. Helmedach referenced recent voter turnout numbers from Middlefield and Durham to contextualize the scale of participation, noting that the petition represents a substantial portion of recent voters and reiterating her belief that Middlefield residents will reject the budget unless the committee “does the right thing.”

Adjournment

Mrs. Marteka made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to adjourn the meeting.

All in favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Cowan, Mr. Roraback, Ms. Kahnke, Mrs. Marteka, Mrs. Eddinger, and Mr. Moore. Motion passed and the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by Meghan Shortell-Fratantonio