

Manchester Essex Regional School District 2020 Annual Report

The Manchester Essex Regional School District is a high achieving community committed to educating all students, inspiring passion, instilling a love of learning, and developing local and global citizenship.

2020 has been a unique and challenging year for MERSD. The onset of the pandemic forced a school closure that lasted from March 12, 2020 to October 20, 2020, when the first students returned to campus for hybrid learning. Throughout this period, MERSD spent significant time and effort assessing the needs of students and families and redesigning instruction to meet the needs of remote and hybrid learners. The result was a flexible model that not only allowed us to provide the structure and engagement of a traditional school day but also allowed us to easily transition between in-person and remote teaching.

The pandemic has required us to make frequent changes to how our schools operate; however, always at the forefront has been our goal to deliver a high-quality learning experience for each of our students. Currently, all of our grade levels are learning in a hybrid model that utilizes the Hyflex method. This method allows the cohort of students in school to interact virtually and in real-time with the cohort that is learning off campus. Assisting the district with remote access, the Ipswich YMCA, our community partner, has played a critical role in supporting our efforts by providing low cost flexible child care to families who need assistance managing the hybrid schedule. Although we've chosen a challenging model to implement, it is one that we believe is in the best interest of students and one that allows us to maintain continuity of schedule and curricular expectations. There is no one way to structure the hybrid day. Each educator uses his or her expertise to design lessons that balance virtual instruction, online activities, independent learning, and traditional paper and pencil work. This design also allows students to participate in-person for two to four days per week to provide social-emotional support, relationship building and connections for students. Manchester Essex educators' commitment to excellence combined with their innovative and adaptable skill sets have allowed them to create active and engaging learning environments. For more information on the MERSD Hybrid model please visit www.mersd.org – Quick Link: Fall 2020 Reentry

We are living through an unprecedented public health crisis that has upended the lives and livelihoods of millions of people, and it is a traumatic experience for both children and adults, alike. Our current situation has highlighted the persistent inequities among and within communities throughout the Commonwealth and the country. Families have unique circumstances; therefore, we have worked diligently to develop a plan that is equitable and achievable for all. In addition to the pandemic, recent events in our country have brought to the

forefront the realities of systemic racism in our society. Recognizing the need to improve our current equity initiatives, the School Committee voted to approve a resolution committing MERSD to develop and expand antiracism and inclusive practices. *Resolved - the Manchester Essex Regional School District and the school districts in the Commonwealth must guarantee that racist practices are eradicated, and diversity, equity, and inclusion is embedded and practiced for our students, families, faculty, and staff.* This is important work to undertake, and I am proud of our students who are leading the way. As a result of a student petition calling for action, the Coalition Against Racism (SCAR) has been established and is working collaboratively with the high school administration to identify ways in which the school can improve and address issues of equity. *"It is the mission of the MERSD Student Coalition Against Racism (SCAR) to further the diversification of our school culture. We aim to build and foster a community where equity, access, and equality are present and sustainable for all."* This effort complements the existing Middle High School Anti-Defamation League World of Difference program, and our K-12 educator study group that has been formed to examine strategies for diversifying our curriculum and offer recommendations for district-wide improvements to advance our anti-racism and equity goals.

Our equity goals and our experience with innovative learning methods will play a prominent role in our strategic planning efforts. Originally scheduled to be completed by the Summer of 2020, MERSD will be restarting the work this winter. Looking to build upon the success of our program and to prepare students for the workplace of tomorrow, MERSD will use the planning process to define our roadmap for creating a future-focused education program. Phase one (Fall 2019) focused on developing a *Vision of the Graduate*. Following the blueprint from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), this process seeks to define what students should know and be able to do as a result of a Manchester Essex education and examines the question - *What are the skills and dispositions students will require to find success?* In phase two (Winter 2021), the profile will serve as the driver for the development of a multi-year plan that establishes a set of goals and strategic initiatives to achieve the Vision of the Graduate 2033. We will be engaging the community in a conversation about our future needs during March 2021 and will present the plan in the Fall 2021-2022 school year.

I am very proud of our MERSD community, as it always strives to put students at the center of decision making. Our educators have shown heart, professionalism, and creativity in their efforts during this pandemic to make teaching and learning accessible, innovative and exciting. Our School Committee has provided sound and thoughtful leadership during such an unprecedented time, often making difficult decisions, in order to provide our students with the best learning opportunities. Our parent community has shown flexibility, patience and support.

On behalf of the faculty and staff of MERSD, I extend my sincere appreciation to the residents of the communities of Essex and Manchester for their continued support. Our success is a community effort!

Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent of Schools

Memorial School Building Project Update

In the fall of 2020 the first phase of construction was completed, and the academic wing of the new Memorial School opened for students. At the same time, WT Rich, began phase two construction of the gymnasium, cafeteria, pre-kindergarten classrooms, and administrative offices. Phase two construction is scheduled to be completed by summer 2021 and ready for occupancy to begin the 2021-2022 school year.



The final phase of demolition, for the old gym and cafeteria, is scheduled for early summer 2021, when school is not in session. This will allow for the landscape construction (parking lot, playgrounds, and exterior signage) to begin in July with an expected to be completion date of November 2021.

Through the efforts of the Memorial School Building Committee and the Project Team, the project remains on time and on budget. For more information, including aerial construction video footage, photos, monthly construction reports, safety updates and building committee minutes/agenda, please visit the **Memorial School Building Committee** webpage - <https://www.mersd.org/domain/767>.

Finance&Operations

MERSD’s School Committee goals include the objective to “develop and deliver a fiscally responsible budget that restores educational quality, supports District goals, recognizes the confines of Proposition 2½, and advocates for increased funding for the district.”

MERSD begins each budget cycle with a goal of “Level Services,” or, in other words, the same level of program currently in place. When program additions are necessary, MERSD has opted to fund them by finding cost reduction opportunities in other areas of the budget whenever possible. Over time, however, this has become more challenging, and in the past several years, the district has fallen short of a Level Services budget, having had to implement staffing reductions to ensure that budgetary growth fits within the levy limit.

Planning for a Revenue Correction

The challenge begins with the cost of Level Services, which typically grows at 3.5% - 4.0% annually for most school districts, beyond the limits of Proposition 2.5. This puts MERSD and other districts in a cycle of annual reductions to meet budgetary goals. The result over time is a cumulative “Level Services deficit” that must be addressed every 7-10 years with either a revenue correction (e.g. override) or more substantial program reductions. This last occurred for MERSD in FY-16, when Manchester passed an override and Essex used extra revenues to raise the contribution for MERSD. Using its ongoing process of multi-year budgeting, MERSD and its member towns have begun planning for another such decision point over the next one to three budgetary cycles.

Use of “Rainy Day” Reserve Funds

During this time, in order to minimize additional program reductions, MERSD has begun to use rainy day, “reserve” funds as a temporary revenue source. This helps to keep taxpayer costs below the levy limit while multi-year, sustainable budgeting planning continues with member towns. Reserve funds, however, are one-time in nature, and an important source of emergency funding for capital repairs, and as such, continuing use of reserve funds is neither sustainable nor considered best practice. Keeping reserve balances healthy in the long run is also beneficial to taxpayers by signaling to potential lenders that MERSD is a low-risk borrower for capital projects. MERSD’s credit rating was recently upgraded to AA+ (one step below the highest possible AAA rating) by S&P, who cited the strong financial position of both Manchester by the Sea and Essex, as well as MERSD’s multiple years of positive budgetary

results and healthy financial reserves. As a result of this favorable credit rating, MERSD was able to secure initial funding of \$35 million at a 3.289% interest rate, a significant improvement from the estimated 5.0% rating presented to voters in the fall of 2018, when the construction project was approved. The resulting savings in interest payments over the 30 year term will total \$17 million or \$577K per year. Additional borrowing of approximately \$5 million is expected, in addition to up to \$12 million in matching grants from the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) in order to fund the remainder of the Memorial School project.

Healthy reserves will also be important as MERSD shifts its focus over the next several years to renovation **and/or replacement** of Essex Elementary (now 64 years old), which will require input and approval from voters, and additional potential borrowing. MERSD’s strong credit rating has also helped MERSD to reduce the cost to taxpayers of the 2008-10 Middle High School construction project by enabling the district to refinance \$17.5 million of outstanding debt at lower interest rates, generating savings of more than \$2 million over the life of the bonds, or roughly \$130K per year.

Fiscal Discipline and Level Services Challenges

Fiscal discipline has been a consistent priority for MERSD, leading to consistent, stable and low growth in spending and “assessment” (i.e., the cost to taxpayers).

Average Annual Increase		
	5-Yr	10-Yr*
Spending	3.15%	4.04%
Assessment	3.17%	3.60%
*Includes FY16 override		

As noted, however, this achievement has come at a cost of continual program and staffing reductions. There are structural, recurring reasons why Level Services generally exceeds the limits of Proposition 2.5. Staffing, which accounts for nearly 65% of MERSD’s spending, typically grows at 3.0-4.0%, accounting for annual cost of living increases (2.0-2.5%), and any additional contractually obligated payments for increased years of service or staff’s educational attainment. MERSD uses statewide data to ensure that compensation levels are fair and in line with other districts. According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MERSD ranked 88 among all districts in Massachusetts in the category of average teacher salary, despite consistent recognition for MERSD’s award-winning academic and ‘whole child’ program. MERSD’s next largest area of spending is mandated health insurance. With average annual medical trend growth rates in the public marketplace of 6-8%, health insurance, which accounts for 20% of MERSD’s budget, naturally pressures Level Services spending growth

upward each year as well. An unusual challenge occurred in 2018, when MERSD absorbed a 28% increase in health insurance rates after its budget had been set. Since then, MERSD has negotiated changes to its benefits offerings to make them more affordable, resulting in below-average growth in costs. Although much smaller in total size, mandated spending on out-of-district tuition and transportation for special education students is another area that can grow beyond the limits of Proposition 2.5. In recent years, MERSD has developed many in-district special education programs to help manage potential spikes in costs, saving more than \$1.5 million annually. Nevertheless, changes in these placements can be difficult to predict when associated with move-ins (i.e., new residents), and MERSD now several students whose mandated out-of-district placements cost more than \$100K annually per student. Aside from staffing, benefits and out-of-district costs, most other areas of MERSD's budget are level funded each year (i.e., close to 0% growth) in order to offset growth in mandated, non-discretionary spending.

Fiscal 2022 Budget

MERSD's proposed FY22 operating budget of \$27.95 million assumes a \$24.3 million contribution from the towns (operating assessment), up 3.75% or \$880K from FY21. Total spending increases of \$1.14 million reflect a 4.25% increase over FY21, which includes contractually obligated 4.0% increase in staffing costs (no new positions) and a 6.0% estimate for an increase in health insurance rates. Since adopting a higher deductible plan with a Health Reimbursement Account (HRA) in FY20, MERSD has seen utilization fall significantly, leading to a favorable, below-average 3.0% rate increase in FY21, and based on current trajectory, further reductions in the estimate for FY22 are looking increasingly likely. Of note, MERSD now insures more retirees than active employees, with annual retiree insurance costs having grown an average of 12% per year over the past five years, in keeping with requirements under Massachusetts General Law. Fortunately, MERSD is on track to have more than \$3 million set aside in its trust fund for OPEB (Other Post-Employment Benefits, or future-year retiree health care). These contributions have been funded entirely from savings generated from employee migration to less costly plans, thereby eliminating an additional potential cost to taxpayers, which has been necessary to fund OPEB obligations in other communities. MERSD's OPEB trust is invested with the Pension Reserve Investment Management (PRIM) Board, the same entity that manages the Massachusetts Teachers Retirement System (MTRS) and Essex Regional Retirement System (ERRS). PRIM's 10-year average annual asset return as of December 2020 has been 8.94%. These asset returns reduce the contribution needed from MERSD to meet its statutory OPEB obligations.

With construction more than halfway complete for the Manchester Memorial Elementary School, MERSD's facilities department is focusing capital planning efforts on extending the life of Essex Elementary School, now 64 years old. In partnership with the Town of Essex, MERSD has used

Green Community state grants over the past few years to fund \$395K of energy improvements, including LED lighting conversion, and installation of a modern building automation system; these systems also help to lower the annual operating cost (utilities). Additional capital investments at Essex Elementary for one-time projects, such as replacement of the Eagles’ Nest playground will be funded by reserve funds, which grew by \$319K in FY19 and \$482K in FY20 from interest income earned on \$35 million in bond proceeds (not yet spent) for the Memorial Elementary School construction project. Capital projects expected in the next five years could cost more than \$1.5 million, including replacement of the Middle High School turf fields (now 13- and 11-years old), potential investments to shore up the Essex Elementary heating system, and normal replacement cycle investments in Middle High School flooring and furniture.

MERSD At A Glance

<p><u>Enrollment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Students = 1,262 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Resident Population = 1,223 ◦ School Choice = 39 ▶ Per Pupil Expenditure = \$18,837 (91 in state) ▶ Per Pupil Exp. State = \$17,131 	<p><u>Active Faculty & Staff</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Faculty = 151 ▶ Support Staff = 33 ▶ 12 Month Administrative = 27 ▶ Average Teacher Salary = \$84,460 (88 in state) ▶ Average State Teacher Salary = \$81,496
<p><u>Operations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Academic Teaching & Learning ▶ Special Education ▶ Social Services: Counseling, Health, Home Health, Homeless & Inter-agency support ▶ Early Childhood ▶ Network & Instructional Technology Management ▶ Facilities Management ▶ Food Services ▶ Transportation ▶ HR Management ▶ Financial Services 	<p><u>Facilities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Open 7 Days <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Weekdays 6am – 10pm ◦ Weekends 9:00am – 9:00pm ▶ School Sites = 3 ▶ Athletic Sites = 4

Curriculum, Instruction, & Technology

The Manchester Essex Regional School District continues to refine and expand instructional practices for teaching and learning at all levels. All teachers were trained on a wide range of different technologies-from communication technologies to instructional technologies- in order to effectively teach and engage students during remote instruction during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Most notably, all teachers implemented remote learning for all students during the months of school closure, and teachers transferred this knowledge to implement hybrid learning, to accommodate students in-person and at home.

Literacy

As a result of an in-depth ELA curriculum review process in grades K-5 and participation in teacher training on the Science of Reading, MERSD moved forward with the adoption of Wonders 2020. Wonders is an evidence-and research-based literacy program with the highest EdReports rating on alignment to evidence-based instructional literacy practice. Wonders 2020 brings to students research-based print and digital resources and provides support for building strong literacy foundations, access to complex texts, writing to sources, and development of social and emotional learning skills. Wonders provides all students with equity of access to rich texts and rigorous instruction (Wonders, 2020). MERSD began teacher training and Year 1 implementation of Wonders 2020 in July 2020.

Additionally, MERSD chaired a cross-district initiative focusing on training administrators and literacy coaches on research-and evidence-based instructional practices in a series entitled, The Science of Reading. School leaders have joined and participation in the Northshore Leadership Series, a district cohort focus group designed to engage and leverage the practice of the Science of Reading research to support the development and implementation of school-wide research-based reading practices across schools and districts. Currently, the following four school districts participate in this cohort: Newburyport Public Schools, Gloucester Public Schools, North Reading Public Schools, and Tri-Town Public Schools.

Finally, MERSD has participated in and provided support to the development of Mass Literacy, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's advisory panel focusing on the most effective research-based instructional practice recommendations for early literacy instruction across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Community Partnerships & Student Support

In order to further engage with families to offer student and family literacy supports, MERSD has partnered with the Ipswich YMCA to create a summer literacy program to target building early literacy skills in rising first and second graders. During COVID, the summer literacy

program became a fully remote support program for 20 Manchester and Essex students. The summer program was structured as a morning literacy program and an afternoon summer camp for students at Camp Dory. This program was very successful and a high growth data for all attending students was determined from pre-and post-student assessments on students' oral reading fluency. Additionally, MERSD has partnered with the YMCA to create an afterschool literacy support program for students in grades K-3. This program will follow similar practices to the summer literacy model and will continue in 2021 as a remote program to best suit students' and families' needs.

Curriculum Updates

In an effort to align to the most current Massachusetts frameworks and to update existing curriculum in digital learning throughout the district, MERSD wrote and won a competitive grant to initiate K-12 Digital Literacy throughout the MERSD school system. Year 1 consisted of a review of current practices and middle school curriculum alignment, Years 2 & 3 will consist of building out a K-12 Digital Literacy Strategic Plan. STEMscopes was adopted and implemented in grades 6-8. MERSD has also begun the process of updating the middle school social studies curriculum to incorporate Civics coursework. This coursework is in its Year 1 implementation and includes cross-content and inter-disciplinary Civics curriculum. MERSD has also begun evaluating mathematics curriculum.

Social Emotional Learning

To further support the work of social emotional learning in our schools, Manchester Essex Public School district accepted an invitation to participate in a three-year research study aimed at developing RULER for all teachers and students through the incorporation of Universal Design for Learning.

Dr. Christina Cipriano, Director of Yale's Center for Emotional Intelligence and Dr. Gabrielle Schlichtmann, from Harvard Graduate School for Education, were awarded two large research grants to further develop RULER to better support Universal Design for Learning for all students in the Manchester Essex Public Schools. The grants, awarded from the Oak Foundation and the Tower Foundation, are geared toward a multi-year research, design, and build out of RULER in the Manchester Essex Regional School District.

The overall research plan includes:

- Year 1: Identification of the bright spots of RULER implementation in MERSD & identify what teachers, students, and administration needs are for the future
- Year 2: Create a universal design for learning plan and identify structures for RULER to fully implement RULER effectively for all diverse learners

- Year 3: Supportive implementation of the newly designed UDL supports as determined by the district.

Members of MERSD’s leadership team have begun preparation and planning for our new five-year strategic plan. To support this work, MERSD is developing a vision of the graduate at the high school level, which will guide and support the work of all our schools through the strategic planning process. In an effort to facilitate this process, our team has begun work with the Creative Education Foundation (CEF). Concurrently, MERSD was invited to join the Essex County Learning Community (ECLC).

Regional Teams

As members of the ECLC, MERSD will engage in an intensive two-year professional development experience aimed at helping educators better meet the diverse learning assets and needs of students with learning disabilities, learning and attention issues, exposure to trauma—as well as those who experience systemic bias related to race, ethnicity, language, income, and gender. The ECLC is funded by the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation. Based in Buffalo, New York, its footprint includes Essex County and Cape Cod & the Islands. Additional funding is provided by the Essex County Community Foundation. Five public school districts in Essex County have been selected to participate in the second cohort of the Essex County Learning Community (ECLC). These districts include Andover, Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical School, Hamilton-Wenham, Manchester-Essex, and Saugus Public Schools (<https://www.essexcountylc.org/blog--news>, 2020).

Student Services Annual Report

The Manchester-Essex Regional School District Student Services Department comprises Special Education, Section 504, English Language Learners, Homeless Students, Health and Counseling Services, and Preschool. Responsibilities of the department include program development, staff training and supervision, budget management, delivery of direct services (ELL, Counseling, Special Education), and maintenance of legal compliance with federal and state regulations in these areas.

The MERSD is committed to providing an inclusive and supportive environment for students with disabilities. The special education department provides direct services, assessment, and consultation for these students through Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The District’s compliance with state regulations is assessed on a three year Tiered Focused Monitoring cycle, which was most recently completed in 2018-2019, and yielded no findings of non-compliance.

The District routinely conducts screenings of children in order to identify potential disability-related needs; approximately two hundred forty (240) students, 17% of the student population, receive special education services. Fifty-four (54) children PK-12 were referred for an initial special education evaluation in 2019-2020. Completion of evaluations was impacted by the COVID-19 related school building closure from March through June 2020. During this time, students continued to receive services remotely. In September 2020, high need students with disabilities in specialized programs returned to school in-person two to four days per week while special education students with mild to moderate needs participated in remote learning and/or hybrid instruction dependent on grade level.

In addition to special education, the District provides accommodations for sixty-seven (67) students eligible for Section 504, a federal regulation that protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination in education and employment. Five (5) English Language Learners (ELs) receive direct instructional services through the District and nine (9) additional former ELs are monitored through the department. The MERSD also provides full time health and counseling services in each building, including School Adjustment Counselors, School Nurses, and School Psychologists.

Essex Elementary School

Essex Elementary School enrolled 225 students in kindergarten through grade 5. The K-5 classrooms average approximately 20 students per class. EES maintains a wide range of support services including reading, math, guidance, special education and health services. Beyond the academics, elementary students receive instruction in art, music, physical education, computer applications, and Spanish.

In March of 2020, schools closed abruptly due to a worldwide pandemic. Teachers quickly switched over to instructing students remotely. Students remained out of school for the remainder of the year. Over the summer school districts were charged with coming up with a plan for remote and in person learning that would meet the guidelines set forth by the state. These plans were presented to the School Committee and the decision was made to open school in a fully remote model that followed the structure of a typical school day. School opened following this remote model on September 16. The School Committee then voted to bring K-2 students back into the building on October 20 and students in grades 3-5 back on October 27. Staff at EES worked diligently to construct and implement a plan to maintain 6 ft. of social distance between all staff and students. This resulted in a hybrid model where half of the students would be in school on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and the other half would be in the building on Thursdays and Fridays. All students work remotely 3 days a week. This requires teachers to teach students on the screen and in the classroom simultaneously (as seen in the

picture below). Safety protocols were put into place per state guidelines and clearly taught to all students during the first week of school. This involves sanitizing hands when entering school and when coming and going from classrooms, walking one way in hallways, eating at an individual desk in the cafeteria, maintaining 6 ft. distance in the classroom, at PE and recess, and waiting outside the restroom if it is already in use by one student. All of these precautions follow the strict state guidelines and students have been adapting well to this new learning environment. The pictures below depict some of the protocols previously mentioned.



The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education cancelled MCAS during the spring of 2020; therefore we have not received any results for comparison to previous years. In the fall of 2020, we conducted school wide assessments to determine where students might have needs in the area of reading and math. We were pleased to find that our data as compared to previous years did not show any glaring changes that we anticipated due to remote instruction. We look forward to assessing students again in the spring to determine progress made this year.

In closing, the sense of community that exists at Essex Elementary School is second to none.

This was demonstrated so clearly as we re-entered school in October. Parents, students, and staff were overjoyed to see one another again and the community fully supported our efforts. During a typical year, the PTO does an outstanding job of raising monies for our school. The Spaulding Education Fund contributes by funding grants for enriching and innovative initiatives. School meetings are held to reinforce the school's core values of caring, respect, responsibility, honesty, and achievement that carry beyond school walls into the community. Each meeting focuses on one core value, with students participating in performances to demonstrate their understanding of the meaning of this attribute. Students are recognized for exhibiting these core values and their names go up on the wall in the cafeteria. These school meetings are excellent community

building activities. Special important experiences for fifth grade students, such as Project Adventure and ballroom dancing, help to make their final year at EES memorable. In closing, EES provides an excellent quality of education for our students in a warm, nurturing environment where every staff member is invested in teaching the whole child.

Jennifer M. Roberts, Ed.D., Principal Essex Elementary School

Memorial Elementary School

Manchester Memorial Elementary School (MMES) has 279 students enrolled in Pre-kindergarten through grade five this school year. MMES houses the MERSD Integrated Pre-Kindergarten program for students from Manchester and Essex. The program is a combination of students with special needs and peer models. The K-5 classroom enrollment is roughly 20 students per class. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic this year, MMES opened in a fully remote model before transitioning to a hybrid model in October. In the hybrid model, students are divided into two groups: the white or green cohorts. Each cohort contains fifty percent of our students from each class. All students participate in school remotely on Mondays, and the green cohort comes to school for in-person learning on Tuesdays and Wednesday while the white cohort comes to school for in-person learning on Thursdays and Fridays. When cohorts are not scheduled to come into school, they participate in remote learning. All students have two in-person days per week and three remote days. In order to make this happen, numerous safety precautions and protocols were developed and implemented to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19 among students and staff. We are happy to report that these efforts have been successful, and we were able to maintain educational momentum during the 2020-2021 school year.

MMES continues to offer its students a wide range of activities and academics as part of our effort to educate the “whole” child. MMES consistently performs among the top schools in the state on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). All students participate in weekly classes in wellness (physical education/health), music, art, library/research, and technology. Additionally, students also study foreign languages (Spanish and French) in grades one through five. Students in the upper grades have the opportunity to take instrumental music lessons and participate in the MERSD elementary band via a remote format this year. The visual arts are typically celebrated every Spring in the district-wide Elementary Art Show that showcasing our students’ artistic talents. We plan to continue this tradition in a remote format this year. MMES also benefits from the tremendous support of our MMPTO who raise funds and organize enrichment activities to enhance our well-rounded curriculum.

When visiting the MMES neighborhood this year, it is hard to not notice the major construction project that is taking place. The first half of the project was completed in the Spring/Summer of 2020. This phase included a state-of-the-art classroom wing that is able to service our entire K-5 population. Phase two is underway and includes the main office, lobby, café/gymnasium, library, and Pre-Kindergarten classrooms. The current gymnasium, cafeteria, lobby, etc. are still in use for the 2020-2021 school year. It is anticipated that the final phase of construction will be completed by the Summer of 2021 for occupancy in the Fall of 2021. The entire MMES community is very excited about fully moving into the new building!

Finally, MMES is very fortunate to have a high level of supportive parent and community involvement in our school. While this year presented us with many obstacles, our parent and community base could not have been more supportive. We look forward to welcoming the community back into our school in the not-so-distant future!

John Willis, Principal Memorial Elementary School

Manchester Essex Regional Middle School

In the fall of 2019, the Manchester-Essex Regional Middle School welcomed approximately 370 students in Grades 6-8 back to school. The early fall consisted of a host of experiences for parents, including a Grade 6 parent orientation evening, and Curriculum Night/Open House for parents at all grade levels. Student orientation consisted of on-site team-building activities leveraging Project Adventure and the RULER program (a social and emotional approach to teaching and learning founded by Yale University's Center for Emotional Intelligence), for students in Grade 6 and off-site experiences for Grades 7 and 8. During these off-site field trips at the Camp Spindrift Project Adventure courses in Gloucester, MA, Grade 7 and 8 students connected with their peers through exercises focused on developing strong teams and a collaborative culture.





Once students and teachers established rituals and routines and efforts geared towards developing strong cultures were well underway, the important work of introducing and revisiting safety protocols began. Faculty, staff, and students participated in schoolwide, annual safety training including ALICE and Anti-Bullying developed by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARCC). Middle school parents were also invited to a presentation by Dr. Elizabeth Englander, of MARCC, on bullying prevention and technology/social media awareness. With a focus on an inclusive culture and safe environments, the middle and high school also welcomed a new School Resource Officer to the team. Officer Andrea Locke quickly went to work building relationships with students and prioritizing not only physical safety, but also social and emotional health.

The fall also included annual training for middle school administrators who attended a Special Education Summit conducted by Lyons and Rogers, LLC and Educator Evaluation Training facilitated by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In early March, the Middle School Principal, Dean of Students, and School Adjustment Counselor also provided training to school administrators and teachers from around the country, when they facilitated a RULER workshop at Yale University's Center for Emotional Intelligence in New Haven, CT.

Curriculum and instruction were in focus during the winter of 2020. English language arts teachers and special education teachers in Grades 6-8 participated in Keys to Literacy training with a focus on improving student writing. Math teachers, along the principal, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and the Math Department Chair began conversations around piloting a new math curriculum with a target date within the 2020-21 school year. As a first step in this work, the team participated in curriculum evaluation and analysis training offered through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In addition to the above areas of focus, the Middle School Principal also began working closely with the High School Principal and District Leadership to map out the early stages of strategic planning and development of MERSD's Vision of the Graduate.

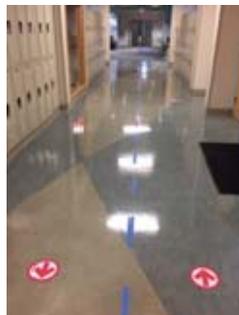
On March 12, 2020, our good work came to a halt as we entered the early days of a global pandemic. As ordered by Massachusetts governmental leadership, we closed the building for the

remainder of the school year. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education instructed schools to transition to fully remote teaching and learning and, following their guidelines, the middle school quickly assembled the necessary technology and resources in order to meet the educational needs of our students through a fully remote model.



During summer 2020, the School Committee presented guidelines for returning students to school in a phased approach, with the middle school's anticipated return to the building being the end of Trimester 1 of the 2020-21 school year. Acknowledging the remote teaching model of the spring was not robustly meeting the educational needs of students, a train-the-trainer model was developed. The middle school, in conjunction with other schools in the District, began working with the Massachusetts School Administrators Association (MSAA) in order to ensure all faculty and staff were trained for effective online teaching. This, along with in-house training provided by our Digital Learning Specialist, increased teacher capacity in a host of online instructional tools, including but not limited to, Zoom, Screencastify, PearDeck, Kami, Flipgrid, Padlet, Kahoot, and EdPuzzle.

Summer and early fall months were dedicated to preparing the facility and ensuring all safety protocols were in place prior to welcoming students back to in-person learning. Hallways were marked with directional arrows, stairwells were designated as one way, classroom desks were set up with proper social distancing, and daily/weekly cleaning protocols were established for all areas of the building.



In September 2020, students were welcomed back to school and a robust online learning platform of full-time synchronous instruction that followed a full-day, middle school schedule.

Benchmark assessments in Grade 6, a critical middle school transition year, were conducted in both math and writing in order to identify the most appropriate content area standards upon which to focus our instruction.

At the start of the school year, students were welcomed onto campus for orientation. Students also gathered on campus in November. Both of these gatherings took place on the football field. In early January, students participated in another in-school orientation in preparation for the hybrid phase of learning, beginning on January 19.



Manchester-Essex Regional Middle School is an outstanding place for middle school students to learn, grow, and explore; we are thankful for fantastic teachers and a supportive parent/guardian community. We look forward to being on the other side of the global pandemic. In the meantime, we will continue to provide our students with the best learning experience possible.

Joanne Maino, MERMS Principal

Manchester Essex Regional High School

Manchester Essex Regional High School continues to progress in an effort to provide all students with a broad-based curricular experience even while educating during a pandemic. The curriculum aims to assist students to gain valuable skills focused on creating, evaluating and analyzing in an effort to prepare students for the global society ahead of them. During the 2019 – 2020 school year we developed a Vision of the Graduate which further defines these skills and dispositions.

The students at Manchester Essex Regional High School continue to achieve at high levels. Ninety three percent of the Class of 2020 moved onto to post-secondary academic options. One hundred twenty students took Advanced Placement courses during the 2019-2020 school year. Those students took 284 AP courses ending exams with 85% of the students scoring 3 – 5 (levels that are deemed acceptable for college credit). The number of test takers was down from prior years due school closure resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The scores, however, increased.

Instead of testing in school, students took AP tests online while at home. Four students were named as a Commended Students by the National Merit Scholarship Board for their academic promise and performance on the PSAT. One student moved on in the competition to be named a National Merit Finalist.

The School Council at the high school level had a productive year. During the 2019-2020 school year the Council worked on the development of the Vision of the Graduate, including the skills and dispositions that students will need to be successful upon completion of high school. The development of the Vision included feedback from all stakeholders including faculty, students, parents, School Committee and the business community.

Students continue to participate in a large variety of co-curricular, extra-curricular and athletic programs. Boys and Girls basketball advanced to the State Tournament. Several members of the swim team advanced to the State Meet. The spring athletic program was cancelled due to Covid-19. In the fall of 2020, athletics looked a little different. All sports were modified to adhere to guidelines aimed to stop the spread of Covid-19. Soccer, field hockey and cross country all compete within the Cape Ann League. Due to the pandemic, all state tournaments were cancelled. Football was not allowed to play during the fall of 2020.

Throughout the school year students participated in community service, taking part in several toy, clothing and food drives. Debate and DECA continued to find success in competition. Robotics did not have the opportunity to compete in the FIRST Robotics competition due to cancellation resulting from the pandemic.

Senior week activities looked different in 2020. The Prom, senior trip and Baccalaureate were all cancelled as a result of the pandemic. Students celebrated graduation day with a car parade through the communities of Manchester and Essex. This was a successful event that we hope to continue in future years. Graduation was held in July, 2020 when it was deemed safe to hold graduation outside with six feet spacing between students and families.

During the fall of 2020, students returned in a remote fashion. Students remained home while teachers taught from their homes over the Zoom platform. In effort to make this instruction model successful, teachers took part in robust professional development during the summer and fall of 2020.

Patricia Puglisi, MERHS Principal

