



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

March 4, 2025

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	March 4, 2025
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Chris Reed, Chairperson John Binieris – Remote Attendance Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Anna Mitchell Erica Spencer Theresa Whitman
Absent:	
Guests:	Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Technology Ian Campbell & Cole Cote, student presenters
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

A. Call to Order of – Mr. Reed called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:06 p.m.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

- 1) Public Comment (Guidelines for public comment can be found in sections BEDH and BEDH-E of the School Committee policy manual)** – Mr. Reed asked commentors to limit themselves to two minutes.

Antonella Muniz, 20 Harlow Street, Essex – Ms. Muniz said that there is a reason every year why the cost of education is expensive in the district, including Covid, the arts program, special ed, health insurance. Except for presentations by Ms. Leonard, Ms. Muniz said that there are few

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substantive discussions about quality instruction or educational experiences. Ms. Muniz said that she does not feel that the actual quality of education has been discussed. Although a lot is communicated about the success of the SPED and Advanced Placement programs, Ms. Muniz questioned the performance of the general population. Ms. Muniz said that the focus should be in the areas where the district does not do well. Ms. Muniz credited academic coaching with improving MCAS scores last year for Essex grade three and four students. Ms. Muniz asked for an explanation as to why grade five scores did not improve last year and how the district will respond. Ms. Muniz said that she hears that middle school students are not engaged in math and engineering and that the high school math department has bigger issues. Ms. Muniz said that the history department also has big issues. Ms. Muniz stated that she wants to hear discussions about these topics. Ms. Muniz said that, by prioritizing quality education and ensuring that all students feel supported, both towns will regard the schools as a valuable investment regardless of an override. Ms. Muniz said that she and other Essex residents want excellent school and stated that Essex families, including their students, feel lesser than their Manchester peers. Ms. Muniz stated that the achievements of Essex students reflect this. Ms. Muniz underlined the co-dependence of the two towns and the challenge of both Essex and Manchester to fund the schools as they have done in the past. Ms. Muniz said that members of the Finance Committees have not seen the budget to actual report from FY 2024. She said that clarity would be provided by a line-item budget report. Ms. Muniz asked if the school budget is built on actual expenditures from two years ago and questioned whether FinCom members could determine the accuracy of the budget. Ms. Muniz said that it would be better if all three entities could look at expenditures and figure things out together. The information would also be helpful to School Committee members. Ms. Muniz advocated for identifying and working on weaknesses and working collaboratively on the issues facing the district. She suggested that budget issues could become opportunities for growth.

Joan McWhorter, Grade 8 Civics Teacher, MERMS – Ms. McWhorter provided the following comments: “Good Evening Members of the School Committee and Superintendent Beaudoin: My name is Joan McWhorter and I am the 8th grade Civics teacher here at MERMS. I am here tonight to speak to you about the proposed merging of the middle/high school principal position. As shared at the last meeting by my colleague, Kerri Schaub, the middle school model is a critical component of our educational system, designed to address young adolescents' unique academic, social, and emotional needs. A skilled and dedicated principal is essential to ensuring the success of this model and fostering a supportive learning environment for students and staff. Over the past several years, we have been lucky to be led by a skillful administrator, Principal Joanne Maino, who always reminded her staff to place the students at the forefront of all we do at the middle school. During her tenure we have implemented successful school wide programs such as RULER and middle school clubs, which have greatly improved our school climate. We are grateful for her kind and steady hand at the wheel and looked forward to finding a new experienced middle school principal to continue her good work. As we all know, middle school is a pivotal time of transition for students as they move from elementary to high school. This period is marked by rapid cognitive development, increased independence, and the need for strong academic and emotional support. A principal who understands the complexities of this stage can provide the leadership necessary to implement best practices, maintain a positive school culture, and support teachers in delivering developmentally appropriate instruction. Without a dedicated principal, these critical functions may be compromised, ultimately affecting student success. I understand the proposal provided by Superintendent Beaudoin is an interim

proposal, but every year counts for our students. We cannot afford even one year without a middle school principal who puts the middle school learner front and center. Additionally, the middle school model emphasizes the concept of teaming. Each grade level team meets regularly to discuss our students and collaborate on programming. A dedicated middle school principal ensures these elements are effectively integrated, fostering students' sense of belonging and engagement. For example, the principal attends middle school team meetings to share important updates and get feedback from the team. They also organize events centered on middle school students, such as dances, Spirit Week, school assemblies, and graduation. Over the years, Principal Maino's graduation speeches demonstrate her deep knowledge of each middle school student. The middle school principal is also crucial in coordinating teacher professional development, facilitating communication with parents, and addressing behavioral and social challenges unique to this age group. Eliminating or downgrading the role of a middle school principal could lead to disruptions in school leadership, diminished academic achievement, and decreased student well-being. Stability and vision at the administrative level are crucial for maintaining the integrity of the middle school model and ensuring students receive the support they need during this formative time. I ask the school committee to recognize the indispensable role of a middle school principal and take the necessary steps to ensure this position remains intact. After all, our community's students, teachers, and families depend on strong leadership to navigate the unique challenges of middle school education. I urge the school committee to consider the significance of a middle school principal in maintaining a middle school model and encourage the citizens of both towns to fund the budget fully. Your teachers appreciate your commitment to the success of our schools and look forward to your continued support of a robust and effective middle school program. Thank you for your time."

Sarah Davis, 11 Highland Avenue, Manchester – Ms. Davis thanked School Committee members for their service and devotion, recognizing the time and energy that goes into the work. Ms. Davis provided the following comments: "As I've been reading coverage of the budget process, I am overwhelmed by the headwinds we face including a staggering 26% increase in healthcare costs, all of which those in this room are no doubt aware. And all of this exacerbated by outdated laws like Proposition 2 ½ and funding formulas that were last evaluated by a legislative commission over a decade ago, and then it took 4 years to get these changes through Beacon Hill. Other communities in Massachusetts are struggling with this as well. A Boston Globe February 9, article titled "We are on a Downward Spiral: Mass. School Districts Face Another Year of Dire Cuts," notes that many towns face the same challenges. "The precarious situation highlights the bleak financial picture many Massachusetts districts are again confronting as they grapple with inflation, and rising costs for special education, health insurance, transportation, as well as the loss of federal pandemic aid and state assistance that fails to keep pace with costs. And the funding problems could get worse if the Trump administration carries through with its threat of freezing federal grant programs." Another article from February 24 describes the situation as "challenging at best and, in many cases, much more dire." Everything feels practically insurmountable and beyond our control. What are we supposed to do? As painful as it is, we are to step up. Education is a public service and the primary beneficiaries, the students, are unable to advocate for themselves. Let's be their advocates. Let's encourage residents to rise to the occasion and support a level services budget.

Brian Gressler, 3 Choate Street, Essex – Mr. Gressler said that it has become clear that a budget override is necessary. He said that it is possible to look back at FY25 and estimate the impact to

town households for a budget override. It would have increased the total levy in Essex by \$100K. This would result in a property tax increase for Essex households of \$7.48 for every \$100K of property. An \$800K residence would see a tax increase of roughly \$65 per year. Mr. Gressler said that, while he appreciates the significance of \$65 to a family, he wanted to point out that couching the override in terms of the impact of adding \$100K to the levy does not represent the realized impact to the average household.”

2) Chairperson’s Report – Mr. Reed. No report

- 3) Student Report – Stella Straub.** Ms. Straub said that there is budget concern among the student population. Ms. Straub shared that she has been reflecting upon what the school has given her and what it will be after she graduates. Ms. Straub said that it is easy during meetings to consider the district in terms of what it takes from the community, particularly money. It is less easy to appreciate all that it gives. Ms. Straub said that her education has been the greatest gift, and she feels a sense of responsibility after graduation to give back to the community. Ms. Straub expressed concern about the erosion of the relationship between the school and the community and how it may alter student’s connection and sense of responsibility to their community. Ms. Straub asked that the SC and towns consider the long-term welfare of the district as they make financial decisions. Ms. Straub shared that she will be joined at future SC meetings by the incoming School Committee Student Representative.

4) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1054 & 1055 and payroll warrant for February 28, 2025
- Minutes for approval: February 4, 2025

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Reed seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5-0. Ms. Whitman abstained. Mr. Binieris, attending remotely, was not eligible to vote.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) –Ms. Whitman shared that the Essex Elementary Building Committee (EEBC) met Wednesday evening for presentations from the three finalists for the Owner’s Project Manager (OPM). Three firms presented - Dore & Whittier, Tuner & Townsend Heery, and Leftfield. Each firm was presented with standardized questions and had one hour to respond. Responses were scored using a standardized rubric. Responses were weighted by Ms. Cresta based on the results of the reference checks. Committee members carefully considered whether the previous relationship of Dore & Whittier with the district provided an unfair advantage. The committee vote 15-1 for Dore & Whittier. They will take over as the professionals coordinating the project. The next step will be district placement on the MSBA meeting agenda for April 7, 2025. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district will meet with the OPM on March 25 to onboard and prepare them to

move forward following the MSBA meeting. The superintendent said that the designer RFS is being prepared now and the designer should be identified by the summer in order to get through the project requirements of the feasibility study. Public engagement is planned for June.

Ms. Whitman clarified that the project will explore all options including new construction, renovation, different locations, and the three student configurations authorized by the MSBA – K-5 at Essex; K-3 at Essex, with 4-5 combined in Manchester, or all elementary students housed in Manchester. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked who would make the final determination of the best design. Superintendent Beaudoin said that, similarly to OPM and designer selection, the building committee will employ a rubric. The cost benefit analysis will be considered for all sites. In the end, the most cost-effective option that meets program needs will be determined. Ms. Spencer inquired about community input toward the decision. The decision is local, based on the data. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the building committee wants guidelines and guidance from the community. There will be public outreach events in addition to the public EEBC meetings at which public comment is welcome. In addition, community members may continue to utilize the public comment section of School Committee meetings to share their perspectives.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/ERICA Spencer/Theresa Whitman) – No Report

6) Superintendent's Report –

- a. **School Choice** – The school choice application period closed on Friday, February 28, 2025. Over 200 applications were received. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that there is no essay or lengthy application to fill out. There is no evaluation of applicants. Preliminary school choice recommendation will be presented to the SC at the March 18 meeting. The lottery will be held in April, following final determination of where students will be placed.
- b. **E&D Report received** – The E&D report came in at \$1.375M. This information is automatically sent to both towns.
- c. **Congratulations** – The superintendent extended congratulations to Dramafest students for their recent competition and Boys Basketball, in playoffs versus Lynn Tech. Athletic Director Cami Molinari was awarded the Ted Damko Award for professionalism and leadership. Seven students from DECA won state championship title.
- d. **Superintendent's Coffee** – March 27, 2025
- e. **STEAM Showcase** – March 24, 2025
- f. **Night of Jazz** – March 13, 2025
- g. **Grade 5 District-Wide Musical** – April 3-5, 2025

Questions: Mr. Foster asked when the final DESE district review would be available. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the report is expected to take a few months. DESE representatives have not been in touch with the district since the site visits.

7) Continued Business –

- **Student Proposal to Install EV Charging Stations at MHS** – Ian Campbell and Cole Cote. Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cote presented their proposal for adding six electric vehicle (EV) charging stations to the high school parking lot. The pair presented survey results of staff at the campus who currently own or plan to purchase an EV to validate the utility of the charging stations. They also researched the growing appetite for these vehicles by the general population. The students proposed installing three, two-charger units at the high school, one of which would be a disabled spot. The model suggested is the same as that installed at Memorial Elementary. The project would require some construction, and the students have planned the work to begin for the summer of 2025 with completion by the start of the new school year. Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cote proposed that use of the charging stations would be restricted to staff and students, between 7:00 am and 3:00 pm. The remaining hours of operation would be open to the community on a first-come basis.

Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cote stated that, while previously lauded as a green school, MERHS has not pursued environmental projects in recent years. The students said that to maintain the school's standing as an environmental leader MERHS should continue to innovate and implement new green efforts. They presented a list of surrounding schools that installed EV chargers, including Wellesley HS, Beverly HS, Danvers HS, Revere Elementary School, Malden HS, Memorial Elementary School, Ipswich HS, Swampscott HS, and Medford HS. The students said that the EV stations would also be enticing to parents and community members with electric vehicles.

The capital expenditure for the project totals \$72,000. This total includes the estimated cost of construction at \$30,000 and the unit cost per station of \$14,000 (\$42,000 for 3 stations). The construction cost is based on figures used for construction of the Manchester Memorial Elementary School in combination with additional research. The station's unit cost also includes 5 years of software and maintenance. Afterward, an operating expense, which consists of software and maintenance, of \$4000 per unit (\$12000 for 3 stations) is paid every 5 years. While in operation, the school must pay for electricity usage. To estimate the cost to MERSD, Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cote used the school's current electricity rate at \$0.1425 per KWH. The rate charged for individuals from 3:00 pm to 7:00 am would be \$0.25 greater than the electricity cost, in this case, the price would be \$0.3925 per KWH. However, from 7:00 am to 3:00 pm, the price would be half the standard cost at \$0.19625 per KWH. The students projected that usage would, on average, generate more money for the school while also serving as a benefit for faculty because the normal price of electricity in the area is approximately \$0.50 per KWH.

As a governmental/nonprofit entity, Manchester-Essex Regional Middle High School would be eligible to have up to 100% of the cost (up to \$50,000) subsidized via the MassEVIP program offered by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. To allow for variability, the student estimate assumes MassEVIP would

subsidize 80% of the cost (\$57,600). If the covered subsidized amount should exceed the maximum of \$50,000, it is also possible to use an additional program for funding, such as National Grid's subsidizing program. This would allow MassEVIP to cover the costs of purchase and installation, while National Grid would cover the costs of construction involved.

Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cote estimated that, after installation, the three stations would realize around \$11,000 in yearly profit. This estimate assumes a 14.9% utilization rate for all but 1 of the parking spaces. The did not include projections for use of the disabled EV spot. Assuming 80% subsidies, the project will have paid itself off in about 2 years. Meaning that, after 15 years of upkeep, the stations would have accumulated about \$150,000 in profit.

Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cote suggested that the district establish a revolving fund to facilitate the reinvestment of realized profits from the EV chargers. The students proposed that profits be earmarked for emergency maintenance or damage costs, use by the Green Team class, future MERSD sustainability projects, and for adding charging stations to the Essex Elementary School.

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked if the students were able to compare their estimates for cost and revenue with those from the other mentioned school districts. Mr. Cote said that they did not believe that data is readily available. They did research the costs of the units, construction costs for the MERHS site, and the costs for installation at Memorial. Mr. Campbell said that they worked with Mr. Waldron, MERSD facilities manager, to review Memorial construction costs but did not have similar estimates for other schools. Ms. Whitman wondered how revenue estimates may pan out. Mr. Campbell said that they used conservative figures for subsidy awards. Actual expenses for installation may be lower. The MBTS town hall received a 93% subsidy. These awards are paid from a pool of state monies. Mr. Cote said that the current usage estimates are also very conservative at 15%. High use would yield a higher profit. Ms. Whitman asked if EV charger installation is included in the district's capital plan. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it is not, but it is assumed that the Essex Elementary building project will include EV chargers.

Mr. Reed asked about the fee structure for the chargers at Memorial Elementary. Superintendent Beaudoin said that currently the profit is going to the town, but the district is working to correct this. Mr. Cote said that their project would also strive to create a standardized process of payment for the district. He said that the current model of two free hours of charging is not a good one. Mr. Cote clarified that currently people plug in and swipe a credit card. He said their project includes an app for faculty and staff. This app allows for the price to fluctuate based on the time of day.

Ms. Spencer asked about applying for subsidies before committing to moving forward with SC approval. Ms. Whitman asked the superintendent about the value in an SC vote at the current meeting. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the student presentation has as a benefit the opportunity for the students to learn about the process. The superintendent said that the students require SC approval to pursue the grants. The district is in support

of their project. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that they are seeking SC approval because they are proposing an alteration to the state of the facility. The superintendent said that construction costs not covered by the grant would likely be able to be absorbed by the maintenance budget. Ms. Spencer asked is there would be any issue with space constraints in the faculty parking lot with the loss of some open spaces. Mr. Cote replied that they see it as a logistical shift, since any car utilizing the charger would have been parked elsewhere in the lot. The superintendent said that the charger spaces would impact the number of open spots. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there may also be policy ramifications from this project as the district will need to look at a policy regarding charging the public to use the EV stations.

Ms. Whitman moved to permit Mr. Campbell and Mr. Cote to pursue grant funding for the EV charger project as presented. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

The motion passed 6-0.

- **SEPAAC Update** – Postponed
- **Curriculum Update** – Heather Leonard, Directory Curriculum & Instructional Technology
 - Digital Wellness Community Education Series – concluded last night. This series supported parents maneuvering around the most popular devices. Informative information from the workshop will be shared via the district community newsletter.
 - Parent/Caregiver Math and Literacy Learning Events – Elementary instructional coaches, Beth LeDoux and Hana McGowan, will share strategies and engaging activities to reinforce math and literacy learning at home
 - Manchester Memorial Elementary School – Wednesday, March 19, 6-7pm
 - Essex Elementary School – Monday, March 24, 6-7 pm
 - Student Academic Support –
 - High dose tutoring in math targeted grades in Essex and the middle school.
 - Additional tutoring was added at the middle school for grade six and seven math. Tutoring is in partnership with Imagine Learning.
 - The district will again participate in the Summer Early Literacy Program with the YMCA. This program utilizes data to target students who could be vulnerable to summer regression.
 - Data Meetings at the elementary schools and Data Chats at the middle school are currently taking place.
 - Curriculum
 - History/Social Studies – The team has completed two rounds of narrowing down published tools that are appropriately aligned to grade level, and they have settled on four tools for the next round. An evaluative checklist based on published curriculum rubrics will be used to assess each. The goal is for field testing by this spring in grades K-2. Grades 5, 6, and 7 are

continuing the Investigating History adoption. Unfortunately, DESE announced a delay in release of materials for grades three and four and have recommended that schools await their update. Teachers are doing cross-collaboration to prepare the organization to support it. Work in history/social science continues, integrating middle school literacy with the genocide education curriculum.

- Science/Technology/Engineering Curriculum Review Process (K-12) – The team has worked at refining the vision, gathering feedback, and inventorying what is currently in place. They will be seeking community input.
- Committee
 - Arts Council – employing the vitality index results to create actionable steps. The team plans listening sessions with students
 - Wellness Advocacy Committee – The ultimate goal is to present the School Committee with recommendations for a Health and Wellness policy this year
- Professional Development
 - PD Pathways – have concluded for the year
 - Universal Design for Learning with CAST (preK-12)
 - Technology (preK-12) MERSD staff facilitators
 - Executive Functioning (PreK-5 & 6-12)
 - AI Conference (Tech Staff) is coming up
 - Content Focused PD led by instructional coaches
 - Professional Development Day – March 17. “Taking Theory to Practice Using What You’ve Learned; Practical Ways to Implement Authentic Learning.”

Questions: Mr. Foster inquired about a data review that Ms. Leonard completed at the request of Antonella Muniz, community member. Ms. Leonard said that she is examining math placement at the middle school and will be happy to share her findings with the School Committee after gathering more information.

- **FY2026 District Calendar** – Ms. Leonard presented a draft of the calendar. The final vote to approve the calendar will be held until the next School Committee meeting, because it was not included on the agenda for this evening’s meeting. The SC will conduct a straw poll at the current meeting to allow the district to announce key dates, like the first day of classes and holidays.
 - **Calendar Highlights**
 - Two weeks for winter break
 - Starting in November, all early release days are on the first Wednesday of the month
 - K-8 conferences will be earlier than this year. This reflects feedback this year that conferences were too late in the year to address areas of concern. During the current school year, the conferences were aligned with the release of report cards in December. Ms. Leonard said that the district will

distribute a survey for input from families following next year's change and synthesize the feedback to make decisions going forward.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if iReady scores will be ready in time for conferences. It is expected that they will. Ms. Spencer stated that, because conferences are not required, there is a perception that the one-and-a-half days off from school is not the best utilization of the time. Mr. Foster asked for the purpose of conferences. Superintendent Beaudoin asked about perceptions around the requirement of attending conferences. Ms. Spencer said that the email to parent from the middle school suggests that parents contact the school if they want a conference. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that her experience has varied. This year a signup form was distributed which made conferences seem more obligatory. The superintendent summarized that parent perceptions of conferences differed based on the communication style employed. Mr. Foster said that there should be more opportunities for communication about student needs because there is more access to student data. He asked if communication time should be limited to a certain time in the calendar (conferences). Ms. Koch-Sundquist clarified that there is a contractual obligation to provide teachers with time outside of the learning day for parent communication. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she is asking for feedback in order to determine what families want in an engagement model. Ms. Mitchell asked about moving the first day of school to after the Labor Day weekend. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district is contractually obligated to start before Labor Day.

Mr. Reed took a straw poll. The School Committee voted 6-0 to accept the FY26 district calendar as presented. Final approval will be at the next SC meeting.

- **FY26 Budget Workshop** – Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that the models provided are intended as a tool and are not proposed options.
 - **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Anna Mitchell) – Mr. Foster reviewed the work of the finance subcommittee during the previous two subcommittee meetings and the first meeting of the “number-crunching” group, composed of the finance subcommittee members; Finance Committee representatives from both Manchester and Essex; Town Administrators from both towns; and MBTS Selectboard Chair, Anne Harrison. It is hoped that the collaborative group will meet again on March 12.

In response to public questions regarding transparency, Ms. Cresta provided details of the revenues and expenses for school choice, tuition-in, and the prekindergarten program. These are program elements that are typically only partially reflected in the budget on the expense side. They are revolving account revenues, and the incomes do not show up in the general operating budget. These reports are included in the current SC meeting packet. Mr. Foster said that it is hoped that these details will be included in future presentations of the entire

MERSD budget. The School Committee is responsible for all revenues and expenditures, including revolving accounts and grants.

Budget context: Mr. Foster reported that the only major budget update since the previous SC meeting is that the healthcare increase has settled at 27%. Ms. Cresta went out to multiple other insurance companies, but all chose not to provide the district with a bid. It is possible that the current plan deductibles could be adjusted slightly to save, but that would be offset by the need to cover out-of-pocket staff expenses.

Ms. Cresta provided updated SC budget scenarios that consider differing amounts of E&D use, OPEB offset, and so on. There are three models presented there:

- Model A: Proposed 2/4 budget, updated to reflect 27% health care numbers. Assumes 350k E&D, +100k Choice, \$150k OPEB, and elimination of 2 admin positions.
- Model B: A baseline comparative to see how much it would cost to stop using reserves at all – this model does not include any reserves, extra school choice, or reduction of OPEB.
- Model C: Highest likely reserve contribution we could entertain. Assumes \$700k E&D, +100k Choice, \$250 OPEB reduction.
- Superintendent Beaudoin also shared a model that outlines the amount necessary to contribute to get down to a 3.5% overall assessment. This model assumes all \$1.4M E&D, +100k Choice, and \$410 OPEB reduction. Mr. Foster noted that there has been no discussion about this scenario; it is informational.

Outcomes from the initial number crunching group: Mr. Foster emphasized that it has become evident that any budget the district is likely to propose will trigger an override in Essex, for sure, and likely in Manchester, as well. Mr. Foster said that Essex has no excess capacity to apply to a shortfall. Manchester is planning for a 5-6% year-over-year increase, including for capital projects, with schools accounting for about 3.5% of 5-6%. Mr. Foster said that the number-crunching group has not yet done any number-crunching with the town reps to understand the level of request they may support or how to structure that support—whether to focus only on the current year or look to cover several years. It is hoped this will be addressed at the next meeting. The towns made several requests of the School Committee. A few of these are actionable this year; most are longer-term efforts if we choose to act on them.

- Continue to commit reserves when the E&D balance is above 8%.
- Continue to find ways to lower the bottom-line number for this year's budget. The town partners asked that the SC think critically about what 'affordable excellence' really is, including examining what is a 'right sized' program for our student enrollment.

- Take a zero-based budgeting process. Ms. Cresta has articulated how her process this year approaches this and is figuring out how to show or communicate that.
- The town reps expressed appreciation for responses to budget-related questions and requested that the SC continue increasing the transparency of the budget lines and costs of particular parts of the educational program.

Mr. Foster highlighted several take-aways from the models. None of them results in the typical Essex target of 3% or 3.5% for Manchester. Were the district to commit all of its E&D this year, that \$1.4M would not close the gap, and the district would be in the same position next year, without E&D reserves. None of the town partners is supportive of cutting staffing enough to close the gap, and neither community would support such a move. Over the next 5 years, there is no year in any of the modeled scenarios with less than 5% overall assessment growth. So, this is likely to be the reality for at least the next 3 years, probably longer. Mr. Foster emphasized that the district cannot put forward budgets for the next couple years that take the district past the EES facilities vote. Mr. Foster said that the district needs to get a sense of the town positions to make a recommendation for the budget which will be voted in by the School Committee on March 18. Mr. Foster said that, even with town support for an override, the SC should develop a contingency plan in case the needed override does not pass.

- **Budget Development Update & Status Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin reminded the SC that it must vote on a final budget on March 18. The four provided scenarios are intended to provide a big picture and structure for examining the budget problem. The superintendent recommended not getting hung up on the specifics of what will be cut. The superintendent shared concerns around managing the budget after the current year. Superintendent Beaudoin said that inclusion of a no-reserve model highlights the hole in which the district finds itself if not successful and the magnitude of the problem going forward. The superintendent expressed concern about the current holding pattern in which the unresolved budget has placed the district. Usually, the district would be starting its hiring process for the next year and planning for summer work by this time. Instead, administration has been forced to devote most of its year to budget resolution. Following the next SC meetings, the district will have April vacation before returning for the Town Meetings. This is a short window in which the district will need to manage its decision.

The all-reserves model would mean that the district would manage the problem independently. It would require exhaustion of the reserve funds. Alternately, without reserve use, the district would need to make offsetting cuts. The 3.5% growth model reflects the amount to which the district is typically asked by the towns to limit growth. The models demonstrate no-reserves use; full reserves use; and two models with varying input of reserve funds. The superintendent said that the long-term solution is additional revenue. This could be sought with a larger override ask for this year. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that, without a

multi-year approach, it would be likely that an override would be necessary next year, as well as this year, based on projections. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the current budget crisis has been five years in the making. Healthcare has accelerated the situation. The superintendent said that the remaining two models balance some level of reserve use with cuts and some level of request for additional funding. Superintendent Beaudoin asked that the School Committee provide direction for administrator budget work going into the vote on March 18 and stressed that it affects preparations for next year.

- **Discussion** - Mr. Reed pointed out that ideally the SC would be voting on the budget at the current meeting and is behind pace. He said that the district has three main stakeholders, but their primary charge is to put students first, then educators and taxpayers. Mr. Reed stated that he hoped to narrow down the options to two for further pursuit. Mr. Reed reminded committee members that the SC has the authority to vote on an overall budget, including the amount of reserves that are to be diverted to the operating budget, but the School Committee does not have the authority to dictate where budget cuts will come from in the program. Mr. Reed pointed out that, should support for a correction fail to materialize, the district could exhaust its reserves and then be in need of an additional override and without reserves to fall back on. Mr. Reed said that the 9% budget for which some community members have advocated does not address the structural problem in the future. Mr. Reed cautioned against becoming mired in conversations about how a particular savings might affect the assessment. He said those conversations do not matter at this point. In addition, there are very few savings options remaining without cutting heads and increasing class size. Mr. Reed asked for each SC member to present where they stand with the budget.

Mr. Spencer suggested that members address the budget levers of reserves use, administrative cuts, and re-allocation of staff and refrain from speaking to the merits of each model, since the models are not meant as proposed budget iterations.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she sees two main bumpers – the total amount of reserves contributed by the district and the assessment that the SC chooses to pass to the towns. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that limits on reserve use were clarified with the recent SC adoption of a reserve policy setting the goal at 8%. This figure was supported by town partners at the recent meeting. Since the E&D is at 9%, that represents is the amount available to contribute.

Ms. Spencer said that, while the towns were in support of the district continuing to contribute to reserves, every likely budget version will require an override in Essex and possibly in Manchester, too. Ms. Spencer was resistant to presenting a budget that would trigger an override while maintaining the likelihood that an override is required the following year. Ms. Spencer advocated for a multi-year solution that allows for stability in the district and demonstrates long-term fiscal planning.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that, in crunching the numbers, her proposed reserve use would make the reserve use commitment smaller than last year's commitment. Ms. Spencer noted that it would still trigger an override next year.

Ms. Whitman stated that the SC could become mired in debate if worried about the assessment they are comfortable presenting to the towns. Ms. Whitman suggested that the SC focus on the items that are most important to alignment with the Strategic Plan. In preparation for the next "number-crunching" group meeting, Ms. Whitman suggested creating a list of what is most important to the SC and asking the towns to provide the numbers on what the average taxpayer would be charged under a given growth percent.

Ms. Mitchell said that nothing would change before the vote and that she does not expect miracles at the number-crunching meeting. Ms. Mitchell emphasized the importance of working together with the district's partners when it comes to communication and scheduling out an override to minimize upheaval to students and staff. Ms. Mitchell said that she has a problem with the budget because she anticipates it growing from \$30M now to \$40M over the next 5 years. Ms. Mitchell said that in the current year, the only option is to work together to find stability and hoped that the number-crunching group would be able to work going forward.

Mr. Reed stated that modeling cannot address a 27% increase in healthcare. Next year, the increase is likely to be 20%. Ms. Mitchell said that there are many things that can be done with healthcare. Ms. Mitchell said that the healthcare structure needs to be aligned with contractual obligations and the district needs to be more proactive. Ms. Mitchell said that the structure of the current plan is what preempted other insurers from submitting a quote to the district this year. Ms. Koch-Sundquist commented, having participated in the negotiation process, that the teacher's package is fair and pointed out MERSD teachers come to school excited to teach and are not striking, in contrast to neighboring communities. Mr. Reed stated that educators will also see a 27% increase in their healthcare contributions next year. Ms. Mitchell said that the increase has not been up to the 20% increase that Mr. Reed predicted. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that, even for perfect clients, the market rate of healthcare growth is in the mid-teens to twenties. The district also has high usage and is consequently experiencing an additional increase. The superintendent said that healthcare is collectively bargained and set within the teacher contract. Any changes would have to be re-negotiated, and the district can pursue this in FY26/27 when the contract is re-opened. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that it would be a difficult thing to bring to the negotiation table. Mr. Reed cautioned against getting hung up on this issue when the budget must be passed in fourteen days.

Ms. Whitman said that, having looked at the current models and considering the public input that she has received, she is drawn to the Carry-Forward/Level Services model which has relatively low reserves usage and OPEB steady at \$150K. Ms. Whitman said that she could not vote in favor of eliminating the

middle school principal position. Ms. Whitman is also not in favor of removing the position of facilities manager but would tolerate it. Ms. Whitman emphasized that she does not want a budget that includes cuts as the result of healthcare increases and said reserves and town contributions should address this portion of expenses. Ms. Whitman said that the direction of the budget should be for level services as the finance subcommittee works with town partners to crunch the numbers.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she needed to express constituent concerns from Essex so that they feel heard. Some residents say that the district should live within the means of Prop 2 ½, and that household income does not necessarily rise at the rate of 2.5%. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that there is concern that Essex does not own any of the new structures and that students from Essex are experiencing an achievement gap. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she would vote for the best interest of students and that she could not vote for cuts at a time when the district is looking to improve student achievement for Essex students.

Mr. Binieris expressed support for the carry forward/level services model and said that the district needs stability and strong moral, and it cannot wait any longer. Mr. Binieris said that the achievement gap will increase with cuts. Mr. Binieris was able to add, via the online chat, that he supports the level services budget - using \$600k (reserves plus OPEB reductions plus school choice) in reserves, Scenario #3.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist pointed to roles that are needed by Essex students to be successful and which will also benefit all students – a middle school principal, MTSS support, and literacy and math fellows.

Ms. Whitman said that timing is important for the EES building project. If an override is sought, it should be sooner so that it is not close to the Essex building project vote. Ms. Whitman stated that the vote process will inform future planning. Mr. Reed said that the school building vote would not affect taxes for some time. The high school debt is scheduled to roll off in 2034.

Ms. Spencer expressed concern that the level service scenario would require an override in the current year and again next year. Ms. Spencer stressed that she does not want two overrides in a row and agreed that an override close to the building vote is undesirable. Ms. Spencer said that she supports a level service budget with the same resources the district currently has. Ms. Spencer said that she would like to return to a place where the School Committee talks about something other than the budget. Ms. Spencer said that this is a nationwide problem and that she wants to rally the communities to support the district. Ms. Spencer noted that the alternative to educator cuts is administrative cuts. Ms. Spencer shared comments about proposed administrator cuts from the community: Elimination of the facilities manager would not jeopardize the students and the district can manage the situation well. Retirement of the middle school principal creates an opportunity to take advantage of attrition. Many high

schools have a single administrator with a similar combined student body. However, Ms. Spencer noted that no high-performing district has a shared principal model, and there is no other comparatively small district to MERSD that is considered high-performing. Ms. Spencer said that, long-term, it will be hard to avoid cuts.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she is concerned that going without a middle school principal will not be a trial and that the district may never again be in position to reinstate the position of middle school principal.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the level services option will increase the assessment (over 2.5%) to Manchester by \$1.9M and to Essex by \$847,900K. It would cover the shortfall for this year alone. Next year, another override would be required to cover the shortfall for the growth rate of existing staff. The level services option includes \$350K in reserves use. While the superintendent advocated for level-staffing and would like to be presenting a multi-year put-back option that includes reinstatement of programs that have been trimmed, she said that attrition is presenting an opportunity for creativity at the middle school. The superintendent noted that the district has no guarantee of funding until mid-May. At some point, the district must put forth clear indicators about what the financial consequences are. Superintendent Beaudoin stressed the level of her concern and the magnitude of the problem. The superintendent requested feedback and direction about how the district will advocate and communicate these realities. The superintendent said that she does not want to lose teachers, principals, or programs, but she is faced with the numbers. Mr. Reed suggested putting the question to voters. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that, while she agrees ideologically, it could put teachers into the position of doubting the security of their jobs and looking elsewhere.

Mr. Foster said that the School Committee cannot solve the budget problem alone and it is clear that an override will be triggered. Numbers are on the table, and the scale of the problem is clear. Mr. Foster asked about the consequences for the district if it does not receive town support.

Ms. Whitman emphasized that the role of the SC is governance and to pass the budget. Ms. Whitman said that the SC can advocate for students in alignment with the district's Strategic Vision, which was created with the input of both communities. Ms. Whitman said the SC can come together as a group to say that they cannot advocate for cuts because they are not good for students. Ms. Whitman suggested bringing that to the town and asking how they can work with the district and adjust to accommodate the district's needs. Ms. Whitman said that she would like to see models from the town partners including scenarios for their reserve use and other options. Ms. Whitman said that she can use her voice to say she is unwilling to sacrifice the education and program that the district has created. Ms. Whitman said that the communities should have the opportunity to vote on that. Ms. Whitman said that she does not think the district will be any

worse off if it fails via a vote and students and educators would know that the SC supports them.

Ms. Mitchell stated that everyone wants the best education possible, but the problem is to work with the towns to schedule the override with a smooth process. Without doing so the district risks a repeat of two years ago, and that is not in the best interests of students and teachers. Mr. Reed reminded the SC that such a path was pursued eight years ago and culminated in the failed override two years ago. Mr. Reed said that the current situation is the result of the failed override, compounded by the healthcare increase. Ms. Mitchell took issue with Mr. Reed's comments as condescending and said that Mr. Reed does not have to agree with her opinion. Mr. Reed said that he was agreeing with her about the importance of the process but expressing frustration about the failed effort to achieve a previous override. Ms. Mitchell said that the impact of the previous override failure divided the communities. Ms. Spencer said that Ms. Mitchell is worried that, in pursuing a level services budget, without cuts, this year, the SC could be inviting another failed override that would expose staff and students to an even more stressful environment. Ms. Spencer said that part of the SC commitment to students is to choose a path that allows for their success. Ms. Spencer said that it is also important for the SC to demonstrate its willingness to make adjustments. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the district needs its town partners to show the same willingness. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the district receives no guidance from town partners beyond "2.5%," and it is not feasible. Ms. Spencer said that no SC member believes that 2.5% growth is possible. Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted that the district is asked to justify every dollar it spends or saves to reserves. Ms. Koch-Sundquist pointed out that, according to its 2024 Town Meeting booklet, Essex has a total of \$9.8M in reserve accounts. Ms. Mitchell stressed that the important thing is to find a smooth path forward and said that the district is seeing progress in this regard. Ms. Spencer said that there is not a budget proposal that would be a smooth path forward and that the superintendent needs guidance to choose between the scenarios.

Superintendent Beaudoin asked, given that the SC is supporting a carry forward option, whether the preference is for a multi-year, smaller bites override approach or a single, larger correction. Without a successful override, the district will need a plan for moving forward in the after math. The superintendent said that a \$3M override would be necessary this year to cover the next few years. Ms. Whitman said that she would not be willing to entertain further cuts without finding out what the town partners can do via their own models. Ms. Whitman said that the district has been successful in keeping growth to the target 3.5%. Superintendent Beaudoin shared that district growth between 2010-2025 averaged 3.5%. Between 2017-2025, it averaged 3.0%. Ms. Spencer said that we know that will not be possible going forward and reiterated that she will find it hard to vote for any budget that brings the district to the same budget point next year. Ms. Whitman pointed out that without the needed correction there will be radical changes to the district. Ms. Cresta stated that radical changes will happen this year without funding. Superintendent said that radical change would not be innovation-based

and would instead be a degradation of services – number of classes, kinds of classes, class size. Ms. Whitman commented that the Strategic Plan would become unworkable in that situation. It was created based on the idea of reinvestment in the program. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the path would include a multi-year series of reductions.

Mr. Foster said that the SC has a clear charge to see how far the number crunching group can get. That will shape the conversation at the March 18 SC meeting. Superintendent Beaudoin will send the number crunching partners an update regarding the School Committee's position. It is hoped that the group will meet on March 12, though the date has not been finalized.

Mr. Reed apologized for his earlier comments, saying that it was not his intent to express himself his frustration in that way.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for the superintendent's budget recommendations. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she would recommend a level services, all in budget for this year. The superintendent said that she is prepared to do the hard work of cutting \$2M from the budget and moving forward. However, the superintendent expressed regret for the tremendous work over the years to build the program. The district has managed to limit growth. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it is not possible to motivate educators, ask them to invest in the program, and expect them to have a growth mindset when all of that work can go away at any point. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that years of work went into building the middle school model. Ms. Spencer asked for the superintendent's recommendation on reserves. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she would remove reserve use from the budget. If the district were successful, such a budget would reset funding for the district and allow it to create multi-year plans going forward. The superintendent said it is time to take the risk and see where the district stands.

- 8) School Committee Comment** – Mr. Foster reminded the School Committee that it will need to devote time to understanding the process for a search for a new this year so that it is ready to proceed next year. Mr. Foster commented that he will be pushing on the conversation about student math performance brought up by community member Antonella Muniz. Mr. Foster said that it reminds the SC that there may be a systemic inequity issue because it affects not only where students are coming from but where they are going. Mr. Foster said that he would like to talk more about program, and this is a lens that highlights the School Committee's responsibility to have those conversations. Ms. Whitman agreed that it is important to follow up on concerns from the community. Mr. Whitman said that the data does not tell the whole story and commended Ms. Leonard for her willingness to look into these concerns. Ms. Whitman said that the administration has been open to meeting and reviewing data to reach a new understanding.

C. Adjourn

Ms. Whitman moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5-0.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:58 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- March 18, 2025
- April 1, 2025
- May 5, 2025 Monday
- May 20, 2025