



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

May 20, 2025

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	May 20, 2025
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Anna Mitchell Erica Spencer
Absent:	Chris Reed, Chairperson Theresa Whitman
Guests:	
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 6:02 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) –**

Jenn Coleman Michaud – High School Social Studies teacher. Ms. Michaud provided the following comments: “My name is Jennifer Michaud. I have been a Social Studies teacher at MERHS for 15 years. I am here tonight, for the third time this year, to discuss the negative impacts of a high school social studies teacher position being cut as a result of approving the FY26 budget.

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When the FY 26 budget was first proposed to the school committee, it identified a reallocation of a high school teaching position to Memorial School. All of the budget documents reference this reallocation without making it clear to the committee and the public that this is actually a cut of a high school teacher. The term “level services” and “carry forward” have been used in context of the proposed budget, implying that there would be no impact to students when a cut in the high school, impacting course availability, was to be made. The specific high school position to be cut was not identified in the document shared with the public.

At the February 4th budget hearing, I spoke about how I believed that this cut would be from the high school Social Studies department. I believed this because there are two departments in the high school with 6 members and I had a feeling the cut would be made solely based on that factor, without looking at the logistics of what the cut would mean for students. I warned the committee that this cut would have a negative impact on course offerings and class sizes and, in turn, the quality of education our students receive. I also mentioned that a social studies position was cut in the FY 25 budget, meaning that the department would lose 10 sections of course offerings for students over 2 years if this cut came from the Social Studies department.

By the April 1st school committee meeting, the high school teacher being cut had been notified their position would not be available next year if the budget was approved by the towns, and as I predicted, the cut was from the social studies department. I informed the committee of the high interest in social studies courses that the department currently does not have the staff to fill and how eliminating a position from our department would compound this already existing issue. I presented the harms to students of reducing access to both required and elective social studies courses and the overcrowded classrooms this would create, ultimately undermining educational quality and the district’s mission to prepare informed, engaged citizens. I emphasized the importance of elective courses to students' schedules.

I had some time since the last meeting to dig more deeply into the data to show the need for this position to remain.

Student requests for social studies electives grew 32.31% from this school year to next school year. At the same time enrollment could decrease 4.56%. There will be 15 less students in the high school next year based on current enrollment numbers. Students want to fill their schedules with social studies electives. This year, 303 students requested social studies electives and, at max, only 200 will be enrolled. 103 and students will not be able to take a class they want to take. 103 students is the equivalent of one teacher.

I looked at enrollment in Social Studies electives for the Class of 2025 because I was curious how many social studies electives these students ended up taking while at MERHS. Of the 109 graduating seniors who physically attend MERHS, only SEVEN have not taken a social studies elective their junior or senior year, which is when student schedules have the most room for electives. 102 out of 109 have. That’s 93.6% of the

Class of 2025. Of these 109 students, 65 (60%) took 1, 2, or 3 social studies electives their junior year and 86 (79%) took 1, 2 or 3 electives their senior year. None of these elective classes are a semester in length, they are all full year. On top of the 86 seniors taking electives this year, 63 of the 89 juniors (71% of their grade) are also taking 1, 2, or 3 social studies electives. The numbers make it clear that students at MERHS want to take elective classes in social studies. Social studies electives teach analytical thinking skills, empathy and the ability to understand diverse perspectives. They prepare students to become informed, thoughtful, and engaged members of society. There have been a lot of public statements made here the last few months by members of the Class of 2025 about the budget and override. A senior even spoke at Essex Town Meeting about the override. All of these students have taken more than one social studies elective during their education here at MERHS, proof that these classes, and the ability to enroll in them, are creating graduates who have the skills, knowledge and confidence to participate in our democracy. As their AP US Government and Politics teacher, I was especially proud. If a social studies teaching position is cut, future MERHS students will not have the same opportunities the Class of 2025 did to develop these skills.

Hopefully you can understand the multitude of reasons why cutting this position is an error. I have attempted to bring them to your attention with each public comment I made. Once you examine the data, you can see that making a cut to a high school department solely based on how many teachers are in the department is foolish. The high school schedule and desires of students reflect the need for this position to remain, and I feel like I have clearly explained the issues with cutting this position each time I have stood in front of this body.

Part of your agenda this evening is to decide whether or not to take school choice students into the district next year. I heard that you have received many e-mails encouraging you to do so. I also know that at the March 18th school committee meeting you decided as a body that you, and you alone, would decide where any potential school choice revenue is appropriated. I am asking the committee to approve school choice students into the district for the coming school year and to earmark the corresponding funds to keep the social studies position for next school year. You have the power to use this revenue to do what is best for students. Thank you.”

2) Chairperson’s Report – Ms. Koch-Sundquist shared that the MERSD budget passed at both Town Meetings and the Essex ballot.

3) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1073-1075. No payroll warrant
- Minutes for approval: May 5, 2025
- Out of State Travel – Annual Middle School trip to Canobie Lake Park, June 13, 2025. Seventh grade students and teachers will travel by bus to Canobie Lake Park in Salem, NH for their end-of-year celebration.

Mr. Foster moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted a correction in the meeting minutes regarding the call to order time. The corrected minutes will be posted to the MERSD website.

The motion passed unanimously.

4) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) –Mr. Binieris shared that the building committee is working through the process with the OPM for selecting a designer by August. Following the appointment of the designer, the committee will turn its attention to the project scope checklist. Ms. Koch-Sundquist confirmed that the committee has made no decisions yet regarding the building site, design, or whether renovation or new construction will be pursued. Ms. Spencer asked if a timeline exists for these decisions. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the RFS for the designer has been released. Two upcoming meetings are planned for the Essex Building Committee. On June 24, the committee will review the background for the full building project. On July 22, it will examine any concerns. The district has scheduled meetings with the MSBA on July 15 and 29. The MSBA will assign the designer based on the applications received. In the fall, the district will hold community meetings. In September, the designer will go through the checklist from the feasibility study. The superintendent said that the district does not currently have an estimate of when this work will result in recommendations regarding the design, site, etc. of the project. The process involves research and data collection by Dore + Whittier, including determining whether Memorial Elementary School was built to sustain a third level.
- **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Anna Mitchell) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Erica Spencer/Theresa Whitman) – No Report.
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report

5) Student Report – Stella Straub. Ms. Straub attended on behalf of Student Representative, Maggie Whitman. Ms. Straub extended gratitude on behalf of the student body to the voters of Essex and Manchester and the many people who worked to pass the school budget. Ms. Straub also thanked the School Committee for her experience on the SC, which she said was wonderful. Ms. Straub thanked the SC members for their support of the student perspective.

6) Superintendent's Report – General Update. On behalf of the entire faculty and staff of MERSD, Superintendent Beaudoin extended appreciation to the communities of Manchester and Essex and to the many individuals who rose to the challenge of supporting the school budget. The superintendent expressed excitement about moving forward.

- a. Middle High School Schedule Alignment Agreement** – The superintendent complimented the work of Principal Sgroi to design an aligned schedule that

addresses concerns of both middle and high school perspectives. The proposed schedule was approved by META and will be a one-year pilot. The new schedule allows for sharing of world language staff between buildings and will facilitate reinstatement of the grade six world language program.

- i. Aligned 7-Day Rotating Schedule across both middle and high schools
- ii. Maintains the current instructional time and key elements that support student success, including teaming and the Ublock.
- iii. Coordinated class time structures and a common lunch block
- iv. Middle School core classes meet six out of seven days, with one class dropping daily in a consistent rotation
- v. High School maintains its two-period drop schedule, using non-consecutive drops to ensure that each class meets five times per cycle. The schedule avoids long gaps between class meetings.

- b. FY26 Hiring** – Positions were posted following budget passage. These positions, except for one new elementary teacher at Memorial, follow staff resignations characterized as life events, like retirement. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this number could change over the next months if additional staff members notify the district that they are not returning.

Open Positions

- Memorial Elementary Classroom Teacher – 1.0
- MS Principal – 1.0
- MS Adjustment Counselor – 1.0
- MS ACE Teacher – 1.0
- HS Special Education Inclusion Teacher – 1.0
- HS Math Teacher – 1.0
- HS Administrative Assistant – 1.0
- HS Biology Teacher, dual-certified in Chemistry – 1.0
- Middle/High School SPED Team Chair – 1.0
- Districtwide
 - Occupational Therapist (one-year appointment) - 0.8
 - Elementary literacy Specialist (Essex & Memorial) – 0.6
 - Speech & Language Pathologist/Clinical Fellow (LTS) – 1.0
 - Financial Analyst/Payroll – School Accountant – 1.0
 - English Learner (EL) Teacher – 1.0

- c. Interim Middle School Principal** – Maintaining a dedicated middle school principal was contingent on passage of the FY26 budget. The position will be interim, given the current late stage in the budget season. This will allow for a full, high-quality search during the prime hiring window next January – February. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the search for an interim MS principal is already underway. The goal is to appoint a new principal in early July. An update will go out to middle school families this week. The

superintendent expressed concern about the candidate pool given the current dearth of job seekers in the pool.

d. End of Year Celebrations –

- i. May 23: Memorial Day – MMES 8:45 am; EES 9:30 am; M/HS 1:30 pm
- ii. May 28: High School Academic and Athletic Awards and Scholarship Night, 6:00 pm
- iii. May 29:
 - 1. Junior/Senior Prom, leaving from MMES Elementary
 - 2. Elementary Spring Concert at MERHS auditorium, 6:00 pm
- iv. June 5: Baccalaureate, MERHS auditorium, 6:00 pm
- v. June 6: High School graduation, Hyland Field, 4:00 pm
- vi. June 11: EES Moving-On Ceremony, EES, 5:00 pm
- vii. June 16: MMES Crossing the Bridge, MMES, 6:00 pm
- viii. June 17: Middle School Moving-On Ceremony, MERHS auditorium, 6:00 pm

Discussion: Ms. Spencer noted that this year, following the two-week holiday in December, there are conflicts for seniors between sports playoffs and senior week activities. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there is a rule regarding graduation day, which she will forward to SC members, that limits when graduation can occur in relation to the last day of school. The superintendent will also follow up with Ms. Molinari, Athletic Director.

Ms. Mitchell asked if the vacancy in accounting would impact the separation of duties in the district office. Ms. Cresta said that she will be handling the roles of the outgoing analyst while the accounting position is vacant.

Ms. Spencer asked if the district has similar concerns as for the MS principal regarding the applicant pool for its open positions. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she is not yet concerned. However, the superintendent said that Ms. Collins has some reservations about the candidate pool for special education programs.

7) Continued Business –

- a. **FY26 Budget** – The superintendent left room for follow up concerns. There was none.
- b. **FY26 School Choice** – *Vote to Approve*. The school choice vote was delayed during budget approval. The superintendent hopes to update potential families within the next week regarding the program. Superintendent Beaudoin recommended moving forward with additional school choice enrollment for next year. The superintendent presented a revised enrollment plan admitting twelve siblings of current choice students.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist reminded SC members that they voted for the SC to determine how any realized school choice funds would be used. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district has previously used school choice revenue as an income source for the operational budget, meaning it offsets the assessment. The superintendent said she would prefer to use choice revenue to offset the larger deficit.

Ms. Spencer expressed hesitation about applying school choice revenue towards staffing because it can go away. Ms. Cresta said that choice revenue is not used for direct funding but rather as a general offset.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the reduced number of accepted choice students would give the district flexibility next year should it need to reorganize. Previously, the district limited choice enrollment for next year's ninth grade class because of their proportion of choice students already. The superintendent said that the new choice students would bring in an additional \$60K for school of choice revenue next year, and this could offset the increased contributions from reserves for the FY26 budget.

Clarifying Questions: Ms. Spencer noted that choice students were previously accepted into later grades and asked why they are currently planned for the elementary level. Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed that four students are proposed for the elementary level. These students are siblings of current school choice enrollees. Previously, the district was reducing staff at the elementary level. The accepted FY26 budget includes adding a teacher at Memorial Elementary to address class size concerns. Memorial plans to have three sections for grade three and will determine where the additional teacher will be added as enrollment unfolds, likely in July.

Mr. Foster expressed concern about adding school choice students to Memorial where classroom sizes are exceeding benchmarks in some grades and asked if choice students could be enrolled in Essex. Mr. Binieris pointed out that siblings would expect to attend the same school, and Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted that it would be a hardship for parents to drop their students off at two schools. Mr. Foster suggested transferring choice students currently attending Memorial to Essex Elementary where classroom enrollment is lower. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that class size is not an issue in the grades proposed for choice placement next year. Ms. Spencer cautioned against treating choice students differently than resident students.

Ms. Mitchell asked for insight into the number of students withdrawing from the district. Ms. Koch-Sundquist pointed out that families are not required to notify the district by any date. The superintendent said that the percentage is usually around 10%.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to accept the recommended enrollment of School Choice students for FY2026. Mr. Binieris seconded the motion.

Discussion: Mr. Foster stated that the conclusion of the budget for FY2027 will be more of a challenge than the current budget was. Mr. Foster suggested pausing new student enrollment in the school choice program for next year. Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted that EES has a grade with thirteen students per classroom and pointed to projections of flat enrollment growth. Mr. Binieris agreed that the choice additions are not likely to negatively impact class size. Mr. Foster said that it could be an issue if the district ends up cutting staffing following next year's budget process. Ms. Mitchell pointed out that the M/HS schedule alignment will provide additional flexibility for staffing. Ms. Spencer outlined the benefits of adding school choice students to the high school, including expanding student perspectives and increasing course offerings. Although Ms. Spencer understood the district's limitation of choice students to 10% of the total class, Mrs. Spencer said that she did not feel tied to the practice and would support adding to choice enrollment for next year, particularly in ninth grade.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the SC should pause school choice if they do not want the added revenue. However, if school choice proceeds, the process is for the superintendent to determine where the approved number of students will be best placed. The superintendent said that there are factors outside of numbers that are considered, including the number of support staff assigned in each grade.

Ms. Mitchell said that the revenue is minor and suggested pausing school choice while seeing how the schedule alignment unfolds. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the income is multi-year. Ms. Mitchell stated that the district will see budget growth above \$40M and there is a lot of work to be done.

Mr. Binieris noted that the SC was previously considering accepting twenty choice students and the original budget included this revenue. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that, after removing additional school choice income from the budget, additional reserve fund monies were used. The superintendent said that the income from the proposed twelve new students would offset this.

The motion passed unanimously.

c. **School Committee Planning**

i. **End-of-Year/Summer Schedule –**

1. June 3, 2025 – 4:45 pm start for staff retirement reception.
2. June 17, 2025 – rescheduling necessary to account for the annual eighth grade moving on ceremony. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the School Committee is owed an auditor's report. The previous auditor was acquired by a much larger company, and they are behind in submitting the final report. The district has the draft report. Ms. Cresta said that it has been hard to get a response from them, and the district will likely seek a new auditor for the future.

The School Committee plans to add an additional SC meeting on June 10, 2025, at 6:00 pm.

- ii. **Draft 2025-2026 School Committee Meeting Schedule** – Additional discussion regarding the January – March budget meeting sequence. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there is not usually new budget information for the first January SC meeting. The later dates for Town Meetings provide the SC the opportunity to adjust how the January and February meetings are organized. The superintendent suggested a workshop session, School Committee only or a joint session with town representatives, if needed.

Discussion: Mr. Foster suggested thinking beyond the January/February meetings for budget work and pointed to the need for more collaboration work. Mr. Foster advocated for determining, before the close of the current year, how to rethink the budget process to facilitate collaboration.

Ms. Mitchell recommended clarifying the purview of the subcommittees, particularly the finance subcommittee, before new SC members join the committee. Ms. Mitchell said that the finance subcommittee could accomplish a lot over the summer and before the January/February time frame.

Mr. Foster recommended holding an additional number-crunching meeting before the last SC meeting to review the budget process for next year. Ms. Mitchell recommended aligning the SC and town board calendars. The superintendent clarified that this would be additional work versus formal work. Mr. Foster noted that the district has been discussing pursuing a five-year correction and said that the towns need time to determine how to approach that goal. Following the meeting, the SC would have an idea of the timeline leading to budget season. Superintendent Beaudoin will follow up with the town boards. The superintendent noted that town boards are also reorganizing and confirmed that this joint meeting would focus on external work that

needs to be done to come to common ground before next year's budget season.

Mr. Foster asked that several issues be added to the SC calendar. Mr. Foster requested that the DESE report be added. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district is still awaiting receipt of the report. Mr. Foster said that budget work should include a conversation about "right-sizing" the program. Mr. Foster asked for clarification about the district's metrics of excellence and what that means for student outcomes. Mr. Foster asked that the School Committee address issues about student math performance and a perceived inequity between schools. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this issue is scheduled for discussion during the end of year DIP update.

8) School Committee Comment

Ms. Spencer will be leaving the School Committee at the end of the current year. This was her last meeting. Ms. Spencer urged future SC members to ask a lot of question and emphasized that questions do not equal criticism. Questions help ensure that level services do not become status quo. Ms. Spencer urged SC members not to be afraid to disagree and said that she believes the best results come from zealous advocacy from multiple perspectives. Ms. Spencer noted that the district has big-picture questions to consider – re-examining the regional agreement, considering adding to the regional district, and processing how advances in AI will impact delivery of education. Ms. Spencer recommended leveraging local resources to support the district's work. Ms. Spencer expressed appreciation for the support of her family and hoped that they have learned, from her time on the School Committee, the value of community and the importance of fighting for their beliefs. Ms. Spencer said she is grateful to have served on the School Committee.

Ms. Mitchell will be leaving the School Committee at the end of the current year. This was her last meeting. Ms. Mitchell said that she has seen a transformation in the School Committee over the last three years, including an increase in open-mindedness and less judgement. Ms. Mitchell urged the SC to be open to the new voices and ideas that new members bring. Ms. Mitchell recommended utilizing the subcommittees beyond their current role to move things along faster. Ms. Mitchell suggested that the district work to improve its internal communication with staff, noting that faculty have attended SC meetings to appeal for changes to administrative decisions. Ms. Mitchell said that the district should get staff buy-in.

Mr. Foster said that the School Committee also needs to add the superintendent's contract or search to the June agenda. If no search is planned, the SC should consider the superintendent's evaluation. The School Committee settled on June 10, 2025, for an additional SC meeting. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the process for the superintendent's contract would entail the Chair and Co-Chair meeting with the superintendent and bringing the outcome of that meeting to the larger body. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked to confer with Mr. Reed before adding the topic to the agenda.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that her contract is committed through June 2026. The School Committee will need to decide whether to extend her contract beyond that date or hire a new superintendent. Traditionally, this decision is reached over the summer.

C. Adjourn

Ms. Mitchell moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Mr. Foster seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:28 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- June 3, 2025
- June 10, 2025