



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

September 5, 2023

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	September 5, 2023
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Lin Mitchell Chris Reed Erica Spencer
Absent:	
Guests:	
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

A. Call to Order of Business Meeting Open Session– Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

- 1) Public Comment** – none
- 2) Student Report** – none
- 3) Chairman’s Report** – Ms. Whitman asked members of the School Committee to consider and relay their desires for the content of the chairman’s reports. In addition, Ms. Whitman asked for input regarding communication from the chair about community input. Finally, Ms. Whitman asked the SC to provide insight into how members would like SC meetings run – either with strict adherence to a given time

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frame and the accepted agenda or with a looser approach that provides room for varied discussion.

Ms. Whitman shared the opening section of the “School Committee Operating Protocols.” Members will read from successive bullet points at each SC meeting:

“As elected members of the Manchester-Essex School Committee, we, along with the Superintendent, accept the trust that has been placed in us to ensure that the students of our district receive the best possible education. We are continually focused on this goal at all times. We hereby commit to the following when conducting our business. We will:

Support the educational welfare and well-being of all students:

- Represent the needs, interests and achievement of all students in the district and place the students' interests above all others in decisions, while remaining within the limitations of a voter-approved budget.”

4) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP FY24 Vouchers 1010-1012 and FY23 Vouchers 1085-1086
- Minutes for approval: August 8, 2023

Ms. Mitchell moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman and Ms. Mitchell attended the collaboration group meeting. The summary of that meeting has not yet been approved by the group for distribution to the member boards. However, Ms. Whitman reported that, the School Committee’s request that the collaboration group utilize the silent observer format was rejected. The group expressed concern that the meetings would not be compliant with open meeting law. She said that these conversations are taking place anyway, and this group provides a place to discuss together. The collaboration group said that the planned meeting summaries and the three all-board meetings would represent substantial enough change from the previous operating format of the group. The collaboration group asked to run as proposed through January to determine if the changes meet perceived needs for transparency. Ms. Mitchell stated that these meetings will go forward and that the SC would be choosing to either participate with the protocols proposed by the collaboration group or to abandon participation. Ms. Whitman confirmed that the SC can choose to send a representative or not following rejection of the SC proposed format changes. Mr. Foster asked where ownership of the collaboration group lies. Ms. Whitman replied that the sense is that it is Superintendent Beaudoin’s meeting. The superintendent shared that the collaboration

group was formed soon after she stepped into the superintendent position as a place to discuss issues that impact all the groups. Mr. Foster expressed concern that the group is spoken of in a way that makes it sound deliberative, and it may be subject to open meeting laws. He said it should be demonstrated that the group is informative only. Superintendent Beaudoin said that both town administrators opined that the group does not stretch into that realm. However, she stated that the SC could choose to have someone review the issue. Ms. Whitman stated that there was no report back to the collaboration group from other parties. The next SC meeting will be the night of the all-board meeting, with one additional collaboration group meeting before then to prepare for the meeting. Ms. Mitchell expressed her support for seeing how the new format plays out. Ms. Whitman said that, during their session, the collaboration group received district updates from Superintendent Beaudoin, discussed input from the SC, and looked at FY24 and beyond. In regards to the September 19 all-board meeting, the superintendent will set the agenda and the collaboration group will develop the format to ensure all participants have a voice. These norms will be concretized at the September 12 all board meeting and distributed back to the boards. Superintendent Beaudoin said that they will review the format of previous all-board meeting. Mr. Reed asked if precedent exists in other regionalized districts. Ms. Whitman stated that Hamilton-Wenham began all-board meetings two years ago, and they have been very valuable. The superintendent said that smaller regionals are more likely to do all-board meetings since the number of interested parties is manageable.

- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report
 - **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) –Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that they will undertake a Unit B contract with META for teacher aides. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this is the first time a TA contract has been negotiated, so there is not a previous agreement from which to build. She said that a lot of the work on this will fall to META to bring exemplars. Living wages may be part of the discussion. Reportedly, working conditions were a motivator for the desire to have an agreement. Dr. Allison Collins will serve on the team and is familiar with the working conditions of this group as most are under the SPED umbrella. Ms. Spencer said that, following cuts made to TA staff at the conclusion of the school year and some public sentiment, the SC should review the process of contract termination. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district has annual reviews, either by the lead teacher with whom the TA works or by the SPED lead with input from teachers. All TAs are at-will employees, and the number renewed for the following school year is based on the needs of the program plus reviews.
- 6) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin reported that the opening of the school year went smoothly, even with the disruption to parking created by turf field material storage in the parking area.
- a. **School Rankings:** The superintendent shared the news of recent school rankings by Boston Magazine and US News and World Report for Fall 2023. Boston Magazine ranked MERHS the second best high school. This ranking

excluded exam and charter schools. The term “exam schools” typically refers to schools that admit applicants mainly on the basis of performance on entrance exams developed by the schools themselves. Boston Latin, Boston Latin Academy, and the O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science are Massachusetts exam schools. US News and World Report ranked MERSD in the top 5% of high schools nationwide of the 25,000 schools ranked and #28 in Massachusetts and #756 in the nation. Their rankings take into account measures of student growth for underserved communities. A strong showing was MERSD's breadth of curriculum. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that these rankings are just one measure of success and that any achievement of the high school is attributable to the entire K-12 program.

- b. Opening Events, MERSD** - The superintendent stated that the opening staff meetings were successful. Only 16 new staff members joined the district, none of which were expansion positions. Three new administrators were among the new employees. Overall, the district is down 6.5 teachings positions.
- c. District Improvement Plan (DIP)** - The **MERSD Strategic Plan** consists of a district Mission, Vision, Core Values and Vision of the Graduate and informs the development of district and school-based improvement plans and, ultimately, the framework for the development of teacher goals and objectives. Based on the model of continual improvement, improvement plans are cyclical and intended to be a living documents that together provide a road map for growth and improvement. The District Improvement Plan is a three-year action plan targeting the achievement of the strategic priorities identified in the strategic overview. The District Improvement Plan defines the systems, structures, and organizational level work to be done to support the differentiated school level plans which are developed with stakeholder input and collaboration with School Councils. Fiscal Year 2024 has an intended focus on Strategic Initiatives.
- d. Preliminary Enrollment Report** – Total enrollment for MERSD is 1,212, with 661 Manchester students, 466 Essex students, and 63 school choice students. Twenty-two additional students are OOD. An early snapshot of students who moved to private school show only ten leaving MERSD, seven of those were to Essex Tech. This was a decrease in out-going students. Mr. Urbas stated that the district is required to report to DESE where students go when they leave the district. Though not done previously, the district placed calls out to local private schools to ask if they have residents. Ms. Spencer asked about SPED tuition for post-graduate students. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district is financially responsible for these students until they are 22 years of age.

7) Continued Business –

- a. Turf Field Replacement** – Mr. Urbas reported that the first invoices were delayed because of testing delays and the project start. An on-sight meeting was scheduled for the following day, and GMAX testing planned to clear the

field for play. Mr. Urbas anticipated the conclusion of the project at Highland Field within 48 hours. Brook Street is awaiting the final PFAS test, but it is expected any day. Brook Street is on track for completion on September 30, pending testing updates. Gail & Associates will sign off on the final projects. As a result of the turf field projects, the district has exhausted monies from the stabilization fund. The second invoice will be paid using school choice reserves. Ms. Mitchell inquired about actual charges versus the estimated \$800K per field, given that they included buffers. Mr. Urbas replied that the charge orders have been negligible, although there is a small pull out of equipment (\$5-15K) that Gail recommended buying independently to yield a savings to the district. Although it is possible that there will be some savings, it is too soon to tell. Ms. Whitman mentioned neighborhood concerns about work done over weekend hours. Mr. Urbas stated that there is a noise ordinance in town for heavy equipment, and it is only allowed to operate Monday to Saturday from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm. Other work is limited to 9:00 am – 9:00 pm, which is the same as hours of use for the fields. During the rush to complete the Highland Field there were at least two incidents, one over the holiday weekend, outside of these time limits. Mr. Urbas and Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that the requirements are important and should be honored. The contractors have been informed, and it is suggested that the police be notified for further infractions. Mr. Urbas and Superintendent Beaudoin acknowledged the work of Jason Waldron and Cami Molinari to support the construction and MERSD sports teams, as well as the Manchester police for their support of the project.

b. **Budget Updates – Avi Urbas**

- i. **FY23 Budget Update:** reported that the district is ready for closeout of FY23 and preparing for a visit from auditors. The district has not historically been as quick to file as desired, primarily due to understaffing at the district level. Looking at trends from the year, Mr. Urbas said that there is a recurring impact of a decrease in transportation aid. Health insurance and staffing have not changed, with the exception of the impact of staff leaves of absence, which are harder to predict. Out of district expenses for transportation and services continue to rise.
- ii. **Reserves Update –** The School Choice fund is down from FY22 due to the timing of OOD reimbursements from sending communities. \$117K was spent from the fund in July for turf replacement. The Stabilization Fund is currently exhausted due to turf replacement expenses. After the FY23 E&D certification, \$100K is expected to be transferred in from construction interest income. The E&D fund has remained fairly flat and already includes what has been committed for FY24. Facilities Rental is up slightly. The total Reserves balance is estimated at \$3.08 M for FY23 (10.3% of the FY24 budget).
- iii. **Reserves Needs -** Mr. Urbas spoke to projected reserve needs totaling approximately \$1.2M. Needs include the remaining turf field expense

and capital improvements for securing enhancements, accessibility compliance, smartboard replacement for the M/HS to bring them into parity with technology at the elementary schools, and M/HS furniture replacement. Mr. Urbas stated that it will be in the communities best interest for the School Committee to act upon these areas of capital need. In total, these expenses could reduce the reserve balance to 5.6% of the FY25 budget. There is a pending addition of \$131K in construction interest, due to higher returns. Finally, with full town reimbursement of the \$1.2 M for turf field replacement, the reserves would come to \$3.03M or 10.0% of the FY25 budget.

Discussion: Ms. Whitman clarified that the district will receive either full reimbursement from the towns or none. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district has cleared the first round of evaluation for the EES building project, with the first visit scheduled for October. The superintendent said that reserves will be important for feasibility and borrowing. Mr. Urbas added that it is important to keep in mind that the Essex facility may have needs that also tax the reserves, for instance the boiler that has reached the end of its life. Ms. Mitchell notes that the estimated 2.5% decrease in enrollment should be factored into the FY25 budget, and Mr. Urbas said that it is a number always incorporated into the build up budget. Ms. Mitchell stated that, having increased the number of budget to actual reports to three times per year, she would like to see them increased this year to four times. Ms. Mitchell said that quarterly reports are standard in the business world. Mr. Urbas stated that the current focus is to complete reports for E&D certification. The district has limited staff and both reports fall to the same employees. The district does not have the staffing to do both reports in this time frame. The district has recently moved up the audit and E&D certification to October from November. Mr. Urbas said that moving to three budget reports per year was a large undertaking. Other districts that provide three or four per year produce a very abbreviated report without forecasting. Superintendent Beaudoin said that if the SC wants to change the standard for reporting, the district would need to consider software and staff upgrades to meet the requests. Approximately one year would be needed to identify and implement new software. Currently, reports are produced in November, January, and June. The superintendent stated that the current reporting practices of the district meet DESE requirements.

Ms. Mitchell moved to request that the district administration provide four reports per year. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she was struggling to see the benefit of an additional report and asked to see the relevant MASC guideline. Ms. Spencer asked about what component

of a fourth report would inform how to help the school community. Ms. Mitchel said that the fiscal year ends in June and she would like to see final numbers soon after. Mr. Urbas stated that unlike in the business world, the district continues to pay many lingering invoices over the summer months for the previous fiscal year.

Mr. Foster moved the question. Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

The motion failed 1-6, with Ms. Mitchell voting in favor.

- iv. **Preview FY25 Budget** - Preliminary estimate of \$665K deficits at 3.5% assessment/ \$1.3M deficit at 2.5% assessment to Essex. Mr. Urbas stated that the goal is to get the budget down to a total 3.5% assessment. Ms. Mitchell commented that any change to the apportionment agreement would take years and is not a given. Ms. Mitchell asked what is meant by, “level services,” and Ms. Whitman replied that the SC would need to be in agreement about that definition.
- c. **Calendar** – The School Committee was in possession of the current SC meeting calendar which also includes the district program presentation cycle and carry-forward business items for FY24. Ms. Whitman asked the SC members to consider how they would like meetings structured and asked if they should have tight adherence to a timed agenda. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that it is important to have a realistic meeting end time. Ms. Mitchell asked if some items could be tackled in sub-committees. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the rationale for providing sub-committee reports is that these committees are not actionable. Ms. Spencer stated that SC meetings could be more efficient if all meeting materials were reviewed ahead of time. Superintendent Beaudoin cited some of the difficulty in providing all materials by the current goal of the Thursday preceding the SC meeting. Some material is completed after the packets are distributed to members because it is an opportunity for the community to gain the information and to have it entered into the recording for the public record. When this information is not actionable, the administration has proceeded with bringing it to the SC, even if it was not already in the packet. Currently, the SC packets are requiring a large investment of time from the administrative team. The superintendent stated that the SC is currently three meetings behind, requiring updates to the agenda and packets.

Mr. Reed called for a straw poll to set the meeting end time at 9:00 pm. The new end time passed unanimously.

- d. **SC Carry-Over and Planned Commitments** – Ms. Whitman outlined SC commitments for the year. In addition to work with Joint Labor Management Groups (JLMS) around the complaint policy and stipends, negotiation of a teaching assistant contract, agreement for twelve-month employees, and formulating a reserve policy, the SC is also overdue for completion of the

superintendent's evaluation. Ms. Whitman stated that the level of input from the current SC members has increased the time of presentations.

Superintendent Beaudoin recommended that the School Committee engage a facilitator to reach a common understanding and formulate an efficient approach to SC meetings. The superintendent advised reaching out to the MASAC for assistance.

- e. **Parking Lot Items** – Mr. Foster facilitated a document listing SC member issues for consideration as new business. This chart chronicled items that were not addressed during FY23. Mr. Foster stated that the SC should determine which of these items is within the purview of the SC and the priority level of those issues for consideration. The SC examined the issues listed with input from Superintendent Beaudoin about the relevant role of the SC. The complaint policy (JLMS) has been referred to legal counsel. The issue of a librarian for the middle/high school is a programming decision that would come from the joint principals and is not entirely a budget issue. Although the position was cut as part of a budget restructuring, it was done by moving from the librarian model to a “learning commons” model. To date, the middle and high school principal have not asked to change that model. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the Health/Wellness policy is up for review this year. A task force will be formed, and the SC will have a designee on the group. Ms. Koch-Sundquist observed that many of the issues included on the list could be considered as curriculum concerns. Mr. Foster stated that the conversation is about the broader educational program. Superintendent Beaudoin expressed the need for clearly defining roles and the charge of the School Committee. The superintendent said that the district is not built for the level of reporting of larger districts.
- f. **SC Subcommittees** – Ms. Whitman recommended suspending the Finance Subcommittee while continuing to participate in the collaboration group meetings. Mr. Foster asked why the subcommittee is termed “finance” rather than “budget.” The SC does not develop the budget. Mr. Urbas clarified that the finance committee is responsible for bond questions, etc., rather than appropriations and the multi-year budget. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the budget is so central to the work of the SC that it is the business of the entire committee.

Ms. Whitman moved to temporarily suspend the Finance Subcommittee. Mr. Reed seconded the motion

The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Reed and Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed willingness to remain on the Negotiations Subcommittee. Mr. Binieris expressed willingness to join the Facilities Subcommittee.

Ms. Spencer moved to amend the Policy Subcommittee to the Policy & Educational Program Subcommittee. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Whitman and Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that they would want to research and review what other districts have done in this regard and to map out the roles of each subcommittee.

The motion passed 4:3, with Ms. Spencer, Ms. Mitchell, Mr. Foster, and Mr. Binieris voting in favor and Mr. Reed, Ms. Whitman, and Ms. Koch-Sundquist in opposition.

Ms. Whitman moved to appoint Mr. Reed and Ms. Koch-Sundquist to the Negotiation Subcommittee; Ms. Whitman and Mr. Binieris to the Facilities Subcommittee; and Ms. Spencer, Ms. Mitchell, and Mr. Foster to the Policy & Educational Program Subcommittee, with Ms. Whitman and Ms. Mitchell continuing to represent the SC at the collaboration group meeting. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

The subcommittees plan to return to the School Committee with recommendations for their charge.

- g. **School Committee Goals** – Ms. Whitman stated that the SC has still to fulfill its goal to complete the superintendent review. Ms. Whitman said that a form is sent to each SC member for completion. Members already have the end of year updates. All completed documents are sent to Ms. Whitman and Superintendent Beaudoin. Ms. Whitman will compile the full report. The due date was in May, by mutual agreement. The superintendent has allowed for the delay in completion of the review.

- 8) **School Committee Comment** – Mr. Foster stated that Boston University recently published a study on young athletes in high contact sports that he encouraged members to review. Ms. Mitchell asked about an analysis of the school ranking information, and Ms. Whitman said information would be sent to all members via email. Mr. Reed stressed the importance of the SC determining how to approach the budget process as a unified group. He said that the time has passed for debate and that the SC needs to come together. Ms. Whitman said that the time to do that will be following the upcoming all-board meeting. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the next SC meeting, following the all-board meeting, will be on October 3. The superintendent said that the meeting will be devoted to debriefing from that meetings, reviewing the elementary School Improvement Plans, and discussing budget framing.

9) Adjourn

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 9:42 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- September 19, 2023
- October 3, 2023