



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

January 23, 2024

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	January 23, 2024
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Mitchell, Co-Chair Chris Reed Erica Spencer
Absent:	Chris Reed
Guests:	Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Technology
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

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

B. Business Meeting Open Session

- 1) **Chairperson's Report** – Theresa Whitman: Ms. Whitman stated that she had reported out to the Essex Board of Selectmen the previous evening during their quarterly department head meeting. This meeting has a new format. Going forward, the Essex BOS will request that the SC Chair report out to them the following
 - a. Recent Achievements
 - b. Obstacles to Current Goals and Objectives
 - c. Expectations for the Coming Quarter
 - d. Long Term Goals on the Horizon
 - e. Concerns

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- f. Recent Grants and an explanation of whether the Town of Essex will assume additional costs when the grant expires.

Ms. Whitman intends to send out an email to SC members prior to the next quarterly Essex BOS department heads meeting for participation in populating the responses. At the current meeting, the main topics were that EES was accepted into the MSBA's Eligibility period. The Essex BOS voted to include an article seeking funding for the feasibility study. Chair Ruth Pereen stated that she would like the project to consider a relocation of the school site to 11 Apple Street. The group covered the upcoming principal search for EES and long-term budget approval. The board also reiterated their ask for an MERSD operation budget with 2.5% growth. Ms. Whitman discussed ongoing negotiations with paraprofessionals and the School Committee's interest in pursuing a learning exercise, guided by the Mass Association of Regional School, in regards to apportionment, and Ms. Whitman shared the news about the Arts and Culture Grant awarded to the high school. Ms. Whitman brought up participation in future collaboration group meetings as an area of concern and stated that the meetings are an opportunity for relationship building and for the public to see those relationships. The scope of the meeting did not allow for further discussion on that topic. Ms. Whitman said that she and the superintendent met with Ms. Ann Harrison and a community member regarding advertising revenue, and the topic will be included on the February 6 SC agenda. Ms. Whitman stated that the Finance Committees of both towns plan to hold a joint meeting on January 24, 2024 to discuss long-term strategies for funding the school district. Members of the School Committee are able to attend.

Ms. Whitman provided an update on community engagement efforts. She stated that a possible line of outreach is to utilize the District newsletter. As a mid-range target, Ms. Whitman and Ms. Koch-Sundquist stopped by the senior center in Essex. Regarding listening sessions, Ms. Whitman proposed, after adoption of the budget, scheduling weekly listening/engagement sessions at community locations. Ms. Whitman asked SC members to propose locations for these meetings. In addition, the SC will hold office hours prior to upcoming SC meetings.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist read from the Massachusetts Association of School Committees Code of Ethics, "The acceptance of a code of ethics implies the understanding of the basic organization of school committees under the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The oath of office of a School Committee member binds the individual member to adherence to those state laws that apply to school committees since school committees are agencies of the state. This code of ethics delineates three areas of responsibility of school committee members in addition to that implied above.

1. Community Responsibility
2. Responsibility to School Administration
3. Relationships to Fellow School Committees

2) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1042-1044
- Minutes for approval: January 9, 2024

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Foster seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

3) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/John Binieris) – No Report
- **Finance Committee** (Anna Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the negotiations team met on January 16 and will meet again on February 1. Superintendent Beaudoin said that an executive session should be planned beforehand.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – Ms. Spencer provided an update of the policies under consideration by the subcommittee:
 - Class Size – they are continuing to discuss the utility of the class size policy. The next step is for the superintendent to request a budget assessment from HS principal Julie Sgroi. Ms. Spencer that the matter is extremely complex. It is not a simple matter of eliminating all courses with fewer than 10 students. Many cannot be eliminated because of legal requirements. For other classes, any class that is eliminated has a cascading effect. Where will those students go? Will their presence in another class split it into two sections?
 - Reserves – The subcommittee would like to first report on what is considered the reserves, and has learned that there have been different revolving funds considered “reserves” at different times in history. Superintendent Beaudoin is preparing a list of capital needs that will impact the development of policy, as will the pending reimbursement from the turf field project.
 - Advertising – There is an existing policy. A community member plans to present an advertising proposal to the SC shortly. Current policy allows for consideration on a case by case basis. The question will be whether the policy requires alignment or adjustment going forward.
 - Middle School Sports Participation – A community member requested a review of the existing policy to allow participation by private middle school students on MERMS sports teams, with stipulations. The next step is to meet with middle school administration to understand the benefits and challenges of admitting students outside of the middle school onto the sports teams.
 - MASC – Mr. Foster has taken on this update and circulated it to SC members.
 - Graduation Policy – The issue was taken under consideration and an update to the graduation policy was voted upon at the last SC meeting.

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked if it is reasonable for the policy subcommittee to tackle this entire list by year's end. Mr. Foster said that demands on the superintendent's time are the limiting factor, particularly with the business manager's post pending. The class size policy requires administrative assistance to run scenarios. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the unfolding of the budget season will dictate the time that she is able to devote to issues of policy exploration, but she is hopeful that she will be able to get through these issues with the members of the subcommittee.

- 4) **Superintendent's Report** – Pam Beaudoin. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that a hybrid focus group was planned for the following day at Essex Elementary School for their principal search. The superintendent was contacted by DESE because our district had reached out regarding consideration for tiered focus monitoring and is already in the NEASC Accreditation process at the Elementary Level. Ms. Spencer asked that the list of items covered by a DESE review be re-circulated to see if any of them would be likely to satisfy local calls for a voluntary audit. Mr. Foster said he would send that information out.
- 5) **Continued Business** – District Improvement Action Steps: Heather Leonard. Ms. Leonard stated that she looked back at some of the items mentioned in the fall in order to review their status for the school committee.
 - a. Curriculum Mapping: K-5 ELA Mapping- working both horizontally and then able to look at the vertical snap shot of alignment as well.
 - b. Analysis & action planning for impact of attendance on select students/populations – more work will be shared out with the SC as action step planning is achieved.
 - i. HS Attendance Working Group
 - ii. DESE's Chronic Absenteeism Recovery Initiative
 - c. Curriculum Review Processes
 - i. History/Social Science – Investigating History curriculum grant from DESE. Last curriculum review meeting was K-12. Starting to curate what have and where need to go to meet what the curriculum frameworks identify.
 - ii. Arts Council has been launched – opportunity through DESE grant. Implement Arts and Culture Vitality Index to measure health of opportunities in our community.
 - iii. Wellness Review – partnership with educators and community members. Just sent out communication seeking community involvement.
 - d. Mid-Year I-Ready Diagnostic Assessment Window (K-8) – Occurs in both mathematics and reading and is followed by data meetings with educators. At the middle school, discussions happen with students to discuss what data means for them as learners, while at the elementary level the MTSS team connects with grade-level teachers, across schools, to dig into what tier one instruction looks like and to identify students for tier two intervention.

- e. High Dosage Tutoring Grant – Essex and Middle School. Ms. Leonard stated that she is seeking permission from DESE for expansion of tutoring to other content areas and also exploring if it is possible to use ESSER funds to do so.

Questions: Mr. Foster asked about insight into the issue of chronic absenteeism. Ms. Leonard stated that some on the high school working group have been pursuing the issue, which DESE seems very concerned with, since the fall and attended a conference around the initiative. DESE's initiative is K-12, although the working group is focused on the high school. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this may be a topic for follow up and said that DESE often provides funding when they are launching a new requirement. They seem poised to increase the importance of student attendance. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if parents would see I-ready scores coming home. Ms. Leonard said they would be emailed home before February vacation.

Ms. Whitman asked that the SC consider accepting online public comment as well as in-person. Mr. Foster stated that it is fair to honor the contributions of online participants. Mr. Binieris suggested taking in-person comments first. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the agenda should contain a clear message about how participant commentary will be accepted and prioritizing in-person. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the SC may want to consider the purpose of hybrid meetings and include that information on the posting. Mr. Foster pointed out that a public hearing is not a typical business meeting. Ms. Whitman summarized that the comments would have a round of in-person and then would be opened to a round of online viewer comment. If additional time is required, the SC may vote to extend the meeting.

C. Public Hearing – Ms. Whitman stated that, unlike regular School Committee business meetings, the public hearing format allows for back and forth engagement between members of the SC and commenters. The hearing will open with a presentation by the superintendent, followed by comment from town partners, with Manchester speaking first, followed by a representative from Essex, as determined by a coin toss prior to the meeting. Ms. Whitman reminded attendees that details of public comment are available under School Committee policy BEDH and BEDH-E.

- a. **Presentation of FY25 Budget for 2023-2024** – Superintendent Beaudoin referred to the budget packet available on the MERSD website. No movement on the budget has occurred since the last presentation, and there has been no change to the key drivers of personnel, health care, of special education (including out of district placement). Health care estimates for renewal remain at 14%, and the final number is not expected to come in until March. The superintendent reminded attendees that personnel obligations alone drive the operational budget the most of the way beyond compliance with a 2.5% limit on growth. This is without investment in the educational program. To achieve program reinvestment, the district has long relied on reorganization and efficiency. Superintendent Beaudoin recommended adopting the Carry Forward Budget with 3.4% growth. The superintendent described this budget as delivering level services to students, providing the same program scope, class size, course offerings, and services as

FY24 and level staffing. Superintendent Beaudoin also stated that the Carry Forward Budget maintains flexibility to manage key drivers that are still based on early assumptions. It also allows for the reorganization of current resources to fund principal and director staffing requests in support of district and school improvement goals and identified student achievement needs.

b. Public Comment (Guidelines for public comment can be found in sections BEDH and BEDH-E of the School Committee policy manual)

Ann Harrison, Manchester Select Board, 13 Tuck's Point Road, Manchester. Ms. Harrison said that she had not seen the relationship between the two towns this strained in all of her time working with the BOS and previously as a School Committee member, and she urged the partners to prioritize financing of the district going forward.

Ruth Pereen, Essex Board of Selectmen, 15 Lufkin Street, Essex. Ms. Pereen reiterated that the Town of Essex has been consistent in its desire to limit growth to 2.5% since the all-board meeting. Ms. Pereen said that their position remains the same, as stated at their board meeting the previous evening.

Jodi Harris, Essex Finance Committee, 21 R Spring Street, Essex. Ms. Harris stated that Essex does not have excess capacity to fall back on and reminded those present that the override failed last year in Essex. The Carry Forward budget recommended by the superintendent represents a \$500K increase to the Town of Essex. At 2.5%, the increase to the town is \$365K. Ms. Harris said that last year, following the failed override, the town used its accrued excess capacity. They are now in a tough position. Ms. Harris stated that they could end up with nothing remaining for town department expenses.

Brian Gressler, 30 Choate Street, Essex. Mr. Gressler thanked the district leaders for being thoughtful stewards and said that it is clear how well this district is managed when comparing it with other districts. Over the last ten years, MERSD budgets have grown an average of 3.45% yearly. Mr. Gressler stated that the US Census puts the average national growth at 4.03% from FY13-FY22. Mr. Gressler shared favorable statistics with local comparable districts, as well, including Essex Tech which has risen 4.68%. Mr. Gressler stated that the numbers indicate that MERSD has worked to be more efficient than other districts. Mr. Gressler called on the School Committee to maintain its focus on students.

Robbie Bilsbury, 126 Eastern Avenue, Essex. Mr. Bilsbury said that he has taught Spanish at the high school since 1998 and that it is sad to watch how the budget crisis affects kids. Mr. Bilsbury said that the students deserve the best educational efforts that the community can provide. Last spring, the district provided a glimpse of what strict adherence to a 2.5% growth would look like in terms of program cuts. Mr. Bilsbury stated that what is worse is that the district is setting itself up for far worse to come in the future by adopting a 2.5% budget and taking on a lower base budget moving forward. Mr.

Bilsbury said that there has not been a budget override in many years. He urged the community to set the budget straight with a small override this year.

August Capotosto, 15 Apple Street, Essex. Ms. Capotosto is a sophomore at MERHS and said she wanted to show how proposed changes to the high school schedule will adversely impact students. The district has a task force looking to align the middle and high school schedules in order to explore sharing staffing to maximize efficiency. Ms. Capotosto said that the proposed reduction of the high school U block would diminish the only the time allotted for some courses, including chorus and band. The U block is the time available to meet with teachers for extra help or to make up work or a test when a student has been out sick. Ms. Capotosto also said that the length of the high school class period is crucial to the lab experience. In addition, Ms. Capotosto expressed concern about having six classes in a day to match the middle school. She stated that if she missed school because of illness, she would not have the U block available to make up work, could not stay after school because she does not have a car and the late bus was previously eliminated, and could not make up a 60 minutes test.

Sarah Stone, 69 Pleasant Street, Manchester. Ms. Stone shared the conclusions of a January 11, 2024 Boston Globe article discussing the detrimental impact of outdated teaching modes of reading. The article emphasized the need for teachers to stay current in their field and extolled the role of instructional coaches in aiding teachers to adjust their instruction. Educators need experts on best practices. Ms. Stone pled for investment in a budget that includes instructional coaches and reinvestment in the library program at the middle and high schools.

Wyeth Takayesu, 101 Martin Street, Essex. Mr. Takayesu is a recent graduate currently working as a foreign language aide at the high school. He stated that he was saddened by the disappearance of programs that were there for him as a student and instrumental in his current pursuit of a career in education. Mr. Takayesu mentioned the library program and late bus and said he was sad that things were not the way they were when he was a student. He worried about the trend continuing.

Jack Cummins, 50 Walker Road, Manchester. Mr. Cummins is a current high school student and spoke in support of the French program and against any consideration of the loss of the program. Mr. Cummins painted a vivid portrait of the vibrant world that Mrs. Coshow and Mrs. Fortunato craft for their students and their contributions outside of the foreign language department.

Antonella Muniz, 20 Harlow Street, Essex. Ms. Muniz stated it is her understanding that the district is contributing \$350K from reserves in order to diminish the budget gap and fund principal requests for instructional coaches. Ms. Muniz asked how the use of instructional coaches will be determined and whether the teachers receiving coaching will be asked where they feel they need supports. Ms. Muniz asked how Title 1 funds are spent at Essex Elementary and whether it is enough to impact student achievement. Ms. Muniz asked if the elementary school teachers have been consulted to align the

elementary school curriculums so that they are matched and to identify where they see holes. Ms. Muniz said that in past budget presentations there were school by school pages that listed staffing and operating budget numbers. She asked why they are missing this year. Ms. Muniz noted that school psychologist/adjustment counselor line lists 1.6 for Memorial and 1.4 FTE for Essex. She asked if this was based solely on the enrollment at each school or if it was need-based. Ms. Muniz cited chronic absenteeism at Essex Elementary and said that mental health issues have been linked to that phenomena. She stated that resources should be allocated to the population that needs it the most. Ms. Muniz also pointed to the demographics of the member towns, asking about trends over the last ten years. Ms. Muniz asked if families tend to move out of the district after their families graduate high school. Ms. Muniz stated that she believes that Essex is not willing to fund an override because they have not seen a return on their investment at the elementary school level. She questioned whether MCAS scores would have been any different if the override had passed last year. Ms. Muniz suggested that the district should put forth an additional \$150K as a signal to Essex residents that the district would focus on Essex student achievement, that the district should then wait for a year or two, and that then perhaps Essex would consider an override.

Ms. Whitman opened up responses from members of the SC and administration. Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to the progress that the elementary schools have made over the last few years in striving to create an aligned elementary curriculum for the two elementary schools. Prior to Covid, the district engaged in moving to the Science of Reading program. The principals were also tasked with creating a district-wide master schedule so that all reading and math specialists could be platooned and go between the elementary schools to provide support where they are needed. The next phase is the NEASC accreditation. Both schools are working together, starting with self-assessment and alignment. The NEASC organization will provide recommendations.

Curriculum Director Heather Leonard stated that the district is exploring setting up a structure that enables instructional coaches to work with staff in the “all, some, and few” model that mirrors what is done with students. All staff would receive professional learning in-district through professional development days to align their craft with current field research and evidence-based practice. Instructional Coaches would work more closely with “some” groups of staff, for instance a particular grade level or new group of teachers. Finally, coaches could work with individual teachers, based either on data or through self-identified interest. Ms. Leonard spoke about curriculum alignment between the elementary schools. The elementary schools use the curriculum resource for literacy Wonders 2020, which is aligned with DESE standards. Teachers work together during district professional development days to make sure that students are experiencing similar pacing of material. Staff identify gaps and this analysis goes to the curriculum leadership team (composed of teachers across grades) to identify where additional support is needed. In the next week and a half, elementary staff will meet across the district to review I-ready data to look at places of strength and places of need. They share their practices and create tier one goals collaboratively.

Principal McAdams stated that Title 1 was a Civil Rights term. There is a common misconception that funds that come to a school through Title 1 are used for services that can only be accessed by students of a certain poverty level. There are a number of ways to receive the funding and utilize it. MERSD has used these funds, totaling \$47.7K, (which must sit on top of the budget) to partially fund the MTSS team as a district team.

Superintendent Beaudoin referenced the staffing report contained in the budget material and stated that Memorial Elementary has 60 more students than Essex Elementary. Memorial carries the pre-kindergarten program and houses two other district-wide special education programs. For this reason, there is a jump in the number of special education teachers housed at Memorial. These programs carry a high number of teacher's aides to meet one to one requirements, driving up the staffing numbers. The school psychologist and adjustment counselor line referred to by Ms. Muniz refers to one adjustment counselor for each school (two total) and one school psychologist who is split between the two schools based on need. The school psychologist's primary role is evaluation and assisting identification of students for special education services. Day to day support of students is the role of the adjustment counselor.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist clarified that the School Committee cannot give money to just one town. Ms. Koch-Sundquist estimated that the apportionment formula would require the School Committee to divert over a million dollars of reserve funds to the operational budget in order to meet Ms. Muniz request for \$500K to Essex,

Katie Vandt, 171 Western Avenue, Essex. Ms. Vandt stated that one override would not fix the long-term problem and that it would be necessary again. Ms. Vandt asked about a long-term solution. Ms. Vandt stated that the budget issues are systemic and suggested that, in order to gain perspective, it is necessary to look at what other districts are doing. Ms. Vandt wondered if anyone has followed up on some of the ideas about creative approaches to teaching in the district and advocated for using volunteers to teach languages and other skills to students.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester. Ms. Banks said that she was happy to see that the recommended budget contained no additional cuts after the path that the district has been on for the last two years. She said she would like to see the add backs of world language, middle/high school library, and the Essex late bus, but that given the limitations of the towns the recommended budget is reasonable. Ms. Banks was relieved to see support for instructional coaches in the budget to support teachers in their work with students, particularly around reading and writing because they were identified as a need in recent assessments at both elementary schools. Ms. Banks voiced support for increasing school choice enrollment and for addressing Essex building needs. As a Manchester resident, she voiced her support for getting Essex up to speed and cautioned the SC against dipping into reserves given that robust reserves will be an asset as the district looks to fund an Essex building project. Ms. Banks stated that it is unreasonable to keep growth to 2.5% because it will result in massive cuts. Ms. Banks said that the district cannot run on clubs and volunteer labor and that the towns must come at the

problem as partners. Ms. Banks stated that the demographic differences between the communities are real and said it is worth looking at the apportionment formula to ensure that both towns can shoulder the cost. Ms. Banks also stated that Essex should look at tax relief programs.

Ms. Whitman opened comment to online participants. None entered their information into the chat for recognition.

D. Adjourn

Ms. Spencer moved to adjourn the School Committee meeting. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:32 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- February 6, 2024
- March 5, 2024
- March 19, 2024