



**SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

**BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES February 2, 2021**

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	February 2, 2021
<b>Location:</b>	Via Webex
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Sarah Wolf, Chairperson Shannon Erdmann, Vice Chairperson Ken Warnock Ann Cameron Eric Bourke Theresa Whitman Matthew Harrington
<b>Absent:</b>	
<b>Guests:</b>	John Willis, Principal Memorial School, Jennifer Roberts, Principal, Essex Elementary School, Alison Collins, Director of Student Services, Julie Riley, Director of Curriculum & Instructional Technology
<b>Recorded by:</b>	Gail Hunter

**AGENDA**

- A. Call to Order** – Ms. Wolf called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.
- B. Business Meeting Open Session**
  - 1) Public Comment** –

Andrew Burnett – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher, EES – Mr. Burnett spoke on behalf of the Teacher’s Association with regard to full time in person learning for grades K-2. META does not believe it is prudent to return to school prior to teachers being vaccinated and with no testing plan in place for K-5 staff and students. Mr. Burnett stated returning to full time for grades K-2 following February break when many families likely travelled and with a resurgence of the virus projected for March is dangerous. Many dedicated teachers have taken unpaid leave and support staff are being asked to act as substitute teachers reducing the quality of education students are receiving. Mr. Burnett pointed out remote learning works for many students and asked for patience and understanding prior to returning to school full time.

Kate Koch-Sandquist – Essex – Ms. Sandquist stated she does not agree with the timeline for students returning to school and recommended returning special education and students not successfully engaging in asynchronous learning to school first. Ms. Koch-Sandquist believes special education students are suffering disproportionately to students at all grade levels.

Bernard Romanowski – Manchester – Mr. Romanowski stated he was happy to see that time in the elementary schools was being expanded. He recommended the School Committee revisit 6’ of social distancing moving to the Department of Education’s recommended 3’ of social distancing. He sees the 6’ as a barrier to in person learning and believes good hygiene practices have resulted in no person school transmissions and 3’ is safe for teachers and students.

Allison Ste. Marie – Manchester – Dr. Ste. Marie expressed concern for MHS students stating as a pediatrician she is seeing evidence of mental illness among adolescents and tweens in the emergency room and is encouraged to see elementary students returning to more in person learning time. She would like to see the District increase in person time for all students in outdoor spaces as spring approaches. Dr. Ste. Marie stated there is no hard stop to the virus and we need to prioritize in person learning for all students.

## **2) Chairman’s Report –**

Ms. Wolf stated the School Committee had received a text from Tina Lane. Ms. Lane’s text will be included at the end of this evening’s minutes and posted on the School Committee website. Ms. Wolf thanked all 125 people joining the meeting this evening and encouraged all to remain for the District budget discussion following the expansion of in person learning for K-2 students. The Committee will adopt a budget this evening that will impact educational programs near and long term. It is the School Committee’s goal to manage the budget for parents, students and to provide the best possible education.

## **3) Student Report – Lukas Shan**

Lukas indicated students were remote today and hybrid, based on feedback is going smoothly. He indicated some students had expressed safety concerns. Between now and the first meeting in March Lukas plans to collect more information and provide a full report. Ms. Wolf asked Lukas if he and other students were excited about choosing classes for next year. Lukas stated he was starting to make class selections and agreed it was an exciting time.

#### 4) Consent Agenda

- Minutes –
- Acceptance of Warrants, Voucher #033

Consent agenda was amended to include minutes for 1.26.21

*Ms. Cameron moved to approve the Consent Agenda (and minutes as edited), Ms. Erdmann seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

Ms. Cameron asked about the invoice from Axis Computer Networks. Mr. Urbas stated the District was using Axis to maintain stability during the transition process the result of an employee resigning. The technological needs of the District have been growing greater than normal and the District is using Axis' expertise to support the infrastructure, integrations and planning for data administration around Aspen and State Reporting. It is anticipated Axis will wrap up the process in spring.

#### 5) Sub-Committee Reports

- Elementary Facilities/MSBC (Ann Cameron/Shannon Erdmann) – No Report
- Finance Committee (Anne Cameron/Shannon Erdmann) – No Report
- Policy Committee (Eric Bourke/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- Negotiation Team (Sarah Wolf/Ken Warnock) – Report

The Negotiation Team continues to meet with META, Ms. Wolf stated she and Mr. Warnock enjoy working with META leadership to address the needs of teachers.

#### 6) Superintendent's Report –

##### Hybrid Transition Indicators Monthly Report

- ❖ COVID Metrics – No in-school spread identified – Essex in yellow and Manchester in red
- ❖ Testing
  - Accepted into DESE Testing Group
  - Paired with Ginkgo – awaiting contact on delivery dates
    - District has already completed an initial training
  - Free through the end of March then cost shifts to District
    - Cost through end of school year approximately \$35K
    - CARES funds will be source of funding
  - Principals & Nurses Coordinating
    - Principals logistics
    - Nurses Medical
  - Target start week of February 22, 2021
- ❖ Staffing
  - Ongoing challenge to maintain substitute pool and coverage

- ❖ Assessing financial implications of secondary staffing ramp up – estimated at between \$250K to \$300K

Superintendent Beaudoin stated Fall II athletics has been approved by MIAA with football scheduled to start following February vacation. The District plans to accept registrations and determine interest following registration pointing out no athletic season has started on time this past school year. Superintendent Beaudoin stated because the MHS is in hybrid it is not imperative for the School Committee to approve, however the Committee retains the right to weight in.

Ms. Erdmann asked if track was slated to start in Fall II. Superintendent Beaudoin stated she was reporting on football only but will update with additional information as it becomes available. Ms. Cameron confirmed football would be played outside. Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed it will. Ms. Cameron asked if hockey was the only sport the District had a problem with. Superintendent Beaudoin stated it was.

Ms. Wolf stated Mr. Edgett, Athletic Director, was doing a great job and now that the MHS are in hybrid she recommended the Committee let the decision on football stand. Superintendent Beaudoin stated sports is a positive outlet and supports the social emotional health of students. Students have done well with compliance and are managing well.

## **7) Continued Business**

- **Elementary Hybrid In Person Expansion Proposal**

### Increased In Person Time – Early Elementary – WHY

- Our youngest students struggle the most with the remote learning model
- K-2 Students can return to in person under current social distancing and safety guidelines
- Both elementary schools can reconfigure space to accommodate the shift

### Recommendation

Return K-2 at 6”

- Remote Monday, Tuesday to Friday all students Hyflex
- Assumes Home School students complete the year in current mode
- Plan accounts for MERSD Remote only students returning when families choose

Facilities work to be done

- Move 4 classrooms at EES, Reconfigure technology/electrical in two of the rooms impacted, Reconfigure EES Cafeteria to accommodate additional students – add desks – remove stored items to open up more space

- Reconfigure MMES Cafeteria to accommodate additional students, add desks, open wall for additional café space, gym goes to half for class. Find storage space, Find or purchase furniture (40 desks)

Bus route reconfiguration to account for full K-2 attendance

Transition Schedule – Friday 2/12 – K-1 Asynchronous (Essex), Monday 2/22 – Asynchronous K-2 (EES/Memorial)

### What About Grades 3-5?

- We do not have space to return grades 3-5 at 6' social distancing
- We can return grades 3-5 when conditions allow for School Committee to safely consider approving 4-5.5 social distancing – Student testing K-5, Revised CDC/DESE Guidance – DESE Order, Teachers able to receive vaccinations, Local Medical/DPH endorsement
- If conditions do not allow for the reduction of social distancing different measures will need to be studied and for fall 2021, For Example: Classroom Trailers, School reassignments, OOD rental space.

Ms. Cameron asked about the return on investment, expressed concern that the number of children returning would not warrant the expense, pointed out \$600+ had already been spent on hybrid and the District is in a budget crisis. Superintendent Beaudoin stated Mr. Waldron will reconfigure the buildings using current in house staff, there will not be a significant cost. The only cost will likely be minor electrical work.

Ms. Cameron asked about Ms. Koch-Sandquist's suggestion to bring back students with special needs and IEP's. Ms. Wolf asked how many high needs students were in school. Dr. Collins responded students who are primarily in specialized programs have been brought back. Students who are primarily included in general education classes have had the option to come in or access services remotely. The higher needs students come in, while some MHS students choose not to come in when their peers are not coming in. Dr. Collins did not have a number.

Ms. Wolf asked about students who were not accessing remote learning and were they being reached contacted. Dr. Collins stated Dr. Riley could respond to that more fully but there is a lot of follow up and special circumstances are prioritized around students not accessing remotely.

Ms. Cameron asked if the cost for buses would result in a cost increase. Mr. Urbas indicated buses are in the FY21 budget. Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed there were no additional costs for buses.

Ms. Whitman asked about expectations for families who were home schooling and asked if the District could tell these families they cannot come back. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the District set an expectation that families home schooling were withdrawing for the year. Ms. Whitman believes the families made a choice and many families anticipated returning in the fall. The District was extremely supportive of the families. At the time families made the decision to home school the option of returning to school four days a week was not on the table. Ms.

Whitman would like the District to take a closer look at the number of children returning to school four days a week and ask for a commitment from the elementary school families if 90% are committed but only 50% are showing up there is a possibility some home school families would be able to return to school.

Mr. Warnock stated he is in favor of additional consideration for home school families. We have changed direction from where we started in the summer. Ms. Wolf agrees that Ms. Whitman has a good point and believes the District should reach out to home school families.

Ms. Wolf asked Superintendent Beaudoin to share the slide from the Advisory Group presentation about Districts and social distancing. Ms. Wolf indicated that Beverly and Gloucester were the schools most people were referencing around social distancing and noted those schools were only in class in the morning students went home for lunch.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the Department of Education conducted an informal survey of districts and received 84 responses to social distancing question.

**January 2021 MA Social Distancing Survey** – 46.4% of School Districts are at 6 feet, 8.3% are at 5 feet and 27.4% are at 3-4 feet. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the majority of school districts are at 6 feet. The conversation about moving from 6 feet to 5.5 feet (or less) becomes more essential when the District is looking at blended models and asks could we live with a variation to grow our process and program.

Ms. Whitman asked about teacher's sentiment that was expressed this evening. Ms. Wolf stated it was expressed more strongly this evening. When the Negotiation Team met with META leaders K-5 student testing was not recommended and K-2 students were a priority because of the difficulty reaching this age group and many teachers were desperate to have kids in the classroom.

Principal Roberts agreed with what Ms. Wolf said. She hears varying things from teachers around stress and safety concerns. However, many teachers are excited to get the students back in their classrooms. Principal Willis stated all teachers have struggled over the year and teachers express different concerns. He is impressed with how hard teachers are working every day and how challenging it is to juggle students at home and in the classroom.

Mr. Warnock stated the School Committee is the employer and it is a concern for us that everyone goes home in the same condition they arrived. Health and safety concerns are a priority and he wants teachers to feel as comfortable as they can that the Committee is making right decisions for kids and staff.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated it was worth mentioning that the Testing Team formed in November 2020 with two Elementary School nurses, MHS nurses, local BOH and Dr. Graves the school doctor recommended testing for grades 6-12 but not for elementary students. This informed expert body did not believe grades K-5 were heavy transmitters and the process for testing the younger group was more difficult.

Mr. Harrington believes it would be helpful prior to discussing how teachers feel for the District to conduct an informal survey of staff for data around how they are feeling.

Superintendent Beaudoin asked to return to the Elementary Schools and the addition of 4 full time days for grades K-2. This is the next step forward to grow the program within current measures. Ms. Wolf stated she believes it is amazing that the District figured out how to accomplish the goal. Ms. Whitman and Mr. Bourke agreed with moving forward with the recommendation.

*Ms. Cameron moved to approve increased in person time for early elementary students grades K-2, Mr. Warnock seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

Ms. Whitman asked to amend the motion to include consideration for home school families. Superintendent Beaudoin stated if all home school families returned in Essex the District could not go forward with the plan. Ms. Wolf suggested reaching out and determining how many students would be coming in four days a week.

Ms. Whitman asked if we assume all students returning in K-2. Superintendent Beaudoin stated we have a commitment to all families. Families in private schools and families home schooling. Ms. Erdmann asked if there is no room at EES and there is room at Memorial could the K-2 students go to Memorial. Mr. Warnock asked what would happen if 12 students moved in grade 2. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that may trigger reverting to hybrid. There is no easy solution.

Ms. Cameron suggested moving forward with the plan and studying if the District can accommodate home school students. She does not want to hold back on a positive move forward. Ms. Wolf stated we cannot assume all home school students will return or all K-2 students will come in.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the District had agreed to provide for students to return at the trimester break. The second trimester ends on April 6 between now and April 6 we will determine which students are returning. The motion was not amended. Ms. Whitman agreed to continue the conversation and explore options.

- **Pre-Kindergarten New Facility Peer Pal Expansion Plan**

What is Integrated Preschool?

- Program where children of all abilities have an opportunity to learn socially, intellectually and physically.
- Developmentally appropriate and nurturing environment
- Students with and without disabilities
- Highly skilled staff – teacher, RBT, therapists
- Peer pals integral to program

Why Expand the Program?

History – Program consolidated in FY13 to gain efficiencies, Capacity for peer pals 16-20, declining enrollment with half days partial week model – 6 Peer Pals FY21 and 5 Peer Pals FY20

Rational for expansion – Increase hours to support working families and align with elementary, Utilize new dedicated preschool classrooms and expand enrollment to defray overall costs

Proposal – Two classes three and four year old’s – Morning and Full Day Options – Classroom Staff and Structure 1 Lead Teacher, Teaching assistant/Registered behavior technician (full day) Shared monitor (full day) Specialists – Occupational therapist, Physical therapist and Speech pathologist

Tuition Structure for Peer Pals Monthly Costs – Half Days 2 days per week, \$350, 3 days per week \$525 and 5 days per week \$875 – Full day 8:30 to 3:00, 2 days \$500, 3 days \$750 and 5 days \$1,250

Proposed Tuition is 12% less per hour of service

Target enrolment offsets \$37.5K of current costs for special ed program (25% reduction)

Ms. Erdmann asked how tuition compared to local pre schools who offer full day. Mr. Urbas stated the costs were below some programs but low enough to create a savings. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the tuition was below area preschools but high compared to public schools. She recognizes the proposal as a good start with strong potential to offset costs as the District builds capacity. The current program is in preparation for universal pre-K.

Ms. Cameron stated this is wonderful to hear and is responsive to parents who work. Ms. Cameron stated the program teaches kids with special needs and identifies kids who may have special needs. Ms. Cameron suggested adjusting tuition to reflect the level of skilled teachers. Dr. Collins stated the one-on-one insures students on I.E.P.s are getting the services required. She feels strongly the District is in a good place for pricing.

The Department of Ed determines class size of 15 for one teacher and one TA, 50% or less students with special needs over two classrooms is appropriate. If there is a student with high needs that student would have a one-on-one and would be determined on a case by case basis.

Ms. Cameron asked about peer pals stating it was her understanding that was a one-on-one relationship. Dr. Collins stated students at this age do not see each other as having a disability and she anticipated the two classes working well together. The classroom teacher stated she agreed with Dr. Collins and children ages 3 and 4 all gain from language development support.

*Ms. Erdmann moved to approve Manchester – Essex Integrated Preschool Plan as proposed, Ms. Cameron seconded the motion. The motion passed with six School Committee members voting affirmatively. (Mr. Harrington had left the meeting.)*

- FY22 Budget Adoption



## The Problem We Are Trying to Solve

- The cost of level services grows at an average 3.5% to 4% which is faster than 2.5%. How do we maintain our program and meet School Committee goals when being asked to cut the budget?
- Perpetual Cumulative and Structural Challenge – not a function of any single budget year
- Level Service growth rate is suppressed annually in recognition of fiscal constraints
- Creates a cycle of cutting to meet a specified budget number
  - Cumulative level services deficit grows over time
  - Every 7-10 years MERSD faces a financial crossroads of significant program reduction or need for an override
- We are at that crossroads in planning for FY22 to FY24

Superintendent Beaudoin stated cuts do not enhance the program and reductions to close the annual gap from FY18 through FY20 totaled \$1,654,000.

Originally the FY22 budget had a 3.75% increase to maintain level services and assuming the District did not have revenue we would use reserves. In the budget process cuts come through assumptions in areas like Health Insurance and Chapter 70 funding (which have moved in the FY22 budget). As a last resort the District considers cuts in program and staffing. Most recently attrition and enrollment have provided for opportunities for decreases. At this time programs may need to go possibly instrumental music and elementary foreign language with a goal to not compromising prep time and impacting contractual agreements.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated 3.5% represents the low end of the multiyear model with 3.2% where the District could land for FY22. Essex has requested a 2.5% increase but has negotiated to a 3.2% increase. Superintendent Beaudoin cannot recommend additional staff cuts and considering the pros and cons is recommending a 3.5% budget increase for FY22. She asked the Committee where they were most comfortable and did the District need to develop a program that would allow for a 2.5% annual increase.

Ms. Cameron stated the last meeting was fraught and asked how the District gets to FY24 which appears to be the better opportunity for an override. Superintendent Beaudoin stated every dollar the District uses is money we need to ask the taxpayers to give us back. Ms. Erdmann stated when we ask for an override, we are not guaranteed on getting the money back. Mr. Warnock stated reserves are for this year.

Superintendent Beaudoin recommended the Committee stay as far to the left among the 5 columns for the FY22 budget presented as possible. Ms. Cameron stated column 2 with a projected 3.5% increase in not a big move and the Committee will continue to review the budget. Superintendent Beaudoin stated our assumptions around State funding and additional efficiencies may help in the process.

*Mr. Warnock moved to approve the FY22 budget at a 3.5% increase, Ms. Cameron seconded the motion. The motion passed with six Committee members voting affirmatively.*

Ms. Cameron indicated with the Annual Town Meetings likely occurring later this year there is the possibility of continuing to work with the Towns around the District budget. Ms. Erdmann asked if the Towns would be receiving additional CARES Act funding. Mr. Urbas did not know.

Ms. Whitman asked about the District's need for portable classrooms and how that would impact the budget. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the District would need to use reserves or possibly there would be additional CARES Act funding. Portable classrooms can cost at a minimum \$250K.

Mr. Urbas requested a motion approving Total Budget Approval, Total Assessment Approval and funding for Debt Services.

*Ms. Cameron moved to approve \$27,930,703 for the Total Budget, \$24,284,731 for the Total Assessment and \$4,272,088 for Debt Services, Mr. Warnock Seconded the motion. The motion passed with six Committee members voting affirmatively.*

#### **8) School Committee Comment**

Ms. Whitman asked if parents could plan on grades K-2 being in school 4 days a week following February vacation with the exception of Friday, 2/12 – K-1 Asynchronous (Essex) and Monday 2/22 Asynchronous for K-2 (EES and Memorial). Superintendent Beaudoin stated she planned to send a survey and check in on Hybrid and ask parents their intentions about participating in school 4 days a week. The District will follow up with all home schooling families. Yes, parents can plan on grades K-2 being in school 4 days a week.

Ms. Cameron stated she had intended to ask for adoption of the Theater Arts Motion developed by another School Committee as a message to the State that Theater Arts are as important as Athletics. If the State has not moved on Theater Arts, she will bring the motion forward at the first meeting in March,

#### **9) Adjourn –**

*Mr. Warnock moved to adjourn the meeting, Ms. Erdmann seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

#### **10) Correspondence:**

To the MERSD School Committee Members,

I am an Essex resident. I did not move here for the school system. Like many, I married into the school system. My children have been out of the school system for over a decade but I continue to support the school system through 60% of my property taxes. I am submitting this comment to ask that you specify the "Programs & FTEs" that may be impacted by a decrease in the requested 3.75 budget increase.

Our Board of Selectmen is asking the School Committee to limit the school operating budget annual increase to 2.5% which is in line with the 2.5% annual increase allowed to our town's property taxes. What I learned at the 1/26/21 budget hearing is that the School district needs a 3.75% annual increase to its budget to be level funded and therefore overrides are predictable and necessary. It was suggested rather than wait many years to have large overrides, perhaps the towns should have more frequent, smaller overrides to ease the shock to the taxpayers.

The School Committee says that without their requested increase, "Programs and FTEs" will be cut which will impact the students' school experience and limit the amount of choice spots availability which bring in revenue to the district. The Superintendent said she is confident that she will be able to work within a reduced budget by making the difficult decisions and by creatively reimagining the school experience (my interpretation of her words). A taxpayer may interpret that a cut in the "Program" would result in our district producing illiterate, nonproductive students, but the Superintendent's comments assured me that that would not be the case.

I find it difficult to have this budget discussion without the School Committee providing detailed descriptions of the "Programs" and a breakdown of the costs in each. I am asking that the Committee provide this information for the sake of transparency and to inform the taxpayers of the consequences of a reduced budget increase. From the District website I see that "Programs" include 21 sports teams\* and 19 extracurricular activities\*\*. Each of these programs have one teacher advisor (some have 2) which is counted in FTEs. I see that user fees collected from families to help cover the cost of these programs are 40-45% of the cost, with the taxpayers picking up the balance. I assume some programs that are embedded within the curriculum (i.e., the Anti-Racism Program that the School Committee adopted in July) also have a program cost that is not accounted for quite as clearly. I assume there are some material/supplies costs budgeted to run each program on top of the FTEs. I would like to know that should remote learning be part of our Program moving forward, would we need the same staffing levels given that one teacher's Program can be broadcast to a large number of students at once with no overcrowding?

I know that per contract, the district currently funds 70 to 75% of teacher health insurance costs (down from 85%) and that the taxpayers' obligation fund retirement health care, by state law is for the life of the teacher and is approximately 20% of the School District's budget. I know that if a budget is level funded it must absorb the COLA increases to the teachers' pay which may come at the expense of the "Program". This information is important because it must be factored into the cost of FTEs.

I hope that the School Committee can understand the need for this requested transparency regarding cuts in "Programs and FTEs". The school budget vote should be based on data and numbers. A school system of our size with our tax base cannot be all things to all people, to the dismay of some parents. The past school year has shown that everyone is being challenged by a changing economic, social and technological environment. I do not find it unreasonable to ask the district to live within the means of the taxpayers who fund them.

I appreciate your response and welcome clarification for information that I may have misinterpreted.

Thank You,

Tina Lane  
21 Lanes Road  
Essex