

**Collaboration Group Meeting Summary**  
**October 20, 2023**

**Participants:**

MERSD: Pamela Beaudoin, Avi Urbas

School Committee: Theresa Whitman, Anna Lin Mitchell

MBTS: John Round, Sarah Mellish, Mory Creighton, Greg Federspiel

Essex: Ruth Pereen, Ben Buttrick, Jodi Harris, Brendhan Zubricki

**DISCUSSION TOPIC: *FY25 budget updates.*** The group discussed the FY25 budget process and pressures across the three entities. Key points:

- Pam reported that the MERSD FY25 budget is in development. Healthcare growth, impact of the new paraprofessional contract, and out-of-district placements are still in the air.
- All agree that healthcare estimates are concerning; Greg reported that MBTS was advised to budget for a 10% healthcare increase.
- Both towns report the pressure of increased wage expectations in hiring and difficulty attracting quality candidates at the wages being offered. Pam shared that while the District was able to attract quality candidates for recent administrator roles, wages for administrator positions are not keeping pace with teaching positions, and this will need to be addressed in the coming years to continue attracting quality candidates.

*No action requested.*

**DISCUSSION TOPIC: *Debrief of all-boards meeting.*** The group spent the majority of the meeting discussing a third-party review/operational audit of the District as suggested in the all-boards meeting. It was clarified that this idea is indeed supported by the four town boards represented in the all-boards meeting as an item of common ground, but disagreement remains about the role of the District and School Committee in the process.

**Outcomes:** The primary outcome of the conversation is understanding of where all stand on the matter, as follows:

- Essex leaders expressed the opinion that two towns should undertake the matter together and effectively be “the client” separately from the District but with the District’s agreement to cooperate. Reasons shared include a desire to move quickly and concern that involving the School Committee would delay the process, and that since payment ultimately comes from the taxpayers of the towns, the District shouldn’t have to fit the expense into the previously approved FY24 budget (by contrast, the towns are able and planning to ask citizens to approve funding at fall town meetings). One participant

wished to go on record with the opinion that the two towns should together be the client, but that the School Committee should have a voice in the process.

- MBTS leaders expressed the preference that it be a three-way undertaking, including the District/School Committee as part of the process and sharing the cost three ways. One participant expressed frustration that the School Committee had not moved quickly on this idea following the all-boards meeting.
- Pam expressed concern about expectations regarding how the findings will be used and the predicament this could create for district personnel, particularly if the School Committee is not involved in the process. She also asked whether anyone had checked on whether the “towns-as-client” option is allowable. One participant reported that Hamilton-Wenham has done so, and that it is common practice. Avi noted that for the results to be of any benefit, the solution provider needs to have the mutual respect of all three groups; all agreed.
- School Committee members shared that this is understood to be an item of interest by the towns, expressed the opinion that discussion and planning of such an undertaking should include the School Committee and District administration, and affirmed that the idea was included in the list compiled at the 10/3 meeting and discussed on 10/17. Because this conversation has already been taking place between town partners, Theresa reported that for the School Committee to have an effective discussion and come to a decision on whether to support the current course of action, members will need to understand the intended purpose, scope, procurement process, timing, and expectations regarding results. Anna noted that the way this takes place matters, and that communication that includes the School Committee is important and could yield more support from Committee members.
- Reasons shared for the purpose of the undertaking include:
  - Because there is consensus among the four town boards in support of the idea
  - To find efficiencies that the School Committee and District have not identified
  - To get a new set of eyes on the District after 23 years in existence
  - To yield “the best district both towns can afford”
- After lengthy discussion, it appears that both towns are amenable to a collaborative effort between the three entities, but disagreement between the towns’ leaders remains regarding whether the District/School Committee engage as partners with the towns or simply have representation within the process, and the School Committee will need to consider the matter in their next meeting (November 7). As Ben has been in contact with a number of groups regarding this service, he offered to create a proposal for the School Committee to consider at their next meeting. It will be provided to the group as soon as possible to generate consensus among town boards prior to School Committee consideration.

**Action requested:** Town boards to discuss endorsement of Ben’s proposal once shared; School Committee to consider the matter November 7 and provide the towns with a decision about whether and how the Committee is willing to engage. Both towns have articles asking voters to appropriate funds toward an educational review/audit of MERSD at their fall town meetings on November 13, so timing is critical.

**DISCUSSION TOPIC: *Turf field replacement project funding.*** The group discussed the status of the towns’ reimbursement of expenses for the recent turf field replacement project.

**Outcomes:** The group recognizes that the project is now complete and has come in under budget due to minimal use of contingency funds. As such, Avi will provide final numbers as soon as possible given the upcoming fall town meetings. It was confirmed that Essex plans to include an article at the upcoming fall town meeting to pay for its portion with the use of free cash. The group then discussed that the District will need to amend its FY24 budget to reflect reimbursement from the towns after the Essex vote; however, MBTS had already moved forward with a vote in the spring based on the original plan of district borrowing.

**Action requested:** MBTS leaders to consider the status of their approved vote and report back on next steps.

**DISCUSSION TOPIC: *Annual Report referenced in the regional agreement.*** After a hiatus of several months, the group continued the discussion of the Annual Report referenced in section 10c of the regional agreement. Pam reported that after searching through all available records, the District is unable to find evidence of a standalone report ever having been delivered to town leaders by October 1 as stated. Pam noted that after considering all options, it appears likely that the language referred to the end-of-year report which must be filed with DESE by October 1. Pam noted that the District is in process of uploading past reports to the website so that they will be easily available to the public. One participant asked whether this report includes a detailed accounting of reserve accounts; it was clarified that this is already available, and Avi offered to direct the participant to where that info may be found.

**Outcomes:** There was nothing decided, and further conversation will be needed regarding whether “Annual Report” contained in the regional agreement should refer to the DESE End-of-Year Report which could in future be delivered as a PDF according to the language in section 10c of the regional agreement.

**Action requested:** Discuss as boards and be prepared to discuss further.