



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

April 15, 2025

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	April 15, 2025
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Chris Reed, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Anna Mitchell Erica Spencer Theresa Whitman
Absent:	
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 6:09 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) –**

Sarah Wolf, 4 Soginese Creek Road, Essex – Ms. Wolf provided the following comments: As you discuss the budget tonight, I am here to remind you that the schools are the very heart of our communities. Every single household in our communities benefits from our district, whether they include students who are enrolled in the district or not. Why do I say that all households benefit? The economic impact of having a school nearby

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is significant. The district employs a large number of residents. Our teachers, staff, and administrators contribute to the local economy, as do the businesses that cater to the families and school events. Parents who are considering moving to our towns want to know their children will have access to a good education. Families that move to Essex and Manchester eat at our local restaurants, shop in our stores, and bring friends and relatives to visit.

The future of our communities depends on the opportunities we provide for our children today. When we invest in their education, we're investing in the future of our local workforce, our economy, and our overall quality of life. These kids will grow up to become doctors, teachers, police officers, paramedics, and trade workers. They will become leaders who will not only shape the future of our communities but also give back to them.

Let's continue to support our regional school district and protect the program without further cuts, not just for the children who enter the doors today, but for the entire community and generations to come.

Miriam McAvoy, 7 Allen Street, Manchester - Ms. McAvoy provided the following comments: Good evening. I must say that I never speak at these meetings. I listen and stew and go home to rant always wishing I had the confidence to voice my opinions, but I rely on others who share my thoughts to say the things I'm also thinking...I guess today I'll take the opportunity to quickly speak about the proposed budget cuts and what I believe—and I'm not alone here—has been a constant and continuing annual compromise of our students' educational experience.

I'm a parent of a current 6th grader and I'm not going to drone on about the very obvious and previously stated reasons why the middle school needs its own dedicated principal and administration, but I absolutely do want to advocate for Middle School Academy. MSA is a core curriculum class that is specifically dedicated to strengthening students' writing abilities and I believe is new to this school year. This is a core curriculum class that is not graded, because I assume the goal is for students to fully focus on learning to write. My son said it's super hard but has also recognized how much his own writing has improved since the start of the school year. Ms. Jackie Maher teaches students how to write effectively. It's not just using correct subject-verb agreement, avoiding split infinitives, or the proper use a semicolon. She's teaching evidence-based writing skills and research methods to support their opinions. These are invaluable skills that transcends academia. Students will be able to communicate confidently and effectively, so they're not ignored when talking about concerning symptoms at the doctor's office, they have the language skills to defend themselves in difficult situations, they'll be able to advocate for themselves when they're in the workforce, and they can be a voice for others who need help.

I also see on the level-services budget that the MS Reading Specialist is in danger of being eliminated. While this is a service my son does not utilize, I ironically had to read this portion of the presentation 3 times to make sure this is actually being considered as I was truly dumbfounded. I don't think I need to explain the importance of being able to read.

I needn't tell you that evidence-based writing and literacy are basic, essential skills needed to be critical thinkers. Our students are our future leaders, and they'll need to be able to read and write effectively, so they can advocate for themselves, their peers, to the towns that are considering not supporting their educational growth. Manchester and society in general will not benefit from will-be dupes and patsies, which is a likely future if we're actually considering clipping their wings now. I didn't have the privilege of attending an even adequately performing school. Let me tell you what happens to those students after they graduate: They leave, and they never come back. They don't suggest to friends and coworkers to raise their families there. We're talking one star; do not recommend. What does happen is they become bright, outgoing, and genuinely proud taxpaying citizens of a different town and school district.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester - Ms. Banks provided the following comments: My message for tonight: Get out and vote. Vote for the budget you want to see. That budget is very much built by this school committee, but it's built with the input of the leaders of our towns. Our towns are giving cues to our district of what they want to see. And the district has made it clear that our town leaders disagree - that our messages are on the opposite end of the spectrum. I don't think our town residents disagree or are too far apart on the school's issues - I see too many passionate caregivers and residents even if they don't have kids in the schools currently - who care, who are engaged, who show up for our kids and teachers and our schools. And we are all devastated at the cuts that are on the table here. SO - my message to the way to deal with these cuts to VOTE - figure out who is running for office in your town and figure out where they stand on the issues you care about and then vote according to your values. It could change the entire course of this conversation.

2) Chairperson's Report – Mr. Reed made no report

3) Student Report– Ms. Straub updated the School Committee that the Student Advisory Committee voted in a new School Committee representative at their last meeting and introduced her successor, Ms. Maggie Whitman. Ms. Whitman greeted the committee and shared that she is currently a sophomore. Ms. Straub and Ms. Whitman will share the role for the remainder of the school year, and Ms. Whitman's term will extend through next year.

4) Consent Agenda -

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1061 - 1064 and payroll warrant for April 10, 2025
- Minutes for approval: April 1, 2025

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

The motion passed unanimously 6-0. Ms. Whitman abstained.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Erica Spencer/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Koch-Sundquist reported that the subcommittee met earlier in the day to review policy surrounding technology administration. The subcommittee will bring a recommendation to the School Committee.
- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Anna Mitchell) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report

6) Superintendent's Report – Superintendent Beaudoin

- a. **Essex Building Committee (EBC) update** – On April 7, 2025, the district went before the MSBA and received approval of the proposed building project OPM. The first meeting of the EBC will be April 29, 2025, in a hybrid format with in-person at Essex Elementary School.
- b. **Budget Development** – On April 29, 2025, the district will have a second Q&A session at Essex Elementary School, prior to the EBC meeting, from 5:00 - 6:00 pm.
- c. **Budget Timeline** – The superintendent said that the district expects a long road to budget approval and has been spending time assembling documents and proofing existing documents. The budget was posted to the district website earlier in the day and a postcard notice was mailed to all residents of Manchester and Essex. The FAQ page is almost ready for uploading to the district website. It will contain a section for general information and a section for components of the contingency plan.
- d. **Essex BOS/Fin Comm Information Request** – Superintendent Beaudoin notified the School Committee that the district received a records request from a Manchester resident regarding district healthcare insurance. The district is working through legal counsel to seek clarification regarding the request and to determine if there will be a charge for services.

The district also received an information request from the Essex BOS and Essex FinCom, signed by Chairman Pereen, Mr. Phippen, and Ms. Ingaharro. The request references requirements of the MERSD Regional Agreement, Section 10 – Budget, and the statute for public records requests. The referenced section of the regional agreement refers to the October Annual Report. Usually, the district provides town partners with the end of year report at that time. The request seeks information regarding past data from the district and information for modeling Fiscal Year 2026 and beyond.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that some of this information is already available but other requested elements will require narrative development or report creation. The superintendent sought guidance from the School Committee regarding the process for responding to these requests and whether district administration should bring requests before the SC before producing documents or respond directly requests. Specifically, the superintendent asked for input regarding the different reports and narratives requested, timeline of request fulfillment, and requests that require new report production. Some new reports would be easy to pull. Others would require a significant investment of time. Ms. Cresta stated that the request for budget to actual reports for previous years, in the format used this year, would require approximately 40 hours of her time to reformat from their previous format.

Clarifying Questions: Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that energy is needed now for passage of the budget and questioned the wisdom of such a request two weeks before Town Meetings if the town intends to support the district and work toward the successful passage of an override.

Ms. Spencer expressed concern that some portions of the request are broader than what is stipulated under the regional agreement or a records request. Superintendent Beaudoin broke down the request and addressed whether the data was already available for each component. Some requests require clarification to determine whether an existing document addresses the issue. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that much of this data has been presented at School Committee meetings and is available as part of the minutes and associated documents. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that public records requests apply only to reports that already exist. Other components of the request that are deemed necessary by the committee or selectmen would be addressed by the end of year report.

Ms. Mitchell said that the budget to actual reports from previous years are similar enough to the current format and that the requester can be asked to accept them as is.

Superintendent Beaudoin asked for input into whether documents should be delivered directly to the requester or if they should go through the SC first. The superintendent said that the question is about the process of information distribution when the town boards request documents for their use.

Ms. Whitman stated that administration should share anything already created but that other items would fall under the annual report. Ms. Whitman said that the SC could open a discussion with the towns about what they would like to see in the annual report. Ms. Whitman stated that the conversation should go through the School Committee and expressed concern that the request can be seen as an attempt to cut out the School Committee.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that public records requests would go straight to the superintendent and have a timeline for fulfillment.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that questions about special education are addressed by the SPED review. However, this document is produced every three years and is not due to be done this year. The SC may task administration to produce the report for this year.

Mr. Foster said that the timing of the request is not ideal, with current budget work, but urged the SC to view the request as an opportunity to assume good intentions. Mr. Foster encouraged the district to provide what it is able now and make a plan to address the rest of the request. Mr. Foster stated that the FAQ did not go through the SC for approval before being distributed. Ms. Whitman commented that they did go out to all SC members via email.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the request does not feel collaborative and is framed to cast judgement on the educational decisions that have been made and expressed dissatisfaction with the timing of the request.

Ms. Mitchell stated that most of the request can be addressed with existing documents.

Ms. Whitman said that it is reasonable for the administration to directly supply existing documents and simply notify the School Committee. For reports that do not already exist, Ms. Whitman said fulfillment should be discussed at an SC meeting. Ms. Whitman stated that it sets a precedent that would have to be applied to any entity requesting information. Ms. Whitman stated that the contents of the annual report would be a great place for a collaborative discussion between the School Committee and the town boards.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district was asked to model the budget for future years. This would precede budget modeling for the School Committee. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the town brought their budget projection to the number-crunching meeting. Mr. Foster replied that they did not.

Ms. Spencer suggested that the district share with the requesting Boards the tool created by Ms. Cresta for budget projection and inquired about what would be needed to address the inquiry about special education. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it would require updating the report, in collaboration with Ms. Collins and other staff.

Ms. Whitman suggested offering a teach-in after passage of the budget. The district could hold a posted meeting on these topics and would be able to refer back to these materials in the future.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the special education report was last updated in February/March of 2023. It will be due for update next year. The SPED report includes a cost benefit analysis. The superintendent said that district administration can mobilize to complete the report but would not be able to have it ready by the Essex Town Meeting. Ms. Whitman noted that it would need to be ready by the Manchester Town Meeting in order to provide all boards with the same information. The superintendent said that administration would struggle with the workflow if the goal is to provide the report to the School Committee before passing it to the towns. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed concern that a report would need to be redacted to protect the identity of students.

Ms. Whitman stated that there is an outcome expectation given that the request mentions “right-sizing.” The superintendent said that she could supply the districts Strategic Initiative to address the inquiry about the program. Ms. Spencer expressed concern about town leadership looking to impact the program of studies and determine which classes are worthwhile. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that this part of the request seems like an audit. The request includes an organizational chart with student load assigned to each teacher. Mr. Reed asked if the town boards are making similar information requests of Essex Tech. Mr. Reed and Ms. Whitman said that this request can be used to update what is included in the annual report presented in October. The superintendent said that the breakdown of resource allocation is available in the budget chart when combined with the building breakdown.

Ms. Spencer summarized that the public records request applies to existing documents and other created documents would be under the regional agreement. The superintendent said that for any other requester the reply would be that the district does not have records responsive to that request. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district has conducted a learning meeting with the boards in the past.

Mr. Reed recapped the School Committees position on the current request. The district will share existing documents and any production of new documents will be discussed by the School Committee.

7) Continued Business – FY26 Budget

- a. Health Insurance Renewal Update – Ms. Cresta
- b. FY26 Adopted Budget Amended – Vote to Approve

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to amend the FY26 budget to \$32,597,141 to reflect healthcare savings.

Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Cresta stated that the district has continued to ask for reconsideration from its healthcare insurance provider. They received a third proposal that is a 22.95% increase from last year. This will save the district \$85K and reduce the assessment to both towns. The healthcare savings is the only change to the budget.

The motion passed unanimously.

- c. Manchester & Essex Town Meetings and Budget Approval Timeline
 - Superintendent Beaudoin said that Town Meetings are scheduled for the two Mondays following the spring break. The second Q&A session will be on the Tuesday in between. A simple majority vote is required at Town Meeting for passage. On May 12, 2025, the budget will also need to pass on the Essex ballot. The School Committee has tentatively scheduled an SC meeting for May 13, 2025, at which the committee can reconsider the budget should it fail at either town. If there is a second failure at an additional town meeting or ballot, the School Committee may again reconsider the budget and whether to proceed to a Super Town Meeting. Mr. Reed stated that the full SC is expected to be at both Town Meetings. It is expected that the School Committee chair will introduce the budget at the Manchester Meeting and the vice-chair will do so at the Essex meeting. Ms. Whitman expressed appreciation for the school budget articles being placed early on the warrant. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she will check in with the town administrators about their plan for a second set of town meetings should the budget fail. Mr. Binieris confirmed that fourteen days notice is required before a Special Town Meeting. Ms. Mitchell asked about the plan of action for the May 13 potential SC meeting and suggested discussing advocacy efforts. Ms. Whitman agreed and suggested reconsideration of the budget and an action plan for the next town meeting as the two items on that agenda. Ms. Spencer emphasized that communication outreach is critical right now and said she hopes it will continue after the budget process.

- 8) School Committee Comment** – Ms. Whitman stated that two years ago community members put a lot of time into getting out the message in support of the override. It failed at the ballot. Ms. Whitman said that there are more people involved now as a result, and she extend her gratitude for their efforts.

C. Adjourn

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

The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:27 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- May 5, 2025 Monday
- May 13, 2025 tentative
- May 20, 2025
- June 3, 2025