



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

February 6, 2024

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| Meeting: | School Committee |
| Date: | February 6, 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: | |
| 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 6:08 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 stated, “I have watched the school finances very closely over the years over the last ten years. I’m not a CFO, but my husband is, and while I wouldn’t say that we moved here “for the schools” we certainly would not have moved here if it weren’t for the schools. I have had high expectations for our public schools. When I realized that the district was continually cutting the budget back then, I sought to learn why. I understand the limitations of the towns, and I

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understand the situation in Essex right now. The district is at a crossroads, and tonight this school committee has an opportunity to choose a path of stability, rather than a path of decline. There is an urgent need for high quality care and education now, I believe that this need is greater than it has ever been in my 30 year long career as an educator. Children and families depend on their public schools. Communities depend on their public schools. We are counting on you to come out of this meeting with a budget that sustains the high quality, comprehensive, student centered educational experience that supports our kids and prepares them for life after high school.”

August Capotosto, 15 Apple Street, Essex. Ms. Capotosto came before the School Committee to again voice her opposition to the proposed schedule change to align the high school daily schedule to that of the middle school. Ms. Capotosto said that the principal held an informational session and that the proposed schedule change was overwhelmingly opposed by students and teachers. She stated that while other items, like middle school foreign language or the late bus to Essex, could be reinstated in future budgets, the schedule change would likely remain permanent. Ms. Capotosto asked the School Committee to fully consider the consequences of the change before allowing it to be made.

Betsy McKeen, 35 Lufkin Point Road, Essex. Ms. McKeen thanked the School Committee and administrative team for their work and went on record as an Essex resident who would like to see the school district and town aim higher. Ms. McKeen stated that she is not satisfied to send her children to a school in continual decline and operating on a bare-bones budget. She stated that the proposed 2.7% budget was a temporary fix that does not solve the long term issues facing the budget. Ms. McKeen said that she wants to see the return of supports that have been lost over the years, including the late bus, foreign language at the elementary and grade six levels, and Ms. McKeen advocated for leaving the high school schedule as is. Ms. McKeen encouraged the School Committee to reinvest the health care savings back into the budget, stating that a 3% operational budget would still be well below that of nearly all other north shore school districts. Ms. McKeen asked that the district set its sights on the robust, innovative, rigorous education in academics and mental health that children deserve because they are the future of Essex and Manchester. The towns must figure out the financial piece to build a prosperous future for all.

Ann Harrison, 13 Tuck’s Point Road, Manchester. Ms. Harrison stated that at this point last year the district had a budget that was rebuilding. This year, it is starting at the position of cuts. Ms. Harrison said that the SC’s responsibility is to the students and asked that they reinvest in the schools without yielding to the naysayers.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester. Ms. Banks stated, “For almost a year now, I have watched this committee engage in discussions and cast votes to lead our schools in almost every meeting. Thank you for your time and efforts. In December, I encouraged you to think about the future of MERSD and chart a course for excellence with students at the center. The 2.7 budget discussed at yesterday’s budget workshop is not a budget that will set us on that course. Here are my thoughts on why: I repeatedly observe this

committee center saving money, hammering detailed line items, and wonder at the magical secrets of accounting in meetings. I understand that some of this is necessary as voting on a responsible budget is your job description. Given reasonable growth relative to other towns, it doesn't need to be this much of a focus. However, as an active, engaged, and informed constituent (maybe too much so), you must know that what is missing from too many of your conversations is the STUDENTS and what is in their best interest. I have said it before and I will not stop saying it. You are so stuck in the weeds of the numbers themselves that the student interests -the focus on our young people - gets lost. Perhaps it is your intention to help students through nitpicking the budget because you think you can find \$500 here or \$5,000 there. But when a significant portion of the budget workshop is spent dissecting a spreadsheet, and there is no time to even talk about adding back programs that have been cut when you discover hundreds of thousands in health care savings - that is failing the students. Yesterday I heard one of you say there have not been cuts. Try telling that to families in our district. Cuts, efficiencies, reorganizations, whatever you want to call it, in the last 5 years the educational experience for MERSD has been changing and not for the better. We have lost library instruction, elementary world language, a psychologist who meets with students, and the Essex late bus. Even without cuts, reorganizations can have their impact. Last year's budget caused my son's class size to increase by 10 and has negatively affected his experience in school this year. We feel the loss of that third 4th grade memorial section last year deeply in our household. While it may have its advantages, the new HS/ MS schedule alignment did not start with the question of what's best for students. Its origin was - how can we save some money. That is why I have a problem with it and all of the other decisions that do not come with student interests at the center. And that is why this 2.7 is yet another step in the direction of decline, as opposed to excellence. In summary, in my opinion, you have had it backwards. PLEASE- I'll say it again- Start with what is best for students, build a budget from there that will set us on a course for excellence by centering students and then - fight for that budget. They need us now more than ever. You cannot count on anyone else to do this - This is the job of this committee, and that is what we, your constituents, need and want you to do. This should be your singular focus. Tonight, you have an opportunity to change the course from decline to excellence by talking about what can be added back in the interest of students.

Annie Cameron, 23 Pickering, Essex. Ms. Cameron thanked Superintendent Beaudoin and the administration for the budget work done in response to the charge from the two towns on efficiencies in the program. Ms. Cameron noted the time devoted by the building principals, when time is at a premium, as evidenced by handouts from the previous budget workshop. Ms. Cameron also commended the School Committee members for their growth as a team and professional demeanor. She stated that the SC has been effectively problem solving despite having little collaboration, help, or direction beyond being given a percentage of 2.5%. Ms. Cameron stated that she is always protective of reserves and asked the School Committee to consider a few points: How much reserves will be needed to fund the feasibility study for the Essex building project? Ms. Cameron stated that there were lingering questions after uncertainty was introduced at the Essex FinCom meeting, including whether the district would go ahead with the study or pull out of the MSBA

grant program. Does the District have money to address any system failures that may come? If the district is pushed out of the MSBA program or pulls out, they would have to return to the end of the line. Ms. Cameron cited the similar problems encountered by Ipswich and said that it is important to hedge against that risk. Is money allocated for stabilization? She said that reserves should be protected for borrowing. Ms. Cameron shared two closing points. She said that decisions should be driven by principles and programs. Ms. Cameron said that she has heard a lot about the scores at EES, but said that the faculty and staff are very good and will turn things around.

Zack Carvalho, 2 Jersey Lane, Manchester. Mr. Carvalho is a student at Manchester Essex High School. He stated that the mission statement of the MERHS is to provide a high-quality, comprehensive, student-centered educational experience that prepares them for a post-secondary educational experience or service experience, a career, and life as an engaged member of society. Mr. Carvalho expressed concern about the cuts to the budget and questioned whether they were necessary in communities such as Manchester and Essex. Mr. Carvalho expressed dismay at priorities in the community other than the schools. Mr. Carvalho advocated for putting more money into the budget. Mr. Carvalho was also opposed to the proposed high school schedule change.

Ruth Preen, 15 Luftkin Street, Essex. Ms. Preen thanked the SC for its work on the budget and the administration for their work admitting the Essex Elementary building project to the MSBA pipeline. She expressed her own excitement and that of many Essex community members. Ms. Preen stated that Essex is looking into all financing options for the project and is committed to seeing the current process with the MSBA through successfully.

Caroline Weld, 15 School Street, Manchester. Ms. Weld stressed the importance of autonomy for the School Committee. Ms. Weld said that the stakeholders should support each other but that School Committee should not look to them for direction in what is best for the district.

Caroline Coshow, 84 Old Essex Road, Manchester. Ms. Coshow spoke as a mother and said that she worries about the experience of her daughter if the district continues to decline. Ms. Coshow asked the School Committee to fight for the future of the district.

Sarah Graboys Valeo, 47 Forster Road, Manchester. Ms. Valeo compared the current proposal to alter the high school schedule in order to realize financial savings to plugging holes in a dike while more erupt. Ms. Valeo said it would be a huge disruption to students, and the end of a schedule that they currently love, to yield only a \$65K budget benefit.

Eric Bradford, 32 Old Essex Road, Manchester. Mr. Bradford stated that the district should not be constrained by the artificial restriction requested by a contingent of Essex residents. He said that the shift in the apportionment formula was easily predictable. He also commended the administration for maintaining reasonable growth and highlighted the rise in the expense of education across New England. In Vermont, where Mr. Bradford owns a second home, the school district has increased its operational budget by 18%. Mr.

Bradford reiterated that tax increases should have been anticipated when the district regionalization agreement was signed and suggested pursuing one of several positions going forward. The first would be to compromise the quality of the district in an attempt to blunt that financial impact to one partner going forward. Or, Mr. Bradford said that the district could decide not to consider the financial factors of the Town of Essex because they entered into the regional agreement of their own free will. Finally, Mr. Bradford likened the current situation to buyer's remorse and stated that the district could choose to support renegotiation of the regional agreement to allow the district to move past this situation. Mr. Bradford stated that without addressing the issue head on these problems will continue to frustrate tax payers in both towns. In regards to the current budget, Mr. Bradford recalled that Mr. Urbas cautioned against dipping into reserves unnecessarily, and he did not think that the current demographic shift met Mr. Urbas's rationale for doing so. Mr. Bradford also stated that the planned schedule change at the high school would have a deleterious impact on high school students while yielding paltry savings to the district. Mr. Bradford advocated for maintaining the originally proposed 3.4% growth for the FY25 operational budget and returning some programs.

2) Chairman's Report – Ms. Whitman said that she and Ms. Spencer held office hours preceding the current business meeting, and the SC plans to continue to do so going forward. Ms. Whitman stated that she sent the School Committee's message to the collaboration group regarding follow up by the Essex Board of Selectmen for their plan regarding monies approved at their town meeting for an operational audit of MERSD. Ms. Whitman received no response. Ms. Whitman believes that the SC should consider the issue separately and stated that Superintendent Beaudoin needs to know if the SC wants to proceed with undertaking the comprehensive DESE review since they are awaiting a response. Ms. Whitman took a straw poll. Ms. Koch-Sundquist clarified that this review would be in addition to the current NEASC review of the elementary schools. Ms. Spencer asked if the request from Essex hinged upon the review being independent. Ms. Whitman said that was not necessarily the case. Ms. Whitman said that an operational review could examine how effective the district can be if run at 2.5% growth by reviewing other districts that are run at that level. The superintendent was able to lay out a number of items that could be reviewed for budget impact following such a review and might yield things that the district could implement for cost savings. It might also be possible to do a similar review of the operational procedures of the partner towns. Ms. Whitman said that these items would be on a future agenda for further discussion. Ms. Whitman said that questions have been raised about MERSD's administrative structure. A side by side review comparable with Hamilton/Wenham was prepared for consideration by the SC. That information will be posted. Ms. Whitman shared that the final numbers for health care costs came in at just under an 8% increase. Ms. Whitman said that she has been considering the question, as SC Chair, of that can be done versus what should be.

Mr. Foster read from the "MASC Code of Ethics:" A School Committee member in their relationship with their community should:

1. Realize that his/her primary responsibility is to the children.
2. Recognize that his/her basic function is policy-making and not administrative.
3. Remember that they are one of a team and must abide by, and carry out, all committee decisions once they are made.
4. Be well informed concerning the duties of a committee member on both a local and state level.
5. Remember that he/she represents the entire community at all times.
6. Accept the office of committee member as a means of unselfish service with no intent to “play politics” in any sense of the word, or to benefit personally from committee activities.

3) Student Report – Diego Sanson reflected upon serving on the School Committee over the previous years and the previous budget debates. He remembered the turmoil and the terms being used at the time and stated that the “can had not, in fact, been kicked very far down the road.” Mr. Sanson said that the topic most discussed currently was the proposed schedule change and that not a single student is happy about the proposed change. Mr. Sanson said that it is a big change for students. Everyone participates in U block, which is proposed for elimination. They set Manchester apart. Mr. Sanson said that the district is risking chipping away at what distinguishes it and elevates it from other districts. Mr. Sanson stated that teachers did not seem to be receiving the proposed schedule change well either and that students felt blind-sided by the proposal.

Regarding the proposed FY25 budget, Mr. Sanson said that further use of reserve funds did not seem wise, and said that eventually the reserves run out, resulting in cuts anyway. Mr. Sanson stated that the district needs to decide what it wants to be. It may decide that it no longer wants to be a top performing district. Mr. Sanson said it is not good for students and staff to struggle with the uncertainty of not knowing if their courses or jobs will be there year to year.

Ms. Whitman thanked Mr. Sanson for his contribution and reminded those present that Massachusetts law establishes the student position on the School Committee as equal in all except voting rights.

4) Consent Agenda –

- **Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1045-1047**
- **Minutes for approval: September 19, 2023**

Ms. Spencer moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion. Mr. Reed abstained from the voting. The motion passed unanimously 6-0.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Finance Committee/Collaboration Group** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report

- 6) **Superintendent's Report** – (Superintendent Pam Beaudoin) Superintendent Beaudoin said that interviews for the Essex Elementary principal position would commence on the coming Thursday and Monday. Twelve to fifteen applicants applied to the post and six interviews are currently planned. These will be followed by site visits as previously detailed.

The superintendent provided insight into the schedule workshop. It is the purview of the principals to create the schedule. Since the budget season last year, the district received a lot of feedback with concerns about small class sizes at the high school. A proposed solution to reducing staffing would be to share staff between the high school and middle school buildings. However, this is not currently possible due to alignment of their class times. The ask was to seek time alignment of both schools to create opportunities for staff sharing. Reductions could come in fractional ways. This would be a way to reorganize and reallocate going forward. Principal Maino and Principal Sgroi were successful in this task. They worked with a faculty team and proceeded to present first to staff and then to the student body. There are pros and cons to this approach. The proposed schedule is similar to what is done in neighboring schools. It would provide tools to the district to meet some current criticisms. The feedback since presenting to students has been very strong that this is not how parents and families want the district to proceed. Superintendent Beaudoin asked the School Committee to provide direction for the district. When the superintendent is giving direction to administration, should they focus on the financial interest or what they think is in the best interest of students?

Ms. Whitman opened discussion to one round of SC feedback. Ms. Whitman stated that the schedule workshop was an important exercise, particularly because it demonstrated that the resulting savings would be very low, and that cuts may still be necessary. She stated that she is not in favor of the schedule change and that there is value to recognize and preserve the uniqueness of the MERHS schedule, giving students the flexibility to manage their time. Ms. Whitman said that she also worried about unanticipated outcomes of sharing resources, referring to the drop in staff in-building resulting from sharing staffing between the elementary schools.

Mr. Binieris stated that his mindset is generally to focus first on education and to then maximize efficiencies. In the budget workshop the preceding day, he had initially thought that students could adapt to the proposed schedule change if that is what the district intended to roll out. However, in conversation with his sixth grade daughter, he was swayed by her perspective that she does not have enough time with her teachers now and that adding another class to the daily schedule is a significant addition to student workload.

Mr. Foster expressed appreciation for the effort put into the high school schedule exploration, though the rollout seems to have killed the idea before it has a chance. Mr. Foster questioned the dichotomy of pitting finance against best interest of students. He said that it seems that the scheduling has only been looked at from the point of budgetary savings and that it is possible that there is a version of this scheduling that could have benefits to student interest, as well. For instance, could this schedule facilitate authentic learning or the kinds of classroom interactions that require time. Mr. Foster asked for clarification regarding the role of school councils and schedule construction. Mr. Foster asked that district counsel be consulted on whether the School Committee can charge school councils with reviewing and making a recommendation of any proposal relative to their school improvement plan. Ms. Whitman stated that this issue was covered at the high school council meeting.

Mr. Foster moved to ask School Committee legal counsel to clarify the role of school council and School Committee in determining school year and school day schedules and whether School Committee can charge a school council with developing a recommendation about any school day schedule in relation to their school improvement plan.

Ms. Spencer seconded the amended motion to ask legal counsel to clarify the role of School Committee versus school council.

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell asked if there is a downside to asking council. Ms. Whitman said there are financial implications. Superintendent Beaudoin and Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that there were issues of collective bargaining to be considered whenever discussing the schedule. Mr. Foster clarified that he is looking only at the distinction in roles between School Committee and school council. Ms. Whitman asked why legal council should be approached versus MASC.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved the question. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion

The motion passed unanimously.

Motion to seek legal counsel failed 3-4 (in favor- Foster, Mitchell, Spencer; opposed- Binieris, Koch-Sundquist, Reed, Whitman)

Ms. Whitman stated that she thought it was worth checking in with MASC first and proceeding from there. Ms. Koch-Sundquist continued the round of input to the proposed high school schedule changes. She was interested to know what the complete increased course options could be should the schedules align between the middle and

high schools. The understanding is for expanded foreign language at the middle school and increased performing arts opportunities. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the middle schoolers might benefit from having the high schoolers as mentors or tutors. These would constitute academic benefits, not just financial ones. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about potential long-term savings, not just the one-year, \$65K projection. Ms. Koch-Sundquist also said that the shared campus would negate the concern about insufficient staff presence. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said she would defer to administrators on whether the cost savings of the schedule change would outweigh the negatives.

Ms. Mitchell stated that it is premature to decide on the benefits of the schedule change. However, the savings of \$65K is not enough to make a drastic change. Ms. Mitchell said that many decisions have been made year-to-year in response to the budget resulting in instability to families, and she said this is one of those. Without more in-depth understanding of the impact to program and to other areas, Ms. Mitchell was not in favor of changing the high school schedule.

Mr. Reed stated that he appreciated the spirit of looking at efficiencies as a small district. However, he thought that there was not value in the angle at which the schedule change was approached. He is not in favor of the change.

Ms. Spencer stated that the scheduling change exploration was very important because it was responsive to the ask from Essex that the district look for efficiencies. Ms. Spencer said she has more input on this issue than on anything else, and it aligned with Mr. Sanson's feedback. Ms. Spencer said the exercise has helped her to appreciate the uniqueness of the MERHS schedule and to believe that it should be celebrated. She stated that reducing class time by nearly 20% is a huge change to instruction, particularly for labs and AP discussions, that she does not think that time comes back by adding another block to the day. She said that stress levels would invariably go up when removing time that was provided in the day for students to manage schoolwork. Ms. Spencer said that she does not think it is the right time for this change but did say that the decision should be left to educators. Ms. Spencer said that she would direct administrators to do what is in the best interest of students. If expanding programming is possible through change, that would be a worthwhile consideration, but the impact to the 600 students at the middle and high school does not make it currently prudent.

Ms. Whitman summarized that the SC wants to be able to trust educators to make decisions in the best interests of students. With budget questions, the SC and administration will work together. Some on the SC would be more in favor of changes if academic benefits were clear. Ms. Whitman said that she will follow up with the MASC on the roles of the School Committee and school council.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that, while it is clear that the SC is not in favor of the proposed schedule change, she felt that she needed to defend the work of the principals. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that Principal Sgroi and Principal Maino created a schedule with constraints that *is* in the best interests of students. The proposed schedule would afford students in grades 6-12 some gains and some negative

impacts when compared with their current schedule. Superintendent Beaudoin said that, to Ms. Mitchell's point, the district is in a position where they are in a year-to-year scramble to establish a 2.5% budget. The district is seeking external consult on how to get there and these ideas are not necessarily to grow or invest beyond what currently have. The options are not desirable. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the administration is at a loss as to where to go on their next move. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that a key difficulty is that it is difficult to retain fractional staff. There is value in minimizing those positions. The superintendent stated that, when they undertook this, the administrators are not seeing a road forward that is about investing in long-term positive impact. It is about year-to-year, make ends meet, minimize the growth. Those parameters that have led the district to cut staff. Superintendent Beaudoin said that enrollment trends have allowed for reorganization, but she believes they will run out of creative solutions. Mr. Reed voiced his opinion that, while some had pointed out that schedule alignment could allow for the return of sixth grade foreign language, he thought that the district should just add back sixth grade foreign language.

Superintendent Beaudoin introduced the first draft of the MERSD FY25 district calendar. It is the first iteration and will be on the March 6 agenda for SC final approval. Mr. Foster asked for clarification about the role of K-8 conferences. He mentioned that he knows some people who have not had a conference through middle school. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that no parent conference is mandatory. Previously, conferences were in November. They are being shifted to December in the Fy25 calendar so that they coincide with report card distribution.

7) Continued Business –

a. **Curriculum & Instructional Technology Update** – Heather Leonard. Ms. Leonard presented on progress made on the DIP, referencing materials included in SC meeting materials:

- i. **Strategic Initiative 3** – Includes absenteeism recovery initiative, funding from DESE. Absenteeism is down across the district from 2022-2023 school year across all measures as of 1/19/2024
- ii. **Strategic Initiative 2** – Integrating social emotional learning into all aspects of the school day. The program gained cohesion with the leadership of Ms. Provost as the K-8 SEL/Ruler Coordinator. Currently, the program is being audited- reviewing referrals, data, RULER implementation, and using school-based observations. Findings will be presented in April
- iii. **Strategic Initiative 1 – Authentic Learning.** ELA Curriculum mapping is underway for K-5, across the district for alignment. Curriculum review K-12 for History/Social Science and PK-12 for the Arts is underway. The NEASC Elementary Review Process looks at all aspects of the learning environment. The elementary and middle schools are gearing up for release of i-Ready assessment letters to families which will go out before the February break. At the middle school, students are involved in discussions with teachers about their

learning path based on assessment indicators. Overall, the district is seeing strong progress in K-8 toward growth for the year and Ms. Leonard commended staff for their work. Ms. Leonard reported that DESE has exhausted funds for additional high dosage tutoring grants, but MERSD will continue to seek opportunities to expand into other content areas.

Questions: Mr. Foster stated that at some point he would like to hear how authentic learning is defined and applied to curriculum mapping and curriculum review. Ms. Whitman shared positive feedback with Ms. Leonard from the community, sharing that Ms. Leonard was praised by community members for her attendance at events and from Ms. Whitman's husband, of the Art's Council, who praised her running of management of a recent meeting.

- b. **Field Advertising Proposal** – Ms. Whitman referred to proposal materials from the meeting packet. Following feedback to pursue advertising revenue, community member Donna Furse submitted a proposal for advertising banners at Highland Field. There is a time crunch as a result of a Manchester Town bylaw requiring approval of any such advertising at Town Meeting. Ms. Furse is willing to also pursue this approval, once backed by the SC. In consideration of Town Meeting deadlines, Ms. Whitman asked the SC to take up the issue and approve the proposal, in whole or in part, as a one-time or on-going plan, and to task the policy subcommittee with reviewing the current policy. Ms. Whitman emphasized that the greater policy does not need to be finalized at this time. Mr. Foster clarified that the SC has already been tasked with review of the advertising policy. That policy already allows the SC to approve the current request. There is no provision of the current advertising policy that allows for management after approval. Ms. Whitman stated that the current proposal is for signage on the football field.

Ms. Spencer moved to approve the proposal as presented and to give Ms. Furse the authority required to pursue the change to the Town of Manchester bylaw. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the revenue would go to the athletic department. Superintendent Beaudoin was asked to weigh in, and she stated that advertising revenue would be a separate revolving account. As a volatile revenue stream, it would make sense to allow it to accrue and then the SC would utilize as they determine best, and they would devote it to athletics. Ms. Spencer stated that the community has asked for new revenue sources and that the SC is lucky to have a community member willing to run with it and an athletic director willing to coordinate and oversee the process. She said the district would be lucky to receive the benefit of any offsets that result. Mr. Foster said that he agrees in principal that additional revenue is good. Mr. Foster said that by targeting the offsets just for athletics, the SC is functionally setting up a system wherein certain parts of the building have the potential to generate money for a particular

program. Athletics have the biggest real estate, but the field and gym are for the use of all. If revenue from a particular part of the building is for a particular program, Mr. Foster wondered who would ask next, perhaps robotics or theater. He said the point is equity and questions who claims ownership over certain parts of the building. Mr. Foster also raised the moral issue of whether the SC should be trying to prevent advertising from being the norm in student lives in the building as it is in the outside world. Ms. Whitman stated that advertising funds could be earmarked for one-time expenses like maintenance which would benefit all students. Ms. Whitman recommended a review of the advertising program after the first cycle. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed concern that monies earned would go to needs and not wants. The superintendent stated that it would be overseen by the athletic director.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved the question. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

The motion passed 6 to 1. Mr. Foster was opposed.

- c. **FY25 Budget Discussion & Adoption** – Superintendent Beaudoin referenced an updated budget presentation which is posted in meeting materials online and the FY25 Capital Budget materials. The superintendent shared that the final health care increase has come in at 7.95%, yielding a \$280K savings from the initial estimate. The superintendent factored in this savings, less \$95K for pending META TA negotiations, into an updated FY25 Carry Forward Budget that represents 2.77% growth. In addition, this figure is used to update the 2.5% budget and the T2 Requested Staffing & Capital Improvements Budget. Superintendent Beaudoin recommended SC adopt the carry forward budget at 2.77%. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that her primary concern is that she would need reassurance before attempting to rebuild any program that the district will not be back in the same position of making large cuts next year. The district continues to identify efficiencies. These structures do not meet the goals of the district but are designed to create structures that are sustainable over time with what is available. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the things that make MERSD unique and that people see value in, whether elementary world language or a schedule designed for the social-emotional well-being of middle and high school kids, are not necessarily the most efficient pieces. They are choices made because they support the district's desired outcomes. The superintendent said that the frustration heard in her voice is because the district does not have many options, and there is no discussion about the path forward to change the course of action for 2.5. If the district has to live there (at 2.5% growth), it will have to get more serious about accepting some of the things that are not desirable.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for clarification about whether the principal asks would be funded by the carry forward budget. The superintendent stated that

they would be, with the exception of two TAs for whom the district will be responsible to find funding.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to accept the proposed Carry Forward FY25 budget totaling \$30,065,522. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Ms. Koch Sundquist stated that instructional coaches are key to aligning the elementary schools. Although she is mindful of the Essex ask to come in at 2.5%, the dollar difference is \$18K and the value of the addition of the instructional coaches to the program is well beyond that.

Mr. Foster presented several points via slide presentation to present a narrative linking the district's fiscal and program components. Mr. Foster pointed out that the district has worked to ensure that staffing levels reflect enrollment. Overall, staffing has declined over the last ten years, with a rise for special education staff. Use of E&D funds has increased for the last five years, but not all allocated funds have been used each year. Mr. Foster expressed concern for the relationship with the Town of Essex, particularly in the event of a super town meeting to achieve an override and advocated for participation in the DESE comprehensive review to address a number of expectations noted in the Essex FinCom discussion. Looking at program, Mr. Foster supported the reallocations recommended to strengthen the system of support for students in ELA and math. Mr. Foster is not in favor of the reallocations for the library teacher's aides or the .6 foreign language position. Mr. Foster said that staff need time to redefine the role of librarians in the digital age before re-implementing the program, and he does not think the change to the schedule that would allow for the return of the middle school language is ready yet for implementation. Mr. Foster recommended adoption of a FY25 budget with 2.5% growth.

Ms. Spencer stated that she is not in favor of the motion because further offsets should not be required to fund the modest requests of the principals. Ms. Spencer advocated for the highest budget. Ms. Spencer pointed out that Gloucester is rising this year at 10%, Beverly at 9% and Ipswich at 10.6%. She said that the district has worked hard at efficiency and should look now to supporting students.

Ms. Whitman stated that she is not in favor of the 2.77% budget. Ms. Whitman reflected that she had hoped to see a level services budget come in under 3% and it has. She described the 2.99% budget as reasonable and predictable spending.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the budget did not seem "carry forward" because instructional coaches were added. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that the instructional coaches were added through re-organization and reallocation of resources, not adding positions. The assessment to towns is kept reasonable in this budget because of the use of reserves.

Mr. Reed also said he was not in favor of the 2.77% budget because he is concerned about giving the students, staff, and administration what they need in the coming year. He has not been in favor of the smaller budget all year and did not think that the small cuts should be made.

Ms. Mitchell said that she understood the superintendent's hesitancy to add anything back in because of the cycle the district has endured without a plan for coming years. Ms. Mitchell asked if the superintendent's recommended budget is in the best interests of students because it provides stability. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it is the best that can be done with what is at hand. However, with the \$66K, the district could begin hiring after the February break. Conflicting narratives make it difficult to frame the budget. The superintendent emphasized that time and energy go to countless hours of nipping and tucking the budget. The district is always looking to phase out old models and update to more efficient ways of functioning. If the district is looking to add back programs, it should only do so if it is able to support them going forward. It would be foolish to invest \$200K in positions to start in the same budget situation as the district did this year. Ms. Whitman stated that the SC has come along way and wants to support the district and the superintendent. Superintendent Beaudoin replied that what the district wants may be more than what they can achieve, and she is steeled for that possibility. The superintendent stated that she has to be prepared to make adjustments to meet level services. The superintendent said that she has clearly heard that there is not funding beyond the 2.5%. Ms. Whitman replied that those constraints are out of the SC's lane. Mr. Reed echoed the sentiment. The superintendent stated that she has to be prepared to make the budget work. Mr. Foster stated that he does believe it is in the lane of the SC to look to future years. He stated that the SC needs the goodwill and support of the towns to get above 2.5% next year and get a correction of some kind. Ms. Koch-Sundquist pointed out that the apportioned monetary difference to the Town of Essex between 2.5% and 2.68% is \$18K and questioned if town leaders would choose to send the communities to a super town meeting for that amount.

Ms. Spencer moved the question. Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion failed unanimously.

Ms. Mitchell stated that she was prepared to support the Carry Forward budget, but that she now sees that even the highest budget option is now under 3.0% growth. That growth is much lower when compared to other districts. Ms. Mitchell thanked Mr. Foster for bringing up the point of the super town meeting. She stated that it was a very divisive prospect last year that hurt students and that she wants to see a budget that provides stability for students. Ms. Mitchell said that the SC would need to commit to supporting long term any programs added back. Ms. Whitman pointed out that the 2.77% budget also does not meet Essex's 2.5% ask and could result in a super town meeting. Mr. Binieris stated that the district has provided stability in terms of growth in a consistent range of less than 3.5% for roughly ten to fifteen years.

The motion to approve the FY25 Carry Forward Budget as presented failed 1:6, with Ms. Koch-Sundquist in favor.

Ms. Spencer moved to extend the School Committee Meeting. Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

*Mr. Binieris moved to accept the FY25 Budget in the amount of \$30,130,522 and 2.99% growth
Mr. Reed seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell commented that the SC has come along way as a committee and expressed pride at their current management of the budget and functioning as a group. She stated that the 2.99% is very reasonable.

Ms. Whitman recognized that there is an apportionment problem but said that the SC is no longer in a position to degrade the school district to address it. Ms. Whitman said there are other things that the SC is willing to do to correct the problem, including a learning exercise about how other districts approach the apportionment formula and an operational review of the district.

Mr. Foster stated that he feared this could set up the district to be in the same position next year. Strategy-wise, he said that if the district was going to ask for more than 2.5%, maybe it should ask for 5% and set itself up for next five years. Mr. Foster said that the 2.5% could be reached without harming the program. Mr. Foster said that the public has not been engaged in what is needed to get this approved for this year.

Ms. Spencer stated that Essex partners might be disappointed with the SC's decision, and many MBTS members would be disappointed by this decision because it does not represent greater investment in the school system. Ms. Spencer said that it remains an impossible dilemma to satisfy what the two towns are asking of the SC. Ms. Spencer shared that a community member who she met with preceding the meeting described the budget discussions as discouraging and spoke of a lack of optimism, citing the rising class sizes and program loss at the elementary school. Ms. Spencer said that these issues remain on the SC radar and hoped that they could be addressed holistically in the future. She stated that the proposed budget is the best that can be done this year.

Mr. Reed pointed out that probably the single biggest reason that MERSD costs have not risen as much as surrounding towns is the teachers. Mr. Reed described the teachers and students as stakeholders in the school system who have sacrificed to keep growth manageable. The teachers agreed to a contract that allows the district to stay below 3.5%. The students put skin into the game by losing programming. Mr. Reed said the proposed budget is far from ideal but provides needed flexibility. He stated that until the larger structural issues are fixed, the district would continue to find itself in this boat.

Ms. Spencer moved the question. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

The motion to accept the FY25 Budget in the amount of \$30,130,522 and 2.99% growth passed 4-3, with Mr. Binieris, Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Spencer, and Ms. Whitman in favor and Mr. Foster, Ms. Koch-Sundquist, and Mr. Reed opposed.

Mr. Foster moved to approve the FY25 Capital Budget as presented. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.

Discussion: Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that the Capital Budget is debt management for the two new schools. It is an account for what the district owes, the fee schedules, and assessments to the towns.

The motion passed unanimously.

- 8) School Committee Comment** – Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she appreciated the work Mr. Foster put into his presentation of ideas around the budget. She asked if the SC could have greater notice in the future so that presentations could be placed on the agenda and others could also present. Mr. Foster stressed the importance of the discussion to explore what counts as committee member comments. Mr. Foster said that, although there has been precedent, all members are equal and it is incumbent upon all to understand their authorities, responsibilities, and opportunities, including ten minutes of comments. Ms. Koch-Sundquist requested that material that would become public record be distributed with the same lead time as would be expected from administration. Ms. Whitman suggested adding the topic to a future agenda. Ms. Mitchell stated that the SC should be willing to listen to each other. Superintendent Beaudoin said she would seek clarification from the MASC about roles and “rules of the road.”

Mr. Reed called upon every member to think about how to approach the budget next year and what is important. Will the lens be students and what is best for the school? Mr. Reed said that the SC can get mired down in the devil of the details. He stated that the School Committee’s job is not to determine if there is a librarian but to vote on the total budget amount and what that represents for the administration.

9) Adjourn

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

Meeting Adjourned at 9:30 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- March 5, 2024
- March 19, 2024
- April 1, 2024