



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES DRAFT *April 24, 2024*

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	April 24, 2024
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Anna Mitchell, Co-Chair Chris Reed Erica Spencer
Absent:	Kate Koch-Sundquist
Guests:	
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 5:33 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) –**

Nina McKinnon, 1 Lowland Farm Road, Essex – Ms. McKinnon stated that she believes the link provided through the MERSD budget postcard had key items missing from the budget booklet and asked if there would be additional information available for the Manchester and Essex Town Meetings. In particular, Ms. McKinnon noted that section three, “MERSD at a Glance,” was absent. Ms. McKinnon said that this section was included in the budget packet for the last five years. This section previously included

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visuals about teachers, student size, and school choice. She said that it also included a graph of MERSD reserves over time. Ms. McKinnon stated that the budget booklet did not clearly state that the district is receiving funds from both towns for the replacement of the two turf fields.

Donna Furse, 8 Blossom Lane, Manchester – Ms. Furse stated that she would present at the Manchester Town Meeting regarding Article 20, changing town bylaw to allow the school district to move forward with plans to solicit advertising at Hyland Field. Ms. Furse said that questions were raised at the most recent Essex Board of Selectmen meeting about how funds raised would be used. Ms. Furse asked the School Committee to provide further details on what their comments meant for the program and said that she could table the article, if needed. Ms. Furse stated that she has worked hard with Athletic Director Cami Molinare to obtain SC approval for the advertising proposal and to ensure that funds would go through the athletic department to assist with small-capital improvements and to alleviate user fees, which are rising at a dramatic rate. She asked if there was a plan for funds to go elsewhere.

- 2) Chairperson's Report** – Ms. Whitman responded to the inquiry from Ms. Furse, assuring her that the SC approved the proposal as presented by Ms. Furse. No other use of advertising funds is under consideration.

Ms. Whitman discussed the proposal to solicit community feedback, at question and answer sessions, on the topic of excellence in schools. There was discussion via email about wanting to make this discussion more structured and broad. Ms. Whitman said the idea would be tabled for now, as this approach was not currently possible. Her vision had been as an opportunity to listen. A more detailed and broad approach would need to be discussed further by the SC. Ms. Whitman reached out to several local groups about holding engagement sessions. Ms. Whitman was able to set up two question and answer sessions at the Essex library for next week to answer questions raised after the Manchester Town Meeting. Sessions will be held on Monday, April 30 from 10:00 am to 11:00 am and on Thursday, May 2 from 4:00 pm – 5:00 pm. These meetings are open to the public and to all SC members who would like to attend.

Ms. Whitman distributed a draft of a letter to the town boards broaching the possibility of reinstating collaboration group meetings in an open meeting format. In the draft letter, Ms. Whitman mentioned the concern about violation of Open Meeting Law, which led to the decision to curtail these meetings. Ms. Whitman highlighted the success that the School Committee has since had in creating collaborative opportunities by inviting relevant board members to attend SC subcommittee meetings. However, because these meetings have a limited agenda, it has precluded discussion about other topics of common interest, including a third party review of the district. Ms. Whitman invited town board members to re-engage in collaboration meetings with an open format and closed the letter by asking for a response before the next SC meeting on May 21. Ms. Whitman asked the board to provide feedback on the scope of the letter.

Discussion: Ms. Spencer suggested inclusion of an additional paragraph asking about specific goals the town boards would have for a third party review. Ms. Whitman said that she could add a paragraph suggesting that the first collaboration group meeting focus on the possibility of a third party review and would ask about specific goals for such a review.

3) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1060-1064
- Minutes for approval: April 2, 2024

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

The motion passed 4-0. Ms. Spencer and Ms. Mitchell abstained from the vote.

4) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/John Binieris) –Ms. Whitman reported that the Facilities subcommittee held a meeting and invited town partners to join. Superintendent Beaudoin had been working on the language for the Town Meeting warrants. Attendees were made aware that the SC would be seating members of the Essex School Building Committee at the current SC meeting. Sarah Mellish reported out that the Manchester Finance Committee voted 4-2 to support the Essex Elementary building project feasibility study. Mr. Binieris stated that the subcommittee also had meet and greets with candidates for the Essex SBC.
- **Finance Committee** (Anna Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report. Ms. Whitman asked if there is a time frame for the new TA agreement. Superintendent Beaudoin said that ratification is planned at META’s May 8, 2024 meeting. The superintendent would like to have an executive SC session planned for next week or the beginning of the following week and will be soliciting SC member availability.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report

- 5) Superintendent’s Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district office has been focused on preparations for the Town Meetings. The superintendent responded to the public comments made by Ms. McKinnon, stating that the district created a condensed version of the budget booklet this year because of time constraints and the onboarding of the district’s new Director of Finance and Operation, Michelle Cresta. Having lost the expertise of the outgoing director to understand the source material, some of the charts and graphs were difficult to replicate. The superintendent said that the components that Ms. McKinnon mentioned were left out because of the crunch to

produce the budget booklet and not with other intent. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district could loop back on items of particular interest and put something together on the website.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the budget update postcards went out as planned. However, because they went out so close to the school vacation week, some cards may have been misplaced in held mail piles for those traveling. Timing of the mailing will be adjusted for next year. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the online budget booklet format will be further refined going forward. The district is evaluating tools to improve the presentation. The superintendent noted that funding for the feasibility study is outside of the operational budget and is not mentioned except in the introduction. Using the QR allows access to a full page on the district website devoted to the Essex Building project. It also enables users to download a one page FAQ with highlights from the website. Hard copies of the MERSD budget booklet and QR codes will be available at the Town Meetings. Ms. Whitman stated that some found it difficult to access the information using QR code technology and suggested providing hard copies of the budget booklet at town outlets in advance of the Town Meetings. The superintendent was in favor of the suggestion.

- 6) **Continued Business** – MSBA Essex Elementary School Building Committee Appointment, vote to approve. A full description of the MERSD School Building Committee mission, charge, and responsibilities is included with SC meeting materials. A list of the candidates for the Essex School Building Committee, both voting and advisory, is included in the SC meeting materials.

Ms. Whitman stated that the MSBA has specific role requirements for the School Building Committee. Ms. Whitman said that the district received a lot of interest for participation by qualified applicants. The SC has chosen to have a balanced number of voting members from the two towns. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district is replicating the process used with the Memorial Building project. The advisory positions are used to maintain the 50/50 voting balance. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the commitment is multi-year and that the advisory positions allow for smoothly replacing voting members who need to leave the committee before the completion of the building project. If a change to the makeup of the SBC is necessary, an updated roster must be submitted to the MSBA for approval. Mr. Foster stated that half of those proposed for inclusion on the Essex SBC were on the Memorial SBC.

Ms. Mitchell asked about having additional School Committee representatives on the SBC to better keep the SC informed. Mr. Foster said that the SBC has the experience it needs. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the two SC Building subcommittee members will provide updates to the SC. Ms. Annie Cameron, in attendance, stated that the district is also represented by two administrators. All big decisions are referred to the SC for final approval. Ms. Cameron said that the district has learned a lot from the two previous building projects. Ms. Cameron said that SBC meetings are open and suggested that Ms. Mitchell attend if interested. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that

the SBC charge was drafted by considering how to maintain good lines of communication between the School Committee and the School Building Committee. The superintendent said it is a very public process.

Mr. Foster noted that there is not a teacher currently on the committee. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there is a spot reserved for a teacher. That solicitation will happen in fall. The current work has been to seat the public representatives. Mr. Foster confirmed that there is nothing from the MSBA that requires the district to maintain a 50/50 voting balance between Manchester and Essex. The district has chosen to prioritize that.

Ms. Spencer asked a clarifying question about the SBC charge. Ms. Spencer stated that she had previously asked questions about the feasibility study and been told that the study would consider all options, including the option of using excess capacity at MMES for EES students. Ms. Spencer expressed concern that on the day of town elections she learned that the study would not consider all options and that information she had conveyed to residents and stakeholders now appeared to be inaccurate. Ms. Spencer was particularly concerned given the timing since the public would be asked to vote on the feasibility study that evening.

Ms. Whitman said that there are three reasons why a merged elementary school is not part of the path currently being pursued for EES. The first is that the Regional Agreement does not support a combined elementary school. The second is that the MSBA has stated that eligibility is based on renovation, replacement, or repair of the Essex Elementary building and would not include an addition to Manchester Memorial Elementary. Finally, the Memorial building itself does not have enough space to absorb the Essex Elementary population. Ms. Whitman said that the limits in the scope of the feasibility study were mentioned in a meeting with the MSBA a month ago. Ms. Spencer did not recall that information being shared. Mr. Binieris stated that Essex town leaders have indicated that they want their own building. Ms. Spencer emphasized that she is not advocating for any path and thinks it likely that any exploration would likely suggest a separate Essex Elementary as the best choice. Ms. Spencer stated that the SC would be in a better position moving forward if able to say that the consolidated elementary option had been fully considered. Ms. Whitman reminded the SC that the statement of intent was voted on a year ago, having considered the consolidation option as not viable because of space restrictions. Ms. Whitman said that the option could be explored after seating the SBC. The School Committee may choose to explore the option independently. Ms. Mitchell said that during the budget discussion about potential emergency situations, the superintendent has said that EES students could be housed at Memorial short-term. Ms. Mitchell stated that she was also not aware that the consolidation option was not under consideration. She stated that the Regional Agreement can be changed. Regarding enrollment, Ms. Mitchell said that enrollment has declined yearly and the district has been increasing the number of school choice students. It would be possible to close school choice to entering elementary students. The SC could do an analysis and show

whether it would be possible to combine the two schools in this scenario. Ms. Mitchell said that it is important to show that the option was eliminated by an analysis of the data. Ms. Whitman reiterated that this work could be done after seating the SBC members.

Ms. Spencer asked if Mr. Binieris, in his presentation of the warrant at Manchester Town Meeting, could present the options or if there was another way to provide clarification to constituents about what options are currently under consideration. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that Mr. Binieris is required to read from the scripted statement containing the MSBA's definition of a feasibility study. Ms. Spencer asked if there was a way to provide clarification to voters about the options under consideration, given that she had stressed that all options were under consideration.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that no entity currently has the authority to alter the regional agreement, and the MSBA would take that into consideration if the district were to present to them a proposal to widen the scope of work. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the Regional Agreement explicitly guarantees that elementary students shall receive an education in their own town.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she has been returning to consideration of the 2013 foundational document when the two communities debated pursuing a fifteen-year plan with two updated elementary schools or a merge of the schools into one elementary. The outcome of that debate was for two schools. Foundational variables of that decision have not changed. Enrollment at the time of the 2013 agreement was similar to current enrollment. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the SC can talk about bringing the two school together, but it cannot affect that change because of the limitations of the agreement.

Ms. Whitman said that she could understand the concern currently expressed by Ms. Spencer. She stated that she also thought that the SC would explore the consolidation option until a recent meeting with the MSBA and superintendent. The topic was bumped from previous discussion, resulting in the committee's current misunderstanding. Ms. Whitman stated that voting for the feasibility study still allows the SC to look outside the bounds of the feasibility study independently, if there is a strong enough drive to do so. Ms. Spencer stated that she voted in favor of the statement of interest fully believing that the feasibility study would encompass all options. Ms. Spencer expressed concern that the opinion she shared with constituents was not accurate.

Mr. Binieris asked if he could make a statement that consolidation of the two elementary schools is not under consideration under the feasibility study. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the SC cannot commit to what will be studied, in terms of sites and locations. Ms. Whitman suggested that Mr. Binieris read the prepared statement, knowing that the topic of consolidation would likely be raised by a town member. It could be addressed at that point.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that a commitment was made by previous School Committees to build two schools and that the implied reciprocity with Essex for their own new building should be honored. The superintendent said that there are less expensive options that the study will consider that may address cost concerns by the towns. Mr. Binieris stated that the Town of Essex overwhelmingly supported construction of the Memorial Elementary School. Ms. Spencer said that some of those asking her about the possibility of consolidating are Essex residents. Mr. Reed said that all options have been discussed for the last several years and that changing the Regional Agreement is a heavy ask over multiple years. To delay the Essex building project to pursue a change in the agreement would likely incur millions of dollars in repair for the aging Essex building. Ms. Spencer stated that, to address concern about the growing district operating budget, one way to reduce costs is by reducing infrastructure. Mr. Reed said that soaring building costs would also be mounting during a delay. The superintendent said that, should the SC choose an outside option for considering consolidation of the two elementary schools, they would have to begin from the understanding that there is not buildable land on the Memorial site. An addition would have to go up to a third level. Ms. Whitman remarked that Ms. Spencer did not raise this issue for outcomes but to address the situation she is currently in, having provided insight that she now sees as inaccurate. Ms. Whitman said that these are the questions currently being broached by the community. She suggested moving forward through the current vote and then addressing any concerns raised, potentially by independently reviewing the consolidation option. Ms. Whitman stated that it is possible for the district to choose a path outside of the MSBA process. The superintendent said that the SC cannot commit to anything regarding outcomes before the feasibility study runs. The MSBA's guiding tenet is that the process drives the outcome. The district should not make ball-park predictions about the final cost or project. It is a very proscribed process, and the SC needs to relinquish steering a bit. Ms. Whitman stated that Superintendent Beaudoin would be able to provide answers to any questions raised by voters regarding the option of combining the two schools. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she would reply that there is not room to combine the schools. In an emergency situation, if the district needed to temporarily house Essex students at Memorial, it would require conversion of the gym and other spaces into classrooms. That is not a tenable solution long term.

Ms. Whitman called for the conclusion of discussion to enable SC presenters to get ready for the Manchester Town Meeting.

Ms. Whitman moved to accept the Essex School Building Committee roster as presented. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

7) School Committee Comment - none

C. Adjourn to attendance at Manchester Town Meeting

Mr. Reed moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 6:20 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- May 6, 2024 (Monday) 5:15 pm
- May 21, 2024
- June 4, 2024
- June 18, 2024 - if needed