

Manchester Essex Regional School District

School Committee Meeting Minutes September 8, 2021

Virtual Meeting via WebEx

Members Present: Sarah Wolf, Chair, Ken Warnock, Eric Bourke, Theresa Whitman, Matt Harrington, Kate Koch-Sundquist and Chris Reed

Staff Present: Pam Beaudoin, Superintendent, Avi Urbas, Director of Finance & Operations, Gail Hunter, Secretary

A. Call to Order: Ms. Wolf called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

1) Public Comment

Ms. Wolf opened the meeting with welcome to everyone who is joining us tonight and to 1623 Studios for recording the meeting and posting it for us. We will begin with public comment. I just want to take a moment to remind everyone that this is an opportunity for comment, not debate.

As our policy states: *"A School Committee Meeting is a meeting of a government body at which members of the body deliberate over public business. We welcome the attendance of members of the school district community to view your School Committee as it conducts its regular business meeting, but these meetings are not designed to be an opportunity for dialogue."*

Please know that while we will not be immediately responding to your comments or answering questions, we are listening and paying attention to your concerns. During the meeting we will be focusing on items that are listed on our posted agenda.

If you would like to make a comment, please put your name and address in the chat. Please do not make other comments in the chat. We allot 20 minutes total for public comment, and we ask each person to limit their comments to 3 minutes. I will be timing the comments tonight and I will ring my bell after 2 ½ minutes. After public comment is over, the chat function will be turned off to allow us all to devote our full attention the meeting.

Kathryn Howe, 3 Woodholm Lane, Manchester, Ms. Howe read the letter below:

Dear Principal Willis, Superintendent Beaudoin, and Members of the School Committee,
We understand you and the teachers are doing an enormous amount to maintain the quality of Manchester's education and the health of the students in these trying times. Thank you for your efforts. Nevertheless, it is our understanding that the number of 3rd grade teachers and classrooms has been reduced from three to two. Generally speaking, having a significantly larger class size is detrimental to the learning process, and this is especially true for elementary school children. This year in particular it will be even more damaging to change the number of teachers from three to two for a couple of very clear reasons.

First, from a health standpoint, if we have agreed to have children wear masks due to COVID-19, then it cannot simultaneously make sense to significantly increase the number of children in each third-grade class. According to the original MA guidance, the optimal size for an ongoing group of people meeting in

person is roughly 10 people. While we recognize that strictly limiting classes to under ten people is likely impossible, increasing the class size to more than 20 students will obviously introduce substantially greater risk of spreading COVID-19 in these classes.

In addition to this, from a learning standpoint, our children lost the opportunity for in person learning for a significant part of the last school year. They truly need as much teacher time and individualized focus as they can possibly get this year to be in a position to recover from last year's lost learning opportunities.

For these reasons, we believe that this decision should have been discussed with the affected parent community and needs to be remedied as quickly as possible. We hope that you will engage with us in a discussion about possible mitigation efforts as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Kathryn and Peter Howe, Natasha and Alex Lamb, Christina and Peter Yukins, Shannon and Zac Storella, Julia and Paul Stremple, Kent and Jaime Wilson, Luke Barton, Carolyn and Matt Bergeron, Ereni Markos and Dimitri Kordonis, Mike and Kristin McLaughlin, Erin Greenwood, Miriam McAvoy, Alex and Brittney Burgess, Jamie and Kara Harris, Don and Robyn Seitzinger, Amy and Jeff Lage, Faye and Andrew Ryding, Nadia Wetzler. Chrissa Markos, Pete and Abby Considine, Tamar Lipof and Bernie Romanowski

In addition to the letter Ms. Howe referenced the MERSD Teacher's Contract noting that in grades 3-5 the class size guideline is 19 – 22 students not to exceed 20% of the guideline. Ms. Howe asked how decisions are made determining class size.

Katie Vandi, Essex – Ms. Vandi expressed concern around the mask mandate as stated by DESE indicating if 80% of the student body is vaccinated a District may decide to lift their mask mandate for vaccinated students requiring non-vaccinated students to continue wearing masks. She finds this proposed policy to be discriminatory. Additionally, Ms. Vandi stated Superintendent Beaudoin's letter to parents was written to coerce parents into vaccinating their children when, in fact, that is a medical decision. Ms. Vandi believes that both the DESE policy and the Superintendent's letter do not allow for diversity of thought and will result in discrimination and students being bullied.

Jake Foster, Essex – Mr. Foster stated he son's transition to grade 6 had gone smoothly and requested the School Committee meeting materials be posted to the website prior to the meeting.

2) Chair's Report

Ms. Wolf stated It feels like the year is off to a mostly normal start. I was able to walk through all our schools on Wednesday, and it was great to see the kids and teachers in person learning their classroom routines as usual. The classrooms look wonderful and welcoming as always. I got to see the new playground at Essex Elementary and the new building in Manchester, as well as the middle/high school in action. We are lucky to have such special schools in our district.

Tonight, we will be spending most of our meeting on our district-wide strategic plan and goal setting for the year.

Also, I have an announcement on behalf of the **SEPAC**, the special education parent advisory council. This group is having their annual picnic at Tuck's Point. This event is for children who receive special education and their parents and guardians. Thanks again for joining us.

Student Representative, Lukas Shan reported the school year was off to a great start which in spite of wearing a mask was like the beginning of a normal school year. He also stated all after school clubs and sports activities are running. He indicated the enthusiasm and energy among the students was awesome. Ms. Wolf asked Lukas if he was starting his senior year. He confirmed he was, and it was great to be back.

3) Consent Agenda

- Acceptance of Warrants

Mr. Urbas noted there were two warrants for approval: FY2021 #1056 and #1008

- Budget Transfers
- Minutes

Superintendent Beaudoin stated draft minutes are posted on the website and minutes will be available for review during the September 21st meeting.

Mr. Warnock moved to approve the consent agenda, Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.

4) Sub-Committee Reports

- Elementary Facilities/MSCC (Theresa Whitman/Chris Reed)

Ms. Whitman reported she spoke with Ms. Cameron, member of the School Building Committee, Ms. Cameron reported the Memorial School Project was on time and on budget. She also stated the Building Committee was offering tours of the new Memorial School for stake holders with the next tour scheduled for tomorrow. These tours are an opportunity of School Committee members to ask questions about the building and the process in planning for the building. The construction project is finishing up Phase 3. The Memorial School sign has run into some issues and since the sign does not impact student learning the sign is being backed out of the construction budget and will be addressed under District Facilities.

The School Building Committee is turning their focus to an evaluation of Essex Elementary School and the Middle High School. Ms. Whitman requested she and Mr. Reed be added to the School Building Committee distribution list and will plan on participating in the meetings as representatives of the School Committee.

Superintendent Beaudoin added additional tours of the Memorial School will be conducted when Phase 3 of the project is completed. At that time tours will be available for community members, there will be a ribbon cutting ceremony and grand opening of the Memorial School.

- Finance Committee (Matt Harrington/Theresa Whitman) – Report

Ms. Whitman defined the Collaboration Group for the new Committee members. The Collaboration Group includes the Town Administrators of both Towns, Finance Committee and Board of Selectmen representatives from each Town, Superintendent Beaudoin and Mr. Urbas and two School Committee members. The group meets monthly and more frequently during budget “season”.

At the most recent Collaboration Group meeting Mr. Urbas reviewed the District's bond rating and the audit results from Powers & Sullivan, LLC, District Accountants. On September 28th new Finance and BOS representatives from Essex will meet for an informational session around District finances and the collaboration process.

- Policy Committee (Eric Bourke/ Kare Koch-Sundquist) No Report
- Negotiations Team (Sarah Wolf/Ken Warnock) No Report

5) Superintendent's Report

- Successful Opening –
 - Awesome to Have the Students Back – Superintendent Beaudoin agreed with Lukas that it was awesome to have students and staff back in the building and to be experiencing the regular pace. Additionally, after school activities are back on track. Superintendent Beaudoin is optimistic the District will be able to keep everyone on campus with the proposed mitigation plan.
 - Thanks to Faculty & Staff – for their work in preparing the buildings for school opening. Until early August the District assumed we would have a traditional opening but with the Delta variant several changes need to be made to provide for social distancing.
 - Memorial School Moving into Phase 3 – The inside of the Memorial School looks great.
- Essex Elementary Playground accessible w/ landscaping to be completed
 - Enrollment – In response to the 3rd grade parents at Memorial School Superintendent Beaudoin addressed the parents concerns. She stated at 25 students in each class the classes are two shy of 25% over. Administration will observe and track the classes and set the 3rd grade classes as a priority for next year around the possibility of adding an additional teacher. Superintendent Beaudoin offered the Memorial School parents the ability to cross-enroll their 3rd graders in Essex Elementary where they would have the benefit of smaller classes. If it is necessary, the District will find the resources to add a Teacher Assistant to Memorial School 3rd grade.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated total enrollment in the District is 1,270 students with an overall class size average of 18 to 19 students. She noted there are highs and lows in enrollment and in class size, estimating class size is not an exact science. Superintendent Beaudoin noted enrollment estimates for 2021-2022 school year were based on October 2019 enrollment numbers and during the pandemic some children were enrolled in private schools and some students were home schooled. She concluded that concerned parents should be in touch with Principal Willis.

6) Continues Business

- COVID Procedures Update – Testing Program

Layered Mitigation - Three components targeted at minimizing the risk of COVID being spread at school:

- Daily Screening – MyMedBot
- Symptomatic Testing • Test & Stay for Close Contacts

- The testing program is voluntary. Students will need permission order to be tested, and parents/guardians will be contacted as needed for consent. o If an individual or family chooses not to participate, a close contact will need to quarantine at home for at least 7 days from the point of exposure.

General Definition of Close Contact: Close contacts are defined as individuals who have been within 6 feet of a COVID-19 positive individual while indoors, for at least 15 minutes during a 24-hour period. Close contacts exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols

- Asymptomatic, fully vaccinated close contacts: Individuals who are asymptomatic and fully vaccinated are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- Classroom close contacts: An individual who is exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in the classroom while both individuals were masked, so long as the individuals were spaced at least 3 feet apart, is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- Bus close contacts: Individuals on buses must be masked according to federal requirements. As such, individuals who are masked on buses when windows are open are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- Close contacts who have had COVID-19 within the past 90 days: An individual who has been previously diagnosed with COVID-19 and then becomes a close contact of someone with COVID-19 is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols if: o The exposure occurred within 90 days of the onset of their own illness AND the exposed individual is recovered and remains without Covid-19 symptoms.

Committee members had several questions around pre-screening prior to coming into school and close contacts in and outside of school. Superintendent Beaudoin suggested developing a FAQ sheet with the help of School Doctor, Nurses and Town Boards of Health Nurses.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about absences due to sickness and quarantining, Superintendent Beaudoin stated, an absence is an absence and when students are out, they should contact their teachers for work. Ms. Wolf noted the information is a lot to process and when there are questions, please contact the Health Professionals.

- Update Strategic Plan – Draft Strategic Priorities

Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the Mission, Vision and Core Values Overview had been reviewed and approved by the Committee. She is presenting the draft version of the Theory of Action, Strategic Initiatives Priorities and Strategic Objectives for the Committee's review and comments.

Mr. Warnock stated he believes the Plan looks good but thought there was almost too much in the document and the document could use some distillation or clarity. Superintendent Beaudoin suggested deleting the Strategic Objectives section. Mr. Warnock stated he believes the strategic plan should be the why and more high level and tactical, while the School and Grade levels are separate with the District level the driver. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the draft reflected a summary of the information the communities were looking for. The District understood there was a lack of vertical alignment and part of the goal was to keep everyone in alignment.

Superintendent Beaudoin clarified the Strategic Initiatives Priorities were developed with a 10-year goal for achieving while the Strategic Objectives are to be achieved within a 3-year time frame. Ms. Whitman

asked if RULER had not achieved some of the Objectives. Superintendent Beaudoin stated COVID had derailed some of the work around RULER and the District was now at the point of implementing RULER at the High School level. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the intent of the document was not to overwhelm but for the District and School objectives to sit on top of the Improvement Plan.

Ms. Wolf believes there is too much on one page. Ms. Whitman will work to make the document more visually accessible. Ms. Wolf stated she loves both the Theory of Action and Strategic Initiative Priorities. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the *True North* – every student is at the center of decision making – was added to the document.

Superintendent indicated one of the biggest questions in the document was including the priority around ensuring funding noting it is foundational to achieving larger goals with means and resources. Funding is sometimes unsettling and takes up a lot of time for the District. The objective around ensuring funding is for the District to be moving forward not simply maintaining and not to step back and it takes significant effort to achieve this objective. Ms. Whitman agreed the strategic plan needs to include a sustainable multi-year operational budget and capital improvement plans.

- School Committee Goal Setting

Draft School Committee Goals were presented. Ms. Wolf stated the School Committee goals are long term goals with Budget Goals in a separate section.

Edits included:

- Oversee management of the District budget and budget reserves, working collaboratively with our member Towns
- Evaluate the current conditions of Essex Elementary and Middle High School
- Communicate our newly revised Mission, Vision and Core Values to optimize clarity and engage our communities
- Ensure that diversity, equity and inclusion are becoming embedded and practiced for our students, families, faculty and staff as we work to identify and eradicate any existing discriminatory practices in the District.

School Committee goals will be finalized at the next meeting.

- Superintendent Goal Setting

Draft Superintendent goals were presented and include:

- Student Learning
- Professional Practices
- District Improvement
- Covid-19 Emergency Management

Ms. Wolf thanked Superintendent Beaudoin and indicated she thought the goals looked great. Ms. Whitman agreed. Mr. Warnock stated he appreciated the brevity and accuracy of the goals presented. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated her goals were short on paper but big goals to achieve.

7) School Committee Comment

Ms. Whitman asked about the status of hiring a new Athletic Director. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated interviews were being conducted this week with an offer likely being made and a candidate named next week. Ms. Whitman also asked about Open Houses. Superintendent Beaudoin stated she is committed to Open Houses but would like to wait and see what the world looks like in the next weeks and will decide by the 17th.

Ms. Wolf stated while all the buildings are fully masked the School Committee will continue to meet virtually.

8) Adjourn

Mr. Warnock moved to adjourn the meeting; Ms. Whitman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.

WebEx call-In information available at <http://www.mersd.org/domain/818>

MERSD Mission Statement

Education all students, instilling a passion for life-long learning and encouraging local and global citizenship.