



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

May 21, 2024

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	May 21, 2024
<b>Location:</b>	MERMHS Learning Commons
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Mitchell, Co-Chair Erica Spencer
<b>Absent:</b>	Chris Reed
<b>Guests:</b>	Allison Collins, Director Student Services; Elizabeth Crowley-Burns; Caitlin Eppes; Patric Barbieri; Sally Smith; Officer Andrea Locke, SRO; Officer Mark McCoy
<b>Recorded by:</b>	Maria Schmidt
<b>Link to Reports and Presentations</b>	<a href="https://www.mersd.org/domain/785">https://www.mersd.org/domain/785</a>

**A. Call to Order of** – Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:04 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)** – None
- 2) **Chairperson's Report** – Ms. Whitman shared that the district budget and feasibility study both passed at the Essex Town Meeting. At the meeting, a community member raised the issue of the validity of the SC budget approval vote taken in February. That issue will be addressed later in the current meeting. Ms. Whitman also spent time

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answering questions about the feasibility study prior to the Town of Manchester's ballot vote happening today. Ms. Whitman and Superintendent Beaudoin answered questions for a Gloucester Daily Times article.

- 3) Student Report** – Stella Staub. Ms. Staub reported that the learning commons hosted student SCORE presentations earlier in the day. As a result of tighter parameters for projects, more students participated in internships. There is a lot of excitement over the anticipated comfort dog coming to the MBTS police department. Ms. Staub said it is gratifying to see the results of student efforts, as this program arose from a student civics project. The high school is preparing for finals week. Ms. Staub noted that more teachers appear to be shifting to final projects. An area for concern broached by Ms. Staub is the perceived lack of participation in extracurricular activities by students in grades nine and ten. The high school paper is exploring this topic. Ms. Staub said that clubs are having trouble recruiting and retaining new members, and she worries about the fate of these groups. She has seen this decline in many of the groups to which she belongs or with which she is familiar, including Debate and Cross-Country. Ms. Staub said that club leadership is looking for ways to inspire students to get involved.

Questions – Superintendent Beaudoin asked which clubs were in this position. Ms. Staub replied that she is aware of low participation for debate, journalism, science team, HOSA, and cross country and has heard that there are others in the same situation. Ms. Spencer asked about the typical strategy for soliciting involvement. Each year, Peer Mentors holds a club fair in the fall with tables for clubs. Students sign up on the way to lunch. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about the scheduling of club meetings and how they may clash with sports. Ms. Staub said that some clubs meet during U block, but that is less desirable because it conflicts with band and chorus. Sport team practice times vary. Ms. Staub said that it is not hard to combine athletics and club participation.

**4) Consent Agenda –**

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1068 - 1073
- Minutes for approval: April 24, 2024, and May 6, 2024

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to separate both SC meeting minutes from the Consent Agenda; Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed unanimously.*

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to accept the warrants and AP Vouchers 1068-1973; Mr. Binieris seconded the motion.*

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked if the refrigeration unit referenced in the vouchers is covered under a warranty. Ms. Cresta confirmed that there is a warranty and said that she will meet to discuss this.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

*Ms. Mitchell moved to accept the School Committee minutes from May 6, 2024; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed 5-0, Mr. Binieris abstained.*

*Mr. Foster moved to accept the School Committee minutes from April 24, 2024; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed 4-0, Ms. Koch-Sundquist and Ms. Mitchell abstained.*

## **5) Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/John Binieris) – No Report
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Mitchell reported that the finance subcommittee met with Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance and Operations, to review goals toward formalizing and documenting the budget process and other issues. Topics included:
  - Creating a comprehensive budget calendar with specific, transparent steps
  - Improving the budget book presentation – Ms. Cresta and Superintendent Beaudoin have been reviewing the document for updates this year and the subcommittee plans to build on that work and make it more user-friendly.
  - Implementation of auditor recommendations to finance policy. Ms. Cresta will speak with the auditors for more specifics about their recommendations.
  - Align the long-term financial plan with the district's Strategic Plan and Improvement Plan, demonstrating how they impact the budget.
  - Increase consistency of routine reporting – Until a year ago, there were no internal reports. Last year, there were three. Ms. Cresta said that the goal will be to deliver four quarterly reports. Following Q1 and Q2 reports, Ms. Cresta is hoping to present monthly budget to actual reports to the SC. The timing will depend on the workload as Ms. Cresta settles into her role.
  - Review of the business unit structure – The plan is to review after 90 days. This is an opportunity to review the administrative expenses in response to community inquiries and to determine if staffing is adequate.
  - Consideration of a new auditor for the district finances – formalized the process for consideration of replacing the current auditor. Ms. Cresta will propose a date in 2024 to bring the issue before the full School Committee.

Clarifying Questions: Mr. Binieris asked why a new auditor was under consideration and if there are existing concerns. Ms. Whitman stated that the question was raised during the audit presentation and the subcommittee was asked to clarify the process by which the SC would take the matter up for discussion. It has been determined that

the fall is the right time to put it on the SC agenda. Ms. Mitchell commented that the district has used the same auditor for fifteen years.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Ms. Koch-Sundquist shared that Unit B has ratified the contract. The SC will take its public vote on the contract later in the current meeting. Ms. Koch-Sundquist characterized the contract as fair and well-deserved.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – Report
  - Unenrolled Student Access to MS Athletics/Activities – Ms. Whitman reminded the SC that on December 1, 2023, the district received a request from a community member to consider a revision to district policy allowing, on a case-by-case basis, the participation in district sports of unenrolled students from the member towns of Essex and Manchester. Consideration was asked for those sports that MERSD offers only if the student's school does not offer it. This request was presented to the SC and sent to the policy subcommittee for review. After the subcommittee's report back to the SC, it was decided to have a broader conversation.

Mr. Foster emphasized that the subcommittee approached the issue from desire to say yes. Mr. Foster said that the subcommittee had to consider the implications of any policy created for participation in all extracurricular activities. It was also important to give weight to the perspective of the middle school principal and the director of athletics. The pros of a policy allowing participation by unenrolled students (community members not registered with the district as regular or home school students) included enhanced goodwill and engagement from members of the community who help to fund the district. It would also increase peer networks. Several cons were explored. Only the middle school athletics program could host these students, because the MIAA governs high school athletics and expressly prohibits participation by unenrolled students. Currently, sports enrollment in middle school sports is pushing capacity limits. Allowing additional registration could result in a cutting practice that is contrary to the middle school policy of inclusion. Allowing unenrolled students to participate in the MERSD sports program could have increased budget implications and increase liability to the district. Mr. Foster said that they could not find an example of a district that has such a policy. On balance, Mr. Foster stated that the policy subcommittee recommends maintaining the current practice and not creating a policy. This decision is consistent with past School Committee discussions on the topic. Mr. Foster asked for a vote of support from the SC for the recommendation of no action.

Clarifying Questions: Ms. Whitman said that the original letter stated that the district had previous instances of allowing participation on sport teams by non-enrolled students. Mr. Foster said he was not aware of any occurrences. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she believes there was an occurrence several years ago that sparked a conversation. She said it is possible that others did so

without it coming to the attention of administrators. Although this history was not discussed, Mr. Foster stated that it would not have influenced the broader points raised. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the subcommittee had considered creating standards to be used on a case-by-case basis versus a more general approach. Mr. Foster said that the subcommittee did not consider this to be a case-by-case issue. Mr. Foster said that it is a policy for all potential circumstances.

*Mr. Foster moved to support taking no additional action, at this time, on the issue of creating a policy to address participation in middle school sports by unenrolled students. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Spencer stated that she is in the minority on the subcommittee. Although administrators shared important considerations, Ms. Spencer believes these concerns can be addressed with guardrails. Ms. Spencer said it would be possible to identify the few private schools likely to have residents of Manchester. With their many extracurricular offerings, there would likely be few students looking to participate at MERSD. Ms. Spencer pointed out the benefits of goodwill and increased diversity that could arise from involving these students. Ms. Spencer said that she would be comfortable with a policy that limited opening spots to unenrolled students only if there was room on a team. Ms. Mitchell asked if unenrolled students who had been cut by their own school's program would be eligible. Ms. Spencer stated that the framing was only for students whose schools did not offer a particular sport. Ms. Whitman commented that, while sports teams have a determined process for joining and a coach as the leader, clubs do not have a hard upper capacity. Ms. Whitman said that sports are a good test run for allowing this kind of participation. Ms. Whitman stated that the SC could amend the guardrails as they deem necessary. Currently, the district policy on this issue is silence, though the athletics handbook states that participants must be students. Ms. Whitman questioned how often the handbook is reviewed and who is tasked with its approval. Ms. Whitman suggested that there may be times in the future when participation is low and the district is looking to increase it. Ms. Whitman stated a policy is about who makes the determination about a particular student and decides how to implement that decision. A policy could outline who makes these decisions, for example the athletic director. Mr. Foster said that, in this instance, it is the School Committee's decision.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district has been silent on this issue because the athletics policy is that students must be enrolled to participate. This blocks recruiting. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the administration was clear about their concerns, and she supports their position. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said she believes that the concerns of administration could be addressed by the guardrails. Each parameter could have an "or/if" condition. The current case, for a very full field hockey program, may not have been the best example. The SC student representative just shared that many clubs and some sports teams are having trouble recruiting participants. Ms. Mitchell pointed out that it takes a lot of time and effort to manage the guardrails. For example, if a private school offered a sport during an off season for MERSD, could a student participate in it during our season.

Superintendent Beaudoin highlighted the dangers of evaluating students on a case-by-case basis, using school choice as an example. The district is not allowed to consider applicants individually as a public school. This is why school choice is a blind lottery. A case-by-case consideration of

athletes could start the district down a road where individuals are evaluated for acceptance. Superintendent Beaudoin said that different schools have different cultures and expectations of their students. Coaches would be put into the position of monitoring other schools. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the one clear point of agreement is that a case-by-case basis was not acceptable to administrators. Ms. Whitman stated that she is defining “case-by-case” to mean “this season, this sport,” not applicant by applicant. Mr. Foster said that the issue is more philosophical than logistical and asked if the SC favored opening all extracurricular activities to any unenrolled student, stating that it could become unmanageable and inequitable. Ms. Koch-Sundquist questioned how it would be inequitable to allow a student to join a sport that has space. Ms. Spencer said that there are years when it would be helpful to have additional participants and that it is unlikely that there would be many students who would show interest. Mr. Binieris said that private schools are on different academic calendars from MERSD. A player could show up late each day or go away for vacation. Administrators would have to decide if they are exempt from team policy about late arrival or missed practices. Mr. Foster said that this could involve participation in anything except high school sports, including clubs. Mr. Binieris said that there are tradeoffs in choosing to attend private versus public school, and this policy could open up a can of worms. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it would not just be open to the few private schools in our area, it would also open the door to students who have choiced out of Manchester-Essex, or are at other types of schools, and could result in increased district responsibility to support students who participate. Mr. Binieris mentioned local parochial schools that may have fewer sports options.

Ms. Whitman said that acceptance of these students aligns with the district’s desire to create an inclusive space. Ms. Whitman stated that she does not support no action and prefers to continue the discussion in order to codify, in policy and when the issue arises, who makes the decision to allow, or not, participation by unenrolled students. Ms. Whitman said the policy could direct school administrators to make that decision. Superintendent Beaudoin implored the SC members, should they choose to continue forward, to do so with a generalized policy where the superintendent is responsible for determining process and protocol. The superintendent said the principals and athletics director should not be responsible for making case-by-case determinations because it puts them in a horrible position. There would need to be a localized procedure to follow. Ms. Whitman said that she had recently heard about other districts that allow this kind of participation. Ms. Mitchell said that the recommendation of the subcommittee was not to prohibit it but to take no action at this time. Mr. Foster stated that it is not an easy decision and said that the cons substantively outweigh the benefits. He said that it would be a lot of work to verify whether any outside school had a particular sport. Mr. Foster stated that it would take a lot of work to create a policy for this issue while also working on the many other policies under review. Ms. Mitchell emphasized that the administrators and principal advise against such a policy.

*The motion to take no further action on creating a policy for unenrolled student participation in athletics failed to pass, 3-3, with Mr. Binieris, Ms. Mitchell, and Mr. Foster in favor. The topic will be revisited at the next SC meeting.*

Superintendent Beaudoin asked for the identify of the district purportedly allowing this participation. Ms. Whitman said it is Beverly. The superintendent said that this had not been

disclosed when canvassing local superintendents. Mr. Foster stated that the survey of the MASC policy manual also uncovered no mention of districts allowing this.

- General Update – Ms. Mitchell said that a draft reserve policy was distributed to all SC members as a base for further discussion. The first task of the subcommittee was to clarify the definition of “reserves.” The term should only refer to the E&D and stabilization funds. The policy subcommittee recommendation is for the reserves to be at 8% of the total operational budget. Ms. Whitman asked what directional input the subcommittee is seeking from the full SC. Ms. Mitchell said that the subcommittee would appreciate input on the percentage target. By state law, the E&D must be not more than 5% of the operational budget. The SC can target the amount for the stabilization fund. Ms. Mitchell pointed out that the operational budget would need to have a line item for stabilization. Ms. Whitman asked the SC to consider if it wants to have a limit and what would be the target. Ms. Whitman asked about statutory requirements and where the percentage differs or aligns with other districts. Ms. Koch-Sundquist also asked for comparisons with other towns. Mr. Foster replied that the stabilization fund does not have a statutory limit. Mr. Foster recommended that the SC create language for when the total E&D exceeds 8%. Mr. Foster stated that the SC can apply E&D to operating expenses in extreme situations and that the subcommittee is leaving that determination open for the SC. Ms. Mitchell stated that the purpose of an E&D policy is to demonstrate that the SC is responsible in managing cash and the reserves of the district. Part of this demonstration is to define how the district manages excess funds. Mr. Foster stated that Superintendent Beaudoin had asked if the 8% would be a maximum or minimum. Mr. Foster said the district would need to maintain a large enough E&D total to handle an emergency and maintain a high bond rating. Mr. Foster clarified that previously the E&D included several accounts, including school choice. The district no longer has reason to treat yearly revolving accounts as E&D. Working with Ms. Cresta, the subcommittee was able to clarify constitutes a stabilization fund. Although it was previously defined as a capital improvement fund, it is actually a general reserve fund which can be used for any purpose designated by the School Committee. Ms. Whitman asked about the use of the stabilization fund for parity between the elementary schools. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this was achieved through only the use of interest income from the Memorial building project. Ms. Spencer stated that the subcommittee circulated the issues upon which they are seeking SC input and suggested continuing the discussion at the next meeting. Ms. Whitman stated that she would not be comfortable supporting policy until she understands the history of the stabilization fund. Mr. Foster said that the draft E&D policy will aid further discussion.

## **6) Continued Business –**

- a. Manchester Police Department Comfort Dog Program Presentation – Andrea Locke, SRO and Officer Mark McCoy. Officer Locke introduced Daisy, a six-month-old yellow lab and the newest member of the MBTS police department. Officer Locke described the many benefits the department hopes

to see by bringing Daisy onboard, including building the police department's relationship with the community, providing comfort and support during crises, and improving community policing. The police department was able to utilize remaining funds from the previous K-9 unit and will apply for additional local grants to meet the expenses of training and providing for Daisy. The community has already been very supportive, with Crosby's Market donating food and Dr. Lamb providing discounted veterinary care. The department is considering several sponsorship ideas to support the program. By partnering Daisy with the school district resource officer, the department hopes to positively affect student mental health and build its relationship with the student body. Officer Locke said that Daisy is still a puppy and has not yet undergone training. Her schooling will include obedience, socialization, environment and proprioception, and reacting to unexpected stimuli.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the district had previously considered the merits of a comfort dog but became mired while considering the responsibility it would entail, concerns about allergies, and the current no-animal policy that the district has. The MBTS PD is taking ownership of many of those issues. The district will support the program through its continued contract for an SRO on campus. The superintendent said that the team agrees that it supports the district's goals around social emotional learning, and the comfort dog aligns with the elementary and middle school centers for decompressing and centering of the self. Superintendent Beaudoin asked if the SC would vote in support of the district partnering with the MBTS police department to bring Daisy into the schools.

Clarifying Questions: Ms. Mitchell asked if, given that the dog is owned by the MBTS PD, how would time be shared with other community groups like area seniors. Officer Locke responded that her job is to be present on campus during the school year. While it is possible that the pair could be called upon to aid other towns in the event of a crisis, they would be assigned to the district during the school year. Their presence at other locations would be arranged for non-school hours. Mr. Foster confirmed that the town has already approved the comfort dog program and will move forward regardless of the SC vote. Mr. Foster asked if the issue of allergies had been considered. Officer Locke said that students at the middle and high school level are aware of their allergies and able to partner with her, via communicate, in order to avoid bringing Daisy into contact with these students. The police department will also educate those interacting with Daisy about measures that decrease the possibility of passing on allergens, such as handwashing after being with Daisy. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district will work on an implementation plan and can look to the example of other districts that have comfort dogs. Officer Mark McCoy shared that Gloucester has a comfort dog and has done a great job of creating that program. Ms. Whitman stated her support for the program but questioned how students will be accommodated if they do not wish to interact with the dog. Officer Locke said that, with foreknowledge, she will be able to limit contact with those who do not want it.



Officer Locke stressed that she would never call attention to anyone who did not wish to interact with the dog. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that these considerations would be handled at the building level through the formation of daily rules, regulations, and protocols. The comfort dog would be a resource that would not be forced on anyone. Ms. Spencer mentioned that recent research says that cortisol levels decrease from staring into a dog's eyes for ten seconds.

*Ms. Spencer moved to support the district's partnership with the MBTS PD to bring Daisy to the school district. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell said that there is an animal policy that needs to be considered. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the next level is to look at updating the district's animal policy. The district will solicit attorney recommendations and consider daily operations. Mr. Foster was concerned about the suggestion that Daisy might wear sponsorship patches as that would be against the advertising prohibition at school. Officer Locke said that, if the sponsorship program is implemented, it could be done only in summer. Ms. Whitman noted that this program was pursued because of two students in the civics program. Ms. O'Rourke, present in the audience, read a statement from Scarlett Lee and Kate Bent, the students who devoted their civics project to the comfort dog program:

"Hello. We apologize for not being there today. We believe that a comfort dog would be a wonderful addition to our school's community. Throughout the process of proposing to the police department to get a comfort dog, we have learned so much about civics and the process of making change in our school and in our community, as well as the many mental health benefits of having dogs in learning environments. We hope that you vote in favor of having Daisy at our school so that other students can benefit from and learn about comfort dogs. Thank you for your time."

*The motion passed unanimously, 6-0.*

- b. Introduction of SEPAC Representatives – Allison Collins. Ms. Collins announced the relaunch of the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) and introduced two of its new members, Elizabeth Crowley-Burns of Essex and Caitlin Eppes of Manchester. Both representatives shared how they came to join the committee and their hopes for SEPAC's accomplishments. Ms. Crowley-Burns hopes to be a contact person for the community and to share information and her experiences while assisting with events and supporting communication. Ms. Eppes expressed her desire for SEPAC representatives to act as point people for parents new to the special education process. They both expressed the desire to focus on community building and creating connections. Ms. Eppes also serves on the ADA committee and wants to ensure that activities are accessible and that the towns are involved in serving the special education community.
- c. Special Education Program Review Report – Patric Barbieri & Sally Smith, educational consultants. Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the goal had

been to share the results of the third party SPED review last year. The review wrapped in December, but there have been many pressing issues that delayed the presentation. Since then, Ms. Collins has already begun integrating their recommendations.

Mr. Barbieri stated that they work with seventy-five districts and have seen many programs. They performed their review using interviews and observations of the SPED program across the district. Ms. Smith shared many commendations for the district. Not all districts perform independent evaluations, and the consultants commended MERSD for doing so. The consultants reported strong collaboration between teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers. The district was commended for the quality of its inclusion and co-teaching experiences and the forward-thinking and co-treatment approach of the related services providers, including speech and language pathology, occupational therapy, and physical therapy, who work with teachers to increase co-treatments and push-in versus pull-out therapy. The high school learning strategy liaisons and middle school moderate liaisons were singled out as vital components of both the high school and middle school. The consultants also singled out the district's high quality in-district programs, including IRWL, Transitions, ACE, and the preschool program. Ms. Smith stated that more students are entering school age with complex needs, and districts need to think about keeping kids in the least restrictive environment. Ms. Smith suggested preparing for future growth at the PK level. She reported an increase in students with more intensive needs throughout the state. Ms. Collins reported that, since September, the district has had seven new students enroll who are on the autism spectrum. Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to some of the recommendations from the consultants. Restructuring of the ACE and SWING programs was implemented for the 2023-2024 school year, including updating program descriptions and the criteria for assigning one-to-one aids to students. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there was overlap between these programs. It was established that there should be criteria for assigning aides and that this criteria should be periodically re-evaluated. Ms. Smith said that, while an aide may be assigned at first for safety, the district needs to take data about the role of the aide and complete periodic evaluations of student goals to determine if the aide remains necessary. The consultants also recommended shifting the chairperson's role to an administrative one so that they may observe and evaluate and hold authority to make "resource" decisions at IEP meetings, as required by DESE regulations. The review examined the cost of Least Restrictive Environments (LRE), comprised of the percentage of the budget spent on special education, staffing and resource costs, circuit breaker reimbursements, transportation costs, and cost avoidance. The LRE is the cost to keep students in-district, and it avoids out of district placement. Mr. Barbieri pointed out that two districts with the same LRE number could be doing very different jobs with their program. Ms. Smith stated that, by creating quality programs at the lowest grade levels, the district is better able to continue student education in the least restrictive environments.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the district will be working on vertical alignment of programs between the buildings, including documentation, so that teachers can communicate next steps to parents. Ms. Smith commended the district's documented transition schedule. For professional development, Ms. Smith recommended that staff from general education collaborate with SPED staff to increase understanding about roles and responsibilities between teachers and paraprofessionals.

Steps to Implement Recommendations: Allison Collins. Ms. Collins said that the time since the completion of the special education review has allowed the district to work towards many of the recommendations. Budget considerations have impacted the district's ability to implement some of the suggestions, including shifting chairperson positions to administrative positions. The restructuring of the ACE/SWING programs arose largely due to a shift in the student population. As a small district, MERSD has to respond to the needs of its current population. ACE was originally a program servicing students with memory deficits and language challenges in contrast to a student being medically fragile or non-verbal. The SWING program has been discontinued. A complex needs classroom for younger children will be instituted at Memorial Elementary to serve the needs of current students. The district has created a plan for re-evaluating student needs for one-to-one aides. Re-evaluation enabled the district to reduce middle school ACE TA numbers and add a middle school ACE teacher. The high school is planning to conduct a similar review. Professional development is often in response to the changing needs of the student population. This year, all staff was trained on new IEP methodology and administration of Universal Design Learning (UDL). This work is a partnership between student services and the curriculum director to address UDL and students with disabilities. Next year, tiered focus monitoring is under review by DESE, which will assist in updating district policies and procedures. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that long term recommendations will be pulled from the special education review and incorporated into the District Improvement Plan.

Questions: Ms. Spencer stated that the SC is tasked with developing the district's budget, twenty-five percent of which goes to SPED. Ms. Spencer noted that the district's transportation expenses are high relative to other districts. Mr. Barbieri replied that some of that is due to differences in provider and the service provider. More centrally located schools may have more options for sharing transportation or program options from which to select. However, he also said that not all districts report on their transportation costs. Superintendent Beaudoin said that DESE data has its struggles but is the only tool available for comparisons. Ms. Collins stated that the district always seeks multiple bids. Transportation costs are driven higher by students with significant needs, including those who need a monitor on the van, the distance students are transported, and the scarcity of placement options. Manchester is not close to many service providers. Currently, the district has few students going to the same place, but the district does try to carpool with other districts.

when able. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district is part of the North Shore Collaborative, and its board of directors is comprised of area superintendents. They are seeking ways to reduce costs by creating efficiency models, for example through a regional study to map better transportation routes.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist recommended that referral forms be included in the policy manual so that parents know what programs are available and what they entail. Ms. Collins said that program descriptions are kept by the district and utilized when a student is recommended for a program. In the past, it became controversial to have them on the website. There was concern that the descriptions were promoting the program and encouraging people to move to the district for special education services. Ms. Collins said that parents do not need a program description to refer their student to special education. However, a survey of parents recently illustrated that they would like more information. The district will be working with SEPAC to determine how to make special education more transparent. Currently, there is an open house for SPED families transitioning to the middle school. Ms. Collins said that the district is considering an open house for younger families.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted that, since the report was written last year, the SWING program has been eliminated and asked if any programs remain in Essex. Ms. Collins stated that ACE remains in Essex to service students with memory and language processing issues. Although the district did not want to move the program, currently there are students with genetic disorders and the facility at EES is not accessible. The district engaged a specialist to review what would be needed to bring EES up to safety and accessibility standards. The price was very high and these renovations would have been to a building entering the MSBA pipeline for replacement. Hopefully, the program will be able to return to EES at the conclusion of the building project. Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted that Essex Elementary lost a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) and recommended hiring another for the school. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if it should be considered for next year's budget. Ms. Collins replied that the BCBA position is for level three autism and severe emotional needs and that EES does not have a need for that position going forward. Ms. Collins said that the MERSD model is to have all BCBA as full-time teachers, able to imbed their knowledge in their daily practice.

Mr. Foster asked about the difference between "co-treat" and "co-teach," and he asked for insight or suggestions from the consultants to improve the performance of the disability subpopulation on standard measures of performance. This group consistently is the lowest performing. Ms. Smith said that "co-treatment" refers to collaboration between related service providers, for instance when the physical therapist teams with the occupational therapist. "Co-Teaching" refers to when a teacher and related service provider team up in a classroom. Mr. Barbieri stated that a review of MCAS scores would require a different kind of examination. Ms. Smith said that it is important to

think in terms of evolution. Considering at all staff, SPED and general ed, the goal should be for the student to be fully included in the educational program. The student should be accessing the general curriculum versus doing their own thing, in terms of curriculum. Ms. Smith said this has a benefit academically, as well as around social-emotional components. Ms. Smith shared that research shows that when these students tend to learn with their typical peers, what they learn tends to influence them. Mr. Foster asked for clarification of the recommendation for joint ownership around student learning. Ms. Smith said that in an ideal world there would not be special ed or gen ed but one system. However, there remains the need for a lot of training in terms of differentiating instruction. Ms. Smith said that, when talking about UDL, the educational system is not quite there yet, though huge steps have been made. Ms. Smith said she is always excited to enter a room where teachers are working with groups of students and it is not clear which are special education staff or students.

Superintendent Beaudoin thanked the consultants for their feedback and said that improvement is an ongoing process. In 2012, when the district began its work on the SPED program, MERSD was not an inclusion district. The goal is to reach all learners, find a way to teach all learners in general ed, and to have all staff have ownership of all students. From the financial angle, administrators are working locally to collaborate on finding transportation solutions. At the state level, they are lobbying legislators to take on Chapter 7066 reform and address the limitations of Prop 2 ½. Circuit Breaker only reimburses districts for out of district placements. It would be beneficial to build in a reimbursement factor for districts creating programs that keep their students in-district. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the state should stop incentivizing sending students out.

- d. FY25 Budget Update and Clarification Vote. Ms. Whitman shared that, at the Essex Town Meeting on February 6, it was stated that the School Committee vote to approve the MERSD Operational Budget for FY25 does not meet the required two-thirds approval needed, according to SC policy section DBG. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that two-third of all members of the regional school district committee must vote in favor.

*Ms. Whitman moved to approve the adopted FY25 budget as presented. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she had voted against the original budget presentation because of the perceived lack of support in the Town of Essex. That opposition did not materialize, and Ms. Koch-Sundquist is now able to give her support to the budget. Mr. Foster stated that he originally opposed the budget fearing that it was pushing the Town of Essex into an override and possible super town meeting. That has not happened, and Mr. Foster is now able to lend his support to the budget.

*The motion passed unanimously, 6-0.*

e. META Unit B Contract – Vote to Approve.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the META Unit B contract. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.*

*The motion carried unanimously, 6-0.*

Ms. Whitman update the School Committee that the Essex Feasibility Study passed in Manchester.

- 7) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin reported that hiring work is ongoing, including for a new band director. Senior Week is kicking off at the high school with prom later in the evening and graduation on May 31. All district buildings will commemorate Memorial Day. School Committee members are encouraged to attend.

The superintendent shared a timeline of the EES building project, showing where the district stands in the process and what is to come. The timeline speaks to what will be studied and when information will be available. The district is currently in the eligibility period, which will extend through November. At this point in time, the Essex Elementary Building Committee (EEBC) has been approved. The addition of faculty representatives will occur in the fall of 2024, with meetings scheduled for November of 2024. Seating the committee is part of being ready for the next stage, but their work does not start yet. They have been approved by the MSBA and now await the next steps in eligibility. The district has also received approval for the feasibility study from both towns. Before proceeding to the feasibility stage, the district must complete forming the project team.

In the eligibility phase there is a lot of paperwork and filings with the MSBA. The superintendent is working with administrators to complete an educational profile questionnaire. They are also working on enrollment projects, partly based on DESE numbers from the past ten years correlated with the district's own numbers. In addition, they are putting together maintenance and capital plan information. The enrollment questionnaire also delves into community data, such as housing starts and the history of building permits, to create a picture of the district's history and likely predictions based on the demographics of birth rate, proposed 40B, etc. Once those things are done, the MSBA will schedule an enrollment meeting sometime between June and August. At that meeting, they will start to discuss what the design enrollment may be based on those factors. It is a number determined by the MSBA, and it will become a document that informs future activity. However, not much happens with it until the district reaches the preliminary design phase. That is when the process examines existing conditions, site development, and a built out educational program, including visioning sessions. They will then develop alternatives and file them.

In the MSBA educational profile questionnaire, there is a question that asks if the district will consider studying consolidation or reconfiguration. The district will confirm that it is. This will open the door for consideration of broadening the scope to consider combining the elementary schools. Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed that the enrollment meeting is between the administration and MSBA representatives. Ms. Spencer said that there was interest expressed at an SC meeting to discuss the enrollment results once completed by the MSBA. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the SC could meet to review the report once it is complete but that it is likely not actionable. Ms. Whitman stated that everyone is concerned with not missing a deadline that would eliminate options. Ms. Mitchell noted that the district will not be looking at different building options until 2026. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that each time the district completes a segment in the timeline they must be voted to advance to the next step. Superintendent Beaudoin said that one of the benefits of partnering with the MSBA is that there will be a team of professionals to support any conversation at the local level about wants and needs. These objective professionals will be able to interpret, project, and lead the conversation to a set of potential outcomes. Superintendent Beaudoin recapped how the process may open up the options from those anticipated by the original SOI.

**8) School Committee Comment - None**

**C. Adjourn**

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

*The motion passed unanimously.*

Meeting Adjourned at 9:08 pm

**School Committee Future Meetings**

- June 4, 2024
- June 18, 2024 - if needed