

**Manchester Essex Regional School District**

School Committee Meeting Minutes January 25, 2022

Virtual Meeting via WebEx

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

**Members Not Present:** Matt Harrington

**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 5:30 p.m.

**B. Executive Session**

**C. Business Meeting Open Session**

**1) Student Report**

Diego, a sophomore, noted student concerns around COVID testing protocols specifically when to go to the nurse and when to wait were discussed and resolved. He also stated that some students were not following the rules at basketball games and ruining it for everyone, but the email reminder from Principal Puglisi helped and was needed. Superintendent Beaudoin asked about late entry. Diego stated after break students and teachers liked the option but now late is late and if a student is late, it means a detention according to the Late Policy. He added it would be great to have late entry after February break too. Ms. Wolf thanked Diego and noted she meets with the Student Council often and asked if Committee members had additional questions. There were no additional questions this evening.

**2) Chairperson's Report**

Ms. Wolf stated this has been a difficult budget process around issues related to the MERSD Budget. Following the Presentation of the Budget the Public will have an opportunity to ask questions and comment.

**3) Consent Agenda**

- Acceptance of Warrants 1030,1031 and 1032

Ms. Wolf stated warrant 1030 had to do with retiree health enrollment, 1031 related to interest on the bond, and 1302 was a warrant including med Bot, snow removal and more.

*Mr. Bourke moved to approve the consent agenda including warrants 1030, 1031 and 1032; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote with all members present voting affirmatively.*

#### 4) Sub-Committee Reports

- Elementary Facilities/MSCC (Theresa Whitman/Chris Reed) – Report
  - Turf Field Replacement

Mr. Reed stated he had spoken with Mr. Urbas following the meeting to review the proposal for the new turf field and the recommendation from the vendor was it would be hard to complete the project this summer and the vendor suggested extending the life of the field with some maintenance and combining the Hyland and Brook Street Field replacements into one project the following year. Mr. Reed added the field will be safe to play on this spring and next fall. Mr. Reed stated given the project is a major need and the District is financially challenged it may not be a bad idea to wait a bit.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the School Building Committee is planning a walk-through of Essex Elementary School on February 8, 2022 to review the status of the building. Any members of the School Committee interested in attending are welcome to attend the walk through is scheduled for 4:00 p.m.

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

Collaboration meeting last Friday and as the budget process continues, we will hear more this evening.

- Policy Committee (Eric Bourke/ Kare Koch-Sundquist) – Report
  - Food Service Contract

Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated the Committee is getting ready to review the contract and will first survey the parents and students to see what they like and do not like about the current contract and will move forward following receiving feedback.

- Negotiations Team (Sarah Wolf/Ken Warnock) – Report

Mr. Warnock stated negotiations with META had started late this year and there are discussions around continuing the current contract for an additional year.

#### 5) Superintendent's Report

- **Updated COVID Protocols** – *Implementation of DESE Sponsored T-Home Testing Program*

Superintendent Beaudoin introduced the DESE proposed changes to the current COVID test protocol of Med Bot, Contact Tracing and Symptomatic Testing to be replaced with:

##### At Home Testing (Opt-In)

- Opt-In Form will be shared the week of January 24<sup>th</sup>
- Health Kit (2 Tests) for two weeks will be provided for every student
- Family Reports Results to school via online form

### Quarantine with Positive – DESE Guidelines

- Symptoms improve
- Fever free without fever reducing medication for 24 hours
- Ability to tolerate strict masking and distancing
- Following 5-day isolation – must mask for additional 5-days
- 5-day isolation begins first day after positive test

Ms. Seaman, School Nurse, believes this is an excellent shift and with the shift School Nurses will have time to help with children who are sick. She indicated there is rarely close contact in the classroom due to vigilance of teachers. She cautioned that if children are sick, they should stay home.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the change will be made based on a certain level of participation among families. Superintendent Beaudoin stated she believes there will be significant by-in noting for some families the schools participation was reassuring but for other families it was considered intrusive. Mr. Warnock ask about the not recommended to test again. Ms. Seaman stated most everyone is free after 5-days and all returning after quarantine need to mask for 5 additional days. Ms. Whitman thanked Ms. Seaman and asked if students or staff were returning in under 5-days. Ms. Seaman stated no, however, teachers were interested in returning to the classroom as soon as possible.

Superintendent Beaudoin thanked Ms. Seaman for going above and beyond with the High School nurse out on leave.

*Mr. Warnock moved to support the District moving forward with the proposed changes in COVID management protocol; Mr. Bourke seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.*

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that meetings with Michael Eastman scheduled for February have been rescheduled to March and Mr. Eastman will meet with the Committee at their March 15<sup>th</sup> meeting.

### **6) Continued Business**

### PUBLIC HEARING

#### **Manchester Essex Regional School District Budget for 2022-2023**

- Presentation of Proposed Budget for 2022-2023



MERSD FY23  
Budget 1.11.22.pdf

The January 25<sup>th</sup> Presentation is included in the attached document.

Superintendent Beaudoin clarified roles stating Mr. Urbas is the Manager of the Budget Process while as Superintendent she presents and works with the School Committee to set policy and

management always putting the needs of children first. She noted the District works in partnership with the Collaboration Groups made up of members of both Town's BOS representatives, Finance Committee representatives and Town Administrators. She added the three parts work together. She indicated the Problem Trying to be Solved:

The Cost of Level services grows at an average 3.5% -- to 4% which is faster than the levy limit of 2.5%

- Perpetual and Structural Challenge – not a function of any single budget year
- Level Service growth rate is suppressed annually in recognition of fiscal constraints
- Creates a cycle of cutting to meet a specified budget number – Cumulative level services deficit grows over time – Every 7 – 10 years MERSD faces a financial crossroads of significant program reduction or need for an override.
- We are at that crossroads in planning for FY23 – FY24

Overtime reserves have been used as a means to an end but not a solution. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the District will need either a correction or reorganize service. The District faces a significant gap due to expansion of Out Of District placements and Health Insurance both budget lines outside of the 3.5% growth rate. Additionally, this is the second year the enrollment shift has increased the Essex increase to more than 3.5%.

Mr. Urbas walked the Committee and Public through the presentation. Superintendent Beaudoin summarized that slide 3 was the point for discussion and outlined the challenge in front of the Committee. The District is at the point where reserves will be depleted in one to two years – as indicated due to the escalating costs of Health Care and Out of District placements. This has been managed with a temporary solution to a long term problem.

- Public Comment

Guy Bradford, BOS Essex – Mr. Bradford expressed his thanks to Superintendent Beaudoin and Mr. Urbas indicating the Board in Essex had discussed the Budget at length and the conclusion was the Board is asking the District to decrease the budget to a level where the Essex increase is 3.5% and proposed that be achieved by looking at OOD placement costs and excluding the costs from the budget until the need is likely but not in place. He indicated that would decrease the budget by \$350K while leaving the use of reserves at \$983K. Mr. Bradford stated at last year's ATM there was significant push back from residents when the District budget increase was 3.95% and now is 4.21%. The Essex BOS understand that a 2.5% increase for the District is not sustainable for the District and realizes the need for an override in 2024, however, this year the Town needs space and would appreciate a budget that shows good faith while the Town is working to mitigate expenses.

Jake Foster, Essex – Thanked the Committee and Superintendent Beaudoin and Mr. Urbas noting it is difficult as a community member to comment on a broad and constrained budget. He supports the need for a budget that provides for an education the students deserves. He indicated having been part of the strategic planning he has not heard how that will be impacted by the budget both positively and negatively but could have some impact once the budget is decided. He added to Mr. Bradford's point that an override is unavoidable, and it needs to be demonstrated to the public that everything has been done that could be done. Mr. Foster

indicated that part the notion level services are maintained or enhanced for a given year has been challenged and the question has been asked if there are other ways of doing business that will result in maintaining or enhancing level services.

Superintendent Beaudoin agreed with everything that Mr. Foster stated adding that what the public may not be aware of is there has been a shift in staffing and resources from general education to special education where resources are immediately used up by special education which provides mandated services.

Ms. Mulvey, SEPAC – Stated the past 2-years have had an extraordinary impact globally, for the country and for our Towns as a result students' needs are more critically important to be met now than at any other time. This is not the time to cut the District budget with many families and children in crisis. She suggested finding other ways to provide without taking it from the children of our communities. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the District will meet every obligation we have for the students.

Mr. Buttrick, Essex – Mr. Buttrick stated this is a lot of information to absorb. He wanted to build on Guy's request from Essex that the Essex portion of the budget be decreased by \$128K from 4.9% to 3.5%. The District budget is a challenge because it is half of the Town's operating budget. He understands this does not solve the problem with the money coming from reserves and understands the question of an override is still outstanding.

Mr. Buttrick asked if the cost of educating the 15 School Choice students exceeds the \$5K. Ms. Wolf replied that the Essex request to decrease their apportioned part of the budget by \$128K down to 3.5% is really a \$350K cut in the District budget. She also stated that if a School Choice student requires an ODD placement that will be covered by the student's hometown or city.

Ms. Cameron, Essex – Ms. Cameron asked if the District had used OPEB for funding last year and stated the \$60K for summer work was a reduction from previous budgets where summer work had been fully funded. Ms. Cameron stated prior to Public Hearings the District Administration and School Committee has already done a lot of work, stating it is not easy to find a list of reductions. She asked if the use of OPEB funds goes against the District's Plan and when and where do students see cuts and reductions. Ms. Cameron had one final comment stating the Town of Essex is asking for a reduction of \$128K yet at Town Meeting in fall 2021 there was \$1M in free cash and the Town came to fall meeting and spent the free cash. She suggested there was a way to have had a lot less drama around the budget.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated OPEB was discussed last year but the District did not use the contribution. She clarified the District was using the contribution to the fund not using resources in the OPEB Fund. Superintendent Beaudoin stated it is her job to preserve programs for students and services are key especially around intervention, remediation and counseling those services are being preserved but the District cannot promote innovation.

Mark Renzi, Essex – Mr. Renzi stated structural deficit and use of reserves is a challenge. He requested help understanding level services in light of the fact that enrollment is down 20% while the FTE count is increasing.

Superintendent Beaudoin replied level services are being maintained for general education programs, elementary specialists and 6-8 AP courses. While the District may need smaller staff to support these programs, we are maintaining the same scope and sequence and holding class sizes to the School Committee benchmark of a maximum of 22 students. Superintendent Beaudoin stated there have been teacher reductions citing Memorial School which at one time had 19 sections is now down to 14 sections these reductions were achieved through retirements and combining services. At one time there was a librarian and music teacher in each of the elementary schools these positions are combined into a 60/40 split.

Attrition roll offs were offset by the needs of Special Education where costs increased due to mandated classes and program needs. While a general education class has a ratio of one teacher to 22 students a special education class has a ratio of one teacher to 6 students with a need for a teacher assistant. Mr. Renzi asked if the increased need in TA of 8 is directly related to special education. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that was correct and one on one support is needed for students with severe needs.

Lindsay Banks, Essex – Ms. Banks is interested in seeing the library budget increased. Her child's time in the library has been cut from a full section to 15 minutes. She stated that students need more instruction around media literacy, critical thinking and how to access hard facts. She believes that learning how to and using the library will help children to become informed citizens.

#### School Committee Comment

Ms. Whitman thanked Mr. Renzi for his question about level services. Ms. Whitman summarized the request from Essex. The District budget is maintained at 3.5% with the understanding and support of the Collaboration Group. This year a 3.5% budget was presented, and the new budget is 2.75% for Essex saving \$128K over last year down to \$67K which is \$61K over last year. At Essex Fall Town Meeting the Finance Committee passed a fund for \$50K for apportionment which now represents an \$11K increase over last year. The decrease from 4.9% to 4.2% is a help. The District will still be relying on a lot of reserve usage with the risk of more reserve use when the ODD placements are realized. Ms. Whitman does not support the use of more reserves. And asked what additional cuts can be made. Superintendent Beaudoin believes there may be ways to make additional cuts, but she will need time to review the possibilities.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist in reply to Mr. Bradford's comment stated Essex voters approved the District budget in 2021 by a margin of 2 to 1 and suggested the descension among members of the BOS should be voiced in a public platform indicating that the greater community of people in Essex passed the District budget.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the \$170K was reached by using ESSER, reserves and overlooking OOD placements in FY23. Ms. Whitman does not want to see additional reserves used.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that if \$60K is insurmountable for FY23 she does not understand how an override of \$900K with a 30% for Essex will be reachable it is a big climb.

Mr. Warnock stated the Collaboration Group is a healthy process with the District working with Town Administrators, BOS and Finance Committee members who all scrutinize the budget there are no surprises. He believes the District has done a responsible job.

**7) 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.**