

Manchester Essex Regional School District

School Committee Meeting Minutes February 1, 2022

Virtual Meeting via WebEx

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

Members Not Present:

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

Call to Order: Ms. Wolf called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m.

1. Public Comment

Ms. Wolf opened the meeting with a 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. She took 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. Ms. Wolf will time comments and ring a bell after 2 ½ minutes. After public comment is over, the chat function will be turned off to allow the Board to devote their full attention to the meeting.

Annie Cameron, Essex – Ms. Cameron stated she was disappointed with the Town of Essex stated the requested cuts hurt and are not good for our Town. The Town's apportionment is higher because the Town has a higher number of users, and this is not new information. She is not sure the Town will support the override they appear to be pushing for.

Becky McKeen, Essex – Ms. McKeen thanked the Committee and Town representatives and indicated she was grateful to teachers and staff. She stated she fully supports the Budget put forth by the District and begged that there be no additional cuts to the program.

Mark Renzi, Essex – acknowledged the back and forth to understand what is going on indicating the School had done an excellent job and asked when the requested information would be

forthcoming. Ms. Wolf stated that all communication from the Essex Finance Committee had been provided by the District. Mr. Renzi insisted information had not been provided.

Ellie Wolf, Essex – Ms. Wolf stated she fully supported Ms. McKeen and requested no further cuts be forthcoming from the District budget.

Ms. Cameron, Essex – Ms. Cameron stated the District Budget is always presented in a PDF and that is true of the presentation to the School Committee. It is not the District's practice for materials be provided to Finance Committees in an editable format.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated all budget documents are available for full transparency and disclosure and indicated where the information could be located online.

Nina McKinnon, Essex – Ms. McKinnon, serves on the Finance Committee and stated the Committee had requested information around the apportionment at 4.9% and 4.2% indicating this level of funding for the District puts other Town services at a reduced level.

2. Student Report

Diego is the student representative from the Student Advisory Board. Diego stated since the Committee met recently there were no big issues but there appears to be confusion around the Nurses' Office and when to go to the nurse and when to go to the Office. Diego stated he recently received a Covid booster and was not feeling well, went to the nurses' office and there was no one there. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the District had contracted with a Temp Agency for a High School nurse and likely the agency could not fill the position for that day. She will clarify with Principal Puglisi what students should do and where they can get help.

Diego stated the new Covid Testing Program is welcome by students and parents and will provide peace of mind. He finally mentioned that the recurring issues at sports games was an issue and that students understand the behavior was wrong. Ms. Wolf stated she enjoyed hearing from Diego.

3. Chairperson's Report

Ms. Wolf stated she felt that was one of the most contentious Public Comments the Board has had and clarified the Committee started the Budget Process over the summer and believed the Budget was in a good place at 3.5% or lower. The Committee had hoped to avoid the fireworks that took place in Essex last year at Town Meeting and had been clear that the Apportionment Formula was leaning towards Essex. Essex had taken a step towards preparing by setting aside \$50K at the Fall Town Meeting, however, the Town is requesting the District make additional cuts to the Budget.

Ms. Wolf stated all citizens benefit from strong public schools. The District is facing massive budget challenge and reductions that will impact families. The reductions requested puts the District in a difficult position.

4. Consent Agenda

- Acceptance of Warrants 1033,1034 and 1035
- Minutes December 7, 2021 and January 11, 2022

Ms. Whitman moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Bourke seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.

5. Sub-Committee Reports

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

Ms. Whitman reminded the Committee there would be a walk-through at Essex Elementary School on Tuesday, February 8, 2022 at 4:00 p.m.

- Finance Committee (Matt Harrington/Theresa Whitman)
- Policy Committee (Eric Bourke/ Kare Koch-Sundquist)
- Negotiations Team (Sarah Wolf/Ken Warnock)

6. Superintendent’s Report

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the At Home Testing Program was launching with 100 teachers and 1,000 students expected to be participating. Tests will be distributed on Mondays with participants testing on Tuesdays. Anyone with a positive test is requested to report the positive test. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the District is excited to be taking this next step.

The Middle Show went off on Friday evening but was cancelled due to snow on Saturday. Thanks to the excellent work of maintenance team the Sunday show went off with all parking lots and sidewalks cleared. The Upper Elementary Play Program sponsored by the Y will take place at Memorial School with transportation provided for Essex students to Memorial. Next year Essex will host the program and Memorial students will go to Essex. The Middle School Concert is scheduled for tomorrow evening. Superintendent Beaudoin stated it is exciting to see the everyday normal activities and programs coming back to school.

7. Continued Business

- **SEPAC** – Christine stated SEPAC would be meeting on Thursday at 6:00 p.m. and planned to hold Parental Rights Presentation next month.
- **FY23 Budget Workshop**
 - **Budget Revisions and Reductions**



MERSD 2.1.22 Budget.pdf

Superintendent Beaudoin walked the Committee and Public through the attached Budget Workshop Presentation.

She focused on the enrollment shift causing apportionment concern for the Town of Essex and outlined the MERSD Budget and the goal of the budget to manage key drivers to an agreed upon target of 3.5%.

She noted the mechanics of apportionment can inflate or deflate the apportionment growth rate as Town enrollments fluctuate.

Superintendent Beaudoin reviewed Key Terms: Spending Growth, Assessment and Apportionment concluding the MERSD operational budget is managed to deliver a stable and predictable spending and assessment growth rate from which apportionment is factored.

Superintendent Beaudoin outlined Revenue Sources noting that 86% comes from Town assessment and 14% from State funding. She defined the budget architecture from required spending, to common practices and preventative spending.

Superintendent Beaudoin outlined the FY23 Proposed Revised Budget on page 9 and delineated what has changed since the tentative budget on page 10. She concluded the budget was creating a liability due to reserve usage and reorganizing the budget did not solve the problem. FY23 Budget Drivers are highlighted on page 11 with a comprehensive review of previous District cuts totaling \$2.8M. Options for reducing the Budget are further outlined on page 13 and 14 with additional concerns and considerations addressed on pages 15 and 16

▪ **Next Steps**

Ms. Wolf, an eight-year veteran and Chair of the School Committee stated she was concerned about not taking cuts to the budget and relying on reserve usage in the event an override does not pass next year. She noted this is a similar position to last year when the Committee voted to approve \$1M for Covid expenses not knowing if grants would come in. She added she was not confident an override would pass in Essex.

Ms. Whitman stated last week Superintendent Beaudoin presented a strong package of reductions and anticipated a different response from Essex. Ms. Whitman is not inclined to approve the use of more reserves. She noted what was missing from the process is discussion among Committee members and outlined three options:

- 1) The Committee could make the decision to support the original budget proposed in January
- 2) The Committee could decide to approve the budget presented last week or
- 3) The Committee could adopt the cuts presented this evening.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated she did not have a recommendation for this evening although she was excited about the possibilities of restructuring and partnering with neighbor communities to support and expand programming. She noted cuts are not a conversation she wants to have.

Mr. Bourke stated he had a brief comment totally understanding the impact the District budget has on the Town. He cautioned that none of us knows what the lasting impacts of Covid will have on the children of the District and does not support cutting \$1M from the budget given the gap in education.

Mr. Harrington agrees with Mr. Bourke noting education is in a different place due to Covid. Teachers are retiring he believes the answer is money and schools need funding now for needed resources to support the children. He does not believe assessments and efficiencies are the conversations to be having. He supports the original budget.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist believes it is irresponsible to draw from reserves given the future is unknown. She also believes the Committee represents the District and the role of the Committee is to make decisions in the best interests of the District. The proposed cuts will impact the Memorial School when Essex will be in a position to ask for support for their new school.

Mr. Reed stated he is new to the Committee and understands there are competing interests when it comes to budgets. He understood the role of the District was to deliver a budget at 3.5% increase and the District did that. It appears the Town of Essex understood the expectation but that changed because of apportionment. He suggested expectations for constituents need to be set more accurately and it appears the District has been running on less for the past 8-years. He believes it will be dangerous to cut funds at this point. The use of reserves will impact the District's credit rating, and, on the surface, he believes it is a poor idea to cut services. He stated he is not in favor of cutting services.

Mr. Warnock stated he has two thoughts. The first he appreciates how collaboration in the District works and recalled that when Essex needed \$50K the Committee stepped up and agreed to use \$150K from reserves to decrease the apportionment to Essex. He also noted MERSD is in the mid-range of per student costs supporting the fact that the District is well managed. He agrees with Mr. Harrington's point that student needs are important, and this is not a time to cut budgets.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the Committee will vote to adopt a budget at the February 15, 2022 meeting and from that point the budget can move down but not up. Ms. Wolf stated even in the first budget the Committee was proposing using \$1M in reserves, in the second budget option there was less reserve usage, but the District absorbed risk and in the third option there were more cuts but still absorbing risk and utilizing reserves.

Mr. Reed asked about insurance costs and cautioned that the increase will likely be high this year. Mr. Urbas agreed noting the budget currently includes a 10% increase for Health Insurance and over the past few months utilization has rebounded. The number is usually finalized in April.

8. Adjourn to Executive Session

The Committee adjourned the Business Meeting to move into Executive Session not to return to an open meeting.

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.