



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	September 20, 2022
Location:	MERMHS Library
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson Jake Foster Matt Harrington Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Lin Mitchell Erica Spencer
Absent:	Chris Reed
Guests:	Patricia Puglisi, Principal MERHS, Joanne Maino, Principal MERMS
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

A. Call to Order – Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

1) Public Comment –

There was no public comment this evening.

2) Chairman's Report –

Ms. Whitman shared with attendants that the School Committee has received a few emails from the constituency regarding the turf fields and another from Representative Jamie Belsito to facilitate connection with another district looking to switch to turf playing fields. In addition, an Essex resident also reached out via email to introduce themselves.

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3) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants – FY22 V1082; FY23 V1011; FY23 V1012; FY23 V1013
 - Clarifying questions regarding warrants:
 - Acoustic panels: They sometimes are moved to follow students, and this continues to be done where feasible.
 - Chromebooks and chargers: The district continues to pursue recovery of Chromebooks and chargers, or recompense, for items not returned following Covid lending.
 - Special education law category vendor: Warrant item was for an alternate vendor for a specific special education investigation.
 - Dr. Graves: Our contract with Dr. Graves is usually paid annually. This warrant represents multiple years and extended services to support our staff during the Covid pandemic.
- Minutes for approval: *Minutes from the September 6, 2022 meeting were postponed for approval until the next meeting to provide all members the opportunity to review them.*
 - Process reminder for approval process:
 - The minutes can be approved as presented to the committee with pending small corrections to grammar, syntax, writing conventions or other minor edits.
 - Substantive amendments to the minutes are discussed in more depth before voting.

Ms. Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

4) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/Matt Harrington)
Ms. Whitman reported the Memorial Elementary Building project is wrapping up on time and under budget. There was concern about the state of landscaping given the current draught and stretch of high temperatures. However the plantings around the new school are covered under the building warranty and steps are already being taken to address loses.
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman reported that the Finance Sub-Committee met to get themselves up to speed and process information to be able to make recommendations at the current School Committee meeting. They reviewed the budget season calendar (available on the website) and addressed the request for information made at the last School Committee meeting. The Finance Sub-Committee has resolved to meet each Monday before a School Committee meeting to review.

- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report. Superintendent Beaudoin will schedule preparatory meetings soon.
- **Negotiation Team** (Committee Chairs) – No Report. The committee was unable to meet due to school open houses.

5) **Superintendents Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin

Partnership with Open Door: The Open Door plans to introduce their mobile market truck to the MERSD campuses. Twice per month, the truck will visit our campuses to provide fresh produce to local families. Their model is self-determined need-based, and all are welcome to utilize the service. Essex Elementary Interim Principal Sheila McAdams has spearheaded this exciting program in support of our “It Starts with Me” theme for the year.

MERHS Investigation: Superintendent Beaudoin commended the concerted effort of Essex and Manchester Police departments and happily reported that that no legitimate threat was uncovered. The exercise demonstrated the robustness of the process in place to respond to a reported threat. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that an after action analysis will be completed.

District Improvement Plan: Although the final School Committee vote to approve the District Improvement Plan action items is pending, a lot is already in play. However, it is hoped that the final approval will be in place by January.

Open Houses: Two open houses remain. Essex Elementary, scheduled for September 22, is moving to a community format, welcoming all to the school grounds. The middle school open house is scheduled for September 28.

School Committee Learning Lunch Series: Superintendent Beaudoin plans to host workshop-style lunch meetings with School Committee members.

Covid Guidance: Currently, there are no Covid restrictions in place, and we are seeing a very back-to-normal school year. Guidance is that students who have symptoms of illness should remain at home. For those who self-test positive for Covid, the district is adhering to DPH policy, and effected families should remain at home through day five and mask upon return to school through day ten. Masking at any time is supported by the district, and masks are available in all schools.

Questions from School Committee Members; Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for confirmation that the Open Door program is open to the entire community.

Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed that it is open to all and that special outreach is planned with the Council on Aging. This program is an opportunity to connect across the communities and beyond our immediate sphere.

6) **Continued Business** –

- **School Committee Goals** – Grammatical changes were suggested to the revised School Committee goals, as updated by Mr. Foster following input at the preceding School Committee meeting on September 6, 2022.

Motion by Ms. Whitman to approve goals as updated by Mr. Foster. Seconded by Ms. Koch-Sundquist. Vote passes unanimously, without discussion.

- School Improvement Plans(SIP) - Principal's Reports
 - Superintendent Beaudoin introduced the presentations by Principals Puglisi and Maino by emphasizing that the Strategic Plan is an overarching document. Each subsequent plan moves us closer to the realization of the Strategic Plan. Although the actions are pending approval, the objectives were previously approved by the School Committee and passed to the site principals. Superintendent Beaudoin expressed that she was confident there would be alignment between the School Improvement plans and the Strategic Plan, but emphasized that it may not be a completely direct line as each school is at a different entry point to the four priorities. In case of point, the high school is addressing recommendations from the NEASC review.
 - High School Improvement Plan – Principal Puglisi began by reviewing the SIP process. It has its foundations in the Strategic Planning Committee, the District Improvement Plan Goals, the NEASC review, the work conducted by the high school faculty following the NEASC review to consider the transformation of education, and the input of its School Council. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is the gold standard of accreditation and utilizes a ten-year cycle of review, suggestions, self-reflection, and implementation of school-determined solutions. NEASC recommendations follow on an intensive, high-access review of the school environment. Of prime focus for MERHS has been the need to develop a “Vision of the Graduate” that encompassed what the community considers skills/dispositions that should be integral facets of students upon graduation. Superintendent Beaudoin interjected to expand upon both the impact from the NEASC work and to elucidate the many factors affecting MERSD curriculum. Our ASPEN system now houses a living document of curriculum that did not exist prior to the collaborative process with NEASC. All core subjects are tied to the state standards. Our curriculum maps will be updated to reflect changes that have resulted from the work on the Vision of the Graduate. Further, MCAS and AP scores impact our curriculum. Although MCAS provides a narrow snapshot of a cohort of students, the district engages in item analysis to look at the performance of our students relative to their peers statewide. Finally, our curriculum is updated as the College Board amends its standards. Principal Puglisi presented insight into the goals of Student Centered Learning and Authentic Assessment – to recognize the unique aspects of each student, to provide students with opportunities to craft and drive their learning experiences, and to connect student learning to real world issues and problem solving. Principal Puglisi then presented the MERHS’s School Improvement Plan Template (please see Reports and Presentations on www.MERSD.com) with insight into how its four strategic initiatives relate back to the District Improvement plan. This includes delineation of the school’s goals, resources and responsibilities, and deliverables.
 - District Strategic Initiative I: Principal Puglisi emphasized that this is a two-year plan and that the initiatives are often tied to each other. Of note, in order to meet objectives, a new platform, MEFA Pathways, is being considered as a replacement for Naviance. Student Portfolios will be key

to achieving and measuring student achievement of the Vision of the Graduate. Report card comments and best practices are under review to determine if they provide meaningful feedback. Bringing real-world relevance will be facilitated by implementing interdisciplinary learning and assessment, reviewing the SCORE student internship experience, and adopting grading commonality updates.

- District Strategic Initiative II: Principal Puglisi emphasized the importance of increasing understanding of SEL and Trauma-Informed practices to meet individual needs. In addition, the high school hopes to develop and implement faculty advisors to connect students with a trusted adult to partner with them through the Vision of the Graduate journey.
- District Strategic Initiative III: The pursuit of an inclusive, diverse school culture will be facilitated through curriculum review to expand content and implement the ADL World of Difference Program, faculty training to work on the DEI goal with Michael Eatman, and implementation of purposeful outreach during hiring.
- District Strategic Initiative IV: Responsible budget management will include continued oversight of departmental spending and review of personnel structure to assure efficiency.

Superintendent Beaudoin expressed the hope that the School Improvement Plans be approved if they are directionally in support of the Strategic Goals, with needed wordsmithing done following the meeting. Ms. Spencer asked for clarification regarding how MCAS percentile numbers correspond to any goal. She also asked about the economic benefit of the AP exam system given that many fewer colleges provide credit for passing scores while high schools incur the cost of test preparation and administration. As regards SCORE projects, Ms. Spencer asked for insight into the project given the program's difficulties over the last couple of years. Principal Puglisi reiterated the limitations of MCAS scores and stated that they have been employed to identify students who need concerted assistance to "move to the left" and to highlight larger issues indicated by multi-year dips in a performance area. For example, resulting recently in augmenting the high school faculty with a middle school math teacher specializing in a "dip" area and with a SPED teacher to provide additional support. Ms. Whitman made a point of clarification that the MCAS does not necessarily tie to the DIP. It is a parallel mandate. Ms. Spencer expressed an interest in a goal that was specific to math and Principal Puglisi commented that some of the math dip may be a result of personnel difficulty during the last year. Principal Puglisi next spoke to the AP scores inquiry, emphasizing that the program impacts students, faculty, and is one of the measures for school ranking. Ms. Spencer clarified that she is interested in where the topic of AP testing is best discussed, and Principal Puglisi said that School Council would examine these inquiries. Superintendent Beaudoin commented that there were not indicators from the survey about abandoning AP testing. Rather, they will be an aspect of

providing balance as a traditional element of assessment as we look to include other non-test measures. Individuals should also be able to craft their own road. Unlike other districts that limit AP class access in order to elevate passing scores, most subject areas at MERSD are open to all students with interest in taking an AP test. However, students are counseled to limit AP classes to three and must receive permission to take a larger load. Principal Puglisi acknowledged the struggles of the SCORE program over the last few years when Covid drastically limited the community opportunities. As the high school looks to revitalize the program, a second program advisor has been added. There was also feedback to switch the SCORE presentation to a “fair” format, rather than the smaller, “board room” presentation style, which would allow underclassmen to be part of the experience.

Motion to approve the High School Improvement Plan was made by Ms. Koch-Sundquist, seconded by Mr. Harrington.

Discussion: Mr. Foster stated that he had previously struggled to see alignment between the School Improvement Plan and the DIP, but appreciated the insight Principal Puglisi provided. He asked about waiting to vote until the updated insight is included in the written SIP. However, it was determined that the vote needed to proceed. Mr. Foster also asked how Principal Puglisi balances the demands of the high school with the role of leading the DIP K-12 initiative. Principal Puglisi replied that the work done at the high school involves spiraling back to see what is coming from the middle school and elementary schools. In addition, the work of the curriculum office keeps all the campuses tied together. During motion discussion, Mr. Foster asked for a delay in the vote. Ms. Whitman recommended approving as is, given the context provided, and stated that a re-write would require Principal Puglisi to return before the School Committee. Superintendent Beaudoin asked if there are content changes or clarification changes to address. Mr. Foster clarified that he believes wording changes are needed to insert the additional context and illustrate the relationship to the DIP. In addition, he was uncomfortable voting on a document in draft form, particularly as it becomes the only document the public can see. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she did not see any substantive changes. Ms. Mitchell asked if an issue of time sensitivity necessitated a vote. Ms. Whitman expressed concern that continued delays will result in a logjam down the road.

Motion to amend the motion to approve the High School Improvement Plan with the language from Principal Puglisi’s presentation was made by Ms. Koch-Sundquist, seconded by Mr. Harrington.

Discussion: Mr. Foster reiterated that he is not comfortable voting for the SIP until it is in its final form, and clarified that he believes the School Committee is responsible for providing a clear document to the public. Ms. Koch-Sundquist clarified that the meeting minutes are a public record, as well, for the public to view additional details.

The motion passed with three votes for. Mr. Foster voted nay; Ms. Spencer and Ms. Mitchell abstained.

- As a segue to discussion of the Middle School Improvement Plan, Superintendent Beaudoin addressed the perceived exodus out of MERSD to private high schools. The best measure of this is a report submitted to DESE. However, that report is available in the Spring. Projected numbers are available. Mr. Foster asked if this discussion could be scheduled for a later meeting. Ms. Whitman clarified that the issue was broached last Spring and delayed until this meeting, when the principals present their report to the School Committee. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if exiting students are surveyed regarding why they are leaving the district. Superintendent stated that there is a withdrawal form for all students leaving the district. However, this form is not always completed by families before they withdrawal. Educational records can be requested at any time by families. Principal Puglisi stated that the high school does maintain a “Tide Sheet” that tracks students who leave and return. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that no one is tasked with following up with families who have left the district. While the DESE report will have the best number, the current estimate is eight to nine students who have left for private school. Superintendent Beaudoin agreed that we need to know more, confirmed that a pathway through the DESE report will give us a better idea of the number leaving, and shared that in her experience districts with similar socio-economic status experience a 20-25% loss of students to private school. Ms. Whitman clarified that the school committee members are interested in responding to the perception that there is a mass exodus and that statistics as to how the current cohort compares to normal trends in our own and similar districts would directly address the perception. Mr. Foster emphasized that if we want to learn something, we would need to develop an exit survey that informs why students leave for private school.
- Middle School Improvement Plan – Principal Maino emphasized that the SIP is informed by the Strategic Plan, the SIP, and School Council feedback.
 - District Strategic Initiative I: With a completed Vision of the Graduate, it is imperative to inventory where the middle school is currently providing rich experiences and where it needs to fill in. This work was begun last year, but was spotty due to math training for the iReady program. The inventory completion is targeted for February. Since review by NELMS (New England League of Middle Schools), MERMS has been working to adopt a middle school model and become a data-informed school. MCAS is not a reliable source of this information. iReady was chosen and piloted last year. iReady recommends 40 minutes per week of individual learning to address individual needs. Consequently, two ME-blocks have been dedicated to math and English work for students, preserving teacher class time. To address questions about the funding source for iReady, Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that this program is being phased-in as a replacement to the AIMSWEB program. Although there is an initial investment, these costs are met through fore-planning within the current Operations budget. Principal Maino described the Middle School Academy as central to project-based learning at the Middle School. Finally, Principal Maino spoke about the challenge of internet and phone

addiction among students. To combat it, the middle school is utilizing tools including GoGuardian (allowing teachers to see the sites in use on all classroom devices) and E Hall Pass (enabling teachers to track who is out of class across the grade at any time).

- District Strategic Initiative II: Principal Maino described the RULER program as a main tool of SEL, which fell by the wayside during the pandemic. A RULER family tool is being launched this year through the School Council. Project Adventure is being employed, in conjunction with RULER, to foster foundational, integrated SEL. Students lead the Meta Moment Space, a dedicated, student-designed and trained area, where adults and students can go to self-regulate when experiencing strong emotions. In addition, the middle school is excited to bring back dances and spirit-week events that build the school culture. They will also continue with biannual behavioral screening.
- District Strategic Initiative III: The middle school will continue collaboration with DEI consultant, Michael Eatman, utilize the DEI-focused resource review rubric to evaluate instructional materials, and increase anti-bullying training through refresher training with the seventh and eighth graders. The eighth grade will also pilot using MEFA Pathways as a tool to focus on academic strengths and improvement areas.
- District Strategic Initiative IV: The middle school will hire with an eye to budget efficiencies and manage the school-based budget.

Questions from School Committee:

Ms. Mitchell commented that the topic of earlier integration of DEI principles with students was not evident in the middle school SIP. Principal Maino described the work of Mr. Eatman's program as foundational and critical to the attainment of the DEI goals. Its purpose in working first with administration and faculty is to build an adult cohort that has explored their own biases and is comfortable meeting students where they are. Ms. Whitman made a point of clarification that Mr. Eatman will be joining the School Committee meeting on December 20 to elucidate the program. Principal Maino provided an example of a current topic in which our youth are passionately immersed that challenges the pre-conceptualization of faculty and staff – gender identity. Although gender has historically been perceived as either/or, our students are exploring it in a much more fluid way. A staff member who uses an assumed pronoun or speaks to a group as “guys” can throw off a student and contribute to anxiety. “Shifting a culture is like turning a ship,” Principal Maino concluded to emphasize the necessity of not rushing the process of staff education. Ms. Mitchell acknowledged that for adults, mind-set is not something that changes with one training but expressed concern that while this is unfolding, kids are naturally in a process of evolving and they are exposed to input about these topics whether the adults are ready or not. Principal Maino acknowledged the concern and pointed to programs currently addressing these topics, including the current review of literature

used in an effort to increase cultural exposure. Ms. Whitman suggested that this topic be explored in more depth during the SC learning lunches. Principal Maino provided the contrast between transformative work and transactional work and said that the work done currently through SEL/DEI is not just about emotions but also inclusivity and diversity. Mr. Foster expressed that the context provided by Principal Maino was very helpful at illuminating alignment with the DIP. He asked about why portfolios were in the DEI section and how placing iReady practice into ME blocks impacts whether the blocks still meet their original intent. Principal Maino clarified that although ME blocks were originally designed to provide mentor opportunities for students, this target was not realized because of negotiation limitations. Instead, the time has been devoted to giving middle school students time for what they needed : connecting with each other and tackling homework. Currently, Principal Maino sees the need for skills practice as the most pressing and takes responsibility for this shift in the use of the ME blocks. However, three ME blocks remain weekly for homework and “fun” Fridays. Mr. Foster asked how math and English were identified as the skills needing extra work, and Principal Maino clarified that the iReady program focuses on skills that are utilized across subject/content areas, such as discussion skills. Mr. Foster emphasized that this is an important elaboration that he would like to see spelled out in the middle school SIP. Regarding the Portfolios, Principal Maino expressed that the Portfolios are included with the DEI section because it addresses developing strengths as a whole child. Mr. Foster asked whether contract considerations that Joanne noted in trying to establish a MS advisory could become an issue as the HS began their advisory. Principal Puglisi reported that the idea has already been well-received by the high school staff, and Principal Maino expressed that the culture at the middle school now is not what it was then. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized the importance of investing the time and developing a culture that works to create an opening of the mind for staff that allows them to explore new ways of thinking about education and our responsibilities.

Motion to accept the Middle School Improvement Plan was made by Ms. Spencer and seconded by Ms. Whitman.

Discussion: Mr. Foster asked if Principal Maino intended to edit the document to include the additional context presents. Principal Maino said she was waiting to see what is requested by the School Committee. Ms. Whitman stated that she is comfortable with the current document.

The motion passed with five votes for, Mr. Foster voted nay.

- FY22 Budget Closeout – Avi Urbas
 - Vote to appropriate stabilization reserve funds for security expenditures
 - Vote to transfer surplus state transportation aid to MERSD transportation stabilization

In the interest of time, Ms. Whitman suggested voting on those budget items as a group which were discussed in depth at the last meeting.

Motion to appropriate stabilization reserve funds for security expenditures and to transfer surplus state transportation aid to MERSD transportation stabilization was made by Mr. Harrington and seconded by Mr. Foster. The motion passed unanimously without discussion.

- Vote to appropriate School Choice reserve funds and FY22 operational savings to close FY22 COVID expenditures: Mr. Urbas recounted that our auditors recommend closing out the Covid deficit, which is now at \$240 k. Although the total expense from Covid was around \$1.8 M, funding covered the rest. The recommendation was to appropriate \$40 K from the General Fund and the rest from the School of Choice Fund.

Motion to appropriate School Choice reserve funds and FY22 operational savings to close FY22 COVID expenditures was made by Mr. Harrington and seconded by Ms. Spencer. The vote passed unanimously without discussion.

- Vote to appropriate FY22 operational savings to close pre-existing Food Service deficit: Mr. Urbas explained that food service funds sit in a revolving fund generated solely from user fees. Excess funds can be rolled over to the following fiscal year. Chartwells is our current food services vendor, and 100% of their bill to the district is paid from this fund. We do receive a reimbursement from the state and federal governments for reduced and free lunches in the amount of approximately \$100K per year. Annually, we have a deficit of about \$60K, and the school committee has traditionally voted to cover this deficit with surplus funds so that we do not put an undue burden on families. This deficit has been accruing over the past three fiscal years, with a \$75K deficit in FY20 and only \$5K added in FY21 due to CARES Covid free meals program. In addition, FY22 had a surplus of \$20K due to DESE funding. The balance is \$60K.

Motion to appropriate FY22 operational savings to close pre-existing Food Service deficit was made by Ms. Whitman and seconded by Ms. Spencer.

Discussion: Mr. Harrington asked if families pay over the reimbursement amount. Mr. Urbas clarified that the district allows the purchase of second lunches and a la carte menu items, which are not reimbursable and are paid by families. Ms. Mitchell asked about our options for improving the menu, as has come up repeatedly in discussions. Mr. Urbas acknowledged the concern expressed in parent surveys around the food choices and explained that principals are currently working with Chartwells on this issue. However, many of the survey concerns regard limiting Covid factors like reduced options so that students did not linger close together in lines while deciding what to get. These restrictions are currently being eased. In addition, the elementary schools are looking at ways to incorporate a selection more comparable to that offered at the middle/high school. Ms. Whitman made a point of information that these restrictions were voted in by the School Committee during Covid and in line with what other districts were doing. Mr. Urbas re-emphasized that we can create a plan for what we want to see and put it out to bid. Then, we would have to evaluate estimates from interested vendors to see if the cost is tenable. Chartwells has a one year extension on their contract for this year. Ms. Spencer questioned the wisdom in operating at a deficit long term. Superintendent Beaudoin

shared that we are not alone as a district in running a food service deficit. Mr. Urbas likened it to Athletics, for which 55% of the costs come from the general fund.

The motion passed unanimously

- FY24 Budget Calendar – postponed until next School Committee meeting.
- 7) **School Committee Comment:** Ms. Whitman addressed the length of the meetings and expressed the hope that more could be communicated prior to the meeting and asked that feedback be sent to Superintendent Beaudoin ahead of time. To that point, Ms. Mitchell said the finance committee intends to meet immediately before each School Committee meeting to review material and be prepared to make recommendations. Mr. Foster expressed his concern that, as he serves on several boards, his expectation has been to vote on a document only in its final form. Culturally, that is not what he is seeing here. Ms. Spencer agreed that she has a similar concern. Mr. Foster also renewed his request to review the Yearly Schedule. Ms. Mitchell asked how long the district has employed its current auditor, to which Mr. Urbas responded that it has been the same auditor regionalization. Ms. Mitchell expressed concern that best practice is to change auditors every five years. Superintendent Beaudoin said that decision is completely up to the School Committee.
- 8) **Adjourn**

Mr. Spencer moved to adjourn the meeting; Mr. Foster seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:06 pm.

School Committee Future Meetings

- October 4, 2022
- October 18, 2022