



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

October 18, 2022

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	October 18, 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 Chris Reed Erica Spencer
Absent:	
Guests:	Allison Collins, Director Student Services Principal Joanne Mano Principal Patricia Puglisi
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 5:45 p.m. and adjourned to private session before returning to public session at 6:20

1) Public Comment –

There was no public comment this evening.

2) **Student Report** – Diego Sanson, student representative, shared that he and many students are feeling much happier with staffing levels this year, particularly in the math department. There are more teachers and there is more prepared for students to

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do when a teacher is out. He also said that meal options in the cafeteria are better this year. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the school is getting back to old traditions, and Mr. Sanson remarked that his entire high school experience has been colored by COVID, so he has less experience with “normal.” However, he expressed excitement for the return next week of Spirit Week and its culminating pep rally. Superintendent Beaudoin asked if there is anything that students want to see or change. Mr. Sanson responded, “assemblies and fun things.” He praised the return of football games and echoed appreciation for the bands role in creating an exciting atmosphere at the games. Mr. Foster asked if the Youth Risk Behavior report was something that the student government reviews. Mr. Sanson said that while they do not review it, it is his opinion that the results are accurate to the student experience, because he and others he knows replied honestly.

- 3) **Chairman’s Report** – Ms. Whitman shared that she fielded emails from community members asking about how the School Committee works with other boards and will attend a Manchester-Essex Rotary breakfast meeting in January to present and answer questions. In addition, she signed the year-end financial report for the Town of Manchester.

4) **Consent Agenda** –

- Acceptance of Warrants – FY23 V1015; FY23 V1016
- Minutes for approval: *October 4, 2022*

Mr. Foster moved to approve the Consent Agenda. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell stated that at the Finance Sub-Committee meeting, she had asked Mr. Urbas to include information in the voucher packet to track current expenditures against each budget line. Ms. Whitman suggested this subject be held until the Finance Sub-Committee report.

Ms. Mitchell moved to separate approval for the warrants and minutes. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell indicated that she was not in favor of approving the minutes without a comparison to budget lines and would vote as such.

Vote via roll call: For – Mr. Foster, Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Spencer. Against: Ms. Koch-Sundquist, Mr. Reed, Mr. Harrington, Ms. Whitman. The motion did not carry.

Further Discussion: Ms. Spencer was interested to hear why some members opposed separating the warrant and minutes approval. Ms. Whitman responded that procedure allowed for these things to be closely examined in subcommittee and before the business meeting and, because of time constraints, did not want to tease out the warrants at each meeting. Ms. Koch-Sundquist echoed the concern for time at the business meeting and stated that she has been comfortable with the warrant review process over the last couple of years.

Vote for initial motion to approve the consent agenda, by roll call - For: Ms. Koch-Sundquist, Ms. Spencer, Mr. Harrington, Mr. Reed, Mr. Foster, Ms. Whitman; Against: Ms. Mitchell. The motion carried.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/Matt Harrington) – No Report
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Linn Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Mitchell stated that the sub-committee was able to meet the day before to review apportionment calculation and the budget calendar, gaining a better understanding of what is coming for the next twelve months. She stated that she requested Mr. Urbas provide greater detail by tracking the warrants to budget line items. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified the intent of the vouchers as an instrument of transparency with the public to ensure that money is distributed appropriately. For example, that a contract is not awarded to relatives of district employees. The vouchers also highlight unexpected expenses. It is not intended as a biweekly budget check. That function is performed by building principals and the business manager. The memo may also contain commentary to assist in the overview. The district provides the School Committee with an in-depth budget report three times per year, including upcoming in November. Superintendent Beaudoin also expressed that it was not possible to deliver a warrant to budget line analysis every other week due to the time required for compilation. There was further discussion about the role of the School Committee in approval of the warrants. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for confirmation that the SC is voting that the warrants indicate that monies were spent in intended ways. Ms. Whitman concurred with that perception and stated that this topic is covered in the required “Charting the Course” training material from MASU for School Committee members. Mr. Urbas confirmed that the memo does include areas of budgetary concern in the narrative and that the School Committee has authority over budget transfers. He did offer to try to include more details to address Ms. Mitchell’s request. Ms. Whitman shared that the Finance Sub-Committee had a collaboration meeting with the town boards. Both communities are working toward their town meetings and are concerned about the rising costs of Out of District (OOD placements), utilities, and other anticipating increases. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district received confirmation that a 14% increase in OOD tuition should be expected. That would translate to a direct add of several \$100K to next year’s budget. Currently, the district is working to provide building principals with a budget template by November. Ms. Whitman stated that Mr. Urbas provided preliminary enrollment numbers for the towns to consider regarding apportionment. Although it is early, the trend in Essex growth appears to be holding. The next collaboration meeting is scheduled for November 18, 2022. In addition, the hope is to schedule a meeting of the town selectors, town finance committees, and the School Council.

- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee Policy Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – Mr. Foster stated that the sub-committee continues to make progress in their policy review. They are almost ready to share revisions to section D (Fiscal Management). On the development of a Reserve Policy, the team has articulated several approaches and has been looking at the practices of other districts. The team will articulate key questions for School Committee consideration to inform a draft. Ms. Mitchell asked if they had also considered asking neighboring towns about their policies, and Mr. Foster agreed to take up the suggestion.
 - **Negotiation Team** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Ms. Koch-Sundquist confirmed that negotiations are on-going and stated that they would be meeting the following day.
- 6) Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin shared that they had a successful, thought-provoking professional development day, organized by Curriculum Director Angela Bik and building administrators. Michael Eatman's program tackled the concept of cultural competence and what it means for us from the perspective of the diversity of our community. It focused on the component of self-awareness in developing our competence and becoming aware of the challenge we face, to become self-reflective, and to make the curriculum and instruction accessible for our students. In addition, there was training in iReady and Project Adventure.
- 7) Continued Business**
- **Youth Risk Behavior Report** – Director of Student Services Allison Collins, Principal Joanne Maino, Principal Patricia Puglisi. Superintendent Beaudoin opened by providing background on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) and how the team was assembled. Principals Maino and Puglisi were chosen as stewards of their students, and Ms. Collins, as Director of Student Services, is responsible for counseling. In 2012, there was a desire to re-introduce the YRBS to balance student achievement with a whole child needs. This survey allows staff to understand what students are bringing to the room and is helpful in meeting students where they are. In 2015, there was a shift in the district approach to counseling that provided the structure to support the needs emerging from the survey. Principal Puglisi shared that the YRBS was developed in the 1990's to better understand the types of behavior occurring in young adults and provide information to communities to respond to youth decisions. Currently, the survey is done every other year at the middle and high schools, alternating yearly between the schools. It is given in the Spring in order to capture the behaviors of older students, including the behavior of students after gaining their driver's licenses. There are some gaps in the data due to COVID. Data generated by the survey is used to monitor trends, guide programmatic interventions, and inform school health policies and practices. It is also provided to the community. An example was the SAPC "Sticker Shock" campaign that placed high-visibility stickers on alcohol sold locally to alert buyers to underage drinking. Principal Puglisi shared notable points with the 2022 survey – families and individual students can opt out of the survey, gender information was collected but did not include non-binary categories, there was a significantly lower turnout of freshman respondents, and concern that some of their surveys may have been misplaced. The low participation of seniors is typical. In addition, there is some interpretation inherent in student responses. For

example, a student affirming that they have been in a car driven by someone under the influence may be speaking of a parent who had a glass of wine at dinner. The 2022 survey, and comparison to the 2018 survey, provided much to digest and consider as a community.

Principal Puglisi also discussed the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) program, mandated by Massachusetts in grades seven and ten, to identify students that may have a substance abuse disorder and provide treatment and support. The CRAFFT screening tool is utilized to meet this mandate. Families can opt out. Groups of six students are called to the counseling office, provided information on SBIRT, assured of confidentiality, and notified about how collected data is used. The counselor asks scripted questions with yes or no answers. Based on responses, the screening tool digs deeper. Students are given positive reinforcement for answering and provided with strategies and education to problem solve situations described. In instances of high concern, the counselor asks permission to speak with parents. If the student declines, the counselor continues to support the student at school.

Areas of Greatest Concern:

- Mental Health – majority of respondents reported experiencing stress, anxiety or depression. Concerning responses regarding suicide.
- Vape Use – by far most prevalent form of “smoking”
- Marijuana Use – average age of first use was 13-14
- Alcohol – in both survey years, we were far above the Massachusetts average
- Body Image – anecdotally seeing an increase in eating disorders in female students. The data is illuminating in comparing those considered “overweight” with those “trying to lose weight.”
- Sleep – overwhelming majority are not sleeping eight hours per day.
- Dating Violence/ Coercive sexual practices – a concern for the last five years. Principal Puglisi believes it needs to be a focal point for student health.

Programs Developed to Support:

- Guidance Staff
- Adjustment Counselors – licensed clinicians to meet greater needs
- Bridge Program – Students work with a counselor and academic program to support them to return to school. Has reduced the number of students who leave for a second hospitalization.
- Transitions Program -
- Counseling Fellows -Partnership with Salem State Graduate Counseling Program
- High School Schedule with U Block and waterfall meeting times – provide natural breaks during the day.

Further Steps to Consider

- Mapping the 6-12 Health curriculum – kids are asking for more about relationships and sexual interaction. Mapping would take place as part of the five-year curriculum program
- Extend the health curriculum
- Engage School Resource Officer – a lot of this happens already, but the principals would like to formalize it.
- Maintain/support the current programs
- Parent education programs K-12 – of particular concern to administration is the impact of access to pornography. Principal Puglisi spoke of the need to engage parents on the topic and provide education to students.

In winter 2023, the middle school will take the YRBS

Discussion: Ms. Whitman informed the audience that the SC members receive advance packets containing presentation materials and are able to ask questions and provide feedback. Ms. Whitman noted the downward trend in some measures and asked about the practices that yielded those changes. Principal Puglisi emphasized the importance of the interconnectivity between school-based support and family education in decreasing problematic behaviors. She stressed that it has been critical to foster a culture of trust with students. In addition, Principal Puglisi also mentioned the growing concern with student access to mental health services outside of the school environment. School personnel are not able to provide all of the necessary counseling services for students. Principal Maino highlighted the success of the RULER program in normalizing social-emotional issues and providing students with a vocabulary for discussing these issues. She said that a culture has developed where kids feel comfortable talking to adults when they are not “okay.” Ms. Whitman asked about student understanding of the clinical terms anxiety and depression and whether that understanding affects their survey responses. Principal Puglisi acknowledged that students consider those words as adolescents and stressed the importance of being cognizant of their interpretations while still validating them. Ms. Whitman also asked about the amount of health instruction students receive at the high school level. Principal Puglisi said they receive one quarter of health during freshman year and another during their sophomore year. However, she expressed that the program is limited and that the standards are from 1999. Superintendent Beaudoin said that new standards will be released in the spring. Principal Puglisi mentioned that students have frequently approached the office to raise awareness about the lack of health topics and to volunteer to do their own health presentations from the perspective of the LGBTQ community. Ms. Mitchell asked about school-based programs to educate parents and coaches. Principal Puglisi said that the district usually provides two yearly parent education programs (ex: Elizabeth Englander and Liz Lyons). However, attendance is usually light. The MIAA promotes healthy lifestyles and coaches take part in training. Our athletic director has also prioritized building a sports culture where coaches are caring adults. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that some intended parent outreach programs were disrupted by COVID. However, it is now the intent to rollout programs, including a health advisory council and parent RULER education program with updates from what was learned about online resources. Mr. Foster asked if

there is a survey question about how students have been treated based on sexual orientation or race. Principal Puglisi responded that there is not currently a question specifically for this topic, and any insight would have to be extrapolated. Mr. Foster also asked about the proposed steps to be taken and possible inclusion in the Improvement Plans or the Strategic Improvement Plan. Mr. Foster asked if they are components that are not accounted for currently and may need to be planned for or budgeted for. Mr. Foster asked about the impact in terms of the scope of work. Principal Puglisi replied that a K-12 review is needed and that the district has a five-year review cycle for every discipline. Health and Wellness is up for the first year of its five-year process next year, coinciding with the first year of the new standards release. The middle school is fortunate to have a very strong program, led by Mr. Ricci-Munn. Principal Maino shared that, as the review is pending, the middle school and high school health teachers are working together to map their programs in preparation for moving quickly following updated standards. Ms. Whitman made a point of clarification to ask Superintendent Beaudoin to clarify how this work fits into the Strategic Plan. Superintendent Beaudoin responded that it is impossible to get everything into the Strategic Plan. Budget requirements and needs will surface as the district works through the next round of the budget process. However, updating the curriculum is a fairly low-cost undertaking. Outdated curriculum is moved out to make way for the update. Strategic Plan goals are amended to keep the document current. Ms. Spencer asked how this information is shared with the community. Superintendent Beaudoin replied that the first presentation is to the School Committee where the information enters the public record. It is also shared with faculty. In addition, the information is posted to the website. If needed, the superintendent offered to take a deeper approach.

- Status Report on Turf Field Replacement & EES Playground – Business Manager Avi Urbas reported there were not many updates to the Brook Street turf project at this point, with the date for Conservation Commission presentation slated for October 25. The process looks to be less arduous than anticipated because the field is not new construction. The Conservation Commission, in response to public concern, had asked for additional information about PFAs found in the fibers of the turf. Reviewed studies did not reveal higher concentrations of PFAs in turf areas than in surrounding environs. The construction team will guarantee that no PFAs materials will be used in the turf materials presented to us. The Town of Manchester had a separate advising company investigate and they came to the same conclusion. Mr. Urbas also reported that a preliminary look at field usage between the district and town seems to indicate a 50/50 split for cost division. At Essex Elementary, the playground has been hydro-seeded. Plant materials and tables/benches, funded by the community, will go in this spring.
- PY24 Budget Calendar – Mr. Foster began the budget calendar update advocating for increasing engagement with the community regarding the scenarios for a district funding correction. He advocated for strategizing ways to engage parent and community groups. Ms. Whitman asked whether Mr. Foster was interested in engaging the community during the development process for creating and presenting the MERSD budget or after, when the SC turns its attentions to education only. Mr. Foster indicated that both should be considered and asked if the SC proposes seeking a correction, what would they have done

to engender support at that point. Similarly, if the SC advocated for a level-services ask, what impact would the community likely see. Superintendent Beaudoin asked for clarification about the kind of input and engagement desired from the community. Further discussion explored if the goal was to increase public awareness about the budget calendar, including upcoming opportunities to attend, or if effort is needed to raise awareness about specific areas of concern. Ms. Mitchell mentioned the future of the elementary foreign language program. Superintendent Beaudoin outlined the budget construction process, beginning with a proposal with a level-service goal, plugging in numbers to see where we are and if the benchmark is exceeded. Then, the district includes things they would like, and are willing to defend, past the level-services proposal. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed the view that she sees the SC challenge as bridging educational wants to budgetary constraints. Superintendent Beaudoin assured the group that a great deal of monetary investment is not always needed to support vision change. Instead, it involves re-culturing. The district strives to plan in a way that is cyclical and plans forward to absorb this kind of growth.

Ms. Whitman moved to form a two-person working group to create a plan of action to increase awareness within the community about the budget development process. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

Discussion: Mr. Foster asked why this would not fall under the budget subcommittee, to which Ms. Whitman replied that she did not have the time needed to address it in addition to the other demands of the subcommittee. Superintendent Beaudoin offered to provide a blueprint of community outreach from the previous get-out-the-vote effort. She also said that she has a planned informational communication to distribute in November regarding the budget calendar. She expressed the desire to be thoughtful about what the ways in which the SC is looking to engage each community group – what would be asked of these groups? In addition, Superintendent Beaudoin highlighted the lengthy process ahead and the importance of sustaining engagement through the long process.

Vote via roll call: For: Ms. Koch-Sundquist, Ms. Whitman, Ms. Spencer, Mr. Harrington. Against: Mr. Reed, Mr. Foster, Ms. Mitchell. The motion carried.

Mr. Foster and Ms. Spencer volunteered to take up this role. Superintendent Beaudoin asked for clarification about the deliverable of this group and stressed that formal communication should come from the School Committee Chairman. Mr. Foster clarified that there is no message to deliver and that the goal would be to identify those who can help get the word out about what is coming up. Ms. Spencer added that they could encourage engagement. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that in an “ask” to participate there is a “why”. Why is the SC asking; what is the SC asking these community groups to do? Mr. Foster suggested that he and Ms. Spencer discuss this in greater detail with the superintendent so that they could formulate a plan for next time that takes into consideration the superintendent’s input.

8) School Committee Comment – No comment

9) Adjourn

Ms. Whitman moved to adjourn the meeting; Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 8:54 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- November 1, 2022
- November 15, 2022