



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

March 7, 2023

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	March 7, 2023
<b>Location:</b>	MERMHS Library
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson Jake Foster Matt Harrington Kate Koch-Sundquist Chris Reed Erica Spencer
<b>Absent:</b>	Anna Lin Mitchell
<b>Guests:</b>	John Willis, Principal Memorial School, Jennifer McAdams, Principal Essex Elementary School and staff and students
<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** – Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:08 p.m.

#### **1) Public Comment –**

Jodi Harris, Essex – Ms. Harris asked for an update regarding how many School Choice students the district currently has. In addition, she asked for details about where the income from school choice goes (reserves or revenue stream) and how these students factor into apportionment. Ms. Harris asked for an update on certification of the district's E&D.

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Tina Lane, Essex – Ms. Lane stated that accepting additional School Choice students is a bandaid for a long term problem and a gamble, because we do not know what those students will need. Choice students are ours until graduation. Ms. Lane stated that times have changed and advocated for a review of practices as valuable in encouraging creative program changes that would soften the deficit before making a commitment to choice students.

Annie Cameron, Essex – Ms. Cameron spoke to the purview and responsibilities of the town boards and stated that she does not elect school committee members to balance the books or choose the books in the library. Rather, Ms. Cameron stated that the SC should oversee and focus on governance, policy, and the budget. Ms. Cameron emphasized that she does not like to mandate education. In addition, she does not elect members of the Board of Selectmen to manage the school budget or education. The district is a separate entity. Ms. Cameron said that she was concerned to read in the newspaper that members of finance committee members made claims about missing data. They have asked for one report. Ms. Cameron stated that she does not believe the request is within their purview. Ms. Cameron urged everyone to be mindful about what is communicated to the newspapers and the words chosen when doing so. Ms. Cameron commended the SC for doing what they are asked to do in creating a responsible budget and urged all present to attend the BOS and Planning Board meetings as there are those looking for a reason to reject the school budget and they should not be given one.

- 2) **Student Report** – Diego Sanson: Mr. Sanson congratulated the girls and boys varsity basketball teams for their post season success and turned the discussion to the recent student forum regarding input on the search for a new high school principal. He stated that the library gathering become an opportunity for the student body to voice concerns and perspectives. Mr. Sanson shared that representatives from the band and arts programs expressed concern that their interests and classes are neglected and that the arts and music are not valued and may be cut. The robotics team were concerned about a parent donation to their program that was deposited to the wrong account. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that the error occurred because the funds were sent in as a “donation” without specification on the incoming letter about where the funds should go. Unspecified funds are deposited to a “gift” fund. However, this issue was corrected once the office was notified. Mr. Sanson also stated that students emphasized the importance of hiring a principal willing to listen to students and to establish open lines of communication beyond email. In addition, Mr. Sanson asked about further opportunities for the student body to communicate with the School Committee. Mr. Sanson said that the ADL, of which he is a member, would like to present before the SC. The superintendent asked that Mr. Sanson coordinate with Principal Puglisi to have their presentation added to the May high school spotlight.
- 3) **Chairman’s Report** – Ms. Whitman stated she attended the Student Advisory Council and responded to emails from constituents regarding school choice and the turf field replacements. Ms. Whitman asked the School Committee to provide her with renewed input about what they would like to have presented in the Chairman’s Report so that she can make it what the committee requires.

Ms. Spencer shared an excerpt from the School Committee Operating Protocols:

**Establish and maintain effective communication:** Channel requests for information, reports, and data through the Superintendent and the Chair rather than directly to staff. The Chair and the Superintendent will ensure that each member has equal access to this information in a timely manner.

**4) Consent Agenda –**

- Acceptance of Warrants: (AP) vouchers 1041, 1042 and 1045-1048
- Minutes for approval: *February 7, 2023*

*Mr. Foster moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Harrington seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Mr. Urbas addressed a couple of inquiries related to the vouchers. He shared that the district was awarded a \$25K grant for turf field replacement. Grants must be placed in a separate ledger but will be applied to the cost of the turf field. Mr. Urbas also received input regarding pricing for snow plowing services. It is an expensive contract. Plowing bids are done slightly differently than other bids. Rather than take open bids and accepting the lowest received, the district states a rate they are willing to pay and solicits acceptance. This mitigates the chance of contracting with a service that then will not show up to plow when needed. Mr. Urbas reviewed the issue with Jason Waldron, MERSD Facilities Manager, who said that the current contractor is very reliable and this is the number one priority. However, Mr. Urbas emphasized that we would continue to review opportunities for a reliable contract at a better rate.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

**Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/Matt Harrington) – Ms. Whitman stated that the information contained in the final Habeeb Report would guide decisions about capital improvements going forward. The full report will be posted to the MERSD website.
  - Habeeb Report Final Draft – Avi Urbas: Mr. Urbas presented the final draft of the report first presented to the SC in November. Conclusions of the final draft are in keeping with the original presentation, but include additional detail, including individualized cost estimates and descriptions for each facility component that was part of H&A’s conclusions. For Essex Elementary School, \$18.9 million of the projected \$29 million in identified needs will be needed within the next five years. In addition, it is projected to cost nearly the same to remediate the building in a piecemeal fashion as to engage in a systemic building project. For this reason, H&A strongly recommended that MERSD submit a Statement of Interest to the MSBA as soon as possible. There are \$6.9M of projected Scope 1 and Scope 2 needs that should not be deferred even if a building project is pursued. For the

middle/high school facility, H&A detailed potential expenditures, including \$758K over the next five years.

- **MSBA Statement of Interest (SOI) – Essex Elementary School:** Superintendent Beaudoin stated that tonight’s meeting is a check-in that the SC and district administration are in agreement about submitting our Statement of Interest by April 13, 2023. The preparatory work is a considerable time investment, and the superintendent wanted to make sure it is a direction the SC wishes to go. The rough draft would be presented by March 21 and then finalized before submission to Town Meeting, either at the upcoming SC meeting or an additional meeting, if needed. Ms. Whitman stated her support for the SOI, but expressed concern about the impact to Essex and asked when we could expect to be accepted. Mr. Foster stated that it is something we need to start. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about the timeframe for submitting the SOI. Superintendent Beaudoin said that we would submit in April and be notified in November about acceptance. The district would seat a committee in the spring. It would likely be Fall of 2025 before the feasibility study would be conducted. The superintendent also said that the process with Memorial may have been accelerated because of crowding experienced at the time. Mr. Reed expressed his support for submitting the SOI as soon as possible.

Ms. Whitman took a straw poll for support of completion of the Statement of the Interest to MSBA. The vote was unanimously in favor.

- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that it was a brief meeting with no questions on vouchers. There was another request for the district to “sharpen their pencils.” The outlook on healthcare is that we may see one more adjustment in our favor. Updated changes to staffing look to require a revision by the March 21 meeting of around \$250K.
  - **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report
  - **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the team has reached a tentative agreement with META and the ratifying vote is scheduled for March 9, 2023. Once ratified by META, School Committee will take our public vote to ratify the agreement on March 23, 2023.
- 5) Superintendent’s Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that tonight’s discussion is a preliminary report on school choice regarding the number of applications from siblings of current enrollees and regular applicants and the options for moving forward. A new piece of information is a look at class size across the district and how those numbers factor into where students are accepted from school-choice applicants. No decision-making is being asked of the SC tonight. The SC will have the opportunity to explore the topic in depth at the next meeting before being asked to vote on whether we will continue as a School Choice district and accept additional students.

Superintendent Beaudoin also spoke to the on-going searches for administrative staff. The search for a Curriculum and Technology Director is coming to a conclusion, with an announcement expected by next week. The search for a high school principal will use the same strategy and the district is hoping for strong parental involvement. The hunt for an Essex Elementary principal will begin soon.

Discussion: Ms. Whitman inquired about the recent Dramafest performance, and the superintendent responded that the MERSD company had a great showing. Ms. Koch-Sundquist reported that they received two outstanding actor awards.

#### **6) Continued Business –**

- Elementary Spotlight Presentation –Sheila McAdams, Principal Essex Elementary School and John Willis, Principal Memorial Elementary School, elementary staff and students:
  - Collaborative Approach – Curriculum, DEIB, Student Leadership: Principal McAdams and Principal Willis shared that the elementary schools have worked to collaborate extensively this year, particularly on curriculum. They had planned to journal for science and social studies this year and looked to the Department of Education’s parent curriculum guides around standards. By using that idea, they were able to break down standards by trimester and better communicate with each other and with parents. The schools examined each subject, each term, and cemented the major goals to accomplish in each. This naturally allowed discussion about how each school approaches the work and created opportunities to adopt each other’s successful strategies.

Staff presenters from both elementary schools showcased innovative programs for the School Committee, including Essex’s Socktober project, embodying authentic learning and engaging the community in a relevant manner as they ran a sock drive to help those in need. Their project incorporated multidisciplinary activities in math and persuasive writing as students worked through a real-world task. Ms. Silag shared her work in both schools to support the district’s DEIB goals, starting with a hands-on activity for the SC that mirrored a fifth grade experience and describing her work on book collections in the libraries and classrooms to establish balance in the collections using the “mirrors and windows” framework. This analogy states there are two types of books, those that reflect the reader’s experience and those that give them insight into different experiences in the world. Ms. Silag is working to support this framework by bringing in worldly authors to each school. Ms. Field shared the Essex March Madness tournament of books, which this year features thoughtfully chosen books around diversity, including neurodiversity. The School Committee was treated to student leadership presentations by students from both Essex Elementary and Manchester Memorial Elementary.

- EES Spotlight – After School Inclusivity project: Powerful, engaging learning experiences led by school staff.

- MMES Spotlight – Brain Bins: A soft, engaging start to the school day pioneered by grade four and now being incorporated into all classrooms.
- A Look Down the Road – Principal McAdams and Principal Willis. The principals plan to continue their collaboration efforts, including on the upcoming NEASC accreditation, Safe & Supportive Schools grant, curriculum guides and mapping, and a revision of the elementary report card and communication to families.
- Turf Field Replacement - Avi Urbas, Director of Finance and Operations.

MERSD received three bids for construction of the turf fields. In accordance with MA General Laws, MERSD is required to award the contract to the company with the lowest price provided they meet all the requirements in the bid specifications. Based on this criteria, Gale Associates has determined that the winning bidder is Sprinturf, whose construction bid for 2 turf fields is \$1,352,385. This price is approximately \$72K (5.7%) above the \$1.28 million estimate provided by Gale last summer, when MERSD approved the scope of design. Because the procurement and contract for this work is through MERSD, the School Committee is required to appropriate the full budget amount of \$1.6 million, even though funding offsets will come to MERSD from town sources. The project will be reimbursed entirely by the towns to preserve the school district's reserve fund. MBTS is preparing to approve \$400K of funding at Town Meeting this April for its 50% share of the Brook Street project. MBTS intends to pay MERSD this amount up front in FY24. The remaining 50% of the Brook Street project and 100% of the Hyland field project are considered MERSD obligations that will be assessed to both Towns based on the Capital Budget formula in the regional agreement, 66.4% for MBTS and 33.6% for Essex. MBTS has stated its preference to pay for its apportioned share of MERSD's \$1.2 million over time using debt service. Essex would prefer to pay for its apportioned share using up-front, one-time funds, which per bond counsel, would require an inter-municipal agreement between the towns that can be approved by the Board of Selectmen. Bond counsel has stated that the School Committee needs to authorize borrowing of "up to" the full project amount of \$1.6 million to match the appropriated budget amount. After MERSD's School Committee authorizes indebtedness it must notify the Towns within 7 days, and then wait at least 60 days before borrowing. MERSD will give Sprinturf Notice to Proceed with construction of Hyland Field, following School Committee's affirmative vote to appropriate funds. Construction of this field will begin after the last day of school and will be complete in time for the start of the fall sports season in mid-August. Notice to Proceed for the Brook Street field will be provided by MERSD after and contingent upon a successful passing of the FY24 Operating Budget by both towns, including any override votes, in mid-May. It is anticipated that the Brook Street turf replacement will be complete by late September. Highland field would be offline over the summer, but ready by the start of next school year. In this plan, Brook Street would be available mid to late September. Each field requires about eight weeks for completion. Our renters over the summer would have to look elsewhere. Both fields would be under construction from about mid-July until mid-August.

Mr. Urbas addressed inquiries that came to him regarding field replacement. Regarding delay of the Brook St. field work, Mr. Urbas stated that the contractor does not advise delay because of the increased risk to work as weather becomes an issue. In addition, delaying Brook St. until next

summer will likely raise the replacement cost significantly. The delay to next summer would also require another round of voting for project approval from the towns. The athletic director and facilities manager are working to look at alternatives for the athletic teams impacted by field loss.

- Vote to appropriate \$1.6 million for replacement of athletic turf fields and authorize related indebtedness.

*Ms. Whitman moved to approve the turf field replacement project as written, according to the Language provided by attorney Rick Manley of Locke Lord, MERSD's bond counsel. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.*

VOTED: That the Manchester Essex Regional School District (the "District") hereby appropriates the amount of \$1,600,000 to pay costs of renovating and making extraordinary repairs and other improvements to the District's outdoor facilities, and for the payment of all costs incidental and related thereto. To meet this appropriation the District is authorized to borrow said amount, under and pursuant to Chapter 71, Section 16(d) of the General Laws, and the District Agreement, as amended, or pursuant to any other enabling authority. The total amount authorized to be borrowed by this vote shall be reduced to the extent of any amounts contributed to pay costs of this project by the District's member towns, including, but not limited to, the contribution from Manchester-by-the-Sea to pay costs of improvements to Coach Field Playground (also known as Brook Street Field), as well as by any grants or gifts received by the District from any other sources on account of this project.

FURTHER VOTED: That within seven (7) days from the date on which the above vote was adopted, the Secretary be and hereby is instructed to notify the Board of Selectmen or Select Board, as the case may be, of each of the member towns of the District as to the amount and general purposes of the debt herein authorized, as required by the District Agreement and by Chapter 71, Section 16(d) of the General Laws.

Discussion: Mr. Foster asked why borrowing is required rather than guaranteeing payment against our reserves knowing that the towns plan to reimburse the district. Mr. Urbas explained that each town will pursue an individual path toward paying for their portion of field replacement. While Essex may use one time funds, Manchester has indicated that they may pursue financing. Borrowing would also allow Manchester to break payment over the most manageable amount of time. In order to keep the borrowing option open, the district needs to approve borrowing. The final payment method will be up to the towns. Ms. Spencer asked if the vote would require the Town of Manchester to pursue this process or if they can change their mind about the financing route. Mr. Urbas replied that the SC is only authorizing the borrowing, but we would not need to borrow until the process is done, probably in the fall. The towns would still be able to change their minds. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for clarification about the SC's position of not using reserve funds. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the current approach for turf replacement was generated through collaboration with our town partners. However, should support wane, there is nothing preventing the district from employing reserve funds. Mr. Urbas stated that we would know by mid-May if the town votes failed and could return to looking at other options in time for construction to begin as planned. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated her

aversion to employing reserve funds for the fields. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that approval of the loan would still give each town purview to determine their funding choice or opposition to the projects. If the towns do not approve it, MERSD would decide between borrowing or using reserves.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

Mr. Urbas stated that our next step is to notify the towns within seven days of our intent to borrow.

- School Choice Preliminary Report – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this is a little earlier than usual for a presentation on School Choice. The budget includes the addition of \$50k in additional school choice revenue requiring us to take on ten new students after replacing the three students graduating this year. At a future meeting, the School Committee will vote on whether MERSD will continue as a school choice district next year. If the answer is “yes,” the superintendent will determine how many students to accept and into which grades/locations they will be accepted. This process has been done collaboratively in the past by looking at a snapshot of enrollment levels and accepting input from teachers and administrators at each school regrading grade-level trends and needs. Currently, it looks as though school choice openings could be mostly filled by accepting sibling applicants for current school choice placement. Additional students would be accepted at the high school.

Discussion: Ms. Spencer asked if the district adjusts using historical trends, like the recent increase in eighth graders exiting to private schools. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that they also have to consider students returning to MERSD from private schools for high school. In addition, the preference is usually to bring in younger students to acclimate to the grade. Flooding grade nine with school choice would greatly change the culture of the grade. However, we could open up new seats in August, if the School Committee wanted. Ms. Whitman asked about the district’s ability to select particular students. Mr. Urbas stated that the districts can choose where the openings will be, but individual student selection is blind. If there are more applicants than spots, a lottery determines who is accepted. Ms. Spencer asked about funding for school choice students who are determined to need special education services. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that the district receives \$5000 per student from the sending district, plus an incremental charge up for reportable services. If the student requires out of district placement, they remain our student of record, and we pay the tuition initially. However, the district of residence will reimburse us. Ms. Whitman asked how many school choice students we currently have and how they impact apportionment. Mr. Urbas said there are currently 66 school choice students and they are not factored into apportionment. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the vast majority of SPED students are integrated into the student body.

- Class Size presentation – Superintendent Beaudoin presented information on class size throughout the district. This information was recently requested by a town partner, and the superintendent presented the report to the SC before turning it over as request. Across the district, our class size mostly ranges between 15-20 students. Similar districts are



about 16 students per class. All districts are currently struggling to offer breadth of program without having outlier very-small classes. At the high school, the reduction of two teachers next year will translate into the loss of ten class sections. The decrease in enrollment also puts pressure on the goal of breadth of program. The superintendent stated that we need to employ a multiyear approach to this issue.

Discussion: Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district is looking to bring schedules at the middle and high schools into alignment to utilize partial assignments by having the same teacher teaching in both the middle and high schools. Ms. Spencer asked if there is a downside to this approach and why it is not currently being done. The superintendent said that the current scheduling was necessitated by the peak enrollment we previously had. All the students could not fit in the cafeteria and the scheduling alleviated the usage strain. In addition, the middle school was rapidly growing and needed all staff. Ms. Spencer asked how lunch blocks might change going forward. Superintendent Beaudoin said that we could have two lunch blocks per school without having combined 6-12 usage of the café space. Mr. Foster asked for clarification on why class size information is being presented at the current meeting. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that it is a response to the request by the Essex Finance Committee for a detailed look at class size. There continues to be talk about staffing at MERSD given diminishing enrollment. The district is looking to explain the relationship between programming and class size. If we institute a policy of cutting any section with enrollment of less than ten students, we would be losing some important classes for program breadth, like AP sections or the arts. If the district decides to institute a class size minimum, it would be the job of the next high school principal to look at the issue. In addition, the presentation on class size is included tonight because it is part of the data examined to determine where school choice spots could be opened without impacting class size negatively. Mr. Foster asked for additional insight into why the superintendent is presenting classroom size data in conjunction with the school choice discussion. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that where some people say, “there are extra seats available, let’s fill them with school choice,” others may say, “let’s cut those spots and save by reducing staff.” Mr. Foster and Ms. Spencer asked about having a scheduled time to discuss the programmatic components of class size. Ms. Whitman asked members of the SC to email the SC chair and superintendent when they have a topic that they would like placed on an upcoming agenda. Mr. Harrington stated that he would like to speak at a future SC meeting regarding the value of school choice. Mr. Foster noted that the siblings we are considering absorbing for school choice did not appear to negatively impact the district. As he looked at enrollment trends, Mr. Foster noticed that it looked like the middle school could go down to four sections per grade in the future. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the middle school cannot go down to four sections. The current middle school model has five core subjects per grade with five teachers. Students are naturally divided into five sections which determines class size. Mr. Foster observed that it is important to make sure that we do not accept so many choice students that we go over our class size goals. The superintendent detailed how each middle school grade is sub-divided into five sections. Mr. Foster commented that there are other middle schools where teachers teach across grades. The superintendent stated that this would require additional certification for our teachers and that this level of programmatic change would come about through the SC asking her to explore that option. Ms. Whitman said that class

size and its implications would be discussed further at the March 21 SC meeting. Eventually, the SC will vote to take school choice students or not for the coming school year .

- 7) School Committee Comment:** Ms. Whitman asked if the district has a certified E&D yet. Mr. Urbas replied that we do not and are waiting on the Department of Revenue. Ms. Whitman stated that there is one more SC business meeting and then two town meetings. She asked that committee members prioritize attendance at district-wide, end of year ceremonies. Mr. Harrington stated that tonight's presentation with multiple staff and students was very engaging and enjoyable. This sentiment was echoed by Ms. Spencer and the entire committee.

## **8) Adjourn**

*Mr. Harrington moved to adjourn the meeting; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 pm.

## **School Committee Future Meetings**

- March 21, 2023
- April 3, 2023