



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

April 3, 2023

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	April 3, 2023
Location:	Manchester Memorial Elementary School
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 *arrived late
Guests:	
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 5:05 p.m.

- 1) Public Comment** – Ms. Whitman stated that comment guidelines are addressed in sections BEDH and BEDHE and are limited to three minutes in length.

Nina, McKinnon, Essex: Ms. McKinnon stated that her comments this evening do not represent the views of the Essex Finance Committee. Ms. McKinnon expressed the hope that the SC vote to admit only the siblings of current school choice students for admission next year but no new choice students. She likened acceptance of other applicants to kicking the can down the road as it opens up the necessity of accepting additional siblings each subsequent year. Ms. McKinnon asked if the district is confident that in-district students will have access to special education

programs if they are filled by students from out of district. Ms. McKinnon said that two families have expressed the worry that their students may not get into the IRWL program because those spaces are filled by students from out of district. She stated that the “optic” is that resident students of Essex and Manchester may not have access to a needed program because choice students are applying looking to gain access to these programs and filling them.

Christina Delisio, Manchester: Ms. Delisio spoke regarding the parent petition for a district movie policy. Ms. Delisio stated that there has been general inconsistency in policy, including that she had not heard the chair ask for the name and town of those making public comment. Ms. Delisio stated that, in general, policy needs to be tightened up. Ms. Delisio stated her concern that there is no movie policy and said that parents have expressed concern that no district policy exists to guide teachers and parents. She believes this results in teachers being unaccountable and parents being unaware. She said this should be a joint process for parents and teachers to work together and encouraged the creation of a policy to allow everyone to rely on a document.

Bonnie Rising, Manchester: Ms. Rising also spoke on the matter of having a movie policy. Ms. Rising mentioned her experience as a teacher and stressed the importance of having a policy in place that is consistent and in the best interest of our students and colleagues. It should be clear and concise for substitutes and veteran teachers. Ms. Rising said that parents should grant permission for movies and should not be told at the end of the day that their students saw a PG-13 or R rated movie without consent. Ms. Rising stated that there have been situations of questionable judgement at times has resulted in teachers being put on leave. Ms. Rising asked for parental permission to be granted for all students under the age of 18.

Karen Bennett, Manchester: Ms. Bennett expressed her support for a movie policy at MERSD and said that she was appalled at recent movies shown and glad that she does not currently have a student in the school district.

Sarah Pierce, Manchester: Ms. Pierce asked to clarify her position on the need for a formal movie policy for MERSD. Her intent was to implement a policy that would create consistency in obtaining parental consent for movies watched in school and that movies shown are age-appropriate and have educational value with parent consent. Ms. Pierce stated that there was no intent to take away curriculum or remove books from shelves. Movies shown should be directly related to the curriculum. Parents and teachers need to reference something when trying to make an informed decision when deciding whether to let their child watch a movie in school. Many districts have a policy in place. Each family has different values and comfort levels for media and each child may have a wide-range of tolerance for material. Ms. Pierce hoped this could be a progressive discussion encompassing all views from teachers, parents, and administrators in forming a policy that reflects equity for all. Ms. Pierce referenced Common Sense Media, an online guide for media recommendations, which suggests “following your school/district policy.” Ms. Pierce said it was disheartening to hear a commenter direct the SC to “not waste their time” on a movie policy. Ms. Pierce again asked the School Committee to implement a formal movie policy for MERSD.

2) Student Report – no report

3) Chairman's Report – Mr. Reed read from the School Committee Operating Protocols:

- Recognize the importance of proactive communication and agree that there will be no surprises. If Committee members have questions or concerns, they agree to contact the Chair and the Superintendent well in advance of a meeting.
- Maintain the confidentiality of privileged information, and abide by the Open Meeting Law and all other statewide rules and regulations.

4) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: **Accounts Payable Vouchers #1051-1052**
- Minutes for approval: 03/21/2023

Mr. Reed moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/Matt Harrington) – No Report
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman tabled the report of the Finance Sub-Committee until the arrival of all SC members.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report

6) Superintendent's Report (Superintendent Pam Beaudoin) – Superintendent Beaudoin began with a big thank you to high school teacher Kristen Umile for her work to organize and run the first annual STEAM night for the Middle/High School. The projects were inspiring. The same night, Tyler Garofalo, advisor to the district-wide G5 musical, had her opening night of Alice@Wonderland. The superintendent thanked Ms. Garofalo and the parent volunteers who were tasked with bringing both elementary schools together for the first time. The evening was an academic and art showcase enjoyed by the community. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the search for a new high school principal held site visits, which had a large contingent of students present. A common thread in student input over the visits was concern about absenteeism. Parents and teachers also attended each candidate's meet and greet. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the team was completing reference checks and expected to announce their selection by week's end.

Ms. Mitchell said that the SC is usually involved in major hires and asked when they would get involved in the principal search. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that the School Committee is not involved in hiring staff, with the exception of the Superintendent and Business Manager. However, three SC members were present for each interview with the candidates. The SC charge is to conduct the search for a new superintendent. The superintendent then makes all appointments, except the business manager. Superintendent Beaudoin also stated that the principal position for Essex Elementary has not been forgotten. Her intent is to extend the interim position for an additional year.

Regarding the request for a movie policy at the middle/high school, Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the administration is looking to the instructional materials challenge policy to guide them through a peer review of the choices that were made by teachers. Each school has a policy for use of media. The current issue pertains mostly to the middle/high school. However, each school has a policy where if a teacher finds themselves in a position of using material that is not at their age-appropriate level that they are to notify the principal, seek permission, and notify parents of intent to show the material. It appears that the process did not occur as intended in at least one of the current instances under review. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that there are two avenues to consider for addressing the issue. The first is a personnel issue handled by each building principal should a staff member not follow building-level protocol. The second path regards addressing whether the materials are appropriate. Under the direction of Angela Bik, director of curriculum, the district is convening a team of English teachers, social studies teachers, school psychologists, the district-wide librarian, and the Dean of Students to review the instructional plan from which the movie choices in question arose. They will review the films and convene using a rubric to determine whether the rationale, lead-in, and activity associated with use of those movies justifies the age-level of the content. The personnel issue would be an internal process, not for public consumption. The peer-to-peer review would evaluate whether the materials make sense. Ms. Whitman clarified that while the district does not have a movie policy, there are building protocols and breach of those protocols is handled within the building, and the curriculum material challenge process is in play to address the appropriateness. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that we do have an instructional materials policy, reflected in the syllabus, at the building level. Within a unit of study, each teacher has the ability to select materials that are assistive to the broader curriculum. These are the day-to-day choices of each teacher. Currently, administration is examining at the level of the professional's choice of materials. Ms. Whitman stated that the SC needs to agree that this is the right course of action because they continue to receive concerned comments from the community.

Discussion: Ms. Spencer stated that, although the administration is looking at the movie content as it applies to curricular goals, the parents are talking about the movies in question as being used as a reward. Ms. Spencer asked if there is a different framework used when a movie is a reward. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that if that

is the case, the review would have a predictable conclusion. The superintendent stated that she believes a reasonable and common sense resolution will be reached through the review. If not, Superintendent Beaudoin stated that if the SC wanted to move forward with a broader policy, they could. The superintendent voiced concern that even a broad prohibition about the level of movie that can be shown can still end up with the situation that instructors can be absent-minded or make a mistake thinking they are doing the right thing. Ms. Mitchell stated that is why she believes we need a movie policy, to protect the district and students and to increase transparency. She agreed that educators should choose materials but believes there is a potential liability. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the school-level protocols are written down. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that they are not in the handbook. She stated that movies are rarely chosen that are above the age of the students. We do have two movies, Twelve Years a Slave and Schindler's List, which are larger undertakings. But in terms of teachers forgetting to provide notice to principals and parents, that is an infrequent occurrence. Two of the movies in question have been used before. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that it is important to complete the peer-review process and better understand the full situation of each occurrence. Then we could look at other options. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if existing protocols include parent notification. The superintendent said that they do. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that there is an important line drawn between notification and consent and asked to keep in mind who is most likely to be excluded if the district pivots to requiring parental consent versus parent notification. Parent notification allows parents that want to be involved to opt out. Ms. Whitman stated that the SC is not in the position to rush this process and proposed a formal position for the SC that reflected this.

Ms. Whitman moved that the School Committee choose to accept the review process currently under way, to request a report back at the end of the review, and to table the matter until the outcome. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for a date at which the SC could take up the issue. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she expected a review outcome by the first week of May, allowing time to review and collaborate, and that the SC could take up the matter again at the May 16 meeting. Ms. Mitchell spoke to the protocol process not being in the handbook and questioned why the SC does not want to pursue formalization. Ms. Whitman replied that is not the case, but she would like to have all of the information. Ms. Whitman also stated that elections for SC are approaching that may alter the makeup of the committee who makes the final decision. Regarding the process, Ms. Whitman stated that the issue would go to the policy committee. Mr. Reed said that the answer is that the SC will address it at the right time. Ms. Whitman specified that the matter will be tabled until May 16.

The motion passed unanimously.

Superintendent Beaudoin offered the final insight that the district's policy is hosted by the Association of School Committees. Unfortunately, their site has recently suffered from a cyberattack and is not currently accessible.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that she had attended the legislator luncheon. The group continues to lobby hard for the state to fully fund circuit breaker or increase the overall funding of circuit breaker. The state budget is not complete but administrators are doing their part to bring in more money to the towns. They have asked for a general commission overview, similar to the Chapter 70 mission, where they revisit Chapter 766 and its intent and funding mechanism because it is antiquated. They are asking to revisit Circuit Breaker, which reimburses districts for out of district tuition. The group is asking for funding at 90% of allowable expenses, which would provide a district our size between \$400K-\$500K. They are also asking for consideration for communities like ours that rely solely on residential tax bases and asking for another look at Chapter 70 aid. The superintendent was hopeful that their campaign may bear some small returns this year and more in the future.

7) Continued Business –

- MSBA Statement of Interest – Essex Elementary School (vote to approve). Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the administration is three-fourths of the way through preparing the SOI for Essex Elementary using the Memorial project as a blueprint. Tonight, the School Committee needs to have a formal vote that allows the district to submit to the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA).

Ms. Whitman moved to authorize the superintendent of schools to submit the MSBA Statement of Interest for Essex Elementary School, in accordance with MSBA's formal vote language. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell asked if any important issues were raised during the Memorial submission that should be considered this time. Superintendent Beaudoin said that we were in a similar situation at that time. Her only caution is that during the Memorial project, the school was facing severe overcrowding. This issue may have raised priority with the MSBA. Crowding is not a concern currently in Essex. However, this is a strong argument for the importance of submitting as quickly as possible for Essex. Mr. Urbas stated that the merits of proceeding through the MSBA are the receipt of funds for our project. However, there are also guidelines that the district would be required to follow to receive that funding. During the process, the district would have the opportunity to learn about their guidelines before committing. Ms. Spencer iterated that the SOI submission does not bind the district to the MSBA or to any other pathway. Superintendent Beaudoin affirmed that point and said that the critical discussion would be if the project was accepted right away. Mr. Urbas stated that the next steps would involve more reports, but without obligation. Ms. Mitchell asked about the ability of the Memorial Elementary campus to house both towns, in the event of an emergency. She stated that is would

be a cheaper option. Superintendent Beaudoin replied that the question was not for her to answer. She shared that part of the SOI process for Memorial included community outreach to ascertain how each community felt about the state of the two campuses at that time. Options presented included combining the schools into one campus. There was little support for that option and a strong desire expressed to keep an elementary school in each town. Ms. Whitman stated that at the time that the district decided to pursue Memorial only, there was a commitment that Essex would get a new school down the road. She said that many of those constituents remain active and vocal in their desire to see Essex get a new school. Following the November budget meetings, Ms. Whitman had a lot of communications from Essex residents concerned that the repair/rebuild options were even being discussed. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that “repair and replace” is an MSBA term that signals that no determination has been made. While the school district is submitting an SOI, it does not lead with the request for a new building. We have to go through a bureaucratic process. The district is committed to providing Essex students with a modern learning facility. The outcome is a community decision. Mr. Urbas confirmed that the MSBA requires that districts present them with analysis of projects to 1) Repair 2) Renovate and 3) Build New. The MSBA will not respond until they see all of the options. To receive their funding support, our district must follow their guideposts. Ms. Spencer stated that she feels strongly about our commitment to Essex for a new school and that she strongly feels that it is hard to understand the dichotomy between the two communities in the challenge in funding the operating budget. Ms. Spencer asked if the town officials would be able to come together to help the SC understand how this remains the right path. Ms. Koch-Sundquist emphasized that the SOI does not close doors. Mr. Foster said that, separate from the financial aspects, the schools are viewed by their communities as town centers and a community resource. Mr. Urbas stated that the regional agreement requires two elementary schools. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the Memorial building is designed for sixty students per grade level. Beyond that, secondary spaces would need to be utilized. In an emergency, the district could combine schools but not long term.

The motion passed with six votes. Mr. Harrington abstained.

Resolved: Having convened in an open meeting on April 3, 2023, prior to the SOI submission closing date, the Manchester Essex School Committee in accordance with its charter, by-laws, and ordinances, has voted to authorize the Superintendent to submit to the Massachusetts School Building Authority the Statement of Interest Form dated April 14, 2023 for the Essex Elementary School located at 12 Story Street, Essex Ma which describes and explains the following deficiencies and the priority category(s) for which an application may be submitted to the Massachusetts School Building Authority in the future [Insert a description of the priority(s) checked off on the Statement of Interest Form and a brief description of the deficiency described therein for each priority] Replacement, renovation or modernization of school facility systems, such as roofs, windows, boilers, heating and ventilation systems, to increase energy conservation and decrease energy related costs in a school facility; Replacement of or addition to obsolete buildings in order to provide for a full range of programs consistent with state and approved local requirements; and hereby further specifically acknowledges that by submitting this Statement of Interest Form, the Massachusetts School Building Authority in no way guarantees the acceptance or the approval of an application, the awarding of a grant or any other funding commitment from the Massachusetts School Building Authority, or commits the [Manchester

Essex Regional School District] to filing an application for funding with the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

- Draft 2023-2024 District Calendar (vote to approve).

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification about what the SC should be mindful of in approving the calendar. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that approval is a routine process. Many aspects of the calendar are defined by the state or the teachers' contract. The contract defines the beginning of the school year. The SC could choose to rename holidays or to add a holiday in, for instance Good Friday. The SC could change the vacation times and duration or choose a different configuration of half days. Graduation is set by the state. Ms. Mitchell asked if the number of holidays is part of negotiations. Ms. Beaudoin replied that all holiday are mandated by DESE. The other contractual day off is the Friday before Labor Day. It has become the district's practice to have a four-day weekend. Ms. Whitman made a point of clarification that if there was something the SC members wanted to review, it would need to happen quickly because the approval is currently coming late and people want the calendar approved for planning purposes. Ms. Spencer stated that it is hard to remember when half days are, particularly early in the year. Superintendent Beaudoin said that in the fall, there are more breaks and the district was asked not to schedule the half day with the holiday break. Many of the quirky aspects of the calendar are from prior requests. Ms. Whitman asked about the feedback from Veteran's Day week. Ms. Spencer mentioned the term "No School November." Superintendent Beaudoin stated that conference days are contractual. Ms. Whitman said that they have been trying to change the name of the Columbus Day holiday to Indigenous Peoples Day. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said this is the third year that the issue has been raised and stated the importance of having a calendar that reflects the values of the district and community. She asked what the appropriate avenue is for pursuing the change. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it could be voted on in the current meeting and said that the change would receive a lot of support and be consistent with work being done in the district. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the issue should be on the agenda so that people have the opportunity to weigh-in, and the superintendent said she will place it on the agenda for the last SC meeting. Ms. Mitchell said that she finds it odd to start before Labor Day. Superintendent Beaudoin said that previously school began after Labor Day. After the change, it became part of the contract to give the teachers two days for teacher prep, then two days for student acclimation. The superintendent stated that she does not think it will easily be reversed, particularly as it allows school to end by mid-June. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked why half-day professional development is on Wednesdays instead of Fridays. The superintendent said that it has traditionally been Wednesdays. Although she is open to moving to Fridays, she didn't know how open the staff would be to the change as these are often extended work days. It is difficult to end the week with an extra-long day. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that parents would like the change. Superintendent Beaudoin said she could ask the staff for feedback on the idea. Ms. Whitman took a straw poll of the SC to approve soliciting teacher feedback on moving half-day PD to Fridays, and the SC confirmed.

Ms. Harrington moved to approve the District Calendar 2023-2024 as outlined, for the beginning and end of the school and vacations, with additional items to be considered. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

8) School Committee Comment:

Finance Committee Report: Ms. Whitman shared that they had a collaboration meeting. In the conversation with Essex partners, they are still finalizing numbers but it looks like they will be looking at four votes for education including the Operational Budget and an Override for the district and then the same for Essex Tech contributions. In addition, the collaboration continued the conversation about requesting data. The initial request for classroom size data was through email. The response was that the Superintendent and Business Manager always report out to the School Committee first, and the time for that presentation would be during the March meetings. The response to the request was in the meeting packet for March 7, 2023 and included with the preliminary data about school choice. The feedback from the requesting entities is that the information was insufficient, and they would like to have raw data for each section in district and class size throughout the district. District administration has been trying to work through this but would now like direction regarding whether the SC would like the superintendent to provide this level of granular data to the SC and then to the other town boards. As a point of reference, Hamilton-Wenham recently spent a year to go through this exercise with their town boards. Ms. Spencer asked the superintendent to address the FOIA request and whether the district is obligated to share information. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this is not a FOIA request. If it was a FOIA, the superintendent would speak to our attorney to determine the disclosure required. The issue is that the superintendent reports to the School Committee. An important question to answer is whether a sub-board, in this case the finance committee, has the authority to direct the superintendent. If not, outside boards should direct a request to the School Committee. The School Committee would then decide to take up the issue or not. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the point of collaboration is to seek mutual understanding. The data requested does not further understanding without the context of how the district goes about building school schedules. The superintendent stated that a master class could be held to teach about how the district goes about building a schedule and pedagogy. Without this knowledge, releasing numbers can lead to new obstacles and fires to put out. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the information provided is not an attempt to hide that we have small sections, but it does provide context. The superintendent said she will gladly go through this detailed exercise, although it will be a lot to ask of the new principal coming on board. She stated that it would be irresponsible of them to put out the granular data without this guidance. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if going through the process would give the administration greater insight. The superintendent said that the district already has the insight it needs. Responsibility for determining class/section size is given to the building principals. Their choices reflect what they believe is best for their population. An elementary principal will look at the makeup of cohorts before assigning teachers. A principal at the high school may choose to maintain a program to allow students to complete a pathway even if it results in a small class section. Ms. Mitchell asked about checking the regional agreement to see if the town boards have the right to ask for data. She

stated her support for a workshop to educate interested parties on schedule building. Ms. Mitchell stated that the request reflects years of buildup of mistrust and lack of communication and stated it would worsen the longer information is withheld. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she would happily host a workshop. The superintendent stated that the issue is how a request becomes a demand. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if we recently had to add a budget line for additional district staff to meet the increased demands for data. The superintendent said that is not the case, but the data manager is new. However, this would be a job for the principal. Mr. Foster stated that the question of whether this is public data is important. He said the intent of the request is to get us talking about our current situation, knowing that the budget is tight and will continue to be so. He encouraged the SC to undertake the effort. Some districts do have a policy of not running a class with fewer than ten students. Although we do not, Mr. Foster said it is time to explore those conversations. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there needs to be a summit after the May meeting among the boards in both towns, because they are starting to function very differently. The superintendent also stated that she does not agree that this is many years in the making. It has only emerged over the past few years. The intent of the collaboration group has been very positive in the past. Superintendent Beaudoin described the problem as a fundamental financial problem masked by other layers. Recent input from the collaboration board would suggested the district would have to grow at 1.5% annually to meet Essex where they want their annual budgeting model to be. Knowing that that is at the heart of the problem, it does make sense to look at the schedule, but the superintendent urged doing so in an organized, processed way to eliminate the confusion. Ms. Whitman stated that the question for next time is what, “is the problem we are trying to solve and what is the best way to do so.”

9) Adjourn

Mr. Harrington moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 6:31 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- Monday, May 1, 2023 Essex Elementary School
- Tuesday, May 16, 2023