



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

*May 16, 2023*

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	May 16, 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 Anna Lin Mitchell Chris Reed Erica Spencer
<b>Absent:</b>	
<b>Guests:</b>	Patricia Puglisi, MERHS Principal High School Student Presenters
<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 6:04 p.m.

- 1) Public Comment** – Ms. Whitman stated that public comment policy is outlined in Section BEDH and BEDH-E. Ms. Whitman stated that all online attendees desiring to speak must put their names and full addresses into the comment section. Comments are limited to three minutes.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester: Ms. Banks respectfully requested that the School Committee resubmit the budget without further cuts and implored members to increase the quality and frequency of communication with the public. This is particularly important for busy working families across the district struggling to comprehend the ins and outs of the budget process. She stated that it is vital to get ahead of the issue and communicate proactively. Ms. Banks urged increased communication across all demographic groups. Without this, misinformation spreads. Ms. Banks suggested using all available methods, including the Cricket newspaper, email, and social media to connect with both communities and get them working together.

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Sarah Wolf, 4 Soginese Creek Road, Essex: Ms. Wolf expressed disappointment in the Town of Essex (TOE) vote, particularly as a past SC member and chair. She stated that she has been impressed with the level of professionalism of our district administration. Ms. Wolf said that she is convinced that there was a multi-year campaign of misinformation by some of the TOE leaders. Ms. Wolf emphasized that the district's schools are good and managed with fiscal responsibility and transparency. She said the district strives for parity between the two communities. Ms. Wolf urged Essex community members to attend meetings over the next few weeks, get the facts, and make decisions to re-affirm Essex's commitment to education, made 20 years ago when it joined the regional school district.

Annie Cameron, 23 Pickering Street, Essex: Ms. Cameron took the opportunity to thank high school principal Patricia Puglisi for her accomplishments at the high school, including her work to revamp the counseling office, modernize the curriculum, champion the SEI Health program, help parents to understand Risk Behavior data, and creating the Bridge Program to transition students back into school after a prolonged absence. As Ms. Puglisi winds down her final school year with MERSD, Ms. Cameron reflected on the benefit she has brought to the entire school community and Ms. Cameron's family personally.

Shelley Bradbury, 79 Eastern Avenue, Essex: Ms. Bradbury asked for the district administration to show what 2.5% a growth rate for the school operational budget would look like.

Brian Russell, 30 Choate Street, Essex: Mr. Russel expressed his support for more work to inform the public.

Ella Warnock, 35 Running Ridge Road, Manchester: Ms. Warnock thanked the parents advocating for not cutting the budget and caring about all students. She stated that many of the programs under consideration for cuts are very important to the students.

Alexander Wolf: 4 Soginese Creek Road, Essex: Mr. Wolf stated that something has been lost over time in the district through repeated budget cuts. Even in this world of constantly growing technology, the district has not grown its programs. The STEM and music programs are very small. Mr. Wolf expressed his disappointment in the path.

Phileine DeWidt, 22 Proctor Street, Manchester: Ms. DeWidt stated that she has just completed her AP exams and her classes have had to completely change their usual end of year plan to watch movies because of the recent parent complaint regarding a media policy.

Antonella Muniz, 20 Harland Street, Essex: Ms. Muniz stated that some of those, including herself, who did not want the override to pass do support the schools but want to understand more what other options would look like. Ms. Muniz said she has tried to understand the budget – what we have had, what has been cut and reinstated. She has found that to be difficult. Ms. Muniz said that the point is to make the budget affordable for everyone sustainably.

Ben Buttrick, 81 Choate Street, Essex: Mr. Buttrick asked that, as part of the re-consideration, the School Committee be measured in its response. He suggested that the right answer could be doing something on a measured basis versus digging in on either extreme.

Mary Palermo, 19 Turtleback Road, Essex, and 2 Parsons Lane, Manchester: Ms. Palermo suggested notifying each community early in the school year about the ratio of students from each town and what their likely financial responsibility will be. This would help them to understand the voting needs at the end of the year.

Betsy McKeen, 35 Lufkin Point Road, Essex: Ms. McKeen thanked the SC members and Superintendent Beaudoin for their work producing a thoughtfully economical budget while trying to maintain level services. Ms. McKeen stated that it is important to look at the budget again with visibility on what the cuts will entail. Ms. McKeen believes that the current budget will be seen as the best option.

Sally Berkowitz, 22 Friend Street, Manchester: Ms. Berkowitz thanked the SC and administration for providing a strong budget that represents the minimum educational opportunity that the community wants to provide its students. Ms. Berkowitz acknowledged the hard work of the superintendent and business manager is determining what we should provide our two communities. The failure of the Town of Essex to support the recommended budget pushed Ms. Berkowitz to question the alignment of the two towns on educational goals. Ms. Berkowitz said that the district has worked to provide opportunities for community engagement and feedback during the budget process. Ms. Berkowitz also pointed out that the budget was overwhelmingly approved by the School Committee who represent both communities. She stated that she could not imagine cutting any additional services to the detriment of students' future and that of the community at large. She stated her opposition to additional cuts to the budget.

Sarah Pierce, 9 Friend Street, Manchester: Ms. Pierce stated that she was told this would be the meeting at which the SC circled back to the parent petition for a district movie policy. She wanted to reiterate that the goal was to get a policy in place consistent with age-group appropriate media and that requires parent approval. Ms. Pierce emphasized that she does not want to remove any material. Ms. Pierce also stated that parents have recently been receiving permission slips through Google classroom.

- 2) **Student Report – Diego Sanson:** Mr. Sanson began by speaking to how the recent movie policy controversy has impacted students. He stated that students are disappointed by the lack of communication surrounding the high school decision to put movies on hold. Mr. Sanson stated that, as a 17 year old, he is able to go and watch R-rated movies at the theater by himself and asked why he can't watch them in school. Mr. Sanson also described a high level of student anxiety regarding the new budget under consideration. Students are worried about scheduling for next year and have been seeking out Mr. Sanson for insight and to express concern. Mr. Sanson also spoke to community members stating, "The cuts and decisions you make and the comments from you on Facebook impact the students." He said students are scared that there will not be as many classes. Mr. Sanson stated that, if the community is looking for a high performing school district, what exists is about the bare minimum now. Mr. Sanson concluded, "If you are okay seeing a school district that is less than what it is now, then cut away." He hoped that if the notion gave those present pause they would reconsider.

### 3) **Chairman's Report – Theresa Whitman**

Ms. Whitman was able to meet with the Student Advisory Council last week. The students reported anxiety with the decisions being made right now. Ms. Whitman said their meeting spoke to the quality of our students and how they want to be heard. Ms. Whitman expressed her own disappointment at the place the SC finds itself in and the emphasis tonight on the budget when there are many other topics to review. However, Ms. Whitman stressed that it is the charge of the SC to manage the budget process through to the end.

Ms. Spencer read from the School Committee Operating Protocols:

- Refer constituent concerns and complaints to the appropriate person within the district chain of communication and notify the Superintendent of same, as appropriate.
- Recognize the importance of working collaboratively with each town's officials to improve our schools and actively seek ways to enlist their support for our efforts.

**4) Consent Agenda –**

- Acceptance of Warrants: **Accounts Payable Vouchers # 1058, 1059, 1061 - 1063**
- Minutes for approval: May 1, 2023

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist 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) – Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) –Ms.Sundquist, stated that META has reached out to the district regarding starting negotiations about representing employees not currently covered by the union, including teaching assistants and support staff who are also critical to the learning environment. That process will begin, although it is an unfortunate time for them to undertake that mission. Ms. Whitman asked if that process would happen later, given the current budget climate. Superintendent Beaudoin said that, prior to the current budget crisis, the district had been working to align a meeting for the end of the year and stated that the district is in open discussion with META to schedule that meeting.

**6) Superintendent's Report**

Media Review Team Summary: Superintendent Beaudoin stated that Ms. Sarah Pierce of Manchester submitted a parent petition and made a request in March for a policy regarding movies shown at the middle and high schools. This request was received as a complaint against the instructional materials choice process. Within the classroom, media, including films, is an area over which teachers have some autonomy to make choices. By policy, the default in an instance such as this is to implement a faculty team review. The review team was formed with staff, including teachers and counseling staff, from K-12. Interim Curriculum Director Angela Bik chaired the team. The review team employed a rubric and reviewed the films in question and the rationale from the instructor for their utilization. The group reviewed whether continued use of the specific media, for an age group for which that media is not targeted, is justified by the rationale for using that particular media. Following the review of the three specific films under consideration, the review team had great alignment in their conclusions for the specified media and their perspective with how media should be handled going forward. This resulted in a clearer process for faculty when considering movies not aligned with the age group of their students. In order to provide more transparency in the future regarding the process of incorporating media into instruction, the media review team developed a protocol for effective evaluation and responsible selection of media content. This protocol will be published in the School Handbook and reviewed by school principals both now and during staff orientation at the beginning of the school year. Superintendent Beaudoin also clarified that the current pause on movies at the high school was intended to allow the review process to run its course and reassure parents that their concerns were taken seriously. The conclusion of the review assigned the following results:

### **Film Title, Recommendation, and Rationale**

*The Giver*: Recommended for future viewing. This film directly supports the curriculum and enhances the learning objectives.

*The Hunger Games*: Not recommended for recreational viewing. If used in an academic context, this film would be appropriate as a learning tool at the recommended age. This film contains content that requires teacher facilitation.

*The Witch*: Not recommended for future viewing. The graphic nature of this film outweighs any curricular benefits.

The media review team confirmed that this process belongs at the secondary level, administered by the building principals, confirming Superintendent Beaudoin's expectation that this process would lead us to a common ground. The superintendent stated that principals will review this process with staff starting this week.

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted that the terms consent and notification were used almost interchangeably and asked for insight. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the purpose of notification in the context of this process is to obtain parental permission. Parents would reply to the notice with consent. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed concern that some students may be barred from watching media because their guardians were too busy or missed the notice in time to respond. Ms. Whitman asked where the results of this review would live. The superintendent said the review results would be posted with SC meeting materials on the MERSD website and would reside with the principals and administrators. Use of the outlined procedure will allow staff to make the best media selections for their students. Ms. Whitman asked if the principals will be presenting the media procedure to the teaching staff for feedback. The superintendent responded that the recommendation of the review committee has been endorsed by the

superintendent and will be the procedure going forward. In short, the procedure requires staff to supply rationale and request permission from their building principal. They will then notify parents and provide an alternate assignment for students not given parent/guardian consent. Ms. Mitchell suggested that, to reduce the instance of parents not seeing the notification quickly, teachers might consider sending home a list of media at the beginning of the school year. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that the team did not consider that option. Teachers are making active decisions throughout the year regarding supplemental materials. That flexibility and autonomy is an important consideration that preserves staff ability to tailor their instruction. Mr. Foster agreed that it is appropriate to keep the process at the school level and not escalate to the SC. He asked if this procedure applies to all schools. The superintendent replied that it does, however it is rarely an issue at the elementary schools. Ms. Whitman suggested that, because the matter was brought before the SC, a motion could be made to accept the findings of the review committee and take no further action. Ms. Koch-Sundquist questioned the necessity given that the conclusion of the review demonstrated why media issues should remain within the purview of the building principal. Mr. Foster stated that, from the perspective of the SC policy committee, the vote would be to not pursue a policy at the district level because it is remaining at the building level.

*Ms. Whitman moved to not pursue a district-wide media policy in recognition of the recommendation by the Superintendent. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell stated that this issue is about parent consent and that the district should have a policy about the process and consequences in order to set the tone. Ms. Whitman said that the SC is responding to a specific request. To consider adoption of a media policy, the matter should be added to the summer list for consideration.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the NEASC committee would be welcomed this week to the Essex and Memorial elementary schools to begin the review process and seek accreditation. The elementary principals worked with Curriculum Director Angela Bik to submit the NEASC application. The process mirrors the accreditation process of the high school where the schools complete a self-analysis against a set of standards. Accreditation is a means to bridge the gap between schools within the district's quest to form a common curriculum experience and methodology for student learning. While being committed to preserving the individual cultures of each school, the superintendent stressed that they are also committed to ensuring that the academic learning experience is as similar as possible. Superintendent Beaudoin also reported that the district recently reported to the DESE commission on MERSD's integration of the Safe and Supportive Schools grant into the school improvement process to support cultural competency in-district. The commission received the report very favorably, and it is hoped that we may be eligible for further support.

## **7) Continued Business –**

- High School Spotlight Presentation – Principal Puglisi and Student Representative Diego Sanson. Principal Puglisi began by reviewing some of the work completed by high school staff this year. In response to community inquiry, administration reviewed the flow of students between private schools

and our high school. Currently, there are six students slated to return from private school for next year. The high school has created an exit survey for those choosing to leave MERSD prior to ninth grade or during high school. A review of exit percentages showed that MERSD has numbers lower than our preferred comparable schools – 2% versus 8-12% per year. The high school also completed a review of the AP program. MERHS has a robust program. There is some movement among independent schools away from the AP program. Some of our comparable districts are raising similar questions. Teachers at MERHS have worked this year to design interdisciplinary courses for next year; roll out the student portfolio program, which will highlight student work over their four years; and conduct an extensive review and redesign of report card comments to make them learning-based and linked to the vision of the graduate. In April, Principal Puglisi reached out to the high school clubs to see which would want to express to the School Committee how they utilize what they are learning as part of their groups in real life. The response was overwhelming for students excited to share their experiences with the SC. The evenings line-up had to include just those quickest to respond. Principal Puglisi introduced Diego Sanson, Student Representative to the School Committee, to introduce each group. Group representatives shared their experience with their class or club and emphasized the skills and opportunities gained through participation:

- Visual/Performing Arts – Students began by describing the collaborative space provided by the arts. Students work together across grades 9-12. The program affords students the opportunity to link art to the outside community and to learn about the multiple modalities of their art. Students also explained the personal importance in having a creative outlet, even going so far as to say that their opportunities in the visual and performing arts get them through the day. That art is their safe place to go. Recently, MERHS has started the Music Honors Society and is happy to have the support of the community The Friends of the Manchester Essex Performing Arts. Students shared that the visual/performing arts program gives them insight into careers in the arts.
- Peer Mentors –Peer Mentors work to promote kindness, helping 8<sup>th</sup> graders to integrate into the high school and acting as a bridge to the high school guidance office. Mentors work with students in the eighth grade, helping with schedule organization and supporting them through summer freshman orientation. The connection is maintained by meeting with these freshmen during their U blocks. The peer mentors had a guest speaker teach them to be better mentors and hopes to expand their program.
- ADL – The World of Difference Group has the goal to make the school as welcoming as possible so that all individuals feel safe to come to school and share their identity. Members are taught to share knowledge and help incoming freshmen create a better community. They meet with each freshman class for an hour to teach them how to stand up for friends. They hope to expand their program to meeting with 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>

- grade students. Students described learning to be a better member of the community and said that the ADL was the most impactful thing they had done, beginning with the middle school conference.
- SCAR (Student Coalition Against Racism) – The group’s goal is to address systemic racism and create lasting and concrete change. They organize fundraisers to help with issues that impact minority populations disproportionately. Their ConCon (Connections Conference) included workshops on societal issues and student participants shared how impactful it was to listen to different perspectives and topics they would not otherwise have considered. Students were inspired to take more action and learn more.
  - Science Team/Math Team/HOSA (future health care workers) – These clubs provide the opportunity to expand their knowledge in STEM subjects beyond what is available through classwork. The math and science teams have monthly competitions and are able to explore ideas and general concepts, taking that knowledge back to their classwork. The Science team invites speakers in to discuss many topics. HOSA provides students with an opportunity to hear from inspiring speakers from fields they hope to explore in the future. Speakers share their career path and discuss the work they are doing in the real world. Students shared the success of the recent STEAM night in showcasing the explorations afforded them in their clubs and connecting them to local businesses in their fields of interest.
  - Journalism – Students enthusiastically shared that “The Independent” recently won three awards for articles. In creating an entire paper, by a deadline, students stretch themselves far beyond writing skills. They build and utilize time management and communications skills. Reporters learn to think critically and ask decisive questions – all skills that transfer easily to the real world.
  - DECA (Distributive Education Clubs across America) business – With almost 90 members competing in the district competition, DECA has the largest following of any club. However, it also translates between club to an in-school curriculum. Students can choose from business-oriented classes in marketing, business management, and a proposed class for next year in sports management. During competition, individuals or teams are presented with a business scenario that they are prompted to solve in their selected category. They must present their ideas to a judge. Most students in the club are interested in pursuing a career in business.
  - STEM Design – The school STEM curriculum has five classes and their instructor creates an environment that is largely self-led. Given constraints, students determine how to fulfill a challenge. For example, they might be tasked with creating a robot that can navigate a maze. Learning occurs within the design process. Students are looking for the best way to meet a challenge and continually strive to improve their designs. The CAD class is learning about how computers and AI are developing in the real world. Students engage in real-world problem

solving and design process. The team also worked collaboratively with the anatomy class to design a personal centrifuge. About half the projects are team-based, facilitating collaboration skills.

- Robotics – The club works across several modalities to create large-scale robots designed to meet a challenge. The process requires a full year of learning, design across mechanical, electrical, and programming domains, and construction of robot. Students in grades 7-12 are members and the older students must teach those beginners needed skills from the ground up. This includes business and communication skills as well as mechanical skills. Members gain experience soliciting support and working with many local businesses.

Mr. Sanson extolled the exceptional MERSD school community and the group of students who represented just some of the student undertakings. Mr. Sanson said that he would hate to see any of that growth diminished. Mr. Sanson reminded the SC that many other groups had been eager to share their accomplishments and experiences at tonight's meeting.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked, as a parent of younger students, for students to explain the term "U block." Principal Puglisi said that in 2014 the district undertook a change in the bell schedule that would include a flexible block. The U block is 45 minutes long and provides students with an opportunity to tackle school work or check in with a teacher for help or to complete missed tests. Although all students are assigned to a class with a teacher, they can check themselves out. In addition, music students employ this block for band and chorus. Mr. Sanson said that the u-block not only provides an opportunity to study but also needed downtime. He said the block has helped him to build time management skills. Mr. Foster said that it was great to hear the range and focus in the student presentations. As most of these experiences were after school, Mr. Foster asked how their experiences informed core classes or how application is informed there, as well. Principal Puglisi pointed out that many of the highlighted clubs, even with a student advisor, are student focused. It is a way for them to take their learning and apply it in a way that is meaningful for them. Principal Puglisi stated that, "Learning at our high school is not just in the classroom. These kids run their clubs."

Ms. Whitman utilized the opportunity to thank Principal Puglisi for her leadership and stewardship of the students in her care.

- FY 24 Reconsidered Budget – Ms. Whitman opened the discussion by quoting one of the evening's student presenters, "we work hard to find not just a solution, but the best solution." Ms. Whitman described tonight's meeting as an opportunity for the SC to deliberate on next steps, following failure of the budget override in Essex. The public hearing is scheduled for Tuesday, May 23, 2023.

Superintendent Beaudoin thanked the students presenting for the high school spotlight and said that they had been scheduled to present on this night for some time. Tonight's presentations demonstrated how the qualities pursued in the Vision of the Graduate manifest in the student experience. Their accomplishments include perspective-taking, problem-solving, the design process, financial literacy, and empathy-building. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that reconsideration of the FY 24 Budget is necessary because the district's budget presentation last week to the community of Essex as a ballot measure did not pass. The district must create a budget within the confines of the financial structure accepted, excluding the override.

- Limited Available Resources - Role of Reserves & Capital Liabilities: Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the reserves are intended for planned capital expenses and emergency funds. A strong reserve fund provides sound financial footing when borrowing money. MERSD sought advice from financial advisors at Hilltop Securities. A detailed response is included in meeting materials. In summary, they did not recommend using reserve funds as best practice. Preservation of the fund was recommended to maximize MERSD's bond rating for borrowing for the anticipated Essex building project. The reserve fund has several components – Excess and Deficiency; Facilities Rental; School Choices funds accumulated from sending districts; and the Stabilization Fund. Speaking to the Stabilization Fund, Superintendent Beaudoin said that this fund was created to house interest accrual generated by received monies from the MMES building project. The total borrowed was placed in an account that bore interest while awaiting invoices. This money was ear-marked by the district to ensure equity between the two elementary schools. It has since been used to fund security and tech upgrades at Essex Elementary to levels comparable to Memorial Elementary. Building project expenditures have drawn down the Stabilization Fund, and it will not be replenished unless another major project comes up or the district chooses to fund this account through a stabilization line in the budget. Superintendent Beaudoin also explained potential draws on the Reserve balance through FY 28. It is expected that the district will have approximately \$1.8 million in capital plan expenditures. This drawdown is expected to deplete the Facilities Rental and Stabilization portions of the Reserves. In addition, there are potential liabilities/emergencies of around \$7 million related to the deteriorating Essex Elementary facility. The longer that approval and beginning of construction on that site is delayed, the greater likelihood of incurring these expenses. Replacement of the turf fields is paramount, and the district may also have to shoulder some of these costs in the near future. Collectively, the district's potential expenditures from the reserve fund exceed the \$3.4 million currently available. There is a history of budget savings each year which is added to the Reserves in the Excess and Deficiency category, the total is usually about \$200K per year.
- Operational Budget Reductions – Aligning budget to town meeting approved funding levels. MERSD Budget up to \$29,750,180 was approved

at both Essex & Manchester Town Meetings. MERSD Budget override of \$295K failed at the ballot in Essex. The district cannot divide expenses between the communities and must create a budget that, after apportionment, yields a savings to Essex of \$295K. This equates to \$781K in reductions from the total budget for the Town of Essex to fund its portion of the budget. Manchester did not require an override to fund the FY24 assessment.

- Options and Decisions Discussion – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the goal was to trim the budget by \$781K with the least impact to students. However, the budget is at the point where that is very difficult. In addition, the revised budget does not bear the recommendation of MERSD district administration. The superintendent stated that the budget presented previously represented previous cuts to spending and represented a META contract in-line with previous town partner requests. The revised budget is a response to the ballot failure in Essex of the budget override. The revised budget does not support the district's strategic plans, limits opportunities for students, and does not set the district up well for the future. Each subsequent year, deeper cuts will be required if the district is being asked to keep the Essex apportionment to 2.5%. In addition, these policies hurt the ability of MERSD to recruit and retain quality staff. Hiring for next year is already behind because the district is in a holding pattern from the budget. We are showing a pattern of releasing new teachers who should be recognized as the path forward for the district. The timeframe for holding town meetings necessitates that the district may not have a budget until late July. However, any cuts being discussed now would need to take affect as of June 15. This overlap would necessitate hiring in mid-August in areas that are hard to fill and in fractional positions that are nearly impossible to make attractive. Superintendent Beaudoin also stated that this approach to the budget does not set us on a course to re-invest and innovate in our schools. MERSD has worked over the last several years to save money by increasing efficiencies. Last year, the math and reading specialists went through a restructuring, making them district-wide employees. For FY23, the district had hoped to reorganize the music program to create, without additional expense, an Arts Director. The cuts being proposed limit the ability of the district to try new programs such as these. Superintendent Beaudoin described the revised budget as setting the district on a course of decline.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the MERSD FY 24 Operational Budget Revision cuts presented are data driven, seek to make reductions in areas that impact the fewest number of students and families, and work to preserve junior/senior elective options using a phase out approach. The previous FY24 included the elimination of four FTE teachers. The revised budget brings that number to 11.65. In addition, the district would not seek funding for reinstatement of the grade six Spanish program, the late bus to Essex, a parity increase to non-META employee salaries, and reduction of the small cap line. While there would also be some health insurance

savings based on the layoffs, there would also be a one year cost in unemployment.

Educational and Program Implications: Superintendent Beaudoin said that 69% of the sections with enrollment under ten students were eliminated or combined. The cuts include a phased elimination of the French program. French would no longer be offered in grades 7-9. There would be a two-year phase out of grade 11/12 electives with multi-level combination. There will be a significant reduction of STEM and sustainability course offerings, including Green Team and Environmental Science. The K-12 music restructuring would include a reduction in chorus/band frequency, larger group instrumental instruction, reduction of the elementary band/chorus to one group, and deferment of the proposed creation of position for Performing Arts Coordinator. At the middle school, these cuts would mean a reduction in the physical education and health classes from 60-30 per year and an increase in the class size of middle school exploratory classes (art, music, PE, STEM, etc.) from 20-30 pupils.

There are procedural questions about the path forward with different scenarios on what the School Committee chooses to do going forward. On the current agenda is retention of special counsel for municipal finance. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that our current counsel specializes in Labor and School Law. Questions include whether an adjusted budget could be presented to the towns, accepted because it does not require an override vote, and then take effect after a 45 day period. The district asked for a referral to appropriate counsel.

An additional issue looming before the district is that June 15 is the statutory deadline for layoffs. All employees impacted by the revised budget would need to be notified by then.

- Next Steps – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district has some work to do for research and process including verification of the statutory requirements and steps for the town approval process. In addition, the district must prepare for not meeting the DESE 6/30/23 deadline for budget adoption. The district may need to implement a one month budget, with oversight from DESE and the state. Upcoming dates:
  - May 23, 2023 – public budget hearing
  - June 6, 2023 – SC meets to deliberate and adopt a reconsidered, final budget
  - June 7, 2023 – MERSD submits the Reconsidered Budget to both Towns

Clarifying Questions – Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked how many students will be impacted by the proposed cuts. Principal Puglisi stated that the schedule was built between March and April. Guidance has met with all students, and schedules are currently full. However, schedules have an inherent aspect of fluidity as student needs change. Currently, 70 students would be impacted by

the proposed cuts. Principal Puglisi clarified that there would still be chorus and band, but confirmed that the sections would be twice as large. Mr. Harrington asked what would be said to staff at the June 15 meeting. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district held a preliminary meeting open to all staff earlier in the day to present a top-level version of these scenarios. Those affected by the cuts will have meetings with their principals on June 15 to receive their layoff letters. Potentially, they could be recalled if a budget solution is reached. Ms. Mitchell noticed and corrected a couple errors in presented figures. All totals presented were accurate. Ms. Spencer asked if the high school math department reductions involve two separate teachers. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there are two slated from the math category. However some staff split time between math and science courses, so we cannot say for sure that the cut employees will be from the math department. Ms. Spencer asked how likely it will be to re-hire laid off staff. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she is not confident that those employees would be available, and she is even less confident that there will be qualified people available to fill the high-skilled positions should funds be available after the layoffs. Mr. Foster questioned how this process would be different if the budget was about strategic plan priorities and not enrollment numbers. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she would need to think through those implications. It would require looking at the core classes and considering the impact to the elementary program. The superintendent said that the original budget best supported the Strategic Plan and that she does not see a way to make cuts without undermining the Strategic Plan. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about the average class size in the district. The superintendent said it would be 18 across all grades. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the revised budget proposal feels drastic and asked why it is not a compromise. She said that the revised budget does not require an override, but asked if Essex would vote down an override of less money. Ms. Sundquist asked why the override is eliminated completely. Superintendent Beaudoin said that eliminating an override vote gives the district some control of the current situation since no further vote is required. Taking the budget all the way down accepts the outcome and can allow the towns to wait out the 45 days and proceed. There is a dramatic level of disruption to the district if the process is dragged out the full 60 days related to multiple town votes, and the outcome is by no means guaranteed. The administration went into this budget year with the belief that they had partnered with town representatives to craft a palatable budget and would have support for an override. That did not materialize.

Discussion: Ms. Whitman invited SC members to speak less formally. Ms. Spencer began by thanking the students who presented and reminding the SC that we are at a unique point in history, coming out of a pandemic that resulted in real challenges to learning. Ms. Spencer was deeply troubled to be looking at deep cuts and stressed the importance of bringing the discussion back to the kids. She said the comments at Essex town meeting likening the program at MERSD to “filet mignon” was not accurate. There are some good things happening in the district, but we have also been working to correct challenges, particularly in the math department. New staff worked to correct the situation. Ms. Spencer feared that those contributors will be lost to the cuts. Ms. Spencer pointed out that any program is about attracting and retaining quality people. Ms. Mitchell said she was glad the high school presented tonight. She challenged the School Committee to do better regarding communication around the budget planning process. Ms. Mitchell said the SC should be more open and that it cannot continue as currently. She stressed that Manchester is in a relationship with the Town of Essex and stated that she does not believe they do not support education. Ms. Mitchell said there is mistrust in the community for the budget process. Ms. Mitchell described four budget scenarios: 1) Make no change to the

proposed budget and wait it out – but even successfully passing the budget would have consequences in the relationship with the Essex and might generate additional problems next year; 2) Cut the full amount and ask the towns to pay for the fields; 3) A happy medium using reserves to decrease the amount of the requested override; 4) Recommend funding of the \$780K from both the towns and the district reserves to fund the fields. Ms. Mitchell suggested that the district could build back better and the towns would not have to pay capital expenses that are coming. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked what would happen next year when the district needs a double override. Ms. Whitman said there are some assumptions of which the SC needs to be aware. There has been a breakdown in communication between the district and town partners, and the decline in trust goes both ways. In past years, the collaboration group would meet, report back to their respective committees, and there were no surprises. That process has ceased. Ms. Whitman stressed that the SC cannot assume Essex will support field funding. She said she does not believe the towns would want to give their reserves and was not comfortable relying upon town support for the vote before the SC. Ms. Whitman pointed out that Essex is asking what a 2.5% to Essex would look like, and that figure requires another \$915K reduction for next year. Ms. Whitman said that her question is whether that kind of reduction is what Essex truly wants and will support. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district cannot deliver a 2.5% to Essex without impacting the program substantially. Ms. Whitman asked about a scenario where staff doesn't receive layoff notices, and the superintendent said that is not possible. However, the superintendent said that with enough support for acceptance of a budget plan without staffing cuts, the conversation with staff about the probability of being asked back would be different. Ms. Koch-Sundquist remarked that in the position of staff, she would be looking for a new job. Superintendent Beaudoin remarked that this is the fourth year of cuts and program reorganization. Mr. Foster stated that there are no good options time-wise, and the SC should therefore put that consideration aside and act in the best interests of the students. He agreed with Ms. Mitchell that either extreme is unpalatable. Mr. Foster urged finding a middle ground. Mr. Foster stated his dislike for approaching the cuts by the numbers and said he would prefer to use the Strategic plan as a driver. Mr. Foster was concerned about cutting newer courses that have not had time to grow yet. Ms. Koch-Sundquist reminded the SC of the requirements of the teacher contract for seniority. Mr. Foster urged creative solutions to maintain student offerings and stressed that the SC should find a compromised middle position to minimize the impact to the students. Mr. Foster pointed to the student presentation and said that there have not been many previous examples of our district program before this. However, the evening's presentations were mostly extra-curricular. Mr. Foster stated that he still does not fully understand what the core program is. Mr. Harrington stated that we have open meetings and posted recordings to inform the community. He described Town Meeting as a little more collaborative. Mr. Harrington stated that he does not like the single narrative that voters have spoken. Mr. Foster stated that the flip side of this discussion is the town budgets and what the towns have not been able to do because of the needs of the school district. Ms. Whitman stated that even if the district presents a budget that passes this year, the district will run up against the growth problem in ensuing years. Ms. Whitman said that she would like to hear what the town is doing to increase revenue.

Mr. Urbas briefed the SC on the FY25 gap, speaking to the point that the SC needs clarity from both communities on what they want.: The budget revision sets us on a course of decline. Assuming we grow at an average of 3-4% annually we begin the FY25 budget process estimating that we will need to reduce the budget by approximately \$915K to meet current

expectations of a 2.5% apportioned increase to Essex. The deficit has three components – 30% of the \$915K is a reduction required to get to 3.5% total growth for next year. To get the Town of Essex to 3.5% growth, another 42% of the total \$915K reduction is required. To bring it down to 2.5% requires the remaining 25% of the \$915K.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for insight into examples of what could be accomplished with a creative approach to funding. Ms. Mitchell said that she would look at the cost per student. She would also pursue creative ways to create programs. She would also advocate for both towns moving their reserves to the school district. Ms. Spencer clarified that this would be asking the town to fund things the district cannot and the town would be using reserves toward the operational budget. Ms. Whitman cautioned against planning on that support. Ms. Spencer acknowledged the appeal of this approach but asked how next year's budget challenge would be met. Ms. Mitchell conceded that she does not know. Mr. Foster asked for clarification about the path to the public meeting. He advocated for developing a middle ground solution for the public meeting and stated that he is not comfortable going to that meeting with only the two extremes as options. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the SC could provide many iterations and none of them would appeal to everyone. The superintendent said that the revised budget is the best approach and impacts the program as minimally as possible. Mr. Foster asked if there are steps and possible scenarios with less impact. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the SC's job is to direct the administration to cut a specified amount. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that this dramatic cut still just kicks the budget issue down the road. Mr. Reed said that he is averse to guessing what people might want and stressed the need to make a decision and send it sooner for approval. He stated that guessing about what may pass is just repeating the same mistake. Ms. Mitchell said that the SC would have more time to address the issue next year. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed frustration that the town partners have not come forward to provide a number behind which they would lend full support. SC members not privy to the conversation of the collaboration meetings expressed frustration with not understanding what expectations and messaging are from the community partners. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the current message is to reduce the scope of the district to fit 2.5% model for Essex. Mr. Reed stated that the delivery of this message is why he believes the collaboration meetings should be public from now on. Ms. Whitman stated that, by voting down the override, Essex is saying that they will pay up to the levy limit, meaning they are asking for a reduction of the full amount. Mr. Foster asked if members were saying that the revised budget is the only option open to the SC. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that may be the case until town leaders provide a number they will support fully. She said that there are no more program efficiencies. The only place left to cut is facilities. Ms. Koch-Sundquist emphasized that she supports a new elementary school for Essex. Mr. Reed said that efficiency would be moving Essex Elementary students to Manchester. Ms. Whitman stressed the need for renewed town input from Essex about what they support, particularly as the towns speak about waiting for the super town meeting as a solution. Mr. Foster asked if the SC was considering voting on the revised cuts versus articulating other alternatives. Ms. Whitman said that they had done so already. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the failed ballot measure in Essex is the input from the town of Essex. As a representative from that town, she feels compelled to follow that input, although she does not think it is prudent. Mr. Foster emphasized that, regardless of the timeline, he feels that the SC has an opportunity and a responsibility to reconsider the options and figure out how to do something in between. Ms. Spencer stated that she is hearing from many Manchester residents that they do not want the SC to consider the revised budget and its deep cuts. Manchester residents supported the budget and field funding

overwhelmingly. Ms. Spencer asked if there were any part of the proposed cuts that could be seen in a positive light. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the restructure of the music program falls within a perceived opportunity to reorganize and create a richer capacity. However, none of the cuts being considered puts the district in a positive position. Going forward, considerable energy will be devoted to managing resources in a declining environment. A high amount of time has been required this year to address the budget process and that limits the administration's opportunities for innovating. Mr. Foster advocated for figuring out how to work differently so that the end of the budget process does not require cuts and prevent innovation. Ms. Mitchell advocated for increased planning and advised cutting this year and using reserves. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district's action or inaction is not the major force at play. Bringing the growth of the district down to 1% would require steep cuts to the program no matter how creative the approach. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked how much of the athletics program is covered by user fees. Mr. Urbas stated that approximately 55% of the athletics budget is paid by the district and 45% is paid through user fees. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that it could be seen as unfair to talk about cutting language and the arts without discussing the athletics expenses. Mr. Foster expressed that he is advocating for exactly that kind of strategic thinking. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that 70% of students participate in a sport. In addition, the district does not charge a user fee for the arts. The superintendent also took the opportunity to say that small class sizes are not an oversight. They are a conscious investment in a program. Ms. Whitman reminded the SC members that the administration decides where to make cuts after the SC instructs them what that number should be. Ms. Whitman asked what dollar amount the SC wants to discuss as a middle ground. Ms. Mitchell recommended not cutting core program components and suggested cutting the smaller items. Ms. Spencer emphasized that next year will have us in an even worse position. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that it is irresponsible to use any amount of the reserve funds. Mr. Harrington suggested that perhaps the cuts were not yet drastic enough to underline the dire nature of the district's situation. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the district is putting teachers on notice and they are the district's greatest asset. Ms. Whitman asked if there was a scenario that could solve the immediate issue and prevent the SC from being in this position next year. Mr. Urbas said that there are two problems facing the district – a “this year problem” and a multiyear problem. Mr. Reed stated that the reserves will also be gone next year. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that there has not been an operational override in the Town of Essex since 2005. Mr. Reed stated that the change to apportionment has been the biggest issue for Essex. However, the SC and district cannot control the amount of students coming from Essex. Mr. Harrington asked whether passage of a budget at the “super” town meeting would force Essex to adopt the budget. Ms. Whitman stated that legal counsel is needed to better understand that issue. Mr. Reed stated that the district does not ask for overrides, but rather for a correction. The towns decide. Ms. Mitchell pointed out that with a forced passage at town meeting the relationships between the two towns would be damaged. The SC needs to think about what to do for next year. Ms. Whitman stated that she would like to know what option the Essex boards will throw their support behind. Ms. Spencer stated that she would also like to hear from the Town of Essex so that the SC can better approach the question before them. Ms. Mitchell asked if the SC could request another meeting with the Essex Fin Comm. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the SC has had meetings prior to this with the Fin Comm. The Fin Comm. voted to support the prior budget, and there were signs that members then worked to undermine that budget. Superintendent Beaudoin asked that, before the next meeting, the members give thought to where they stand on the budget and how to move forward. She stated that there is value to putting this year to rest. That could be achieved through use of the reserves. In line with

Ms. Spencer, the superintendent did not see the success of going into next year with a double override ask. Superintendent Beaudoin said the SC could plan for a commission to look at the regional agreement and could retool the collaboration team to be a publicly appointed board that meets with a public meetings. In revisiting reserves, the superintendent reminded the SC of previous conversations where the reserves were offered as a bridge to when a correction could be pursued. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this has been a multi-year conversation about when to seek a correction. The strategy for approaching this budget year was planned well in advance but not followed. The district needs a decision on where to go from here.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve engagement of special counsel for municipal finance to advise the district on the current situation. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Mr. Urbas stated that rate is about \$400 per hour.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

Ms. Whitman asked for final comments from School Committee members. Ms. Mitchell stated that cutting the entire deficit and eliminating the need for correction will not change the strained relationship between the two towns. She said that using the reserves would buy time to fix the core issues. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the core issues have existed since regionalization. Ms. Spencer said that the administration is trying to communicate that they have been actively working on these issues, and that there are historical perspectives to consider. The superintendent said that an increase in enrollment in MBTS would change apportionment and enrollment tends to be cyclical. The superintendent said that previously the district had a reputation of not taking care of our buildings. Currently, the capital budget is focused on taking care of the new buildings. Drawing down the reserves will cripple the ability to manage capital assets. The superintendent said it would be foolhardy to rely on a town meeting each time the district needs to address a problem. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that there is a devastating question at the root of the problem and suggested that if the Town of Essex can only afford yearly growth of 2.5% Manchester may not want to be a part of that program. Mr. Foster said that he wants to stay optimistic and believes the SC is responsible for finding a path forward. He expressed discomfort and disappointment with the all-or-nothing option. Ms. Whitman emphasized the importance of hearing from her town leaders in Essex in order to make an informed decision. Ms. Whitman said the next meeting at which the SC will take a vote on the budget is scheduled for June 6, 2023 and invited SC members to present another solution for deliberation. There was discussion on the benefits of scheduling an additional, earlier SC meeting, giving towns an additional week for calling special towns meeting. Mr. Reed expressed concern over suggestions that communicating possible budget cuts at the beginning of the school year. He cited the impact on the moral of affected staff and the likelihood that they would leave the district. Superintendent Beaudoin reiterated that we do not have an approved budget. The two towns have thus far only approved funding within Prop 2.5 limits. Unless the budget is amended to the levels passed at the town meetings, it will need to go back to town meetings for a full reconsideration of the budget. If the district goes into July on a 1/12 month-to-month budget that would be level-funding. The SC did not pursue adding an additional SC meeting.

- 8) **School Committee Comment** – Ms. Whitman asked if the current recording can be uploaded ASAP to the school website so that the community could respond. In addition, Ms. Whitman acknowledged that this is the last meeting for outgoing School Committee member Matt Harrington and thanked Mr. Harrington for being a voice for student needs. Mr. Harrington shared his experience moving from New York City where there was little input into town and school governance. He wanted to have a voice and support caring for those who care for our students. In closing, Mr. Harrington stated that, with two young children entering the school system, he could be back!

9) **Adjourn**

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

*Meeting Adjourned at 10:30 pm*

**School Committee Future Meetings**

- May 23, 2023 – public budget hearing
- June 6, 2023