



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

*May 23, 2023*

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	May 23, 2023
<b>Location:</b>	MERMHS Cafeteria
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Lin Mitchell Chris Reed Erica Spencer
<b>Absent:</b>	
<b>Guests:</b>	
<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 5:34 p.m.

- 1) Student Report** – none
- 2) Chairman's Report** – none
- 3) Consent Agenda** – none

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#### **4) Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman) – 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) –Report

- 1) Superintendent's Report** - Superintendent Beaudoin reported that there are many considerations regarding the delayed finalization of the MERSD operational budget for FY24, including budget considerations, timelines, and legal obligations. The district has a deadline for notification of staff layoffs and has a state imposed deadline for budget submission. It is unlikely the district will have a budget timeline to facilitate either of those. At the last SC meeting, approval was granted for retention of counsel to advise on municipal finance law. Administration executed the agreement and counsel will brief the SC at the June 6, 2023 meeting. On advice of counsel, it looks to be in the district's best interest to have two town meetings to approve the budget. In 2012, there was a similar scenario where the district was able to cut the budget down to a level that did not require an override, both towns communicated acceptance and waited out the 45 day period. Currently, the climate is different this time, and the recommendation is to encourage the towns to proceed. Ultimately they will decide on funding. Counsel also indicated that if the process requires a joint town meeting any decisions reached there would be binding and would not require an additional vote for that budget to be active. However, each town would have to pursue their own options for funding. The action would force the budget.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for clarity on the process for sending a revised budget back to the towns and whether it would require a ballot measure following the town meeting. Superintendent said it could be an option for them if they decided to pursue funding through an override. The towns could also choose to reduce their own operating budget to contribute funds or consider using their own reserves. The decision would be up to them. Ms. Whitman stated that strategy-wise, it impacted the SC's consideration of the budget. Ms. Mitchell asked if Essex would also be asked to fund their portion of the turf field replacement at the same Town Meeting. Superintendent Beaudoin said that is potentially the case. However, the district has received a lot of input on the presented 5/16 budget and has an additional compromise proposal to present this evening. The superintendent hopes for feedback on that as well from community members and town partners. With more time, it would have been possible to have an additional budget hearing on the compromise proposal, but there is a time crunch with the end of the year coming. The compromise budget does include a proposal for the fields, which the superintendent plans to outline. Ms. Spencer asked for clarification that any budget passed via a joint town meeting would force the Town of Essex to fund the budget. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that is her understanding,

but increased clarity will come from the June 6, 2023 meeting with counsel in attendance.

Mr. Urbas stated that the March 7 presentation on field replacement included information from bond counsel regarding statutory general law requirements and how they impact authorization. The Town of Essex has since sought special counsel and received an opinion that the district is required to adhere to the provision of the regional agreement that says both towns have to vote. However, this could be viewed as in conflict with the Mass general law stipulation that the school committee approves, and parents have the right, but not the obligation, to vote. If parents do not vote, it becomes effective after 60 days. District counsel believes MERSD has met the statutory obligation. Though this could be perceived as in conflict with the regional agreement, the law generally takes precedence. Consequently, it appears that the district has the ability to borrow for the field replacements but still has to consider the political issue of the disagreement with Essex on this course of action. Ms. Whitman clarified that the Board of Selectman in Essex has retained their own counsel and that counsel has a differing opinion. The district had advice from two sources who were in agreement. Ms. Mitchell clarified that, funding aside, Highland Field work will begin as soon as school ends while Brook Street field work awaits the resolution of the current dispute. Mr. Urbas agreed. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the direction the budget goes, and its use of reserve funds, will be important considerations before determining the start of work on the Brook Street field.

Ms. Mitchell asked if the SC could review the compromise budget and said that it would be helpful to have a group discussion before the beginning of the public hearing. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that both of the budgets are templates from which to work and respond to the question of whether the district is addressing enrollment. The administration went into the budget conscious of the need to reduce staffing to meet enrollment. Since FY2019, the district has reduced positions annually, eliminating or consolidating positions. This year, there was considerable concern from the community about small class sizes at the high school, particularly those under ten students. The district attempted to communicate that small class sizes are often an intentional carry to provide access and opportunity to starting course and high-end electives like AP. There was marked feedback that this was not an accurate portrayal. The district took this feedback to heart with the failure of the override in Essex. The proposed cuts were chosen by the high school principal in response to the allegation that the small class sizes should be addressed. Since the revised budget was presented, the district has received very strong input from the community that this is a feature that community members value and wish to invest in. As the district looks at a need to cut the budget annually, the revised budget is a glimpse of what it would look like to have class size requirements. It also illustrates how, during cuts, the elective, non-required courses are the first to be eliminated.

Ms. Mitchell noted that the May 16 budget revision was much more drastic than the compromise version being presented currently and does not seem to involve much programmatic change to students. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that there is change, particularly in larger class sizes, but they think that it is manageable. The two budgets

are structured very differently, with the compromise budget employing a sizeable amount of reserves to fund the gap. This will seem like a solution in the short term, but sets us on course next year to be \$915K short, unless there is a commitment to investing and a resolution to the apportionment issue. Everything currently up for cuts will be back on the table.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that these issues are of general interest and should be explored in the public hearing.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to recess until 6:00 pm. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed unanimously. Recess at 5:52 pm*

- 2) **Public Hearing** – Ms. Whitman called the meeting back into session at 6:05pm. Ms. Whitman clarified that the regular comment time limit is suspended for the public hearings, but urged attendees to consider all those waiting to speak. Priority for speaking was given to those in attendance before remote viewers. Unlike regular meetings, speakers are able to engage in two way conversation with the School Committee. School Committee members provide their own comment at the end of the session. Ms. Whitman emphasized that all viewpoints would be welcomed.

- Presentation of Reconsidered Budget for 2023 – 2024: Superintendent Beaudoin expressed gratitude for the large amount of input from community members. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the 3/21/23 budget was presented following the conclusion of META negotiations and with updated health insurance numbers. It attempted to manage the use of reserves as revenue and to fulfill the work of the district's Strategic Plan. In addition, the budget was structured to manage decreasing enrollment by reducing staffing by 4 FTE. This budget required a correction by both communities. Input from town partners in Essex expressed concern about class size, especially in elective programs. The override did not pass in the Town of Essex.

The 5/16/23 budget is four years in the making and represents a difference in opinion about where to invest. It makes cuts to the program necessary to reduce the bill to Essex. This requires working backwards through apportionment and yielding a deficit of \$781K. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this would require the district to cut many programs that they do not want to cut. Assessment to each town equals district spending minus income, including state and grant funding. For the past three years, the district has used reserve funds as a source of revenue, and that kept the assessment low. Due to shifting enrollment patterns (i.e. Manchester is currently experiencing a drop in enrollment), Essex has seen an increase in their apportionment percentage. The district had engaged in an ongoing discussion with town partners over the last three years about this situation and attempted to seek a correction which did not pass. The 5/16/23 budget is not a budget that positions the district for future success. It feels drastic, but signals the view of what is to come each successive year that the district's funding problem is not addressed. Mr. Urbas stated that prior input from the towns of

Manchester and Essex was to keep yearly growth to 3.5%. The district met that request, with an average increase over the last three years of less than the requested percentage. The apportionment percentage is outlined in the regional agreement and beyond the control of MERSD. Looking forward, in order to reduce the MERSD budget to keep Essex's apportionment growth to 2.5% would incur a deficit of \$915K for next fiscal year. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the 5/16/23 budget cuts \$780,894 and eliminates every opportunity the district has to reinvest in itself while impacting the music, language, and health and wellness programs. Superintendent Beaudoin concluded that this cycle is not good for kids.

Superintendent Beaudoin introduced the FY24 5/23/23 compromise budget by stating that it kicks the can down the road another year. The district would again contribute reserve funds to offset the assessment to the towns. The district would be unable to pursue some program improvements, including the creation of an Arts Coordinator. Tied to this compromise is a district stipulation that Essex would be asked to support finance of the turf field replacement and participate in facilitated mediation to reconcile what the district maintains are structural financing problems.

- Public Comment: Ms. Whitman opened the floor to public comment and invited any town boards in attendance to call themselves into session if they have a quorum.

Ms. Kathleen Chrzanowski, 21 Harold Street, Manchester introduced a group of students who presented the School Committee with poster boards containing their message:

Mary Annabel Chrzanowski  
Martha Davis  
Annabel Smith  
Owen O'Leary  
Anna O'Leary  
Maddie Machain  
Nathan Kelleher  
Charlie Weld  
Sylvie Oldemann  
Ava Rizzico  
Alec Rizzico  
Sammy Rizzico  
Adrian Keuhnemund  
Saskia Keuhnemund  
Garrison Bradford  
Josh Cohen  
Frankie Villa French  
Clarinda Bradford  
Luke Chrzanowski

Nate Clements  
Rhys Woulfe  
Kate Costello  
Luke Donahoe  
Cecilia Donahoe  
James Donahoe  
Clara Donahoe  
Caroline Chrzanowski  
Thomas Chrzanowski  
Nate Chamberlain  
Calvin Lee  
Scarlett Lee  
Asa Beardsley  
Mario Zanetti  
Clara Grant  
Zoë Coshov  
Chloé Lilly  
Kit Carpenter  
Sebastian Ochs

Gregory Ochs  
Devin Peavey  
William Mondello  
Olivia Gado  
Riley McKinnon  
Lila Carpenter  
Isaac Starr Collins  
Maggie Whitman  
Cate Vendt

Sean Vendt  
Anne Stevens  
Henry Stevens  
Kate Bappe  
Charlie Langendorf  
Benjamin Langendorf  
Peter Langendorf  
Joanna Shan

Ms. Whitman recognized town boards to call into session:

Manchester Select Board call to order at 6:41 pm. Roll call vote: Brian Sollosy; Catherine Bilotta; Anne Harrison; and Becky Jacques.

Manchester Finance Committee call to order at 6:42 pm. Roll call: Sarah Mellish, Andy Oldeman, Albert Mory Creighton, Dean Nahatis.

Essex Board of Selectmen call to order by Ruth Pereen at 6:42 pm. Ms. Whitman stated that it is customary to ask town boards to make comments first.

Sarah Mellish, Manchester Finance Committee, stated that the Manchester Finance Committee and the Manchester Select Board met jointly prior to the School Committee Public Hearing to craft a joint recommendation to the SC. Together, the boards recognize that the school district represents its own entity. The boards expressed discomfort with reducing the budget to the its lowest level in the 5/16/23 budget. They are also uncomfortable accepting the original 3/21/23 budget and possibly pushing it to a joint town meeting and believe that should be avoided at all costs. They expressed support for a budget in between and hoped that there would be a good faith effort made to consider reductions. Ms. Mellish suggested the district look at making cuts to the athletics program and not only to STEM and the arts. In addition, the boards recommended looking at the administrative budget including COLA adjustments, staffing, and applying school choice revenue to the operating budget retroactively and going forward. They suggested looking at revenue streams and taking the opportunity to increase fees. In addition, the boards believe that the current level of reserves is not necessary to maintain the bond rating and its impact on the interest rate. This rate is heavily impacted by the ratings of the two towns since they are the ones paying the budget.

Ms. Whitman stated that teachers and staff, although not necessarily residents, are allowed to speak. All speakers were instructed to share their name and address before speaking.

Bruce Shaw, 7 Lufkin Point Lane, Essex: Mr. Shaw stated that he is fully in support of an override. He is on a fixed income and pays very high taxes. Mr. Shaw is also a life-long educator. He stated that he believes it is our job as citizens to support the future and to ignite desire to learn in kids. Mr. Shaw said that as parents and grandparents, it is our job to make sure that kids can succeed. Mr. Shaw stated that he would rather make cut back on his own end than know that he voted against kids' future.

Michelle Magana, 19 Dodge Street, Gloucester: Ms. Magana is the high school foreign language chair. Ms. Magana stated that the elementary language program was eliminated last year due to the budget and faces cuts again. She stated that the teachers have not failed the budget, the budget has failed the teachers. In 1997, the elementary language program was introduced with students starting French and Spanish in kindergarten. In 2007, one third of students in grades 6, 7, and 8 were enrolled in French, guaranteeing the success of the high school program. AP numbers and scores went up. The 2010 budget cut elementary French to only a short introductory lesson at the end of eighth grade. Enrollment in French began to decline since students had only taken Spanish and did not want to start over with a new language. The 2020 Covid-closure did not include French instruction, to the detriment of the program. Due to these cuts, the program has had seven part-time French teachers. It is extremely difficult to retain qualified staff when you can only offer them part time employment on a rotating schedule. These teachers work tirelessly to engage students with authentic resources and cultural experiences. Ms. Magana asked how we could ask our highly qualified and experienced teachers to remain in the district for the next three years to watch the program die out. It is much more than the French students who will be impacted by the cuts. These teachers contribute to the culture of the entire school. Ms. Coshow started the French club and created the first French-language newspaper for the school. She is also planning a trip for students next year. Ms. Fortunato is the advisor for the highly successful Robotics team and student council. These cuts are also not performance based. The thirteen students who took the French AAPPL last year qualified at a level allowing them to teach at the school level. MERHS is one of the few high schools that regularly awards the French seal of bi-literacy. Elimination of the middle school program will prevent students from achieving proficiency by their senior year, limit their ability to enroll in an AP course, and limit their ability to choose. The world language department is offering students a rigorous and engaging language program and the budget is constantly failing our program and students. Ms. Magana asked that the community fight for the program and request a second vote.

Charlie Weld, 15 School Street, Manchester: Ms. Weld is a recent graduate of MERHS and currently a student at Berklee College of Music, with two other graduates from her grade. She likened this accomplishment to “playing D1 music.” Ms. Weld challenged those present to consider their lifelong experience with music – listening on the radio or attending a concert and to appreciate the art that they enjoyed. Ms. Weld emphasized that everyone producing music had to be taught. She received her music education through the schools. She said that cutting the arts risks erasing a generation of artists. Ms. Weld encouraged the community to continue to invest in artists because they repay the investment a hundred times.

Doris-Ann Vosseler, 15 Mount Vernon Street, Salem: Ms. Vosseler is a teacher at MERHS in both Spanish and French and stated that, in reviewing the Vision of the Graduate outlined in the MERSD Strategic Plan, she was struck by the emphasis on the understanding and acceptance of different cultures as well as the importance for our graduates to acknowledge and respect the diversity of others. These themes of cultural competence and the ability respect and critically think about multiple perspectives are repeated in almost every section of the Vision of the Graduate. The first section is entitled, “empathetic global citizen.” With opportunities for our students to learn multiple languages, our students enter into knowledge of a larger variety of different cultures and beliefs. French is the official language in 29 countries of the world. Why take away a language that is an entrance into intercultural perspectives when it is the first thing proposed in the Vision. Ms. Vosseler stated that her acceptance of the position at MERHS was

due in large part to the reputation of MERSD for hosting a strong language program. At that time, both French and Spanish were taught in K-12. Students are able to take both languages, right up through the AP test. Ms. Vosseler mentioned the district's DEI coach who promotes having faculty identify strategies to make curriculum more inclusive of diverse perspectives, coaches staff on creating a framework for cross cultural alliances, and promotes cross-cultural competencies in our district. This coach called the language department critical to this work because they constantly teach culture, using authentic material from diverse countries. Ms. Vosseler said it would be a tragedy to take away another component of the strong language program and that our students deserve better. She urged the community to consider the cultural opportunities lost to our students if the French program is eliminated.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester: Ms. Banks stated her support for the original budget and called on the SC and all town leaders to resolve the budget with minimum impact on students. Ms. Banks said that this situation is the result of a majority vote against the override and cited the low voter turnout for the vote. Ms. Banks asked the SC to speak to what they would need to see from residents from both towns in order to move forward with no cuts or as minimal as possible. Ms. Whitman stated that she is reserving decision until the last minute as she is continuing to take input from the community and town board members. This includes feedback on the newly proposed compromise budget. However, Ms. Whitman stated that it would take an overwhelming ask from the community and the support of the town boards for confidence in that path. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that it is a very hard question to commit to at this point. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she is seeking guidance in the form of community comments as to the will of the townspeople for investing and carrying forward with small class sizes.

Caroline Coshow, 84 Old Essex Road, Manchester: Ms. Coshow, a French teacher at MERHS, reminded those present that MERSD is a top district in the state, to which other district look, wondering how we have done it. In her previous district, she was challenged to determine how to compete with MERSD. However, Ms. Coshow said that it simply comes down to the districts programs and class size. She said that education is the foundation of society and the key to our future. It is through education that we shape leaders, innovators, and responsible citizens. It creates a well-educated work force. Ms. Coshow stated that accepting the proposed cuts budget, would compromise the future of our students and the long term success and prosperity of both towns. The privilege of accepting a good education is too rare in the world, even in the US, but here we can give this gift. Ms. Coshow stressed that these teachers connect with students all day in many ways. Their loss will diminish the quality of the experience with large class sizes. Ms. Coshow asked if the SC wanted students treated as part of a machine, to have the arts and language programs vanish. She spoke of the students as her colleagues in education and thanked them for their role in the program.

Sarah Stone, 69 Pleasant Street, Manchester: Ms. Stone spoke as a parent and public school educator. She stated that she has tried hard to be empathetic to Essex residents who voted against the school budget for the reason that they are frustrated about the state of the Essex Elementary school building. She stressed the importance of seeing the operation budget of the district as separate from the building project that will apply for state funding. She cautioned against holding student education hostage, especially for a group that has been and continues to be impacted by the effects of Covid, particularly in the area of literacy and teen mental health. Ms. Stone said it is irresponsible and immoral to consider cutting a school budget in this climate, including the



proposed loss of a reading interventionist. Ms. Stone asked the SC not to support the proposed budget cuts. Ms. Stone pointed out that it is difficult to find qualified educators right now, and it is not for sure that we will be able to rehire the teachers we lose or attract qualified applicants, and asked about the probability of staff returning. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she is very concerned about the district's ability to recruit and retain high quality educators. The district is obligated to notify staff of layoffs by June 15. The superintendent expressed the hope that she would have a positive message to share with them at that time, but she does not currently have the clarity to tell these staff members where things are likely to be in a month. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that, because hiring was frozen pending resolution of the budget process, the district is currently two to three months behind in hiring for next school year. Although the district was fortunate to come through the Covid crisis with strong staffing, the superintendent is concerned going forward, not only for teachers but for the two new administrators starting for next year. Those are critical positions. When speaking about mental health, they are frontline, as they are for building safety. Administrators are key managers of the building and oversee evaluation, supervision, students activities management and the general well-being of kids. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that our district is structured administratively similarly to other districts, and she expressed concern that these cycles are putting the district at great disadvantage. Ms. Stone responded that school leaders are essential for the functioning of a school building and emphasized that everyone in the building is an educator. She shared that in the recent school safety lockdown, it was the administrators at her school who made the kids feel safe and helped the teachers feel ready to make the kids feel safe.

Tamera Burns, 1 Ancient County Way, Manchester: Ms. Burns has lived in Manchester for 42 years and is a senior faculty member in the art department. Ms. Burns stated that the high performance of MERSD as a district has not been an accident but the result of staff committed to teaching students in a way that allows them to reach their full potential. Using a student-centered approach, staff have provided coursework to reach to meet the needs of all learners. As a resident, Ms. Burns expressed her appreciation for the work of the district to contribute to strong property values and to reflect the town's belief in the students and the community's future. The Vision of the Graduate reflects the skills and qualities desired for each graduate. Ms. Burns said it is essential to provide students with authentic learning, such as the arts. These courses promote essential creative risk-taking, expansion of new skill sets, and the development of students who are original thinkers and makers. Elective courses can be the high water mark in many students' day. The arts remain one of the last hands-on areas of our curriculum. Ms. Burns warned that students may begin choosing out to other districts and public schools. Ms. Burns urged community members to stand by what is right for students and not allow the district that has been built to be compromised. She urged settling the budgetary issues with students at the forefront; students are the future and the arts must be part of that future.

Finn O'Hara 8 Rockwood Heights, Manchester and Erik Bischoff 13 Skytop Drive, Manchester: Mr. O'Hara and Mr. Bischoff, both seniors at MERHS, presented their insight into the link between housing prices and school system quality with the aplomb they usually bring to their DECA competitions. The students directed their presentation to those who voted against the override because they do not have students in the school system. Citing a study from Harvard University, Mr. O'Hara relayed that for every 1% increase in a school budget home prices increase by 5.9% in that region . In addition, median housing prices have a .72 correlation to SAT scores in certain regions of Massachusetts. He concluded that an increase in school system

leads to higher home prices, and it would be wise to invest more in the school budget. Mr. Bischoff spoke to buyer perception when purchasing a home and stated that 63% of people looking to buy a home value education and school quality. That leads to the conclusion that a good school system leads to a healthier housing market. Mr. Bischoff also found a direct correlation between a strong system and a strong community, as measured through public works, infrastructure, or general appearance. Mr. Bischoff concluded that investing in the school system tends to money back into the community. Improving the school system improves the housing market which then improves the community.

Caroline Epp, 432 Essex Street, Beverly: Ms. Epp spoke to how scheduling can distort class size on paper. Ms. Epp teachers photo at MERHS. One of her classes has 26 students. However, it is a combined class of CP (college prep), and Honors students. On paper, it appears that she has one course with only five students, but that is not the case. In addition, Ms. Epp questioned the methodology of how courses are chosen for inclusion. Many students ask for the introductory course. If the schedule had been built with only demand in mind, many more students would be registered for photo. Because the schedule favors fulfillment of the AP path, there are some classes with lower enrollment to accommodate those students. Ms. Epp noted that the AP students have a 100% pass rate. Ms. Epp stated that the visual art department was cut by .4 FTE last year. It is very hard to keep a staff member there because it is a .4 position. The demand exists for expanding the program. Even at current levels, Ms. Epp teaches 38% of students. In closing, Ms. Epp stated that these cuts disproportionately affect the visual arts.

Brian Wessler, 30 Choate Street, Essex: Mr. Wessler asked for the administration to speak to the growth of the 504 program and other special education expenses and the impact of rising prices given the state mandate on services. Dr. Allison Collins, Director of Student Services and responsible for the special education budget and oversight, responded that the 504 program is not part of the expense of special education because 504 plans involve general education accommodations within the regular classroom. No additional staffing is required. Dr. Collins stated that she would have to make some estimates as she did not anticipate speaking. In her recollection, special education (SPED) funding was at around 16% of the total budget, but that was some time ago. Student Services works to contain costs while maintaining the success of the program. One of the largest drives of sped costs is out of district placement (OOD). When a student requires services that cannot be provided in district, that student is sent to another facility, for example Landmark, to receive services. Relative to other districts, we have a lower OOD because MERSD has worked to create a program within district that meets the needs of those students who would otherwise go to Landmark for school. This also allows more of our students to stay in their community. Consequently there is a lower cost per pupil by teaching them in district. Each year, the SPED begins with a zero-based budget methodology. They do not assume a start at the same level as the previous fiscal year. Staff review every student to see what is needed and adjust accordingly. Mr. Urbas confirmed Dr. Collins's assessment. He said the number of paraprofessionals/TAs shifts yearly based on the assessment of needs. Initially, the district piloted our own programs using grant monies because the state saw the value of in-house programs. Mr. Urbas said that at the last check, these programs were saving the district about \$1.8M per year. While a clear financial advantage, in-house programs also allow students to remain with their peers and be taught in their community. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the North Shore trend from 2007-2019 was a 47% rise in sped costs. The superintendent stated that the growth of special education costs, both programmatic and staffing, are outpacing the

costs of general education and creating a squeeze out. Reductions taken in general education often have to be redistributed to meet special education needs. Mr. Wessler stated that the 2022 Essex town meeting, the finance chair stated that Essex was spending about \$18K per pupil while Manchester was spending \$22K per pupil and called this a “good deal for Essex.” He asked if there is still a gap in the amount of per pupil spending between Essex and Manchester. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that they do not run those kind of numbers because the district does not differentiate between students between each town, choosing to see them as one group of students - Manchester-Essex and includes students choosing in from neighboring communities. The superintendent said that unity and coming together is an important part of how the district runs. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that there has been a breakdown in collaboration of late, and she said the district is calling for help to bring the communities back together. Superintendent Beaudoin that the district uses per pupil spending numbers from DESE. Looking at these numbers, our smallest school has the highest per pupil expenditure (PPE). There are fixed costs associated with running a building. Even though there is a perception that the high school is overspending because of some small class sizes, it is not the most expensive school to run, in terms of PPE. Mr. Wessler asked about the superintendent’s previous experience with a budget crisis like is currently being experienced. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that in North Reading they went through a period of misalignment and a multi-year cycle of reductions resulting in forced ½ days of instruction every Wednesday to reduce expenses and many eliminated programs. Superintendent Beaudoin said that while we have worked to craft a Strategic Plan for the district, we no longer know its viability with the direction we are heading financially. The superintendent said that a final aspect of the budget discussion is the destabilization of the district’s culture. The current crisis is wreaking havoc with morale, and it is hard to get people to invest in the district. Dr. Collins updated her figures: in 2008 SPED funding was 20% of the district budget. The latest figure is 23%. That rise is commensurate with fluctuations at the state level.

Keith Stefanek, 107 Holden Street, Danvers: Mr. Stefanek teaches seventh grade math at MERMS and is president of META. Mr. Stefanek spoke to the risk of losing what is unique about the district. The current juncture will define what the district values and what it will become. He asked the SC to advocate for a fully funded budget as it represents the best outcome for all voters.

Martha Davis, 48 Forester Road, Manchester: Ms. Davis is a senior at MERHS and the recipient of a Choir Director’s Award and seals of bi-literacy in both French and Spanish. She has taken every AP language class offered at MERHS. Ms. Davis spent her day presenting her SCORE project (an internship at a French language library in Boston) and performing the national anthem with the Soundwaves at a high school game. She said that she had come from a day filled with music and French to fight for both. Ms. Davis said that, as a dual language student, she has gained knowledge of many cultures that enriched her worldview. Thanks to that Spanish lit class with only five students, she was able to travel to New York City to see a play entirely in Spanish. The music program has been a rock for Ms. Davis and she described music as something that stays with you for life. Ms. Davis questioned how the district can claim to value diversity, equity, and inclusion while showing no interest in supporting students whose vision of success does not meet the traditional curriculum. She said the message is that their passions matter less.

Christine Umile, 110 Central Street, Ipswich: Ms. Umile is the STEM department chair and a science teacher at MERHS. Ms. Umile shared Carl Sagan's estimation of television networks' disinterest in science programming on TV. He was told it took too much time to educate the watchers. Dr. Sagan described this as a short-term advantage for the networks and a long-term disaster for the country. Ms. Umile said the current cuts give short-term savings but are a long-term disaster for students and the community, even without students in the system. Ms. Umile endorsed the importance of smaller class size for upper level STEM classes with more complex concepts and labs. These laboratories cultivate creativity, innovation, and inspiration. This can happen only in intimate settings where a teacher's attention is not divided into small fractions and students can thrive under their teacher's experience and guidance. Ms. Umile urged safeguarding the array of electives that have peaked student interest. Ms. Umile spoke about the loss of the newest members of the math department who have been a strong addition to the staff this year. Ms. Umile also stated that these cuts hurt the greater community, wounding the sense of pride that our towns have in our school system and damaging home values. One of the most significant measures of quality is student to teacher ratio. Maintaining a quantifiable and public metric of our school systems quality communicates to new families that their children will be cherished and that their children's education will be worth their investment. The commitment to students should be honored, even when it is not easy.

Ms. Whitman reiterated that this is an opportunity for the School Committee and town boards to hear all viewpoints and invited all to speak and share their views.

Jim McKinnon, 5 Brook Pasture Lane, Essex: Mr. McKinnon stated that his family moved to Essex because of the value of education their daughter would receive. He expressed confusion that the town would approve the override for a handful of Essex students who opted out of the district to attend Essex Tech, but not pass the school override. Mr. McKinnon stated that our students are already suffering the long-term impact of the Covid shut down. While expressed admiration for trying to keep funding for the juniors and seniors to conclude targeted programs, he said that there are younger students coming that are losing that opportunity. Mr. McKinnon asked that the SC reconsider and pass the full budget.

Gillian Polk, 8 Beasley Avenue, Somerville: Ms. Polk is a counselor at MERHS. Ms. Polk said that as the district endeavors to tie classroom learning to real world experience, the classes that we now propose to cut are a natural tie to that goal. Ms. Polk works extensively with students to help them select classes each year. She said that few freshmen are sure of what to pursue. Often, they shift their focus based on a class or connection with a teacher. Making these cuts will decrease their paths of exploration. If these cuts are made, Ms. Polk questioned how they will ever come back. She anticipated that our small school will experience fewer options in the master schedule and more conflicts for students as they try to build a schedule. Ms. Polk said that staff work to be creative, but the deficiencies will show as smaller classes are eliminated. It will become more difficult for kids to take high level classes. Ms. Polk also addressed proposed health class size increases at the middle school. She said that staff have been told to pursue avenues to support the mental health of students. The proposed cuts will take a toll on the mental health of students and of teachers in their efforts to balance the emotional needs of students with their academic needs. She said that kids need more of that support now than ever before. Under the proposed cuts, teachers would have 30 seventh graders in a health class at a time.

Elle Woulfe, 44 Forest Avenue, Essex: Ms. Woulfe stated that the proposed cuts take us quickly from being a strong district to being a mediocre one. Ms. Woulfe says that she has a daughter who struggles socially. However, she joined all the chorus and band classes and found acceptance. Ms. Woulfe said that these programs are not frivolous. On the other side of cuts are kids who will feel the pain of this loss. Ms. Woulfe said that her kindergartner has not begun to get the benefit of the programs for which her family moved here to be a part. Ms. Woulfe said that she wants to be from a town willing to invest in future generations.

Joe Janack, 230 Fells Way, Medford: Mr. Janack, band teacher for the middle and high schools, spoke to the drastic impact the proposed cuts will have on the music and performing arts programs. Mr. Janack cited the 40-plus years of dedication from this department's staff to the program. He said that they are just beginning to rebuild the program following the impact of Covid which severely hampered the music program. This was especially true at the elementary level where the foundations of the music program are built. Bouncing back was difficult, but the program is rebounding, and Mr. Janack said it would be a shame to have another force beyond their control take a toll on the program. The current "small" class sizes are the result of previous cuts and the impacts of remote learning that curtailed introducing students to the program and in-person lessons. Following these cuts, participation will likely decrease. Mr. Janack stated that participation in the performing arts helps students achieve the qualities laid out in the district's vision of the graduate. There are benefits to students' social-emotional well-being, and they have opportunities to collaborate creatively with their classmates. Many studies show the cognitive impact and benefits of music education, including increasing memory, executive functioning, and problem solving. Mr. Janack stated that ensuring access to music education helps our students to be more well-rounded, and because all of the music programs and ensembles are incorporated into the day, all students have access to the many benefits of these programs.

Nadia Wetzler, 10 Moses Hill Road, Manchester: Ms. Wetzler stated her support for the original budget and pursuing a course of action that prevents the community from arriving at this same place next year. Ms. Wetzler said that it is important to offer a breadth of courses because children are multi-faceted and you never know what will spark their interest. She has a daughter who took to the French program in grade six when the program was available, and Ms. Wetzler appreciates that the program was structured so that those students can go on to success at the high school. Her youngest daughter needs something to incite her passion, and she is already a music and art lover. She needs something to incite her passion and show her that she can shine too, even if she doesn't take to science and math right away. Ms. Wetzler likened the budget cuts to a death by a thousand cuts. Ms. Wetzler stated that she works in the tech industry, and they are currently struggling to find qualified employees. She urged the SC to think outside the box.

Fiona Dooley, 150 Lafayette Street, Salem: Ms. Dooley is the music teacher at Memorial and Essex Elementary Schools. She teaches music, rock band, elementary chorus, and the high school Soundwaves acapella group. Ms. Dooley stated that art is about the human soul, and that this is about kids developing as people. She suggested that this may be the worst time in history to take that away from them. Art is about processing and expressing emotions, deciding what matters and finding meaning in life, and connecting with others. Ms. Dooley said that students need that as much as they need academics. Mr. Dooley asked, "What good are academics if you do not know what matters to you?" Music can be a way to excel and a way to fit in. Ms. Dooley said that with current priorities, a kid who wants to be a lawyer comes out ahead, but what about

the kid who wants to work in music? Access to music education within the school day provides opportunities to all students, regardless of economic status. Ms. Dooley said more teacher turnover will result and questioned how a professional such as herself can afford to remain in a position that would be further reduced. Ms. Dooley asked that the community invest in students and teachers the way they have been investing themselves in the program.

Rick Fedorowich, 18 Greenbrier Road, Manchester: Mr. Fedorowich stated the importance of addressing the structural agreement between Essex and Manchester regarding assessment. In addition, he said that the community does not have transparency into the way budgetary allocations are done. Mr. Fedorowich said there is little insight into how the strategic approach is being overlaid against spending. This is something that exists at the town level. Mr. Fedorowich suggested that from a fiduciary perspective, the level of visibility should be very high. Mr. Fedorowich also said that there is a qualitative issue. We are going into a world where rote knowledge is becoming obsolete. Mr. Fedorowich stated that we should therefore foster creativity, which is supported by the arts. To the extent the community is interested in taking a more qualitative approach the district should be pursuing how to have a very rich, full-human, educational experience for children so that they can proceed into the next century with great progress. Mr. Fedorowich said that the incremental cuts result in a massive non-incremental impact, and he asked the SC to consider the whole-person experience.

Avery Hayes, 10 Birch Woods Drive, Beverly: Mr. Hayes expressed support for the original budget and re-submitting it to voters now that they have all the information. Mr. Hayes said that it is normal for the Town of Essex to want to cut the fat of a government program, but after the budget was revised, it was shocking.

Owen O'Leary, 12 Forest Street, Manchester: Mr. O'Leary said that he is a senior at MERHS involved in the performing arts. He stated that the performing arts are underfunded versus the sports program, despite the success of the competitive Dramafest. The impact of Covid on the performing arts prevented them from competing for a year and a half. However, the program was resilient and hosted virtual performances. Mr. O'Leary thanked Ms. O'Neill for her support of the program and expressed shock that these programs are again on the cutting block. He stated that there is not much more that can be taken from the program. He stated that in an environment where only testing and college are the focus, kids do not have a chance to be well-rounded.

Brigid Carovillano, 64 Pine Street, Manchester: Ms. Carovillano stated that she is a three sport athlete but a student first. Her love for French came from the amazing teachers she has had, sparking an interest in her that she would not have thought possible. Ms. Carovillano expressed concern about the opportunities her younger brother will have. She advocated for increased resources for health and wellness, knowing the mental health struggles of her fellow students. Ms. Carovillano also spoke about the world of STEM that she has taken to and now knows that it is the path she wants to take for her future. Ms. Carovillano said that MERSD pushes core careers but not enough attention is paid to other areas, limiting opportunities for students to make discoveries about themselves. Ms. Carovillano concluded that these are not just cuts to the school but to the staff that invests in students, and everyone will feel the impact of their loss.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the 5/16/23 reductions to art in only a reduction to the proposed Arts Coordinator. There is no intent to cut the program. Staff levels are being adjusted

to meet enrollment. In regards to statements about the athletics program, the superintendent said that funding for the arts in FY 23 was \$450K while the athletics budget was \$400K and supplemented by user fees. Athletics is not on the list for cutting because the cuts were driven by concerns over enrollment.

Sylvie Oldeman, 61 School Street, Manchester: Ms. Oldeman said that her family moved here from Beverly because of the school system, and she is now a rising junior at Barnard/Columbia. Ms. Oldeman credited that language program for her success in gaining the Seal of Bi-literacy in Spanish and the STEM curriculum for putting her on the path to major in biology, as well as helping her find her friend group in college. In addition, she benefited from the arts program.

Jeanne Kinch, 15 Lincoln Avenue, Manchester: Ms. Kinch spoke on behalf of her daughter, Olivia Gado, sharing that the Green Team program being cut was formative in her life. Not only did the class teach environmental topics but also gave students the creative freedom to craft their own impactful sustainability projects. These projects, including the fruit tree grove and water efficient fountains at the high school, continue to improve the school facility today. These opportunities gave Ms. Gado a purpose, and she realized that she wanted to pursue the field in college.

Henry Stevens, 16 Main Street, Essex: Mr. Stevens expressed his frustration that he had to be at the public forum late rather than at home studying for a Spanish test and preparing for a track meet. He said he is angry and outraged toward every Essex parent who supported the override but didn't show up to vote. The measure had strong support a week before to be placed on the ballot. Mr. Stevens said that showing up is a duty to the students and urged the adults in our communities to participate for those who are not old enough to advocate for themselves.

Caroline Weld, 15 School Street, Manchester: Ms. Weld spoke to the town boards and finance committees. She urged them to support the original budget. Ms. Weld stated that the school budget is not broken. What is broken is the method of how the boards work. Communication has broken down. Ms. Weld said that the current budget is not a scare tactic. It is a targeted cut.

Hannah Davis, 3 Forester Road, Manchester: Ms. Davis spoke in support of the French program and stated that she wishes for those who come after her to have the same opportunity and amazing experience that she did.

Miriam Bradford, 128 Old Essex Road Manchester: Ms. Bradford expressed her support for the full budget. For her multi-faceted family, small class sizes have helped to identify and provide the education that her students need. Ms. Bradford said that mental health has suffered through Covid and the arts are imperative to the well-being of students. It is through the arts that many find the confidence to speak in public. Ms. Bradford stated that a compromise budget will take time that our students do not have. The kids should not bear the weight of adult inability to communicate. Ms. Bradford asked how many voters are registered in Essex, but that figure was not available. Ms. Bradford said that information is rampant and there is an opportunity for people to vote again.

Ms. Whitman asked if the Essex Board of Selectmen wished to comment. Ms. Jacques of the Manchester Select Board said that Sarah Mellish spoke for both the Manchester Finance Committee and the Select Board who had voted unanimous support for their statement.

Jack Cummins, 50 Walker Road, Manchester: Mr. Cummins said that he has always thought of Manchester as a place of many open doors of opportunity. When students asked if they could start a French language newspaper, teachers answered, “yes.” When they asked about a new language, Python, the answer was yes. Mr. Cummins said that the teachers believe in their students.

Alana Carpenter, 1 Sumac Lane, Manchester: Ms. Carpenter spoke in defense of the performing arts. Ms. Carpenter stated that low enrollment numbers in the performing arts is because the district sends the message that they do not support the performing arts. Covid drastically cut the program. The music department suffered the loss of Mrs. O’Neil, whose classes are no longer offered. There is no departmental head and therefore no way to institute fees to support the program. Other towns have stronger performing arts programs. Ms. Carpenter pointed out that music and band teachers are not interchangeable. For a difference of 119 votes, Ms. Carpenter urged the School Committee to send the original vote back.

Ms. Whitman asked online attendees interested in speaking to add their name and address to the chat.

Charlie Latons, 16 Washington Street and 20 Desmond Avenue, Manchester: Mr. Latons stated that the changes on the budget are not numbers but people. He expressed the hope that the people of Essex would be able to make the right decision and vote while thinking of those who have spoken tonight and those who have not been able to.

Joanna Shan, 66 Summer Street, Manchester and Kate Bappe, 19 Lowland Farm Road, Essex: Ms. Bappe spoke to the importance of having opportunities to try something new. She was able to try Robotics, on the advice of her friend, Joanna Shan. Having an art block in the day was very important to her for balance. All of the teachers, said Ms. Bappe, are there for the students. Ms. Shan interjected that Ms. Bappe will be the next captain of the successful robotics team. Ms. Shan stated that they see more of Ms. Fortunado than their own parents as they work long hours on robotics. She stated that many of the classes they take to support their work in robotics are only offered for one section. Ms. Shan also gave an eloquent and impassioned speech in French, translated by Ms. Bappe. Ms. Bappe concluded that because of their language experience at MERSD, they are able to converse, listen to music, and hear the world news.

Caroline Chrzanowski, 21 Harold Street, Manchester: Ms. Chrzanowski spoke to the importance of the classes to her personally – band, French, and the math department. She and her brother choose to take band during their study U block because it is so important. Ms. Chrzanowski expressed concern that her younger brother would not be able to take advantage of the French program. Ms. Chrzanowski said that last year her math class had three different teachers and lamented that now that they have a strong group of teachers, they will be let go.

Robbie Bilsbury, 126 Eastern Avenue, Essex: Mr. Bilsbury has been a teacher at MERSD in the language department for 24 years. Mr. Bilsbury said that we are in danger of losing half of the



MERSD world language curriculum. He asked that the SC consider the fully-funded budget. The cuts and the resulting snowball effects will be catastrophic to kids in the district. Ms. Bilbury also spoke to the discussion of class size. He said that it came up repeatedly that the district should adhere to a class enrollment requirement, and he questioned why. He suggested that a small district should strive to meet the varied interests of its students and prepare them for diverse future career paths. Mr. Bilbury said that looking at a one-year sample of class enrollment gives a limited view. Coming out of Covid, Mr. Bilbury's Spanish literature class has only five students. Next year, enrollment is already back to sixteen students. Mr. Bilbury encouraged a vote on the fully funded budget and implored all in attendance to reach out to their connections to vote.

Ava Rizzico, 119 Pleasant Street, Manchester: Ms. Rizzico made an impassioned plea to the School Committee, stated that she fears that everything she loves is being taken away. Every one of the proposed cuts would affect her. As a member of the robotics team, she relies on all of the STEM classes to support their work. Mrs. Fortunado is their advisor in addition to all her work on behalf of the French program. Ms. Rizzico ended by dropping to her knees to ask the School Committee not to take away the programs.

Kathleen McKinnon, 5 Brook Pasture Lane, Essex: Ms. McKinnon voiced disappointment in those vocal in town who expressed themselves online but did not show up to speak at the public hearing. She said she is frustrated only two members of the Essex Finance Committee chose to attend.

Adrian Kuehnemund, 10 Moses Hill Road, Manchester: Mr. Kuehnemund, a student at MERHS, spoke to the particular classes that may be cut. He said that STEM is part of his livelihood, and he researches biology-related topics all day because he is inspired to do so. Although he takes Spanish, he stated that it is important to diversify the languages offered so that we diversify the cultures to which students are exposed. To address the proposed cut of environmental science, Mr. Kuehnemund said that we are living in a world that is not doing enough to combat climate change because people are not informed and the only way to change is to educate people. Plans to increase the class size of middle school physical education classes do not align with the national obesity crisis. Mr. Kuehnemund said that combatting obesity requires more education and encouraging activity. He said that if the district does not return to a full budget, they are going to experience harm in the short term and harm in the future. Mr. Kuehnemund reminded attendees of the words of Prince Ea, "While students may be 20% of our population, they are 100% of our future."

Meghan Ollington, 42 Walker Road, Manchester: Ms. Ollington stated that she has a master's degree in clinical psychology and specialized in group therapy with children. After looking at proposed cuts, she wondered what would be left. Art, language, and music are crucial for brain development and building learning pathways. For many children, these can be their major sense of positive connection and the thing that a child needs to go back and participate in their classroom. When doing therapy, one of the first steps is to help them find a creative outlet. Ms. Ollington said that cuts to these programs will lead to increased costs in the future.

Josh Cohen, 8 Ledgewood Road, Manchester: Mr. Cohen noted that most who had spoken are in support of the original budget. He said that their goal was not inside but out – to convince, to

change the minds of others. He said they need to show even the most casual voter how much this vote matters.

Diego Sanson, Sr., 71 Pleasant Street, Manchester: Mr. Sanson shared that his son is the SC student representative and has been talking about the budget crisis for month. He said it was no surprise to his son. Mr. Sanson said that his son is only a junior in high school and that he is only educated about the situation because of his son. He believes there is a lack of education about the budget process and its challenges. Mr. Sanson's son told him that there is a finite amount of dollars and that it is not a question of if cuts will be made but how much. Mr. Sanson said that although we are talking about art today, it is important to step back, think strategically, and decide what we want to be as a district. He said the Vision is being diminished every day, and what makes the district different is the extras. Mr. Sanson stated that the SC has a huge problem that will not be solved even if the original budget is passed. Tomorrow, another area will be cut. Mr. Sanson stated his disappointment that no one came to debate the other side of the issue. He also said that retention in the district applies to students in addition to teachers. He said when he was choosing a community for his family, the realtor said the difference in the housing markets was their education systems. Mr. Sanson questioned what, at the end of the day, the community is going to stand for and said that aspiration has to match actions.

Ms. Whitman took the opportunity to thank the younger Diego Sanson and acknowledge how he has served the School Committee.

Annie Cameron, 23 Pickering Street, Essex: Ms. Cameron told Superintendent Beaudoin and Mr. Urbas that she has a great deal of trust in them. She asked to talk practically about next steps. Regarding the possibility of reserves use, Ms. Cameron said that she could see the district is trying to find a middle ground and way through the current turmoil. Ms. Cameron recommended consideration of the compromise budget and said that she does not think the Essex building project will come up anytime soon, requiring the banked reserves.

Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to the concept of compromise. She stated that this is the beginning, the second or third year, of decline for the district. Although she supports the 3/21/23 budget, the superintendent presented the compromise budget out of responsibility. Superintendent Beaudoin said that if we cannot align the vision of where we want to be with funding, we will have to reconsider what we are. The next level is reduction of teachers in math, English, and social studies. Class sizes will rise drastically. The district has pending liabilities of \$7 million dollars if the district does not get an MSBA and town approved new building in Essex. Superintendent Beaudoin said she does not know where that \$7 million will come from. Although there is a perception that the reserve fund is very large, it does not stack up well once the liabilities are taken into consideration. We have weathered emergencies before, most notably Covid, relying on the reserves. Unlike other communities, MERSD was able to utilize reserves to respond quickly to Covid requirements while waiting for government reimbursements.

Ms. Whitman opened the floor to online speakers and invited the Essex Board of Selectmen to comment. Ms. Preen, chair, did not have comments.

Kerry MacDonald Schaub, 4 Cathedral Avenue, Rockport: As an educator at MERSD, most recently in reading and IRWL, Ms. Schaub said she has seen the impact of successive budget

cuts on the library program. Students at the middle/high school went from a full time librarian to a part-time librarian to no librarian. Student access to books is now limited. Ms. Schaub said MERSD should be looking to increase the budget and restore essential services, like the librarian, that have been lost to the needs of past budgets. Ms. Schaub emphasized that education is the key to unlock doors and our duty. Ms. Schaub asked that those present consider the long-term consequences of budget cuts and pass a budget without cuts to demonstrate commitment to the future.

#### **Town Board Comment**

Ben Buttrick, Essex Finance Committee: Mr. Buttrick stated that he would attempt to present a more balanced view. He said the Finance Committee is trying to balance the financial health of the town. Mr. Buttrick said the reality is that the Town of Essex has had a substantial tax burden, including the Memorial building project, public safety facility, and rising apportionment. He said that the voice of voters comes from tax fatigue. He asked, from a political standpoint, that the SC consider the compromise budget. He said the original budget was not supported by the majority of the town. Mr. Buttrick said that apportionment has been a real challenge, and addressing it is an important long term goal. Mr. Buttrick said that the Essex finance Committee met the previous day, and no one was in support of the full cut scenario. There was support for the original budget with a slight majority favoring the compromise budget.

Ms. Whitman stated that the SC would continue to take input. The meeting on June 6, 2023 will focus on that input and a vote will be taken regarding the budget.

#### **3) School Committee Comment**

Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she views the job of the SC as solving an ongoing budget problem. This could be accomplished with an override to support the natural growth of the district, or the SC could advocate for cuts that limit the district. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she does not see the compromise budget as solving the budget problem. The compromise budget only kicks the can down the road as has been done for the last several years.

Mr. Binieris said that he has only been on the School Committee for less than a week but has been greatly affected by those speaking. He acknowledged the students and teachers who stood up for each other and spoke of the pride he felt as a resident to see their connection.

Ben Buttrick, Essex Finance Committee: Mr. Buttrick stated that an additional challenge is that the compromise budget would still require an override. The full cuts package would not require an override, but even one dollar above that requires an override. He said that the tax levy in Essex uses past year's excess capacity of \$435K and that Essex could potentially make use of that capacity. However, taxes would still go up. Mr. Buttrick stated that he does not see the issue as strictly binary and stated the need to navigate in a way that appeases both sides.

Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to Mr. Buttrick, stating that if the district proceeds with the compromise budget they estimate a deficit next year of \$915K next year. The superintendent asked where Essex would be to start next year. She emphasized that the district is getting to the hard part of the cycle now where there are not additional losses possible through attrition and the district is running out of quiet places to cut. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district has

worked to be a good partner with the towns. In order to meet the ambitions of the Strategic Plan they need to know how the town partners will support the district going forward.

Mr. Reed stated that he is not surprised by the evening's community support and is appreciative of it. What he did find surprising is that there was not representation for the opposing viewpoint. Mr. Reed wanted to hear the opinion of voters who sent the SC on the current path.

Ms. Mitchell said that, as a Chinese speaker, she supports the foreign language program. She said that she is who she is today because of the music program she had in school. Putting on her CFO hat, Ms. Mitchell said that even if a budget is passed this year, the district will find itself in the same position next year. She stated that she believes the SC did not do its job in preventing the current situation. Ms. Mitchell said that we are two towns together and need to figure out how to make that work to support good education. She emphasized the need for stabilization of communication. She asked the community to bear with the SC and committed herself to solving the issue.

Mr. Foster stated that the decision before the SC is about the next three to five years and the issue is not solely about the schools. The economy is experiencing increased insecurity, leading to a lot of worry in people. The district is largely town-funded, and its growth requires periodic override of the Prop 2.5 limits. We have not experienced overrides as frequently as other districts, but as a result the district has had to squeeze services. In addition, there have been many demands on tax dollars to support town infrastructure, etc. Mr. Foster expressed gratitude to all who submitted statements and said it reflects the understanding that the quality of education is due to committed educators. Mr. Foster also said he was disappointed that more perspectives were not heard. Mr. Foster spoke to the need to invite opposing perspectives and not override one of them. His understanding of that other perspective is that they do place value on education. Mr. Foster also pointed out that members of both towns voted against school-based funding. Mr. Foster stated that consensus is that the district has had an excellent educational system in the past and that it is believed to be excellent now, but the question seems to be what education will look like in the future. He stated that the SC is being asked to make sure that they have significantly vetted the budget, and he has not seen that there currently exists a mechanism for looking inward as a school district to understand the implications of these votes and address concerns proactively. Mr. Foster stated that the district has been making program reductions without the perception of impacting the quality of education. Now, those cuts are turning to the middle and high schools because that is where opportunities exist for reduction. Mr. Foster stated that he is a proponent of innovation in education, and he said the SC needs the support of everyone to make that happen. The current cuts are not strategic and do not support the district's goal of preparing students for a quickly changing world. He appreciated the input of those who spoke to the importance of thinking differently. Mr. Foster concluded that this is a long term issue and it is important to figure out how to have these conversations on a more regular basis and not just during these crises moments.

Ms. Spencer stated that she came to listen to community members. The cuts package presented was devastating, and she was very disappointed not to hear from those opposed to the override because that is the only way to resolution of the budget crisis. Ms. Spencer said that concern has been focused on declining enrollment and she hoped that the feedback presented spoke to that issue. Students need opportunity and schedules need flexibility. Ms. Spencer asked if the Essex

Finance Committee saw the possibility, by shifting field funding to reserves, for Essex to provide assistance that would eliminate the need for an override. Ms. Spencer pointed out that the district does not know what the magic number is for passage of any override.

Ms. Whitman said that she wants the district to look at alternate revenue streams, consider funding for athletics, and increase transparency going forward. Ms. Whitman said that this is a pattern experienced before during the fourth year of the budget cycle. She stated that the same results will continue to arise from doing the same thing over and over. This was a full year for administration with META negotiations. Ms. Whitman said that to entertain the compromise package kicks the can down the road, and uses reserves, but the benefit is the stipulation for mediation between the town partners and the district. She said this is important because she is seeing two towns with very different views on education. Ms. Whitman emphasized the need for the two towns to understand each other better.

#### **4) Adjourn**

*Ms. Spencer moved to adjourn the School Committee public hearing; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

*Meeting Adjourned at 10:32 pm*

#### **School Committee Future Meetings**

➤ June 6, 2023