

Ipswich School Committee

MS/HS Ensemble Room
134 High Street, Ipswich
Thursday, March 9, 2023
7:00 PM

MINUTES

1. Call to Order

KE called the meeting to order at 7:03 PM.

Members Present: G. Stevens (GS) K. Eliot (KE)
 J. Donahue (JD) P. Kneedler (PK)
 J. Poirier (JP) E. Cannon (EC)
 D. Freehan (DF)

Also Present: B. Blake, Superintendent of Schools (BB)
 T. Markham, Director of Finance and Operations (TM)
 J. Bornstein, High School Student Representative (JB)

2. Reading of the District Mission Statement

JB read the district mission statement.

3. Announcements

- The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, March 23rd at 7:00 PM in the MS/HS ensemble room.
- A Tri-Board meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 14th at 7:00 PM at Town Hall, Meeting Room A.
- The Vision 2030 Working Group is meeting remotely on Monday, March 13th at 5:00 PM.
- The Policy Subcommittee is meeting in person on Thursday, March 16th at 6:00 PM.

4. Special Acknowledgements

KE acknowledged the administrative team for their work presenting their budgets to the Finance Committee.

5. Citizens' Comments

Prior to the start of citizen' comments, KE reviewed the ground rules. Speakers were asked to sign in at the podium and limit their comments to three minutes per speaker. KE reminded the public that all comments should be directed to the Chair and that this was not a time for debate or dialogue. There would be 15 minutes allotted for comments. KE added that BB agreed to meet with representatives regarding the future of the theater program at a later date.

Anna Maher, student: shared a message from a friend currently enrolled in a theater class. Theater class was important because many students cannot attend after school theater programs. Theater class provides skills that students can then use in the workforce. Theater numbers are currently down and classes can't be allowed to wither away. Middle school students work tirelessly after school in their theater program. It is easier for middle school students to attend after school programs because there is not as much homework and other responsibilities. There are so many creative solutions to address the theater issues.

Seamus Kelly, student: there is community in theater and we must protect our culture. Students don't feel listened to. We are open and willing to have open dialogue with you.

Jane Mosco, parent: talked about the data analysis she did for course enrollment and the trends over the past three years. There was an increase in technology, engineering and math courses and a decrease in music, art and theater courses. She suggested that more classes should be looked at beyond just theater because out of 36 electives, theater classes are in the middle when it comes to student enrollment. She was willing to share the data with the School Committee to review. The School Committee should be able to find the \$38,000 to keep the theater program.

Elizabeth Bova, former student: joined theater Freshmen year after a significant sports injury. Within 6 months, she was running the booth and took the “tech for hire” job. She spent all her free time in the tech/theater world. The people she worked with have become her second family. Now, she is enrolled at Penn State and has received a lot of leadership positions at school because of her role in theater. The theater department matters to a lot of people.

Mark Allman, parent: wanted to address the conversation regarding the approval of the budget and the claim that the superintendent approves the budget, while the School Committee approves the bottom line. It is the School Committee’s budget and the School Committee reports to the people. The School Committee is hearing from the people who are asking to amend the budget. The School Committee has the ability to do that and should have the moral courage to restore the theater position.

Jeffrey Simon, former Ipswich School Committee member: as a former School Committee member, he understands the difficulty of making choices. Through his time on the School Committee, he learned that a system has a culture and the culture gets defined by the values the system expresses, the courses they offer, the activities they fund, and the things that make students feel good about themselves. It is not new to grapple with the decision to fund academics vs. administrators. For students to not have the opportunity to participate in something that defines the culture of the school system would be hard. In considering the choice between the theater program and two administrators, think about the culture you are creating and leaving with the school system.

Missy Dowling, parent: my daughter loves the performing arts programs. She respects all the students and parents speaking up tonight on behalf of the theater program. She works for a senior assisted living program and knows the residents enjoy going to the productions. Residents are concerned about the theater program.

KE closed the public comment section by stating that Dr. Blake was willing to discuss the future of the theater program. KE acknowledged that the School Committee and administration were coming off the busiest few weeks of the year and it has been difficult to schedule a meeting. KE and the School Committee were pushing the administration to continue the theater productions in a way the community has grown to love them. KE also clarified that there is not a hierarchy, but rather lanes of responsibility.

EC added that there was no trade off of administrators for teachers. There was significant analysis that went into decisions around the budget and no one factor was a decisive factor in any decision.

6. High School Student Representative Report

JB acknowledged that he was unable to attend the budget meetings and wanted to know why the School Committee chose to cut the only theater teacher at the high school. JB asked what the Ipswich Public Schools and community gain from losing the theater department. JB then quoted fellow HS student, Seamus Kelly, “we all survive, but at what cost?”. This is a big change and not a positive one from JB’s perspective. Students want to know the facts and why the program has changed so drastically.

7. Presentations

A. Vote to Approve S. Ames as Representative to ICAM Board of Directors

Scott Ames is currently serving on the Board of Directors for ICAM and seeking an additional three year term.

- *Motion to appoint Scott Ames to a three year term to the Board of Directors of Ipswich Community Access Media effective April 2, 2023 was made by GS and seconded by EC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

B. Recap of School Budget Presentation to Finance Committee

KE asked for feedback from the committee on the budget presentations to the Finance Committee.

GS felt the administrators did a great job and it seemed as if the Finance Committee was both impressed with the work they do everyday and shocked at the amount of needs at the elementary schools. There was a clear concern over how sustainable dealing with these needs will be in the budget.

EC echoed GS’s thoughts on the administrators’ presentations. EC felt that the committee and superintendent could have been more prepared to address questions around ESSER funding. It would be helpful to pull out the mandated parts of the budget like testing, services, ratios, evaluations, etc. that are eating into the budget. Budget information needs to be presented differently to better address the concerns from the Finance Committee. A better relationship with more communication with the Finance Committee could help strengthen future budget presentations.

This year's budget presentations were scheduled for two nights instead of the three nights that typically take place. On the third night, which did not happen this year, the Finance Committee and School Committee typically focus on the long term viability of the budget. GS said the School Committee had made a commitment to the community to stick to a five year plan with the override. The committee will still need to address increasing student needs, but will have to make adjustments in future years to continue with the five year plan. The budget cannot come in at 5-6% each year. GS felt it was unreasonable to predict what will be but in the budget this far in advance.

BB shared that the Tri-Board meeting will focus on the override calculator, residual funds, and future budgetary planning. The FY24 budget represents a 5.79% increase which is significantly higher than what can be supported moving forward. The ESSER funding that is going away currently supports 6.4 positions in the district. The district will also be starting negotiations with all collective bargaining units next year. The meeting next week will focus on the outlook of the budget, as well as Capital Plans, and the debt exclusion for the roofs.

Some members thought it was an unreasonable expectation to assume that the School Committee would be prepared to talk about specific plans to address the projected budgetary shortfalls over the next couple of years. KE added that the School Committee can review the override calculator and determine a number that the budget needs to fall under, but will be unable to present just how to do that at this time.

EC felt it was important to recognize that a reduction in force may not equate to a reduction of courses. EC suggested looking at where coursework can remain in place with a reduction in force.

KE suggested looking at the money the district is currently spending on maintenance and any potential cost savings to the district with the installation of the new roofs.

JD felt uncomfortable going to the Tri-Board meeting without an explanation or plan for what the district is going to do as they reach the fiscal cliff. BB shared that conversations and planning have already started for a future budget without ESSER funding. As the district moves forward, it will be important to look at all systems and how things are done throughout the district- everything from custodial supplies, classroom materials, online subscriptions, staffing patterns, etc. All needs will need to be evaluated.

JP added that this situation is not unique to Ipswich. The community needs to know that the School Committee has an eye on the budget and are looking at ways to address it. BB added that while some things have changed as a result of COVID, prior to that, the district was in the middle of the later stages of the last override and were on target with the calculator. The School Committee has proved to the community that the district is able to live within their means.

The discussion continued about how to present the budget moving forward, with a suggestion to lead with statistics, rather than with school goals.

JD stated that if in a few years the plan is to cut teachers, she would be the first person to advocate for cutting the elementary assistant principal positions. JD shared that she would not want to lose teachers in the future. GS suggested that there was time before the next budget season to adjust and review before jumping to what positions will be cut from the budget.

GS suggested meeting with the Feoffees Policy Working Group to consider redefining the definition of enhancement and enrichment to give more leverage with funding. It will also be important to look at the revolving fund balances and how they may be able to take the pressure off the appropriated budget.

It was decided that GS would share the override calculator with the Finance Committee and Select Board. BB would circulate the Capital Plan with the School Committee.

C. MS/HS Outdoor Recreation Paine Grant Update and Vote for Additional Funding

GS has been working with Sean Fitzgerald on the completion of the work included in the Middle School Outdoor Recreation Space Paine Grant. The work needed to complete the project must go out for a competitive bid. As a result, the project will likely cost roughly \$120,000 more than originally anticipated. GS spoke with the Feoffees Committee and they expressed support for the ability to use unspent Feoffee Grant funds from prior years to support the completion of this project. GS and Mr. Fitzgerald would like the support of the School Committee to move forward with the project. It was clarified that the money used for the additional

expenses would come from unspent funds already given to the district from the Feoffees Trust. The current distribution policy allows the School Committee to request use of those unspent funds without the need for Paine Grant Committee approval.

After discussion, it was determined that the Paine Grant Committee and the School Committee had previously approved the grant and the scope of the project has not changed. The additional funds would not impact this year's disbursement.

*D. Motion to allow Sean Fitzgerald to move forward with putting the Outdoor Recreation Space Paine Grant project out to bid and asking the Feoffees to use returned funds to support the final project was made by GS and seconded by EC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

E. School Committee Communication Plan Discussion

Members discussed the need for continuity in messaging and response to community emails. Oftentimes, a community member emails the full School Committee, but the full committee is not included in the response and is unaware of the outcome or message. Other times it is unclear who should respond and whether someone had responded at all. In an effort to tighten up communication and be mindful of Open Meeting Laws, KE and EC sought ideas and feedback on how to improve communication. For the time being, it was decided that it would be most helpful if the Chair responded, or forwarded the email to the superintendent, and then replied all on the response. It was suggested that the Communications Subcommittee consider looking at creating a communication plan document at a future meeting.

F. Financial Update: Vote on the creation of two student activities at High School: Pure Pals Club and Boys Intramural Volleyball

TM first spoke about ESSER funding, stating that it was critically important for the community to understand that the very purpose of the funds was to address pandemic-related issues. They are counterintuitive grants by design. More funds were spent over the past 3 years on non-recurring things like salary and technology to provide services and address student support coming out of the pandemic. It is hard to know what students will need in the future and it could be irresponsible to put a dollar figure on need or cuts so far ahead. EC asked how to walk the line between not having these difficult conversations in public, but also not having people feel blindsided with potential cuts. TM suggested looking at mandates and required elements, whether in student plans or legal requirements, first. Some positions or services need to remain in place to meet legal requirements. All budgetary decisions should be done carefully and with transparency.

TM continued with his financial report stating that FY23 is in good shape. He shared the financial updates from the meeting packet. Accounts have healthy balances. TM anticipates moving \$1.5million to the Stabilization Fund, but will have a final number closer to Town Meeting. TM clarified that it was also possible to prepay out-of-district tuition with leftover funds from FY23.

GS talked about the override and Chapter 70 funding, stating that the amount moved to the Stabilization Fund was what the committee had planned for. There is no "found" money.

The High School has requested to establish a new club called the Pure Pals Club and a boys intramural volleyball team. There needs to be a vote to authorize the opening of a new line for the Student Activity Fund for each group to expend and receive funds. In both instances, there is no request for stipends and no request to access district funds.

Staci Sonke, the IHS Varsity Volleyball coach, would like to start a boys intramural volleyball team. The objective of the club is to give male students at IHS the opportunity to learn, play and love the sport of volleyball. There are no tryouts and everyone is welcome to join. Her hope is that we continue to generate interest in the sport so we may eventually be accepted by the School Committee as a Spring MIAA sport by 2025. Funding will be by fundraising, no school funds are to be used.

➤ *Motion to approve the establishment of a Boys Intramural Volleyball Team at Ipswich High School and to authorize the Business Office to open a separate line in the student activity account to receive and expend funds on the Team's behalf in compliance with the District's policy on student activity accounts was made by EC and seconded by GS. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

The Pure Pals Club at Ipswich High School would fundraise to support the club's goal of spreading happiness and promoting their club. The club would promote themselves by holding meetings, hosting a holiday gift swap and through activities like making friendship bracelets. Funding would come from bake sales and donations.

- *Motion to approve the establishment of a Pure Pals Club at Ipswich High School and to authorize the Business Office to open a separate line in the student activity account to receive and expend funds on the Club's behalf in compliance with the District's policy on student activity accounts was made by PK and seconded by GS. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

G. Elementary Building Project Update: Status of SOI

Last week, the elementary principals reviewed the SOIs and updated information from the SOIs previously submitted. The documents were then shared with the Facilities Director to ensure they included updated information on facilities upgrades and repairs. BB recommended a workshop next week to discuss the information included in both SOIs and work to identify the priority school. At the next regularly scheduled School Committee meeting, the committee can then vote to allow the superintendent to submit the SOIs to the MSBA. After some discussion, a date was set for the workshop and a remote meeting to vote on the SOI.

8. Superintendent's Administrative Report

BB's report included the following:

- Discussion to explore additional grant funding for the Middle School Outdoor Space Paine Grant
- An update from the athletic director
- Several subcommittee meetings
- Attendance at the national superintendent conference
- Work on the SOIs
- An Administrative Team meeting to discuss the start of threat assessment training
- Attendance at Ginger Eaton's retirement celebration
- Finance Committee budget presentations
- Webinar to review the Governor's budget
- Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents Executive Board meeting

EC asked about the funding and support for greater services as mental health treatments evolve and whether there were any lobbying efforts being directed towards that. BB shared that there has been a significant lobbying effort on the national and state level.

9. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports

- **Budget Subcommittee:** covered during an earlier agenda item
- **Vision 2030:** The group has their first meeting scheduled
- **Traverso-Weatherall Innovation Grant Committee:** Meeting scheduled for April 26th to review the spring grants
- **STEAM Showcase:** The showcase has moved to May 18th.
- **Ipswich Education Foundation:** talked about updating/creating a list of recurring projects to anticipate each year. There are a few open seats on the committee that need to be filled. There was a conversation about athletic fees and transparency.
- **Elementary Building Project Working Group:** DF asked that the meeting minutes from the last meeting be approved at the next School Committee meeting because the working group has gone dormant. DF also suggested the district website be updated with more generalized information on the building project.
- **High School Council:** discussed the attendance policy and the lockdown response. An updated attendance policy may come before the School Committee for approval at a later meeting.

10. New Business*

JP asked about the addition of a fourth preschool classroom and whether that would be housed at Doyon. The plan is to add an additional preschool classroom. BB is currently looking for additional space. EC suggested reaching out to the current preschool teachers to hear their thoughts on the future of preschool.

11. Vouchers and Bills

All were reviewed and signed.

12. Consent Agenda

- *Motion to approve the consent agenda with the revised total of the Winthrop FRIES donation was made by GS and seconded by EC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

13. Adjournment

- *Motion to adjourn the meeting was made by EC and seconded by GS. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

Meeting adjourned at 9:21 PM