



**SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

**BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES August 17, 2021**

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	August 17, 2021
<b>Location:</b>	Webex & MERHS Library
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Operations and Finance Sarah Wolf, Chair Ken Warnock, Vice Chair Eric Bourke Theresa Whitman Matt Harrington Kate Koch-Sundquist Chris Reed
<b>Absent:</b>	
<b>Guests:</b>	
<b>Recorded by:</b>	Gail Hunter

**AGENDA**

**A. Call to Order** – Ms. Wolf called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:10 p.m.

**B. Business Meeting Open Session**

1) **Chair’s Report**

Welcome to everyone who is joining us tonight, whether you are in person or online. Thank you to 1623 Studios for recording the meeting and posting it for us. We will begin with

public comment. I just want to take a moment to remind everyone that this is an opportunity for comment, not debate.

As our policy states: "A School Committee Meeting is a meeting of a government body at which members of the body deliberate over public business. We welcome the attendance of members of the school district community to view your School Committee as it conducts its regular business meeting, but these meetings are not designed to be an opportunity for dialogue."

Please know that while we will not be immediately responding to your comments or answering questions, we are listening and paying attention to your concerns. During the meeting we will be focusing on items that are listed on our posted agenda.

If you are attending online and would like to make a comment, please put your name and address in the chat. Please do not make other comments in the chat. We allot 20 minutes total for public comment, and we ask each person to limit their comments to 3 minutes. I will be timing the comments tonight and I will ring my bell after 2 ½ minutes. After public comment is over, the chat function will be turned off to allow us all to devote our full attention to the meeting.

Because our meeting tonight is in a hybrid format, I will be alternating between online and in person comments.

## **2) Public Comment**

Tina Lane, Essex – Ms. Lane’s Comment – It’s been a year since the antiracism resolution was adopted by the School Committee. At that meeting the Committee said, they should all read Ibram X. Kendi’s book *How to Be an Antiracist* to learn more about antiracism. I have been reviewing policies for the District and find no policies that allow racist treatment of anyone, or that promote unequal opportunities. I think the School Committee was urged by an unelected body, Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), to agree to a resolution condemning actions that our District is not committing. By adopting the resolution, our School Committee is speaking for the member Towns in our District and I, as an Essex citizen, object to that representation.

I would like the School Committee to retract its support of this resolution because we were already aligned with its ideals. We do not need to sign on to a document that certifies that we act in accordance with MASC. Interestingly, this spring, MASC issued guidance for School Committees on how to deny that schools are teaching Critical Race Theory. Perhaps the School Committee should not hastily bend to group pressure. Especially during riots and a pandemic. The School Committee should act in the interest of the taxpayers of the Towns and not outside groups promoting their agendas. The School Committee should not allow our teachers, staff and Towns to be bullied into accepting the label of racist.

To anyone who is unhappy being called racist but afraid to speak up, I would like to share this quote from Vivek Ramaswamy: “The Health of a Democracy is measured by the percent of people willing to say what they actually believe in public.”

Jeff Rubin, Essex – Mr. Rubin urged the School Committee to not mandate masks for kids this year. He noted that today there were two cases in MBTS and 6 cases in Essex and stated the reality is our kids are not getting Covid. Governor Baker has chosen to allow communities to make their own decisions. Mr. Rubin believes it is draconian for our children to have their faces covered for 6 hours a day and expressed concern for the psychological consequences of mandating masks.

Carla Christensen, Essex – Ms. Christensen stated she is the parent of a 6<sup>th</sup> grader who is too young to be vaccinated and asked MERSD to implement a mask mandate as a way to keep cases low. Ms. Christensen believes everything must be done to keep kids healthy and supports mask wearing at this time.

Miranda Gaudet, MBTS – Ms. Gaudet is making a comment on behalf of herself and the Howe family who reside on Woodholm Road. They are requesting a change in the bus route for Woodholm Rd. because a registered sex offender resides near the current bus stop. The families are asking the bus stop be moved further up the Road to Woodholm Circle where the children could access the bus and the bus could easily turn around. Ms. Gaudet indicated there were five families with children impacted by and in support of the change. Mr. Urbas will follow up and stated the email address for bus route changes is [schoolbus@mersd.com](mailto:schoolbus@mersd.com).

Nina McKinnon, Essex – Ms. McKinnon stated there is no one opinion on masking and supports parents making the decision for their kids. She noted children represent only 18% of all Covid cases. She also asked the Committee to look at the two communities and consider the social emotional health of the children. She reiterated she supports parents choices for their children.

Kate Vindy, Essex – Ms. Vindy stated she was not for or against mask wearing this year. She is an Essex resident and a registered nurse. She noted that last year the students were in school two days a week and this year they will be in school 5 days a week. She would like to see additional strategies in place, if there is a mask mandate, around children spending time outdoors.

**3) Consent Agenda** – There were no items on this evening’s Consent Agenda.

**4) Sub-Committee Reports**

- Elementary Facilities/MSBC (Theresa Whitman/Chris Reed) – Report

Mr. Urbas addressed the Elementary Facilities report stating the project was on time and on budget. He noted there had been some playground surfacing issues delaying the playground completion at the new Memorial School. However, the Essex Playground surface is in and will be ready for the beginning of the school year.

Mr. Urbas clarified there were three phases to the Memorial School construction project: Phase 1, the classroom wing which opened last year, Phase 2, the cafeteria & gymnasium which is completed for the opening of this school year and Phase 3, exterior landscaping which will be completed in November. Mr. Urbas assured participants the inside of the building is ready for the opening of the 2021-2022 school year.

Mr. Urbas stated the School Committee would be voting on the final round of bonds for the Memorial School Project and the District is saving significantly on the new interest rates for the final round of funding.

- Finance Committee (Matt Harrington/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- Policy Committee (Eric Bourke/Kate Koch-Sundqvist) – Report

Mr. Bourke introduced the Operating Protocols which states as elected members of the Manchester Essex Regional District, School Committee, we along with the Superintendent, accept the trust that has been placed in us to ensure that the students of our District receive the best possible education. We are continually focused on this goal at all times. We hereby commit to the Following when conducting our business. We will:

- Support the educational welfare and well-being of all students:
- Demonstrate professional and collegial relations with each other:
- Establish and maintain effective communication:

The full document 2021-2022 School Committee Operating Protocols is available on the School Committee website.

Ms. Wolf stated this evening would be considered a first read of the Operating Protocols and will be voted and approved at the School Committee meeting on September 8, 2021. Ms. Whitman stated she liked that the Committee was documenting the Operating Protocols.

- Negotiation Committee (Sarah Wolf/Ken Warnock) – No Report

5) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin moved into Continued Business and the Fall 2021 Covid Procedures

6) **Continued Business**

- Back-to-School Covid Preparations – Mask Policy

Priority Goals:

- Student and Staff Health and Safety
- Open in and sustain full in-person instruction
- Minimize staff and student absences

Considerations:

- Ensuring Access to All Students
- Support of Local Health Team
- Regional Metrics
- Availability of vaccination for all students and call for booster for those vaccinated – Grade Levels at Each School

- Manageable to implement
- Number of Staff and Students indoors for extended periods of time
- Rely on Methods that have worked to prevent school spread
- Lack of information about the Delta variant
- Allows for rollback as more information becomes available

#### Recommendations:

- Follow CDC Prevention Strategies & Recommendations for Masking and Distancing
- Implement Layered Mitigation  
*CDC recommends universal indoor masking, physical distancing to the extent possible, and additional prevention strategies to protect students, teachers and staff. Schools should not exclude students from in-person learning to keep a minimum distance requirement: layering multiple prevention strategies is essential when physical distancing of at least 3 feet is not possible at all times.*
- Monthly Conditions Report and Reevaluation (1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the month)

#### What it Looks Like – Modified Spring 2021

#### **Fall 2021 COVID Procedures**

##### CDC Prevention Strategies

- Promoting vaccination
- Consistent and correct mask use
- Physical distancing
- Screening testing to promptly identify cases, clusters and outbreaks
- Ventilation
- Handwashing and respiratory etiquette
- Staying home when sick and getting tested
- Contact tracing, in combination with isolation and quarantine
- Cleaning and disinfection

##### **MERSD Application of** consistent and correct mask use & physical distancing

- Masks required for all staff and students indoor activities and on buses (except medical exemption)
- Maintain three feet distancing guidelines when organizing physical space (classrooms/cafes) – Single desk seating at lunches
- Public admittance to building be appointment only/masks required
- No Restrictions Outdoors

**MERSD Application of** screening testing to promptly identify cases, clusters and outbreaks. Staying home when sick and getting tested, Contac tracing, in combination with isolation and quarantine

- Continue with Med Bot Daily Screener
- Implement the DESE Diagnostic Testing Program
  - Symptomatic Testing:* (for when individuals present symptoms while at school; individuals should not go to school if experiencing symptoms while at home): Shallow nasal swab samples are collected at school using the BinaxNOW rapid antigen test or another approved diagnostic test.
  - “Test and Stay” (close contact testing):* Shallow nasal swab samples are collected at school using the BinaxNOW rapid antigen test or another approved diagnostic test. Tests are administered daily from the first day of exposure for at least five (5) days.
- Follow DESE quarantine guidance for those who opt out of “Test and Stay”

**MERSD Application of** ventilation and cleaning and disinfection

- Standards Remain in Place from 2021-2021
  - MERSD Facilities Cleaning Protocol
  - HVAC Report

**MERSD Application** hand washing and respiratory etiquette

- Continue Hygiene stations and school based routines

Next Steps

- Continue MERSD Masking Policy
- SC Vote to support Implementation of DESE Testing Program
- Implementation August 23, 2021

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the District has everything needed in place and the School Committee would need to vote to stop masking policy. Superintendent Beaudoin is asking the School Committee to vote to support the DESE testing program effective next Monday when sports activities begin, class orientation is taking place and students are dropped off to receive their locker assignments.

**School Committee Comment:**

Ms. Koch-Sundquist confirmed rapid testing is available if someone goes to the nurse with symptoms on the checklist. If the test is negative the person stays in school, if positive the person goes home. Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed that was correct and stated if a child on Med Bot is identified at risk the child can either stay home or come into school to be tested there are options available depending on what parents want. The goal is for students to come to school and stay in school and the objective is to keep students in school. Superintendent Beaudoin stated it is important to listen to and trust the school nurses.

Ms. Whitman stated last year the School Committee developed a framework for an exit strategy can that question be answered. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the school doctor, a respected Pediatrician and Public Health nurses will inform the District if we need to roll back. Ms.

Whitman noted kids need mask breaks and how do we interpret the data. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated there has been lots of inter-district conversation on the subject and DESE has given districts what is needed. Superintendent Beaudoin stated it is not realistic to implement a choice option. Ms. Whitman also asked if there is verification that wearing masks is detrimental for kids in school. Superintendent Beaudoin does not believe there is any accurate information on the subject. Superintendent Beaudoin is looking forward to the upbeat energy and joy of kids being back in school and most things will be back to normal with masks. She cautioned, we may face the possibility of reverting to remote but there is no perfect solution.

Ms. Whitman asked if it was possible to have different policies for different age groups. Superintendent Beaudoin pointed out the Middle High School included 6<sup>th</sup> graders and many 6<sup>th</sup> graders are too young to be vaccinated so it was unrealistic for MERSD to have different policies for different age groups.

Mr. Harrington stated he understood electrostatic cleaning which was part of the cleaning protocol at the beginning of Covid is no longer recommended and in fact is being discouraged. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the Facilities Manager, Mr. Waldron, had brought that up. Mr. Urbas stated the information is being taken under advisement.

Mr. Warnock asked if ongoing testing of asymptomatic staff and students was continuing. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated it was not continuing due to lack of buy in. Ms. Wolf asked if teachers would continue being tested and Superintendent Beaudoin indicated there had been no requests for ongoing teacher testing.

Mr. Reed asked if in speaking with the health team in general had there been any mental health effects on children wearing masks in school. Mr. Reed has two main questions: one around students in K-5 and even younger students who do not understand the need for masks. Superintendent Beaudoin stated it had not been discussed as a problem by the health team or principals, noting that last year mask wearing in K-5 had been well managed and there was little resistance or daily issues. The children followed the rules although it is not perfect and no one raised emotional health concerns.

Mr. Reed's second question was around the data the District was using, indicating the CDC was looking at national data in developing their recommendations and he believes the School Committee should be considering local and community data, noting Covid positivity rates locally are nearly zero. Mr. Reed also indicated rates in Essex County were high but not in MBTS or Essex. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated District employees live in communities with higher rates. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the CDC, the American Academy of Pediatricians and DESE are all in alignment with the recommendations and it is important to rely on the school pediatrician and school nurse when establishing policy.

Mr. Reed asked if there was a path laid out to return to a school year with no restrictions. Superintendent stated the Committee will review the information at the first meeting of each month. It is important to see what is happening. Schools returning without masks are seeing surges and people need to get more comfortable with and understand the Delta variant.

*Mr. Warnock moved to support the current masking policy in place and to revisit at the first School Committee meeting of the month. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion. The motion passed by a roll call vote, 6 yes and 1 no.*

Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated no one wants to be here but it is important to create an environment that is safe for all students and staff. Ms. Whitman asked who people should contact if they have questions. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the Principals of the schools are the best resource for day to day issues and to answer questions.

Ms. Whitman asked about busing for the school year. Mr. Urbas stated the busing standard will return to normal. Families who live 1.5 miles and above ride free, families living less than 1.5 miles pay for the service. On the buses masks are required, ventilation and distancing is encouraged.

Mr. Urbas stated in person open houses will be postponed because the total number in the building for these events is 500 to 600 in the Middle High School.

Ms. Wolf concluded the School Committee hears your concerns about children wearing masks all day and the discussion will be continued. We are all disappointed in the mask guidance but we want to keep everyone in school.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to implement BinaxNOW rapid antigen testing (or another approved diagnostic test) programming, Mr. Warnock seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.*

- Update on Strategic Planning and Review of Core Values

Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the strategic planning and District improvement strategies were in alignment with the Core Values. The Leadership Team had one recommendation to add Family & Community Partnerships to the Core Values. The Committee fully supported the recommendation.

Mr. Reed stated the document needs to make it out to the communities so the communities understand where the School Committee is going and how we plan to accomplish our objectives. Superintendent Beaudoin agrees and to Mr. Reed's point she believes the Committee's next objective is communication. Ms. Wolf stated it is important to bring up the different approach to the communities. Additionally, Ms. Wolf indicated it has been a long process with over 700 members representing the broader community participating in a comprehensive survey.

Mr. Warnock pointed out he agreed with the process and indicated we were different but consistent with other efforts to define Core Values and believes the current Core Values are a reaffirmation of where we are but refreshed. Ms. Wolf stated she had met with concerned Essex residents before this evening's meeting and the group had stated the District was great before and is still great.

*Mr. Bourke moved to approve the strategic mission, vision and core values document, Mr. Warnock seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.*

- School Committee Goal Setting

The School Committee initiated the process of defining Goals for School Year 2021-2022.

- Agreed the first goal to provide for the health and safety of students and faculty while maintaining the robust educational program MERSD and our member towns value, specifically during the Covid crisis. Is still part of the Committee's goals.
- Goal two – manage the District's budget and budget reserves, allocating for both near- and long-term financial health of the District. Is a core goal.
- Keeping parity with Essex – Superintendent Beaudoin suggested beginning the pursuit of the new Essex Elementary School. Mr. Warnock asked if the process would likely take up to 3 years. The District will complete a new Habib study including both Essex Elementary and the Middle High School
- Ms. Wolf is interested in see the antiracists policy reworked.
- Mr. Warnock suggested reworking and reframing the mission/vision statement with the goal of equity.
- Ms. Whitman would like to see the mission, vision and value statement as part of the process.
- Superintendent Beaudoin stated she has had conversation with Michael Eastman who will assist in District deliverables and help lay the foundation for the work ahead.
- Ms. Wolf supports a separate budget goal while keeping the Covid goal. Mr. Urbas stated the Towns have Federal funding and the District is working in collaboration with the Towns for some help.
- Mr. Harrington would like to see the Committee address and fund learning loss.
- Ms. Wolf indicated student centered achievement ties into budget goals.
- Superintendent would like to identify student achievement with a list of things that are part of the modern educational environment. Student achievement goes beyond the basic program.
- Ms. Wolf and Ms. Koch-Sundquist will look at the goal and develop additional recommendations.

- Vote to Approve \$3.5 Million Manchester Memorial Elementary School Construction Bonds

Mr. Urbas requested a motion to approve the final \$3.5 Million Manchester Memorial Elementary School Construction Bonds. Throughout the construction process the project has remained on time and on budget. Interest payments overtime had been projected at <3% now the interest rate is in the 1% range and the District's AA+ rating is helping us managed the \$38.5M.

*Mr. Harrington moved to approve the vote to support the bonds as put forward by Locke Lord Bond Counsel for \$3.32M as presented at 1.05%, 20 year structured borrowing. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.*

**7) School Committee Comment**

School Committee's next meeting will be fully remote on Wednesday, September 8, 2021 at 6:00 p.m.

**8) Adjourn**

*Mr. Warnock moved to adjourn the meeting, Mr. Bourke seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote.*