



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES *June 26, 2023*

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	June 26, 2023
Location:	Essex Elementary School Library
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist Chris Reed Erica Spencer
Absent:	Anna Lin Mitchell
Guests:	
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

A. Call to Order of Business Meeting Open Session– Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 5:39 p.m.

- 1) **Student Report** - none
- 2) **Chairman’s Report** – none
- 3) **Consent Agenda** –
 - Acceptance of Warrants: **FY23 1070-1077 and FY24 1000-1002**
 - Minutes for approval: May 16, 2023; May 23, 2023; June 6, 2023

Mr. Foster moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Ms. Spencer seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

4) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) –No Report

5) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that, in addition to the ongoing budget work, the end of the school year has been very busy. The district met the 6/15 deadline for staff notification of layoffs and was able to reassure affected staff that the budget is likely to be resolved this week. The superintendent expressed cautious optimism that these staff members plan to remain with the district. In meetings with town partners preceding the upcoming Special Town Meetings, the Town of Manchester discussed how to use the excess monies that had previously been approved for the district's operating budget given the current compromise budget. The Manchester BOS plans to seek approval to apply these funds to the cost of the turf field replacement.

6) Continued Business –

- a. Town of Essex recommendation for Essex Tech School Committee Representative (Vote to Approve). Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to the history of the SC approving the Essex Tech representative from the district towns. The superintendent specified that it has historically been the role of the School Committee to provide final approval for Essex Tech representatives. This may be the SC's role in part because these students are ultimately the responsibility of the sending district. However, Superintendent Beaudoin stated that if the SC would like in-depth information on the history of the approval process and rationalization for the SC role, she will need to pursue the matter in depth. Currently, the process is a combination of appointment by town moderators and SC approval of that appointment. It is not an elected position. Mr. Foster stated that the role of the SC makes sense because these students are ultimately the responsibility of the district, but it implies that there would be reporting back to the SC at some point.

Motion to approve appointment of Robert Teel as Essex Tech Representative from Essex was made by Ms. Whitman. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion

The motion passed unanimously.

- b. Turf Field Replacement Update and Funding Strategy (Vote to Approve) – Superintendent Beaudoin provided an overview of the progress of work on Highland Field and Brook Street Field. The contract with Gale was contingent on the MERSD budget passing, which it did not. Consequently, work on Brook Street field was put on hold. For Highland Field, the Conservation

Commission made the start of work at the location dependent upon analysis of a sample of the actual turf material going into the site. Gale was able to start synthesis of this material following the vote to approve the project. Assuming this sample comes back without PFAs, Gale will be green-lighted to proceed. They have expedited the testing process and will begin erosion control work as soon as they are cleared. Approximately a month is needed for the work to be completed. Gale still believes they can meet the scheduled substantial completion deadline of 8/18/2023 for the start of fall sports.

Clarifying Questions: Ms. Whitman asked about the impact on fieldwork because of the delay in budget approval. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that Gale is confident that they will be able to meet the original schedule. It is accurate that, if the full budget had passed originally, they would have been able to begin generation of the carpet for both fields at the same time. Ms. Spencer stated that there have been many questions from the community because construction work did not begin the day after school released for the summer as anticipated. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the Conservation Commission set the conditions for beginning work, and they have not yet signed off. These conditions include PFA testing, no illicit discharge, and erosion control. The Con Com will continue to monitor the project and can stop work anytime the project does not meet these conditions. Mr. Waldron, MERSD facilities manager, will oversee the project. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district has a good track record with Gale for completion of these projects. The superintendent offered to publish a time line for the public if there is remaining concern about deadlines.

Superintendent Beaudoin introduced the topic of funding strategy for the Brook Street turf field replacement. Superintendent Beaudoin asked that the SC consider assuming risk for full funding of both projects. The SC could choose to greenlight the projects at the current meeting rather than wait for the two towns to conclude their Special Town Meetings. This would ensure that construction could begin as early as possible at Brook Street. The superintendent stated that MBTS would prefer not to delay the work. They are advancing additional funding for the entirety of the project, leaving \$400K for the district to finance or assess to the towns. Essex has indicated that they will make their \$400K available in the fall. If the district and towns cannot reach an agreement regarding financing, the district could commit to funding through reserve funds.

Ms. Spencer asked to examine the wisdom of being down a field during the fall sports season when several school and town teams make use of the fields. Ms. Spencer had asked previously about Gale's estimate of the cost should work on Brook Street be delayed until the winter. Her own research indicated that turf is as easily replaced in winter as during the summer. Ms. Spencer asked for the impact to cost if construction at Brook St. was delayed until the winter. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she could not estimate the financial impact of delaying construction. However, the current timeline is in-

line with the existing contract. Gale has previously stated that the weather would be an issue during winter. If the SC chose to change the timeline, the district would have to work with Gale to change the contract. It is not guaranteed that they would be available for a delayed start and it would likely impact the start of the spring athletics season. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that the facilities manager and athletics director have worked with the town to create a plan for the sports programs, and they are confident that the current construction time line will work. Regarding the total placement cost for both turf fields, Superintendent Beaudoin summarized that the total project is \$1.6M. Of that total, \$400K belongs solely to MBTS. Of the remaining \$1.2M, 36:35 the towns are still finalizing contribution mechanisms. The SC vote is whether to authorize use of reserve funds, if needed, to complete construction. Of the reserve funds, excess and deficiency funds are not available because use must be appropriated through the annual budgeting process. The district plan calls for using the remainder of the Facilities Rental fund and the Stabilization Fund, in addition to \$705,000 from the School Choice Reserve fund to fund the fields. Ms. Whitman presented a constituent email question stating that the school choice fund has previously been earmarked for the fields. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the original goal was for facilities rental to cover field costs. However, rental income has not met this need. The school choice fund, noted the superintendent, has not grown in years and once spent there is no mechanism for replenishing this fund. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the cost-share on Brook Street is set in stone. She wondered if the 50% usage by MERSD is reserved because it is needed or if the actual hours of usage could be reduced, reducing the district's obligation. The superintendent stated that the lease agreement contains the 50% use and maintenance responsibility. Mr. Foster clarified that usage is the opportunity, regardless of actual use.

Ms. Whitman made a motion to approve moving forward with the field replacement contract, as currently detailed, providing funding through district reserves, if necessary. Mr. Binieris seconded the motion.

Discussion: Mr. Foster clarified that the SC is committing reserves, at least temporarily, while awaiting the towns' financing decisions. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the plan was always to use reserves to fund the replacement projects prior to borrowing funds so that the district would have a more exact number for borrowing. The plan is to use funds from facilities rental first, followed by stabilization funds, and then funds from school choice.

The vote passed unanimously.

- c. FY 24 Budget – no new information was presented regarding the reconsidered FY24 budget currently before both towns for approval.
- d. FY24 SC Calendar and Summer Planning Work – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the School Committee has traditionally used a three year

presentation cycle. FY 23 was a “School Program Spotlight” year. The coming year will focus on a K-12 curriculum spotlight. FY25 will review the athletics, student services, and food service programs. In addition, there are some items leftover from this year including META negotiations for teaching assistants and regarding the teachers’ complaint policy review and stipend work. In addition, next year’s budget will require a large effort. Usually, the SC does a DIP follow up at year’s end. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the SC could choose to complete this in the fall, followed by the SIP follow up. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the SC calendar is critical for meeting scheduling challenges and that the SC should start now if they want to add extra meetings.

Discussion: The SC members discussed the items that have been broached during meetings but deferred for summer consideration. Although noted by the superintendent and SC chair, no running list was kept of all items. It was determined that, going forward, Mr. Foster will maintain a working list of these topics for discussion. For the current year, all members will submit topics which they would like to address at the summer session. Ms. Whitman stated that it will be important to share the topics that are most important to each member before the subcommittee chairs are set for next year and to create committee goals for the coming year. Ms. Whitman also stated the importance of forming a united sense of what the SC is responsible for and to redirect to that vision over the course of the year. Ms. Spencer and Mr. Foster asked about starting work on the FY25 budget earlier and exploring ways to interact earlier with the community about the vision for the district. Mr. Foster made a distinction between the internal budget work of the SC to achieve the district’s goals and the external work of creating a sense of scale, scope, and financing strategy with town partners, which needs to occur earlier. Ms. Whitman stated that some of that external work has already begun. The chair from each town’s Select Board and their Town Administrators met collaboratively in the preceding weeks. Ms. Whitman said the collaboration group would build from there. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the SC needs to determine with whom to engage in technical and vision conversations and stressed that the root problem needs to be addressed. Mr. Reed stated that he has received many emails from locals regarding their desires for the school district. He stated that the SC needs to decide what kind of district MERSD wants to be and then engage the towns. Ms. Spencer said that she believes the original budget would have passed if the community had been engaged earlier with insight into possible cuts, citing the strong community response following the failed budget vote and the district’s cuts budget proposal. Ms. Spencer hoped for a continuation of the support that has built in the community. Mr. Foster urged the SC to communicate to the public not only the budget process but also how it supports the district’s strategic plan. Mr. Binieris stated that people need to be engaged on a rolling basis. Superintendent Beaudoin expressed the need to communicate in a way that supports and advances the district’s program and stated that it is important to address the fundamental issue with partners about funding. Mr. Foster said

that buy-in to funding is visionary and that some voters believe the district is offering too much. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she believes that voters were voting against increasing taxes. Mr. Binieris said that he has heard comments equating MERSD to a private school and emphasized that MERSD is not in that category. The committee discussed class size goals as expressed during recent community input and possible consequences if larger class size goals were implemented. Mr. Reed stated that for a district this size, MERSD is average across the board in all areas except for ranking, where the district is high. Superintendent Beaudoin expressed the hope that the district could get to the point of presenting a budget that includes growth and said that the current budget represents the base of a hierarchy of needs. Regarding the budget time line, the superintendent stated that in September district staff is busy with end of year reporting. In October, the district begins laying out items for the principals for their work on the budget. The SC discussed the need for a moderator for discussions with town partners. Although members expressed concern about the efficacy of the collaboration meetings, the superintendent stated that collaboration was a successful process for 12 years. Ms. Whitman said she would support a public collaboration meeting. Ms. Whitman stated that previously Essex had not provided a model of what they can afford and they have just done so. Superintendent Beaudoin suggested that the SC propose that each board send a delegate to collaboration and said this could happen at the August meeting. Ms. Koch-Sundquist suggested that the SC await the outcomes of the week's Special Town Meetings and then work with town partners to put collaboration meetings on the calendar.

7) School Committee Comment – Mr. Foster presented comments to the SC regarding the distinction between curriculum and program:

“Throughout this year I’ve heard us mention many times that we do not have a say in what program elements get cut; that anything that touches the program is up to our district leaders. This position conflates educational program and curriculum, so I want to clarify the distinction and explain why I think this is important in our work as a school committee.

I’ll start with curriculum since that is what students and parents notice most.

The MA Department of Education defines curriculum as:

- *Curricular materials are resources teachers use to facilitate sequences of learning experiences (e.g., lesson and unit plans, texts); also called adopted or written curriculum, or instructional materials.*
- *A curriculum is a sequence of student learning experiences teachers facilitate using curricular materials as a foundation (not a script!); also called enacted or taught curriculum. (<https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/impd/curriculum-matters.html>)*

Curriculum is the combination of instructional practices, learning experiences, and assessments for a particular subject or course. Think of it as a detailed plan for instruction. Creating a curriculum is technical work that requires expertise in content,

student learning, and pedagogy. This is why we leave it to our professional staff to select, create, and implement curriculum.

School is not, however, just about the instructional materials. Curriculum is always embedded in a larger context – the broader educational program.

The educational program includes the broad student outcomes, nature of student experience, range of learning opportunities and options, as well as the overall conditions for learning, including the structure of the overall program. All of that is informed by, and constrained by, community values and available resources (the budget).

I think it is helpful to look at contexts that are significantly different from our context to help illustrate what an educational program is.

Let's imagine a community, for example, developing a Career and Technical school. The educational program would reflect decisions about which vocational shops to include. The choice of shops would be a reflection of community and employer needs, student interests, and other local factors that the School Committee would need to consider. Once the School Committee decided on the shops, it would then be up to the professional staff to determine the curriculum to make those shops a reality for students.

If a community were to institute a Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) program, they could look to the state's guidance on key features of such a program (<https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/programs/tbe.html>) which provides key characteristics and a couple of program design options, including Early Exit vs. Late Exit models. The School Committee would use such guidance, and input of professional staff, to adopt a set of guiding principles, a program model, and basic structure and goals in accordance with their community values, student population, and needs. Professional staff would then identify, select, and/or develop the curriculum to make the program a reality for students.

A community could chose to have their educational program be project-based, where the majority of classes and subjects were taught through community-based and project-based learning. If a community wanted students to focus on social issues and challenges, they could define that as a key characteristic of their educational program. If a community valued the interconnected global nature of the world and wanted to empower students to actively contribute to global challenges, they could choose to organize their education program around the UN's 10 Global Challenges or 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Some of the key issues and questions about educational program that we have raised just in the last few months as needing attention include:

- *Class size, or balancing classes with low enrollment while providing a range of electives*

- *Growing performing arts programming*
- *How do we advance innovation and our strategic plan even in moments where we have to make reductions?*
- *What breadth of programming is necessary for a quality school system?*
- *How do we understand and convey implications of program additions, reductions, or reorganization?”*

Due to time constraints for attendance at the Essex Town Meeting, further discussion on Mr. Foster’s topic was postponed.

8) Adjourn – Attendance at Essex Town Meeting

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

Meeting Adjourned at 7:00 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- August 8, 2023 School Committee retreat
- August 22, 2023 – Business Meeting