



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

*March 21, 2023*

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	March 21, 2023
<b>Location:</b>	MERMHS Library
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson Jake Foster Matt Harrington Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Lin Mitchell Chris Reed Erica Spencer
<b>Absent:</b>	
<b>Guests:</b>	Joanne Maino, Principal MER Middle School and students
<b>Recorded by:</b>	Maria Schmidt
<b>Link to Reports and Presentations</b>	<a href="https://www.mersd.org/domain/785">https://www.mersd.org/domain/785</a>

**A. Call to Order** – Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:04 p.m. Ms. Whitman reminded the public that comment policy is contained in section BED and BEDH and asked that public comment be presented in three portions, the first to address media use in classrooms, the next to focus on budget questions, and the final portion for other comment.

#### **1) Public Comment –**

Sarah Pierce, Manchester: Ms. Pierce spoke in regards to a recent movie shown during class and on behalf of parents (90) who have signed a petition requesting that the School Committee create a policy for movies. Ms. Pierce stated that the current protocol for movies has not been

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consistently followed within the schools. She said that some parents believe some of the recent choices are not aligned with curriculum. Ms. Pierce asked for a prohibition on the types of rated movies that would be allowed and the content that could be shown. Ms. Pierce asked that the SC require written parental consent, kept on file, for movies. Ms. Pierce stated that the depictions in question are not in keeping with the standards of the district handbook.

Sophia Johannson Manchester: Ms. Johannson expressed gratitude for the work of our teachers and stated that she has trust in the choices our teachers are making. Ms. Johannson said that there is already so much consent and paperwork required from parents and encouraged the SC to put its energy elsewhere.

Lindsay Banks, Manchester: Ms. Banks encouraged the SC not to spend more time regarding classroom movies. She stated that a system exists to handle situations at the school level and time needs to be allowed for building administration to address it. Existing policy allows parents to limit the media that their students are given. Ms. Banks stated that it is a small group that is asking for a movie policy. She also underlined the importance of movies in building empathy and engaging students in ways other mediums cannot. Movies provide students with an opportunity to explore their own values. It is an art form that provides a rich learning opportunity to engage in critical thinking as they engage in all media, including social media where they are engaged by content much worse than anything that receives a movie rating. Ms. Banks encouraged the SC not to ban or consider a ban on any materials on a district policy level. She believes it is cumbersome, satisfies only a few parents, and doesn't support the work of our teachers and growth of our students.

Sarah Stone, Manchester: Ms. Stone paraphrased author Jason Reynolds who recently presenting at the Danvers school at which she works, "our children live in a very complex world and we need to, as adults, allow them to wrestle in a safe environment with those complex thoughts." Ms. Stone stated that she wants her children to watch movies like Schindler's List and have their teachers walk them through the gravity of that material, particularly as opposed to them secretly reading movies and books without talking about the difficult topics that kids face in the world that we live in. Two of the titles raised this evening are books that Ms. Stone has taught. She cautioned against silencing books that are taught because we do not agree with them. Parents have the right to limit what their students are exposed to, but not by limiting access for all students. Ms. Stone promised to follow up and to be present if this topic continues to be debated.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she is waiting to see if correspondence she has received so far is a formal complaint that would activate the review process as part of the policy that calls for the district to convene a faculty team (grade 6-12) to review the choice of materials to determine how they are used in the future. However, the issue is still being addressed by the building principal. Superintendent Beaudoin asked for confirmation and a copy of the petition.

Nina McKinnon, Essex Finance Committee, speaking as private citizen: Ms. McKinnon stated her support of education and spoke to the current budget revision and increase of school choice students. Ms. McKinnon said that school choice is not a reliable revenue stream but rather is a net loss. However, Ms. McKinnon stated her support for admitting siblings of current choice students and stressed the importance of family. Ms. McKinnon also addressed the recent Essex

Fin Com meeting at which members were told that new information was coming. She asked how they could be expected to make decisions knowing new information was coming. Ms. McKinnon stated some in the public are misconstruing the discussion at these meetings and said that she sees her job as an individual on the committee to be asking questions. Ms. McKinnon also spoke to the declining enrollment and asked if the district doesn't also want to know what actual class sizes are to better understand real student-teacher ratio.

Jodi Harris, Essex: Following passage of the budget, Ms. Harris asked what the next steps are for the SC to delve into efficiencies. She asked who is responsible for creating a plan of action and whether progress could be a regular part of the SC meeting agenda so that the community is able to follow along. Ms. Harris also asked for clarification regarding SC subcommittees; how many members are there, and is there a chair for each committee? Ms. Harris asked if there is a detailed annual report of yearly reserve fund expenditures and how to access it.

Christine Bain, Manchester: Ms. Bain shared information regarding two programs for local students coordinated by the organization with which she works, Empower Peace, a Boston-based non-profit. Team Harmony trains student leaders to combat hate in their home communities. On May 8-11, 2023 they will have a leadership program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which includes a tour of the site of the Tulsa Massacre. This program seeks to fight hate in all its forms. The program is fully funded, except for travel expenses. Ms. Bain would like the opportunity to present more information to district administration and solicit participants. Ms. Bain also wishes to share information on a program called Women to Women, but was unable to do so within the time constraints of public comment. Ms. Bain has been unable to reach a school representative via phone. Ms. Whitman said that she has seen an email and will follow up.

Sophia Johansson, Manchester: Ms. Johansson thanked the volunteers and SC for their work and encouraged them to keep the needs of students with disabilities front and center when thinking about the budget. Ms. Johansson stated that the new playground at Memorial Elementary does not accommodate wheelchairs and expressed hope that plans for Essex Elementary could be seen as an opportunity to create meaningful spaces for all communities.

**2) Student Report – no report**

**3) Chairman's Report – Ms. Koch-Sundquist read the next excerpt from the School Committee Operating Protocols:**

- Respect the leadership roles of the Committee Chair and Superintendent.
- Leave the day-to-day operations, including business transactions, to the Superintendent and staff. It is the School Committee's responsibility to evaluate the Superintendent's effectiveness in these matters pursuant to the DESE's Model System for Educator Evaluation.

Ms. Whitman spoke to the need of student presenters to leave at a reasonable hour.

*Ms. Whitman moved to rearrange the agenda, moving Continued Business ahead of the Consent Agenda. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.*

There was no discussion.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

#### **4) Continued Business –**

- Middle School Spotlight Presentation – Principal Joanne Maino, “Understanding Differences as a way of connecting to ourselves and our community.” Principal Maino stated that tonight’s presentation shines a spotlight on the work of the history and social studies teachers in grades six through eight. Presenting students were chosen as leaders by their teachers. The curriculum showcase shows the vertical alignment continuum of topics between grades and meets SEL and DEI goals. This begins in grade six with broad-base knowledge about cultural identities and ideologies. In seventh grade, a narrower view of global issues is used and students examine specific religions. Eighth graders look locally at unsung local heroes that are role models for enacting change. Grade eight Project 351 ambassadors bring the goal of enacting change to their home communities through leadership training and civic action and service.
  - Grade 6: Exploring Ethnocentrism – students shared the acronym G.R.A.P.E.S (geography, religion, achievements, politics, economy, social studies) as a tool to examine other cultures. They also use this exploration to explore their own preconceptions. They stated that they arrive at the conclusion that our similarities bring humans together across cultures and time. Understanding another culture requires not judging. They cited the class exploration of “Nacirema.”
  - Grade 7: Building Cultural Awareness and Breaking Down Stereotypes. Students learn about the world religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism.
  - Grade 8:
    - Prince Hall: Democratic Thoughts and Actions. Mr. Hall was a Bostonian, civil rights activist for African Americans, and little-known contributor to democratic thought and action. Mr. Hall fought in the American Revolution and founded the first African American Free Mason Lodge in 1784. He used the concept of “foundational ideas,” (like the idea of natural rights that all are born with), to convince the Massachusetts’s legislature to end slavery. Using Mr. Hall’s principals, students will be writing petitions to encourage change in their own community. Mr. Hall exemplifies the idea that a regular individual can create change.
    - Project 351: Service and Community. Project 351 is a Boston non-profit, named for the 351 cities and towns in the state of Massachusetts, whose focus is guiding students to build skills to lead positive change. Their mission – to build a movement of youth-led service. Their core values are kindness, compassion, humility, and gratitude. Ambassadors serve one year and have the opportunity to continue as alumni. This year, the

ambassadors have returned to organize a clothing drive with local non-profit Cradles to Crayons.

Discussion: Ms. Spencer asked if there are organizations like Project 351 in other states. The students replied that there are not. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about opportunities for the community to support the current clothing drive led by students, and Principal Maino stated that interested parties can contact the middle school. Mr. Harrington asked when students would choose their petition projects and learned that it is at the end of eighth grade. Mr. Foster asked how their classroom experience has impacted engagement with each other in the school day. Students stated that they had not previously learned about civic action in the community and that it was good to learn about real people they did not know about. Superintendent Beaudoin asked for student recommendations for the SC to create a better school. Students recommended “educated” listening to students and taking their opinions into account. Principal Maino notified the SC of the upcoming STEAM showcase on March 30 and encouraged members to attend.

- Manchester Essex Teachers’ Association contract – Chris Reed and Kate Koch-Sundquist (vote to approve). Negotiations were brought to conclusion resulting in a three year contract with a fourth year extension. The teachers association ratified the contract last Thursday afternoon. Now it is on the SC agenda for approval which will set it in stone for the next four years.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved that the Manchester Essex Regional School District approve the three-year-plus-one contract as ratified by the META. Mr. Reed seconded the motion*

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed her pride in the process of negotiations and the outcome, including a COLA of 2.5% for each of the next two years, 2.25% for the third year, and 2.5% for the extension year. Throughout negotiations, the proceedings did not feel contentious. Overall, Ms. Koch-Sundquist felt the negotiations were a positive exercise in teamwork. Mr. Reed said it was a process that took a lot of work, and he is also proud of how the interests of all stakeholders were taken into account to reach an equitable agreement for all. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that this was the first time that the procedures included silent observers from the META, town partners, and the School Committee. The outcome was increased insight into the process and increased transparency that was a benefit to all. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that a lot of time was devoted to two-way teaching. The district and their partners were able to share information about the budget process, current realities, and constraints. The META had the opportunity to teach about their concerns. Mr. Reed expressed his appreciation for all the time that the teacher representatives spent with the SC members through this process. Ms. Whitman clarified that the SC met in executive session to discuss the details of the contract before tonight’s vote. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the MOA will be posted after it is finalized.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

- FY 24 School Choice – Superintendent Beaudoin (vote to approve). Superintendent Beaudoin distributed updated summary of budget changes and school choice projections and stated that every year the SC is required to affirm that MERSD is continuing as a

school choice school. If the SC does not vote to continue, the district still keeps currently enrolled choice students since we are responsible for them through graduation, but no new spots would be opened to applicants. The district's approach to school choice has historically depended on several factors. This year, our enrollment is down. Class size projections for next year do not include projected changes to enrollment, for example from students moving out of the district or returning from private school. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that it appears we have room to place all siblings of current choice students. However, we can wait until August to assign students between Essex and Memorial. The superintendent stated that we could also put additional choice students into grade nine. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the order of operations is for the SC to vote on whether to remain a school choice district. If the answer is yes, she will take feedback on what that would look like. Mr. Foster asked for clarification of the amount in the budget for school choice income. Mr. Urbas stated that the amount is \$75K in the latest version of the budget that is currently before the SC for approval.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to continue as a school choice district with seventeen offered positions. Mr. Harrington seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist began the discussion by asking for clarification about the numbers that go into per pupil expenditures versus the cost of putting another student in a classroom. She stated that we do not get to choose which students are admitted, and they may have high expense needs. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that choice populations mirror the general population. So, if 12-15% of the general population is special education, so is the choice population. Most applicants are general education students. Of those who receive services, most only get liaison services and are added to the caseload of an existing staff member. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked which services end up costing the district more. The superintendent stated that we may end up needing an additional book, etc. Ms. Whitman asked for insight into where the notion is coming from that the district loses money on school choice students, and she opened the floor to audience member Nina McKinnon, Essex. Ms. McKinnon stated that the simple math is that the amount reimbursed to MERSD from the student's sending district does not come close to equaling the published per pupil cost of student education in our district, based on the \$5K per student that comes to the district for each choice student. Mrs. McKinnon referenced the 2013 discontinuation of school choice when the superintendent and business manager both cautioned against considering school choice as a revenue stream. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that at the time we had high numbers in-district and were not growing personnel to meet that enrollment. Accepting additional choice students would have pushed us to increase staffing. Ms. Koch-Sundquist shared the analogy of a plane that is fueled and ready for take-off. Unfilled seats are analogous to school choice and do not increase the total cost of the flight. Mr. Reed stated that the important thing is not to place these students where their presence would require hiring additional staff. That is why the choice of placement is left to administrators. Ms. Spencer noted that the cost per pupil actually goes down when we accept school choice. Mr. Reed cautioned against counting on school choice as a revenue stream. Potential students could back out, and we would not receive their money. Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to the early days of regionalization. At that time, MERSD carried between 130-140 school choice students, and district enrollment was very similar to what it is now. Choice students brought in \$750K in

revenue. The superintendent said that she does not see us getting back to those numbers. Mr. Reed asked why we are looking to add so many students to the entering ninth grade class, since it is already the second largest class. Superintendent Beaudoin replied that they are anticipating student fall off to private school or Essex Tech. Mr. Harrington stated that he always wants to give credence to more than just financial considerations. He is proud of our district and that others want to be a part of it. He stated that he believes the district has a moral-based argument for allowing choice students to do so. Mr. Harrington pointed out that two of the evening's presenting student-leaders from the middle school were from out of district. Ms. Spencer asked about the previous goal of keeping all classes to under 10% choice students. Superintendent Beaudoin replied that in reviewing the historical levels, the numbers went as high as 15%. Ms. Mitchell agreed that there are ethical considerations, but questioned whether the SC should commit to additional students if there is debate in the public. At only \$75K in revenue, Ms. Mitchell stated that there are other ways to bring in that kind of money, including selling ad space at sporting events. Ms. Mitchell advocated for looking at other revenue sources. Mr. Foster stated that, after examining the class sizes, he was comfortable with accepting the proposed siblings plus an extra five ninth graders. At this level, we are not forced to add resources as we are maintaining less than 88 students, effectively maintaining 4 sections. Any more than that and he would be concerned. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the middle/high school building project had planned for approximately 110 students per grade. The current proposal would keep us at that level. The superintendent stated that, given current SC concerns, the administration will table consideration of increasing numbers from the below recommendation.

Recommendations from district administration:

- Admit all sibling applicants
- Admit an additional five applicants at grade 9
- Total New Revenue = \$75K
- Additional Considerations for admitting more school choice students

*The motion to continue as a school choice district with seventeen offered positions passed with 6 ayes. Ms. Mitchell abstained.*

- FY 24 Budget Update – Avi Urbas. Vote to adopt revised budget. Mr. Urbas presented an updated FY24 Operating Budget reflecting updates in revenue and cost assumptions since the 2/7/23 SC meeting when the budget was adopted.

Summary of changes: Spending growth is now at 2.85% reflecting final insurance rates from Tufts, salary updates from the new teacher's contract, projected savings from new retirements, and extension of the ESSER III grant (COVID-related) covering an additional year of student learning loss interventions. Overall assessments are now down to 5.09 % growth, with MBTS at 2.94% and Essex at 7.12%. The apportionment formulae is pushing the increase in assessment rate to the Town of Essex. The previous budget included a \$250K placeholder for the estimated impact of settling the META contract. The new contract requires closer to \$150K in the revised FY24 budget. Three new teacher retirements have recently been formalized, for additional savings. The revised budget also covers updated teacher assistant levels, with the addition of a position. This still results in overall savings within the middle school because they are

eliminating one special education teacher position at the middle school. The revised FY24 budget also includes increased school choice revenue (\$25K) and reduced Chapter 70 state aid revenue (\$35K) due to preliminary figures from DESE's FY24 budget. Final Chapter 70 figures are not expected until June.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that these are real time revisions to the budget that may require a larger adjustment next year if health insurance jumps more in-line with preliminary estimates this year. Mr. Urbas stated his concern that the current estimates are very conservative and leave little room for unexpected changes to enrollment in our health program.

*Ms. Whitman moved to approve the revised FY24 budget of \$29,750,180 with total operating assessments at \$26, 259, 922. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Whitman shared her excitement about the revised numbers for all constituents and the benefit of patiently working through the process, with its difficult time line. She expressed concern at how lean the estimates are that we are using in this final revision. Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification of the number of FTE reductions. Mr. Urbas explained that one of the perceived cuts is actually the ESSER position being moved out to grant funding. In addition, the fractional changes are minor adjustments that he is rolling through. They are not actual cuts. In addition, retirement savings are not reductions. It reflects anticipated savings because new employees will come on board at a different rate. Ms. Mitchell inquired if, with META negotiations resulting in a 2.5% COLA, this percentage should be applied across the board and not a 4% increase for administration and non-META employees. Ms. Koch-Sundquist replied that teachers move up yearly on the salary grid, in addition to the COLA in accordance with the Massachusetts-wide model). Teacher aides, administrators, and office staff do not, so they have been rising slower in comparison. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that combining STEP and COLA, the teacher increase is also about 4%. Ms. Whitman stated that the towns are currently in negotiations with their unions and invited Anne Harris, Essex, to comment. Ms. Harris stated that there are currently three on-going town negotiations. Police negotiations are concluded, clerical and DPW are nearly so, and the fire department does not show signs of resolution. Mr. Harrington asked for clarification that the vote before the SC applies only to the revisions, and Ms. Whitman confirmed that is the case. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that anyone listening to the Essex BOS and Fin Com meetings knows that concerns were raised about the size of the budget. She said that the SC needs to revisit re-instatement and reaffirm that it is the will of the SC to reinstate the programs at a cost of \$100K. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the Town of Essex wants to know that the district has trimmed all possible. Ms. Whitman stated that would be a separate motion and would require voting the current motion down. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked to hear the opinions of the SC members. Ms. Mitchell stated that she did not know if the three items for reinstatement are the best place to prioritize. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that they were the top three because they had been cut in the previous budget. Ms. Mitchell said that reinstatement of the middle/high school librarian, cut before that, might be a better place to reinstate. Mr. Foster stated that he appreciates Ms. Mitchell's perspective. Ms. Whitman stated that the SC does have to vote on the budget tonight. Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to the feedback regarding the library. She stated that the library program has been put on the district's plan of action for next year to study the library and how to best bring it back. Ms.



Spencer said that it is important to look for opportunities to allow students to at least check out books. She also stated that she appreciates Ms. Koch-Sundquist's concern, but believes the SC has been very conservative. Ms. Spencer stated that her constituents want more, not less.

*Mr. Reed made a motion to move the vote. Mr. Harrington seconded the motion.*

*The motion passes unanimously*

Ms. Sarah Mellish, Manchester 2:25:00 interjected from remote viewing to ask if this budget change is legal. Mr. Urbas replied that the budget revision is legal. In addition, it is a reduction in that the towns are asked to pay. Those reductions can come all the way up to the Town Meeting floor if brought by the School Committee.

*The motion to adopt the revised budget passed unanimously.*

#### **5) Consent Agenda –**

- Acceptance of Warrants: **Accounts Payable Vouchers 1049-1050**
- Minutes for approval: *February 7, 2023*
- Student Travel – Request for out of state travel for members of the Spanish Literature class to attend a play in New York. One day of travel

*Ms. Spencer moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Reed seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed unanimously.*

#### **6) Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/Matt Harrington) – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that they are working diligently on the MSBA Statement of Interest for Essex Elementary School. This will likely be the only agenda item for the meeting on April 3, ahead of the Manchester Town Meeting. Mr. Reed asked about the accessibility of the new playgrounds. Mr. Urbas stated that both Memorial and the newly constructed playground at Essex Elementary are designed to be ADA compliant.
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Mitchell stated that the finance sub-committee supports the decrease in the budget but has work to do over the summer. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district was not able to complete the budget book in time to include with the annual report from the Town of Manchester. Consequently, it will be sent out to the towns through direct mailing.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – contained in approval of META contract

- 7) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the STEAM showcase on March 30 is being held on the same day as the opening of the district-wide grade five musical, *Alice @ Wonderland*, and hoped the SC would be able to see the show. In addition, the search for a new Curriculum Director is complete and they will be putting together a spring schedule for preliminary events that the new director will attend before she comes on board full time. The second day of interviews for a new high school principal has concluded and information about the final candidates is expected to post by week's end. There will be a scheduled public meet and greet. In conclusion, the superintendent stated that they are working toward an SOI for Essex Elementary School.
- 8) **School Committee Comment:** Ms. Whitman asked if the SC meeting recordings are currently posted on 1623. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that they have been sent to 1623, and the district is following up. Ms. Whitman spoke about the current movie situation, interested in SC feedback. She described two approaches to parent concerns. Either the current complaint is addressed as a specific incident within existing guidelines, perhaps leading to a review within the school. Alternately, the SC could move on the request for policy creation, for which there is a process within the SC. Ms. Whitman stated that her inclination is to put this in the priority queue for summer business. She also stated that it may be helpful to share the established process with the public. Mr. Reed stated that the SC creates the policy but then allows the district and each school to see it through. Ms. Spencer said she is disinclined to create a policy around movies and asked if the SC would then have to also create one around books. She advocated patience while the school administrators and superintendent process formal complaints through established procedure. Mr. Harrington stated that there is a process in place. The SC is tasked with determining whether the superintendent has followed policy, so there is nothing currently that the SC needs to address. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she sees a disconnect at play as their already is a policy in place regarding protests about curriculum materials. She advocated for leaning on that policy and stated that deciding which movies students should see is beyond the SC's purview. Ms. Mitchell said that it is important to listen to what parents are saying and 90 parents is significant. She believes that the SC should represent their view, even if it is not through policy creation, to respect their viewpoint. Ms. Whitman summarized that the SC would let the process play out to the point where it comes before the SC. In the meantime, she asked for clarification of what the criteria is for policy change. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the current complaint has not gone through the process, starting at the school level and preceding through the district. Addressing it prematurely would be inviting similar complaints out of order. Superintendent Beaudoin recommended that the SC reach out to their MASC representative regarding requests to manage school instruction materials. She acknowledged that there may have been some missteps and stated that new information was mentioned tonight that will need to be explored. She suggested engaging with the consultant about how the SC may want to engage with the community around this issue. Mr. Reed stated that it should be dealt with over the summer. The superintendent stated that the progression of the current policy is to put together a team of staff to review the material and that may be done. There are other factors to consider in creating a specific policy. Ms.

Spencer clarified that in the meantime, the district is addressing the missteps. Ms. Mitchell questioned how that would be adequately addressed, and Superintendent Beaudoin said that is why she would like to seek assistance. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the next steps are clear. The district has curriculum aligned with material currently used. Teachers have autonomy to make choices and are using tools used in the past. The superintendent agreed that we need to offer parent opt-out when used materials beyond their age-range. The superintendent recommended that any parent that has strong beliefs communicate them to their school.

Mr. Foster asked to address the committee and presented the following statement:

“There is an interesting concept in system theory, and I’m paraphrasing here, that a well-established system is designed to protect itself; that the culture and norms of a system will act to return the system to its normal state, even in the context of external pressures to change. I ran for school committee because I believe in strong schools. I believe in the purpose and outcomes of public education in general and our district in particular. Public education is the foundation of our democracy, our community, and our economy. In particular I ran for school committee because I believe that our district has the capacity and conditions for innovation, to more actively engage students, and to better help prepare them for the broad, diverse, and quickly changing world they will need to live in and contribute to. I came away from my engagement with our strategic planning process in 2021, before I was on the SC, with the belief that conditions exist for us to deliver educational excellence and value through innovative and engaging programming. Now that I have been sitting at the table this year, I am seeing how our relatively traditional program and assumptions of the system we operate within, in conjunction with a history of success on traditional metrics, is a typical system that works to maintain the status quo.

So I’m making myself a commitment to try to do little things a little bit different. I am starting with these comments tonight, which are essentially an introduction of me to you all. It struck me the other day that we functionally do not know each other as a committee. We never have introduced ourselves to each other, to share our experiences and values, and why we care enough to be serving on this committee together. So I am doing that now.

Beyond articulating why I’m here, let me give you a brief sense of my personal experiences to highlight why I believe that districts like ours can innovate while still providing excellence.

I spent most of my school years in northern Vermont, living in a log cabin with no electricity, running water, or refrigeration, and with kerosene lamps and wood stoves. I graduated with 20 students, which was the “big class” in the school. I learned woodworking and carpentry, activities I still engage in today, because those were the electives available. I had science with students from multiple grades because there was only one science teacher in the school. We built sheds for the town and renovated a

house for a family because those were the opportunities to practice skills and give back in a small town. While much of the classroom instruction I experienced in the 1980's was traditional in nature, the program, by necessity of small size, was not. This is an important distinction I want to talk more about at another time. My point is that the program afforded me unique opportunities not often seen in other schools.

I then attended Hampshire College, in Amherst, an institution designed to be a model of innovation in higher education. My chemistry course, for example, was a class on Plant Poisons. I still learned typical chemistry concepts, but through the context of plant biology and ecology. My transcript only had grades from the scattering of courses that I took at the other institutions in the Five College system; my Hampshire transcript was narrative summaries of my coursework and research. I learned to be a teacher through project-based learning, integrated classes, portfolio assessments, and team-based cohorts. I have since spent my career in public education working with educators, with schools, with districts, with museums, with architects, and others, all on rethinking education for students. To be very clear, I am only sharing my personal experience here; I am not advocating any particular approaches for us to consider.

Here is what I've learned throughout my varied engagement with different schools and contexts. First, excellence is not what we have, but *what we make of the opportunities available to us*. Second, *an educational system will do its best to carry on as is; until it can't*. If change is not planned for, change is typically quite painful. I've learned the value of taking the opportunity to make change in schools while things are still good. In many ways this is counter-intuitive, but if we wait until change is forced upon us, it is very difficult to manage to positive effect. If all we look at is what we have, change looks like a loss. If, however, we manage change to maximize available opportunities, there is a rich array of possibilities to advance excellence.

While I had a sense coming into my service on the school committee that change is coming, and hopeful that our strategic plan acknowledges this, now that I have been here for a bit I believe even more strongly that change coming. Signs include: increasing budget pressures and shortening override cycles, declining enrollment, technologies that are pervading our schools no matter the efforts we take to limit them, pandemics and remote learning, and the increasing demands of the quickly changing world around us. I believe substantive change is on its way whether we want it or not. One or two failed override requests in the next few years might even be the straw that brings it on. We likely can hold on to our program as is for a number of years, but I believe we are seeing the signs that will ultimately force us to make some sort of substantive change.

I am supportive of this year's budget because I believe it will give us time to plan. It takes time to innovate in a traditional educational system such as ours. I will be encouraging us to take advantage of the time this year's budget provides us to engage in that planning. Such planning would mean we talk about the big picture purposes and desired outcomes we have for students, budget allocation and program design, and

how to effectively collaborate with a variety of stakeholders. It would mean we focus more often on implementing and refining our strategic plan, which has some excellent foundations to build on, but which can only be successful if we are willing to look at innovations to ensure the plan has a chance. Many schools have done this, others are actively doing so. My experience in small schools over the years provides me confidence that we can innovate even as our enrollment drops. We are not alone in these challenges or efforts.

I believe this is necessary work; necessary for both our students and our communities. This is why I speak up, why I often ask dumb questions, try to pose potential ideas, and encourage us to have big picture conversations. As I look around the table, I am excited for our potential. We have a dream team of perspectives and expertise on this committee that most districts can only hope for. I look forward to learning more about why you agreed to serve, how your experiences inform your perspective, and what you see for our district's future."

## **9) Adjourn**

*Mr. Harrington moved to adjourn the meeting; Ms. Whitman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

The meeting was adjourned at 9:01 pm

## **School Committee Future Meetings**

- Monday, April 3, 2023 Memorial Elementary School
- Monday, May 1, 2023 Essex Elementary School