



**SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

**BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES**

January 9, 2024

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	January 9, 2024
<b>Location:</b>	MERMHS Learning Commons
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Mitchell, Co-Chair Chris Reed Erica Spencer
<b>Absent:</b>	
<b>Guests:</b>	Stella S., incoming Student Representative Julie Sgroi, Principal MERHS Michelle Cresta, incoming Director of Finance & Operations Cameron Molinare, Athletics Director
<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 of** – Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:03 p.m.

**B. Business Meeting Open Session**

**1) Public Comment (Guidelines for public comment can be found in sections BEDH and BEDH-E of the School Committee policy manual) –**

Antonella Muniz, 20 Harland Street, Essex. Ms. Muniz stated that, because the two elementary schools combine at the middle school, it makes sense to focus there on

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closing the achievement gap. She stated that multiple measures demonstrate that one of the elementary schools is doing well while the other needs additional support. Ms. Muniz said that Essex is a Title 1 school in a community with a higher percentage of low income families. Ms. Muniz advocated for a focus on each elementary school individually to highlight and support their specific populations. She said that the district should consider the per pupil expenditure at the classroom level by combining teacher plus teacher aide salaries and removing external factors that do not directly impact students to calculate the cost per pupil in each classroom. This number could be used for comparison. In the high school, Ms. Muniz said that this measure would allow a comparison of each course offering within the same subject and between AP and college prep courses, subject-to-subject and grade-to-grade. Ms. Muniz stated that per pupil expenditure at the classroom level clearly identifies where the district's priorities lie and establishes the costs in providing certain options. Ms. Muniz questioned whether the district should continue to provide the same program as it has for the past ten years with enrollment decreasing or whether it should transition to a different model. Public school enrollment is declining statewide. Ms. Muniz asked for evidence that the district's current approach could not be done in a better way. Ms. Muniz stated that the budget should reflect working toward closing the achievement gap between elementary schools, that it should be built on strategy and student achievement and not last year's budget, and that it should reflect strategic high school schedule offerings.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester. Ms. Banks expressed concern at the lower performance scores relative to Manchester and Essex and said that she wants to see that addressed. Ms. Banks said that the way to accomplish that is with a more robust budget, including instructional coaches as requested by the elementary principals to address issue.

- 2) **Chairman's Report** – Theresa Whitman. Ms. Whitman provided an update on community engagement. Since the last SC meeting, she was able to connect with Erika Brown, editor of The Cricket, regarding the School Committee's idea to have a regular FAQ section in the weekly newspaper. Ms. Brown shared that the paper has received several similar requests from local groups looking for dedicated time and space in The Cricket. Unfortunately, there is limited space available to accommodate all these requests. Ms. Brown said that the Manchester Planning Board has found itself eliciting similarly strong reactions during certain times. The Cricket has accepted submissions from the planning board when a major issue looms for them. Ms. Brown suggested the School Committee plan to submit three process pieces educating the community around important topics, for example the MSBA process, how it works and what to expect. In addition, the letter to the editor section can still be utilized by the SC. Ms. Whitman also stated that the SC was not able to hold office hours preceding the current business meeting due to a finance subcommittee meeting.

Mr. Sanson read from the "School Committee Operating Protocols:"

- Honor our agreed upon operating protocols and norms, and agree to take responsibility for reminding one another (through the chair) when discussions get off track, personal or redundant.
- Channel requests for information, reports, and data through the Superintendent and the Chair rather than directly to staff. The Chair and the Superintendent will ensure that each member has equal access to this information in a timely manner.

**3) Student Report** – Mr. Sanson introduced Stella Straub from the high school Student Advisory Council. Ms. Straub will accompany him to SC meetings throughout the year and will assume his position at year’s end. Mr. Sanson stated that the AC talked about the Program of Studies and the ongoing discussion about class size. He said that the student’s take on the issue is that small class sizes are more beneficial. Usually smaller classes are either high level or lower level classes where more individual attention is helpful. Mr. Sanson said that variation in enrollment should be averaged over years, as well, to level out trends. He cited a class that has two sections of over 25 students this year that was not as crowded last year. Mr. Sanson also worried about the elimination of AP singleton courses which are very important to those who plan for them. Mr. Spencer asked if there was a different way that classroom enrollment should be examined and tightened up. Mr. Sanson said that perhaps there are some small sections that could be looked at that students are in only because they had nowhere to go.

Ms. Straub shared that the Advisory Board, in an effort to increase student input, has posted QR codes throughout the building. Students can upload feedback and ideas, providing students with a channel for their voice and a way to ask questions during the current budget season. Mr. Binieris asked if suggestions go to the principal and superintendent. Ms. Straub said that they go to her first and the AB works to channel them to the most appropriate place. Mr. Sanson stated that, even if there is not an obvious resolution, each student’s concern can be heard. Ms. Straub said the program has been in the works since last spring.

**4) Consent Agenda –**

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1034-1041\* original agenda incorrectly listed the vouchers through 1037, but the School Committee was furnished with AP Vouchers 1034-1041 for consideration and approval.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the AP Vouchers 1034-1041; Mr. Binieris seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

- Minutes for approval: December 19, 2023

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the minutes; Ms. Spencer seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. Mr. Foster abstained.*

## **5) Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/John Binieris) – No Report
- **Finance Committee/Collaboration Group** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman Provided a budget timeline for upcoming meetings;

Budget Workshop	January 16, 2024	12:00 pm
Public Hearing	January 23, 2024	
Budget Adoption	February 6, 2024	

Ms. Whitman stated that the Essex building project is at the stage where the towns will need to come together to discuss financing of a feasibility study for the MSBA. To that end, Superintendent Beaudoin will invite the chairs of the town boards to a collaboration meeting to discuss. Ms. Koch-Sundquist commented that the collaboration group is not currently meeting, and Ms. Whitman said that the matter would be discussed in more depth later in the meeting.

Ms. Whitman stated that she received another email regarding the apportionment formula, and she thinks it wise to undertake a process of learning about what other districts have in place regarding apportionment. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) offers consultation services. They work in partnership with DESE. The superintendent was able to participate in a webinar earlier in the day. MARS strongly suggested enlisting outside support in conducting any review. They also stressed the uniqueness of any district and said not to cut and paste when applying what is found in other districts to MERSD. Ms. Whitman said that on December 21, Superintendent Beaudoin sent an invitation to the collaboration group to see if they are interested in meeting in a public session. The Essex Town Administrator, speaking on behalf of the Essex BOS, said that they are not interested in participating if it is a public meeting. The Essex Finance Committee did not respond. The Manchester Selectboard prefers an informal meeting, but is willing to meet publically. Two Manchester FinCom members responded similarly. Some members cited how the collaboration board previously functioned, and Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for elaboration. Ms. Whitman read from one of the responses, “The purpose was to bring a few people together from the two towns and the School Committee for informal discussions about budgets and directions... The collaboration meetings were formed at a time when the budget process was very divisive, with the district proposing large budget increases in excess of 7%, Manchester facing significant annual increases, and too much political animosity. The collaboration meetings were in addition to the School Committee meetings and the individual FinCom and Select Board meetings... These collaboration meetings have been valuable in exploring ideas, pulling in new thoughts and information that everyone benefits from. At times, the discussion does move into confidential areas

and uncomfortable discussion topics. However the ideas and information have been extremely useful for the district and the two towns.” Ms. Spencer asked if there had been follow up on whether the collaboration meetings violate open meeting law. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she did not ask for a legal opinion but did have a conversation with council. At issue is how the group has evolved. It has moved into having a formal agenda and summative report out, which are characteristics of a formal meeting. There have been decisions made at the collaboration group and decision-making puts the group into the realm of a public body. Ms. Whitman clarified that the report outs arose because there were different summaries given to different bodies following the meetings. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she thinks the district needs help in building safe communications with its town partners. Ms. Mitchell commented that there was a recommendation to decrease the size of the collaboration group. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the refusal to participate in a public meeting is surprising given the calls for transparency. She said she would have hoped that the town partners would have already sought legal counsel. Ms. Whitman pointed out that the collaboration group existed to problem solve issues leading up to budget presentation. The district now has a working budget and knows what Essex is asking and where Manchester stands. The parties will be invited to the conversation regarding the MSBA. Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed that she will reach out to the chairs of the BOS and FinCom of both towns to discuss the MSBA and timeline. Mr. Reed stated that he believes it is important to revisit apportionment but he wanted to make sure that doing so does not distract from the budget finalization process for this year. Mr. Reed said he thought it was a good idea to line things up to pursue revisiting apportionment, though. Ms. Whitman confirmed that the plan was to focus on the budget process and not rush the apportionment review. Ms. Mitchell reminded SC members to send Superintendent Beaudoin topics for the budget workshop on Tuesday.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the next negotiation meeting is January 16, 2024. Mr. Reed stated that negotiations are reaching the point where the district will need to return with a financial proposal.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – Superintendent Beaudoin referred to the MERSD proposed IKF graduation requirement revisions distributed with SC business meeting materials. The proposed revisions would replace the current IKF graduation list, which includes a breakdown of specific hours and credits by area of study and community service. The proposed revision would allow “options to meet the requirements (to) be established by the High School administration.”

Mr. Foster stated that the policy subcommittee has not met since the last SC meeting. In their last meeting, they discussed how to indicate that the graduation requirements are housed within the program of study. Mr. Foster stressed that graduation expectations are a core responsibility of the School Committee. Putting the requirement in the program of study could indicate that the responsibility resides with the administration. The program of studies document is a high school administration document. It is also a document that

is adopted yearly, indicating that graduation requirements would be adopted yearly. Mr. Foster recommended not acting on the revision, but instead keeping the graduation requirements in the policy manual and copying them into the program of studies. Ms. Whitman asked the SC if they wanted to discuss the matter tonight or table discussion.

*Mr. Foster moved to table the discussion. Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.*

Discussion:

Ms. Whitman stated that she was able to read the revision and did not think it was terribly controversial. Ms. Spencer asked if there was a way to rephrase the revision so that it would alleviate Mr. Foster's concerns. Mr. Foster referenced the MERSD graduation requirements, currently housed in the program of studies, and said they should be made the policy in the policy handbook.

*Mr. Foster moved to amend the graduation policy to reflect the graduation requirements. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.*

Ms. Whitman asked the superintendent if there were any foreseen consequences of such a move. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this update was modeled after Andover policy and would have negated the need to update the policy yearly. Principal Sgroi did not see undesirable consequences with the revision. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that as a team, the SC would need to remember each January that the policy document should come prepped with the program of studies. Mr. Foster stated the SC should only have to approve the graduation requirements when a change is made, not yearly.

*Vote on motion as amended passed unanimously.*

Ms. Whitman stated that she received communication from a community member willing to take on an aspect of soliciting ad revenue. However, there is existing SC policy that states there will be no advertising without permission from the SC. Ms. Whitman asked whether the policy subcommittee wished to engage and review the policy or move forward on a case-by-case basis with each potential ad solicitation. Ms. Whitman asked about expediting the process for the current interested party. Ms. Spencer stated that, given the interest in finding new revenue sources and the willingness of a community member to facilitate that, the subcommittee should be willing to make needed changes. Ms. Whitman clarified that the interested community member is channeling revenue to a particular avenue. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she does not want to get into funds having to be used for a specific purpose. Ms. Mitchell commented that many other schools have ads.

Ms. Whitman asked that the policy subcommittee present a schedule of prioritized deliverables at the January 23 SC meeting. Pending policy considerations include reserves, middle school sports participation by private school students, class size, ad revenue, and MASC. Ms. Whitman stated that it is expected that the policy subcommittee

will return to the SC with follow up questions and not necessarily draft policy for each of these issues.

- 6) Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin introduced Michelle Cresta to the School Committee and formally recommended that the SC appoint Ms. Cresta to the position of Director of Finance & Operations.

*Ms. Whitman moved to approve the appointment of Michelle Cresta to the position of Director of Finance and Operations. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.*

Clarification and Questions: Ms. Whitman stated that the SC is responsible for the appointment as specified in Massachusetts general law. Ms. Mitchell asked if Ms. Cresta would be able to assist the superintendent with budget construction prior to her official start date. Superintendent Beaudoin reassured the SC that she was able to complete the work on the budget and that Mr. Urbas continues to advise where needed. During the summer, the administration will look more at issues of transparency in budget building and lean into Ms. Cresta's expertise.

*The motion passed unanimously.*

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the district is ready to open the search for a new Essex Elementary Principal. The position will be posted January 12, with a parent focus group assembled by the week of January 22. Interviews are planned for February 5-12, site visits on February 26, and appointment by March 9. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for clarification regarding publicity for the process and how parents are selected for the focus group. The superintendent said that any Essex parent can participate on the focus group and that site visits are open to all. Standard community outreach measures are used to notify the community about opportunities to engage in the process. Ms. Whitman said this would be an opportunity for SC members to amplify the district message through individual social media presence.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that MERSD is in the very earliest stage of the building project. The Period of Eligibility runs from March to November. During this time, the district will demonstrate its readiness to partner with the MSBA by completing a series of documents. The towns will demonstrate their readiness by funding a feasibility study. Superintendent Beaudoin also said that there is a delineated process for getting on the building committee, including an application and interview process. It will include representatives from the town governing bodies. The superintendent said that the SC should look to create a facilities sub group soon. During the Memorial building project, this subgroup became the appointees to the building committee.

Superintendent Beaudoin ended her report by thanking the facilities staff for their work through the weekend storm to prepare the buildings for Monday. In turn, the SC

members thanked the superintendent for calling the delayed start in the evening on Sunday rather than Monday morning, allowing for a smoother transition to the week.

**7) Continued Business –**

- a. High School Program of Studies – Julie Sgroi, HS Principal. Ms. Sgroi referenced a memo included with the SC meeting materials listing proposed changes to the high school program of studies. These include changes to the name of the School Counseling, formerly Guidance, department; a change to the visual art course pathway to allow more students to access the curriculum; and replacement of the term “elective” with “offering” in course descriptions. There were several courses which will be listed as not offered next year due to lack of interest and additional changes to course content.

Ms. Whitman asked if any of the eliminated courses are precursors to other courses. Ms. Sgroi said they are not. Ms. Mitchell asked if, to Mr. Sanson’s point, if any of the eliminated courses might be courses in the kind of slump from which they might recover. Ms. Sgroi said that the art teacher felt confident that interest in the eliminated courses had been waning for several years. Instead of just removing the listing from the program of studies, Ms. Sgroi said these courses will be listed as “not offered.” This allows feedback to come to administration regarding them. Ms. Spencer asked about the difference between Geometry and Fundamentals of Geometry. Ms. Sgroi said that they are both CP courses that are based on student needs. Students do not self-select into those courses, but are assigned based on their needs. Mr. Foster clarified that a course can be listed in the program of studies but not run. Ms. Sgroi confirmed that there is a disclaimer to that effect.

*Ms. Whitman moved to approve the MERHS Program of Studies for the 2024-2025 academic school year. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion*

*The motion passed unanimously.*

- b. Athletics Fees Review – Cameron Molinare, Athletics Director. Ms. Molinare provided a detailed look at the high school athletics program, using figures from the 2022-2023 fiscal year, and presented a breakdown of participation, income, and the division of expense between user fees and the district. Ms. Molinare said that user fees continue to decline. Enrollment numbers for all sports are monitored. Waning programs receive a last effort to boost enrollment but are cut if numbers do not rise. Volunteers are utilized as much as possible. Most sports have one paid coach. The exception is collision sports and a few other sports, like alpine ski and swim/dive that require additional staff for oversight. Ms. Molinare said that there are fewer multisport athletes, and there has been a decrease in user fees. Funding of the athletics program is split between the general fund (the district) and the revolving fund (user fees/gate receipts). The general fund budgets for coaching, custodial, officials,

and membership dues. The revolving fund would pay for fees, trainers, and transportation. The goal is to exhaust the revolving fund first. However, it has not been sufficient to meet the needs of the program. In response, the athletics department has increased ticket prices and doubled gate revenue. Increased expense challenges for the athletics program include rental prices, travel expenses, supply costs and rising uniform costs. Ms. Molinare conducted a survey of user fees and family caps in comparable communities and found MERSD to be in the top three in cost for both measures, despite not raising fees for several years.

Ms. Molinare recommended increasing user fees by 2.5% yearly, beginning in FY25, and increasing the family cap by a one time 2.5%. In addition, she recommended maintaining the current pay per sport structure. Ms. Molinare also recommended pursuing sponsorship and fundraising opportunities and other creative cost saving measures.

Questions: Superintendent Beaudoin reminded the SC that the pending vote applied only to the increase in the athletics fee structure. Ms. Whitman asked members to restrict questions to this topic. Ms. Mitchell asked how MERSD compared to other districts for the number of families who qualified for athletic fee exemption. Ms. Molinari said that this status is derived from qualification for free and reduced lunch and that information is not available for other schools. Mr. Foster stated that the district has a low income rate of 13% and asked if the high fees are deterring sports participation. Ms. Molinare replied that everything the district distributes includes information about fee waivers. In addition, the district is committed to working with all families to meet the challenges of fee payment, including setting up payment plans, because they do not want fees to be a deterrent to student participation. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that declining enrollment means that there are fewer participants to generate user fees.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve a 2.5% yearly increase to athletics user fees and a one-time 2.5% family cap increase. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that there has been feedback about the most expensive sports having some of the lowest participation rates and asked about the process for discontinuing a program. Ms. Molinare stated that when numbers wane, she first considers if the program has the numbers needed to compete. If not, the district looks to cut the program and form a cooperative team with a partner program. The district also considers the costs of the program and the user fee offset. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that historically the goal of user fees has been for them to offset expenses by 50-60%. Ms. Whitman stated that the breadth of the athletics program offered at MERSD was originally intended to increase equity for the district. Although

some have suggested tiering fees based on the sport participating in a students is participating, this could deter students from trying a sport that is more expensive. Ms. Whitman clarified that, although it is not the SC's decision to decide what sports are offered, consideration of these issues helps the School Committee to understand the process. Ms. Molinare said that enrollment trends have ebbed for the sailing program, which was the state champion in 2015. Currently, she is in conversations to seek partnerships for the program. Many of the district's sailors do not participate in other sports. Ms. Molinare stated that switching to a flat user fee, for instance \$600 per year for unlimited sports, would likely drive away participants. Mr. Reed asked why MERSD fees are relatively high considering that they have not been raised in many years. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that 2015 was the last fee review. She said that, for a district of this size it is uncommon to offer this breadth of sports offerings. The structure is redistributive, not favoring one sport over another. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about incentives to encourage students to try a sport. Ms. Molinare said that there is a two week refund period if a student decides not to continue with a sport. Mr. Reed asked how advertising dollars would be applied to the program, given that some sports have greater visibility. Ms. Molinare said that advertising would feed into the department as a whole, but team-based fundraising would stay with that team. Ms. Spencer stated that she thought that the fee increase should only apply to the next year.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to amend the motion to increase user fees by 2.5% for FY25 only. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.*

Superintendent Beaudoin made a point of clarification that the increase was projected to take in \$6100. Operating expenses have increased and the fees have not been raised since FY17.

Discussion: Ms. Spencer stated that the original motion would increase the fees yearly by 2.5%. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the percentage is equal to about \$10 per year.

*The motion carried 4-3*

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved the amended motion. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed unanimously.*

Mr. Foster thanked Ms. Molinare for her insight and detailed presentation on user fees and the balance within the athletics program between the revolving account's user fees and gate receipts and the general fund. In addition, she provided a glimpse into the many aspects involved in managing dozens of

teams across the school year and balancing the needs of hundreds of student athletes in the community.

- c. FY25 Budget – Superintendent Beaudoin. Superintendent Beaudoin first spoke to the term “per pupil expenditure” used by Ms. Muniz in her public comment. The superintendent said the term is defined and detailed on the DESE website. Like other data, it is a lagging document, and the most recent data provided is from FY21. Larger schools tend to have a smaller per pupil expenditure.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the budget is currently awaiting further clarification on final health care numbers, expected on January 30. During the upcoming budget workshop, the superintendent expects to work on language around communicating with the community about school choice and how students placed out of district impact the number of students on enrollment tallies. Another topic will be the increase in SPED and how it is student need driven, meaning that staffing has not declined as quickly as student enrollment. Superintendent Beaudoin also stated that E&D was filed on December 26, 2023. The superintendent said that the budget may be adopted by the beginning of February, but the district is still in TA negotiations, and there will be some expense associated with the outcome. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that now is the time to decide what the School Committee wants from the final budget.

Ms. Whitman clarified that this is the SC’s opportunity to guide the superintendent in the direction they want the budget to shift for the February 6 budget adoption hearing. Superintendent Beaudoin said that, for example, currently the budget has a sharp increase in school choice and the use of \$350K in E&D. This is the time for the School Committee to voice their approval or redirect the administration. Ms. Whitman said that this would be explored in the budget workshop. Mr. Foster stated that in the past workshops were more informative and that this seems more decision based. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said the workshop is to provide guidance. Ms. Whitman stated that it is a publically posted meeting.

Ms. Whitman stated that she was contacted by The Town of Essex Administrator, Brendhan Zubricki, to see if the SC would be taking up the issue of the third party review. Superintendent Beaudoin mentioned that the MSBA feasibility study will cover many components of interest, including an enrollment study and the possibility of merging the elementary schools. However, in review of the email sent Mr. Zubricki, it was determined that he had referenced the passage by the Town of Essex of their warrant item in November. Ms. Whitman will respond to Mr. Zubricki that the School Committee will consider any proposal the Town of Essex brings forth within the provision of from their town warrant.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to extend the School Committee meeting. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed unanimously.*

**8) School Committee Comment – None.**

**C. Adjourn**

*Ms. Whitman moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Spencer seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

*Meeting Adjourned at 9:04 pm*

**School Committee Future Meetings**

- January 23, 2024
- February 6, 2024
- March 5, 2024