



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

December 19, 2023

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	<i>December 19, 2023</i>
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Lin Mitchell Chris Reed Erica Spencer
Absent:	Jake Foster
Guests:	Courtney Brown – Senior Class Advisor Senior Class officers Joe Janack – Middle/High School Band and Music Teacher Ben Icenogle – Chorus Teacher Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Instructional Technology
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

A. Executive Session

B. Business Meeting – The School Committee moved from Executive Session to its open business meeting at 6:45 pm.

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

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Nina McKinnon, 1 Lowland Farm Road, Essex. Ms. McKinnon said that she has heard talk of reinstatement of the late bus between the MHS and Essex and wondered if there was new data available to support this. Ms. McKinnon said she had follow up questions from the last meeting that would be helpful before the next budget presentation on January 23. Ms. McKinnon asked how the SC would pursue public engagement and if it would include small group settings. Ms. McKinnon said that there is renewed public talk about reinstatement of the late bus, discontinued in FY19 due to ridership levels according to Ms. McKinnon, and Ms. McKinnon asked if there is new data to support restoration of the late bus service. Ms. McKinnon inquired about submission of the E&D. State Law requires filing by October 31. Ms. McKinnon asked for insight into reserve funds earmarked for use in the FY24 budget and what they were used for. Ms. McKinnon stated that, since the September 19, 2024 meeting, there has been talk about the amount of reserves that was actually used. This has led to the perception that there was E&D monies unspent. Ms. McKinnon asked for what the original E&D monies were earmarked in the FY24 budget. She asked how the amount of reserve funds to be used in the FY25 budget was determined. Ms. McKinnon said that the community needs insight into why they should support the budget and that asking for clarity is not decisive. If the towns are to be one entity, a solution needs to be found that works for both.

- 2) **Chairman's Report** – Ms. Whitman stated that agenda for the evening includes community engagement and will afford an opportunity to address how the SC will look to reach out to both communities.

Ms. Mitchell read 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.
- 3) **Student Report** – Diego Sanson stated that met he met with the superintendent and the Student Advisory Board. They discussed the perceived divide between Manchester and Essex. Students expressed that over the last two years, there has been an increase in tension between students from the two towns, and this tension was attributed to the budget struggles. Mr. Sanson said that students are impacted by the messages coming in from outside the school system and urged adults to be mindful of the language they use on social media. Ms. Whitman asked Mr. Sanson to speak in terms of the ADL strategies that the Advisory Board used explore this issue. Mr. Sanson said that is has been an interesting exercise. The ADL trained several student leaders in confronting bias, but this is an opportunity to apply anti-bias work to a local issue. Mr. Sanson said that students worked through the exercise by first defining bias and becoming aware of existing bias – in this case regarding notions of who is to blame for the school budget not passing, from both viewpoints. Students admit to having their own ideas about this issue and work to bring this into the classroom by saying, “these are my pre-conceived notions,” and having conversations about generalizations and truth. Mr. Sanson stated

that he and his fellow leaders learn about global issues, but this is something that they can bring back to their everyday experience. At Ms. Whitman's urging, Mr. Sanson also shared that he recently learned that he was accepted early-decision to Duke University. Mr. Sanson said he feels very grateful because the education he receive at MERSD afforded him this opportunity.

4) Consent Agenda –

- Minutes for approval: September 19, 2023
- Student Travel – HS Senior Class/ HS Band & Chorus Tri

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Reed seconded the motion.

Discussion: Several guests were present representing the student groups petitioning the School Committee regarding out of state, overnight travel. Courtney Brown, staff senior class advisor, introduced three senior class officers who spoke about the presentation they submitted to School Committee members. This presentation is included in posted meeting materials and highlights ways in which the objectives of the trip align with the Vision of the Graduate. All three officers commented on how formative the Merrowvista trip had been for them as fifth grade students. The senior class treasurer added that the overnight rafting trip will be restorative to the sense of community to a group that has experienced both a pandemic and the current stress of budget conflict between the communities before they go out into the world as young adults. Ms. Spencer commented that she was glad to hear that Merrowvista was formative for each of the students. Mr. Janack and Mr. Icenogle presented a request to the School Committee, on behalf of the high school music department, to take the high school band and chorus groups to New York City for a three day trip during which they will have the opportunity to perform at public venues and attend professional productions, as well as experience venues of cultural significance. Mr. Janack and Mr. Icenogle explained how the trip links to the district's Vision of the Graduate. Mr. Janack stated that there is a history of the music department going on trips as a way to bring the department together, and increase collaboration between the chorus and band students, while boosting recruitment and retention. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked how these trips are funded. Mr. Janack said that fundraisers cover the music department trip. Ms. Brown said that the senior class trip is completely funded via class dues and fundraising with need-based financial assistance available. Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification regarding the School Committees role in approving field trips. Ms. Whitman stated that the trips before the SC currently are out of state trips. Superintendent Beaudoin added that they are extracurricular trips and voluntary. They are not part of the program. Previous trips referenced by students (Merrowvista and the Washington DC trip), were part of the educational program of students. Therefore, the district needed to accommodate every student's right to attend and entice staff to attend. The cost to do so became prohibitive and the trips were discontinued.

The motion passed unanimously.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/John Binieris) – No Report

- **Collaboration Group** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) –Ms. Whitman reminded the SC that there were no collaboration meetings scheduled. Superintendent Beaudoin intends to send out a request for a collaboration group meeting, targeting the weeks following the holiday break.
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) –Mr. Reed stated that the negotiations are ongoing and that their next meeting is in January.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) –Ms. Spencer stated that the policy subcommittee has not met.
 - Policy Request – Athletics Participation for Students not attending MERSD. Ms. Whitman referred the SC members to the letter included in the SC meeting materials packet detailing a community member request for policy consideration.

Ms. Whitman moved to send to the Policy Sub-Committee the request for consideration of a policy allowing middle school students attending private schools, but living in Manchester or Essex, to play middle school sports. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the letter received stated that the district allows participation by some private school students in certain sports but not others. Ms. Koch-Sundquist clarified that the football and cheerleading “junior hornets” programs are not school programs and wanted to make sure that precedent was not being set based on a misconception that they are school programs. Ms. Whitman said that all considerations would be fully explored in subcommittee. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if it was possible to put a date on the recommendation from the subcommittee. Ms. Whitman said that the policy subcommittee meets frequently already and may have to prioritize their work. Ms. Mitchell asked for the deadline for signups for the particular sport of the interested student. This would be for next fall. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that a decision by the end of the school year would be reasonable. Ms. Spencer stated that she likes the idea of looking for opportunities to say yes when possible.

The motion passed unanimously.

- 6) **Superintendent’s Report** – Pam Beaudoin. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the E&D is ready for submission. However, the auditors, Powers & Sullivan, caught a double entry that needs to be corrected before the full submission can be made. Ms. Spencer asked about consequences of not filing the E&D by the deadline. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district has only received a first notice, having passed the 30-day deadline. Possible consequences could include fund withholding, but there have been no penalties at this point. The filing should go in within a week or two. Superintendent Beaudoin spoke to the historical use of E&D funds. Budget allocation of E&D used as revenue. The intent was to eliminate use of reserve funds by pursuing a budget correction in both towns, but the district did not receive the promised support for this strategy. The district began the current budget with an E&D

revenue placeholder of \$350K. There is not science to the selection of this number. Its goal is to reduce the assessment.

MSBA Essex Elementary Update: The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) is a very large grant program which can yield reimbursement to the school district of up to 30% of the cost of the anticipated Essex Elementary building project. MERSD submitted a Statement of Interest to the MSBA and received notice that it has been accepted into the MSBA's eligibility period. The 270-day Eligibility Period formalizes and streamlines the beginning of the MSBA's grant approval process and benefits the District by providing a definitive schedule for the completion of preliminary requirements, assisting with the determination of financial and community readiness, and identifying needs for planning and budgeting. Successful completion of all activities in the Eligibility Period will allow the District to be eligible for an MSBA invitation to the Feasibility Study. It is critical that the district partner with the MSBA and follow a schedule for approval to receive grant funding. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district has to do a few studies to demonstrate that the district is ready to complete the MSBA program. For example, an enrollment study to determine the size of the facility that is required. The district will assemble a School Building Committee to support the project. The district should anticipate a fall 2026 vote to appropriate funds necessary for the Feasibility Study and Schematic Design phases of the potential project.

Discussion: Superintendent Beaudoin said that initial discussions happen with the collaboration group. In March, a School Building Committee will be formed. Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification about the role of the project manager and how town finances are factored into decision making. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district will seat the School Building Committee, and they will shape the process and report back to the School Committee. The School Building Committee will appoint a Project Manager. There is a feedback loop. The Architect takes the lead in design. No one person makes all the decisions. The MSBA is focused on the educational program and will look to make sure the design work is driven by that program and not finance. Ms. Whitman suggested that the SC have a workshop around the building experience since only Mr. Foster has experience with the process. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the MSBA will provide multiple options/themes with price tags. The MSBA requires that the School Building Committee is comprised of ten to twelve members with required skill sets. In addition, there is a manager and architect.

7) Continued Business –

- a. **Director's Update** – Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Instructional Technology.
 - i. Ms. Leonard reported that MERSD received the Arts and Cultural Vitality Innovation Grant from DESE in the amount of \$5K that will fund the district's efforts to evaluate its current arts program. DESE's grant provides structure for examining four levels of a program – infrastructure, opportunities, participation and impact. It provides

field-designed rubric for examining the program and a network of professionals with whom the district can collaborate. The conclusion of the review will yield recommendations and an action plan for the high school program.

- ii. The district is currently engaged in a K-12 History and Social Sciences Curriculum Review. This explore what is taught and when, focusing on the relatively new history and social science standards that came from the department of education and the district's alignment to those frameworks. The review will look at whether students have pathways and offerings to meet those standards and if teachers have the right tools, resources and trainings to teach the different content areas. Simultaneously, the district was awarded a grant that is allowing them the opportunity to field test the Investigating History curriculum, developed in concert with the department of education and leading universities and Primary Source. This grant is funding rigorous professional development, access to print and digital resources, and connection to a network of colleagues.
- iii. The district became a member of the Student Data Privacy Consortium (SDPC). This group looks at data privacy and reviews district policy and practice to ensure that the district acts as stewards of student information. Membership provides the district with a clearinghouse of tools.
- iv. Assessment Overview in Fall – follow up support. Since the fall presentation on MCAS scores and DESE Accountability ratings, the district applied for and received a \$30K grant for math high-dose tutoring for grade four (Essex) and eight to target those skills. The district is currently exploring what this will look like while continuing to lean into its own plans for supporting tier one instruction.

Questions: Ms. Mitchell asked if grant funds for high-dose tutoring would be used to off-set budget intervention expenses. Ms. Leonard clarified that this is not at all the case with DESE grants. DESE grant's allow schools to access services from DESE approved service providers. In this case, DESE has approved intervention tutors skilled at the high-dose technique. Research is showing that short periods of time, for intense blocks of time, can help to close gaps in learning. It is ninety minutes per week for twelve weeks to target an identified need. Students will meet virtually with tutors. These tutoring sessions are scheduled to align with upcoming assessments, and the district should be able to see their impact. Ms. Mitchell asked about how the \$5K art grant could be used. Ms. Leonard clarified that the art grant is very restrictive. It is for stipended work for staff or materials only. Ms. Whitman said the conclusions of the work can inform the district about whether an arts director is needed. Ms. Whitman likened the exploration to a Habib report for the arts. Superintendent Beaudoin

said that DESE usually provides seed money to grow programs. Ms. Spencer asked if the district has previously worked with the math grant partner and how many students would benefit. Ms. Leonard said that in Essex, the provider would be Imagine Learning. Although MERSD has not worked with them, Ms. Leonard has worked with them while at another district. The eighth grade will work virtually during their ME block while the elementary students will work after school. The district will receive daily updates. The elementary school is in the process of identifying students to participate in the program via benchmark assessment data and classroom measures. Ms. Leonard said that clarified actual participants in high-dose tutoring have not yet been identified as the grant was just awarded and the district is early in the process. Ms. Whitman stated that this program is the tutoring is direct instruction to students. In contrast, instructional coaching is work with teachers themselves. Ms. Leonard stated that high-dose tutoring is based on recent field research that high intensity, short dose tutoring direct to students, rather than long, little bits at a time support. This research is looking at how to address performance gaps. It is small groups. The research shows that the number should be between three to five students, not one-on-one. Ms. Whitman asked what the time frame would be on the art program review. Ms. Leonard said she expects it to be done by June. The curriculum review of the history and social sciences program will follow.

- b. FY25 Tentative Budget Hearing Debrief – Ms. Whitman stated that the SC members should use this opportunity to share their insights following the public presentation.
 - i. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she did not hear requests for program cuts or staffing, even from those constituents asking for budget cuts. She felt the district is heading in the right direction.
 - ii. Mr. Binieris said that Superintendent Beaudoin did a great job presenting the drivers of the budget clearly. He stated that the requests from the principals and directors are not extravagant.
 - iii. Mr. Reed stated that there was nothing surprising expressed at the public hearing.
 - iv. Ms. Mitchell said that the presentation was clear and to the point this year. She stated that, at the end of the day, no one wants cuts or to reduce the education level. Ms. Mitchell said that she sees the divide already in the community even though it is only December. She said there is a budget crisis. Ms. Mitchell recommended better utilizing the time between completion of the budget for the current year and the following September to pursue budget solutions.
 - v. Ms. Whitman feedback from Mr. Foster, who sent his insights via email. Mr. Foster had a few questions for the SC to consider. He asked if it is possible to achieve level services at 2.5% this year in order to

receive support for a plan for next year for into the future. If not, how does the SC and the towns think about investment and growth this year in the context of potential requests, such as for EES.

- vi. Ms. Whitman stated that, while no one explicitly asked for cuts, Essex continues to ask for 2.5% and that equals cuts. Ms. Whitman said she is still hearing a lot of talk around an audit and appreciated Mr. Federspiel's comments on the topic. Ms. Whitman noted his suggestion about adding guardrails to the apportionment agreement. Ms. Whitman said that when stakeholders say they support a reasonable budget, that could mean level services but it could mean a lot of things. Ms. Whitman said the SC needs to decide what that should mean.
- vii. Ms. Spencer stated that Mr. Federspiel was insightful and provided useful ideas for further discussion. The district's growth rate, when viewed in terms of the rate of inflation, is not unreasonable. In addition, there remains merit to thinking about merging the concept of a mediator and auditor together to find someone to help the district and its stakeholders to find a way to work collaboratively. Ms. Spencer said that the community members do not seem to think that learning loss has been adequately addressed. Ms. Spencer stated that the principals need to be given the tools they need to address learning loss.
- viii. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the issues on the table now have been discussed for many years. What was previously defined as "reasonable" for district growth by the members of the collaboration group was 3.5%. That was the bargain that was struck years ago. Although 3.5% growth is not enough to meet all the district's needs, it gave the district enough leverage to manage its levers, reallocate to optimize resources. The superintendent said that a facilitator could be very helpful. Additionally, Superintendent Beaudoin suggested that the towns consider a stabilization fund that they pay into in years when their assessment is down. Ms. Whitman stated that perhaps those suggestions should be pushed to town partners, or perhaps that is why a facilitator is needed. The School Committee and Superintendent Beaudoin revisited the merits of an operational audit, particularly as it could be tied to facilitation. The district has a structural funding problem without a clear solution, and it could use help to reach agreement with its town partners regarding a solution to that problem. Ms. Whitman stated that the conversation tends to breakdown at this point because there was a time when this problem was resolved with the town problems and the district was told that reasonable growth would be 3.5%. However, 3.5% is no longer reasonable to Essex because of apportionment. Ms. Whitman stated that she is unclear whether the 2.5% for Essex is a hard line in the sand or the beginning point for a new negotiation. Ms. Whitman said that the communication styles have not aligned between the town partners. Ms. Spencer stated

that there are people that work to help towns through this kind of impasse, if this could be agreed upon. Ms. Spencer said that it is her understanding that School Committee has to ask for any changes to the regional agreement. The towns cannot bring those requests themselves. Ms. Spencer asked if an amendment could be made to require a surplus fund for each town to pay into when their apportionment level is below a certain level. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that Essex has a stabilization fund, requiring a 2/3 vote to access the funds, and that leadership is hesitant to use it. Ms. Whitman stated that last fall, an MASC policy update stated that MA law now allows regional districts to create such a fund. Ms. Spencer said that there should be a mechanism to make that easier in order to aid towns. Superintendent Beaudoin said that no substantive changes to the budget are planned for the January 9 School Committee meeting. However, the district may look at repackaging or exploring other funding sources. The superintendent stated that the district is pushing VSI for a final number for health insurance sooner, but she feels more comfortable using their best estimate. January 23 will be a budget hearing, and Superintendent Beaudoin would like to hold a budget workshop before then to provide an update. She will send out possible dates to the SC. This workshop will be public.

c. School Committee Goals

- i. Community Engagement – Ms. Whitman shared a three-pronged approach to community engagement recommended by Mr. Guilfoil, Public Relations for MERSD. For **short range engagement**, Mr. Guilfoil recommended letters to the editor of the local newspapers, the Manchester Cricket and the Gloucester Daily Times. Ms. Mitchell commented that the other side can perceive this negatively. Superintendent Beaudoin said that several years ago the district selected several topics for the SC to address via the newspapers. The superintendent drafted a write up, received input from SC members on it, and submitted it to the papers signed by the SC as a whole. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that if the SC had a weekly spot, like an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section, her number one topic would be “what is level services?” Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that some topics lend themselves naturally to the expertise of certain members, and she said the superintendent should address the definition of level services. Ms. Whitman said that the School Committee has not had a united voice in the last year and that engaging the community through the local papers may be an opportunity to have a united voice. Ms. Koch-Sundquist commented that there are many informational topics that could be presented, and she suggested that there could be a section at the bottom that also presented recommendations from the SC. Ms. Spencer spoke to Ms. Mitchell’s point that controversy does exist in

any point presented. As an example, Ms. Spencer stated that if the SC were to explain the ways in which decreasing enrollment does not necessarily lead to lower costs, it would spark debate. Ms. Whitman summarized that the SC is in favor of the strategy for the SC to engage with local newspapers on a topic-by-topic basis, but not with an attached position. Ms. Mitchell clarified that a draft of the contributed article will be circulated for input and the piece will be submitted “signed” by the entire committee.

Mr. Guilfoil suggested employing a social media campaign as a **long-range strategy**. The goal is to amplify the district’s MERSD message. Mr. Guilfoil noted that several town pages receive a lot of engagement. Supporting MERSD could be as simple as liking something. Ms. Koch-Sundquist mentioned the impact of unofficial sites. Ms. Spencer noted that much of the traffic on the town pages is comprised of responses and wondered how that would be handled by SC members. Ms. Whitman said that she had not gotten to that place in discussion but suggested turning comments off. Ms. Whitman clarified that the SC is not being directed to take on these strategies, only to consider the suggestions. Ms. Spencer said that she thought this task was something she could target, particularly when there are upcoming events, like upcoming budget meetings or a meet-the-principal event.

Ms. Whitman said that the strategy for **mid-range** community engagement was more involved and targets members individually and in small groups through two means. The first is to ensure that meeting invitations are extended. For example, to invite to budget-centered meetings those invested in the budget, including collaboration group members, those who have attended SC meetings in the past, etc. This could include extending a personal invitation to a community member. Ms. Whitman stated that the goal is to decrease the likelihood that someone missed the meeting because they did not know about it. Ms. Whitman provided the example of inviting particular groups to meetings of special interest to them, for example school groups when topics of interest are covered. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district could work to share the agenda and ask town partners to push it out. Ms. Whitman said that the goal of these invitations, as a tool to rebuilding connection and trust with the community, is to demonstrate where the items are that the community cares about and invite them to engage. Superintendent Beaudoin said this goes beyond mass mailings, asking that SC members use their memory banks to recall what is important to individual groups or community members to invite them to engage with the School Committee. Ms. Spencer stated that she believes the SC is doing this. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the difference she sees in this approach is to be able to offer this

proactively to constituents who often are too busy to attend, to say, “you may want to set aside time in the future for this meeting about that issue you have mentioned is very important to you.” The second component for mid-range engagement is listening sessions. Ms. Whitman described these as informal sessions for listening to community member input. Ms. Whitman clarified that these suggestions were not directives but rather suggestions for those SC members able and interested in engaging in these ways with the community. As an example, Ms. Whitman said that before Town Meeting in the spring there is an informal listening session at the senior center where Essex Selectmen welcome townspeople informally to go through things. Ms. Whitman shared that Mr. Foster expressed concern about a listening session versus an opportunity to “tell their story.” Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that often people want SC members to hear how things affect them personally. Ms. Spencer stated that Mr. Foster was concerned with continuing the listen-but-don’t-speak theme of regular SC meetings. Via email, he stated that it has been frustrating for many that do participate and a deterrent to more active and broad involvement. Ms. Spencer said she does not disagree with his sentiments and that there is some tension. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that it would be permissible to state personal opinion, were it presented as such. Ms. Whitman stated that the term listening session came from Mr. Guilfoil and that she did not think there was anything to preclude a meaningful discussion from occurring at these interactions. She said the meetings would be informal, like office hours. It was concluded that the listening sessions would not have to proceed with the same rigid listen-only public comment of SC business meetings. Ms. Spencer said that a coffee hour or pre-SC meeting would be most effective. Ms. Mitchell stated that these sessions would be very helpful because public comment and SC comment at School Committee meetings are one-way. Ms. Mitchell recommended having a structured opportunity, perhaps preceding the School Committee meeting, but with the back and forth engagement. Ms. Spencer suggested having one session before an SC meeting once a month and another in a morning slot once a month. Ms. Whitman said that she would move forward with sending out how the SC would move forward with their plans for community engagement based on member responses to the suggestions.

- 8) **School Committee Comment** – Ms. Mitchell commented the SC is making progress and that there is an increased desire. She referenced Ms. Cameron’s many suggestions as evidence of new willingness to put more options on the table.

C. Adjourn

Ms. Whitman moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:58 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- January 9, 2024
- January 23, 2024