



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

December 13, 2023

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	December 13, 2023
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, out-going Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Lin Mitchell Chris Reed Erica Spencer
Absent:	
Guests:	
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

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) Chairman's Report** – Ms. Whitman shared that she met with the student advisory group and discussed ADL programs that are most relevant to MERSD. Ms. Whitman opened the floor to Ms. Mitchell who wished to clarify a statement from the previous SC meeting regarding class size. Ms. Mitchell stated she misspoke regarding class size at the time. Originally, Ms. Mitchell said that 40% of high school classes had less than ten students enrolled. What she meant was that 40 sections had less than ten students enrolled in them. Ms. Whitman reminded the SC that open meeting law prohibits deliberation outside of business meetings. Ms. Whitman stated that it is always safe to

[Type here]

send information directly to the superintendent, cc'ing the chair and vice-chair, for dissemination to the School Committee. This would allow them to send it out in a way that would prevent it from being constituting deliberation.

2) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1029-1034
- Minutes for approval: None

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

Mr. Urbas clarified that the daily transportation annual contract is divided into ten monthly installments. The rate is fairly consistent per installment.

The motion passed unanimously.

3) Superintendent's Report – Pam Beaudoin was pleased to report that MERSD was accepted by the MSBA into the building process for the Essex Elementary building project. There is a 270 day eligibility period, and the superintendent will provide more details at the upcoming December 19, 2023 School Committee meeting. Sixty-three applicants applied to the MSBA. Only nineteen were accepted into the pipeline, which Superintendent Beaudoin described as an indication of the need level of the Essex facility. Ms. Whitman stated that she hoped the experience would be positive and unifying for everyone in the district. Superintendent Beaudoin extended gratitude to Mr. Urbas and the facilities team for their work with the Habib team. She also thanked the facilities team for their dedicated maintenance of the Essex facility. Their consistent efforts demonstrated to the MSBA that the district is forward thinking and a good risk with which to partner.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that MERSD is a member of the North Shore Special Education Consortium. One school, the Kevin O'Grady School, provides services to some of the most fragile or medically challenged students. The costs for placement are much closer to special education costs than to private school costs for the district. Unfortunately, its building's roof and HVAC system needs to be replaced. They do not qualify for the MSBA program. Instead, member districts will receive an assessment in the spring. Currently, MERSD has nine students at the consortium in total and three at KOG. The assessment to MERSD will be about \$50,000 because of the size of the district. The district plans to pay this via use of end of year surplus monies. However, if the budget is built tighter, the monies may need to come from school choice or by building it into the budget. There is additional tuition increases to the North Shore Consortium built into the budget for FY24. Superintendent Beaudoin provided additional background on the consortium, explaining that the board of directors of the North Shore Special Education Consortium is comprised of the superintendents of member schools. MERSD pays a membership fee at the beginning of every year in the amount of \$10K. The superintendents have an obligation to sit, participate, and actively help govern. The consortium also provides professional development for some

of the district's specialty personnel like counseling, psychology, speech and language and staff of that nature.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the search for a new Director of Finance and Operations will continue with a site visit the following day by finalist Michelle Cresta. If all goes well, a recommendation to the School Committee is expected soon.

Ms. Whitman called a short recess before the public hearing presentation of the tentative FY25 budget.

C. Public Hearing

a. Presentation of Tentative Budget for 2024-2025

Ben Buttrick called to order the Essex Finance Committee at 6:30 pm.

Ms. Whitman stated that, in contrast to the guidelines for public comment found in sections BEDH and BEDH-E of the School Committee policy manual, comment during the public budget hearing is not one way. Participants are encouraged to ask questions of the board, superintendent, and business manager, and back and forth dialogue is permitted. Ms. Whitman first invited officials from the Essex and Manchester town boards to speak before opening up questions to in-person participants and then to online participants.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that Mr. Urbas will first run through a high level presentation of the tentative budget, looking at key drivers. This is intended as a progress report describing early assumptions that give visibility on expectations. The proposed budget is built to be a carry forward or "level services" budget. Superintendent Beaudoin said that a good turn of phrase to understand this approach is, "no cuts, no adds." A full definition is available on the MERSD website. A carry forward budget reflects the impact of rate increases and inflation. It does not include staff and capital requests from building principals and directors. Each principal is the budget manager for their building. For the last few years, they have not had the opportunity to make requests of the budget to invest in their programs.

Mr. Urbas reviewed the FY25 Tentative Operating Budget. Total spending is up 3.42% or \$1.002 million in the Tentative Budget to \$30.258 million. The three primary drivers pushing the budget over 2.5% annually are personnel, health insurance, and out of district placement of special education students (OOD). Personnel expenses include a 2.5% COLA for employees not represented by META and a 2.25% increase for those in META. Their increase translates to 4.0% after step and column movement. The largest operating expense increase is in the Insurance & Other Benefits category, which is up \$418K or 7.3%. This includes a 14.5% rate increase assumption for health insurance, based on the recommendation of MERSD's broker, USI. USI indicated that this number could come down, but it is too soon to determine. The budget includes additional use of district reserves as a revenue source and an increase in acceptance of school choice students in grades 6-10. The apportionment formulae spreads changes over a three year period, resulting in growth for Essex at 5.31% growth and for Manchester at 2.35%, because enrollment for Essex has remained largely flat while Manchester's enrollment has continued to

decline. Mr. Urbas stated that MERSD is also planning to use \$150K from its OPEB trust account to offset retiree health.

Superintendent Beaudoin shifted attention to the three major drivers of the district budget – personnel, health insurance, and out of district expenses. Superintendent Beaudoin stressed that in a carry forward budget, adding nothing, the cost of paying for personnel and their benefits accounts for a 3.4% yearly growth rate, creating a cyclical problem. The superintendent said it puts the district in the unsavory position of having to cut personnel to pay personnel.

Superintendent Beaudoin mentioned that the levy limit has been in place since 1980. The rate increases, without looking at investments in the program, are propelling the district beyond the levy limit. Long term, the district looks to maintain the cost of doing business while continuing to improve. The superintendent stated that in recent years she has asked the principals to reallocate and restructure within to seek efficiencies. This year, they have proposed some additions to invest in the program. Superintendent Beaudoin presented budget figures representing district growth at 2.5%, at level services, and at 4.45% that reflect investment in programs to meet requests from principals and directors.

Superintendent Beaudoin highlighted the programmatic investments that the principals are requesting. The principals are looking to add back, in stages, the world language program to grade six. Initially, this would occur by reallocating a high school instructor to the middle school. At the elementary level, the goal would be to realign the program to the new standards and frameworks that exist before implementation. The elementary principals are requesting instructional coaches in support of elementary classroom student achievement. An additional request is for a Teacher's aide for the middle/high school library and another to be shared between Essex and Memorial. As the library programs have been restructured with declining enrollment, the reduction in staffing has really impacted the number of hands on site. There is a plan to revitalize the space, particularly at the high school learning commons where the library TA could eventually become a librarian position again.

Superintendent Beaudoin closed with a graphic double arrow showing the Tentative Budget stretching between 2.5% to 4.45% and asked for feedback on where community members would like the district to land for the final iteration of the budget for presentation to the communities for voting.

b. Public Comment

Ben Buttrick, Chair Essex Finance Committee, 81 B Choate Street, Essex. Mr. Buttrick stated that earlier in the fall Essex communicated its desire for a 2.5% assessment growth before accounting for apportionment. Their view remains consistent, and Mr. Buttrick noted that the apportionment model has shifted to a more extreme level than in the fall. Mr. Buttrick stated that 2.5% growth would equate to an increase of 4.35% to Essex. Mr. Buttrick estimated their overall budget growth tax capacity for FY at \$465,000. Mr. Buttrick estimated the assessment from the district at \$410,000, \$145,000 for town departments, and for \$10,000 Essex Tech. Mr. Buttrick summarized that Essex has a math problem and would need an override to meet the budget at levels above 2.5%. Mr. Buttrick said that the 5.31% apportionment growth for Essex from 3.45

leaves 0.7 % for other Essex town departments. Their town runs with many partial FTE positions already. Mr. Buttrick expressed doubt that the town of Essex could make further cuts.

Jodi Harris, 21 Spring Street, Essex. Ms. Harris Asked if there was certified E&D yet for the district. Mr. Urbas replied that it was not yet certified. The package is finalized but not submitted. It will be in the next few days. Ms. Harris said that last year the district committed \$520K to the budget from E&D, but only \$90K was utilized and asked if the unused portion could be applied to this budget. Ms. Harris said that Essex is a conservative town. She said that it relies on its call fire fighters and worried that if they were driven out they would be forced to take on the expense of a paid fire department, which she estimated at \$1M.

Ben Buttrick, Essex. Mr. Buttrick asked for a budget clarification from the fall, whether there was a reduction in use of E&D from \$520K to \$92K. Mr. Urbas reviewed end of year procedures for savings. Interest income, by prior agreement with town partners, is reinvested in the stabilization fund. These monies would fall under that heading. \$191K from interest income was allocated to the capital projects and stabilization fund. Mr. Buttrick acknowledged Mr. Urbas's insight. He stated that he does not necessarily want to see a cut scenario and that if the insurance quotes come in lower and there is a way to muddle through, by utilizing E&D funds and creativity to assist Essex with their levy limit math challenges, it would be ideal.

Anne Harrison, 13 Tucks Point Road, Manchester. Ms. Harrison stated that there can be no doubt that Manchester and Essex are different communities. On the one hand, she finds it difficult to hear Essex residents say, "yes we want level services, but we don't want to pay for it." She does not like to hear those in Manchester say, "just push them up against the wall and make them pay." Ms. Harrison said she does not see the resolution, but she does trust the numbers from the Superintendent and outgoing business manager. She stated that Manchester will not be happy with fewer services in the school.

Caroline Weld, School Street, Manchester. "Some of the common hurdles that this School Committee has with the past committees is advocating for a budget that both towns can afford while staying within the confines of proposition 2 1/2 and having no control over fixed costs such as special education, healthcare, and personnel. These items are dictated by market forces, inflation and state and federal law. All of this being done while trying to support the "vision of the graduate". This has been a problem that districts have been trying to deal with for years. Some of us in this room have been in your very seat. One area that I feel that is missing from your discussions is around advocacy. When you look at the MASC website, you can find the roles and responsibilities of a School Committee. One of those responsibilities is advocacy.

MASC defines Advocacy as follows: 1) Engage in advocacy on behalf of STUDENTS and their SCHOOLS and promote the BENEFITS of a public school system to the community. 2) Work closely, when appropriate, with other governmental agencies and bodies. 3) Collaborate with other school committees through the state and national school committee associations to let state legislators, members of Congress, and all other appropriate state and federal officials know of local concerns and issues.

It goes on to say that Education advocacy is one of a school committee members most powerful and critical roles. You are the link between the citizens of your community who you represent

and your legislators. I am asking this committee to at a minimum fund our schools for this budget cycle at 3.42% which would be a level services budget, while beginning the process of reaching out to other School Boards and getting involved at the state level to advocate for public school funding and how towns are having trouble funding public education and town funding within proposition 2 1/2. I believe Manchester residents want there MBTS reps to turn there focus to advocating for our schools and kids and not for what Essex town board members say they can afford. You are elected to represent the taxpayers of Manchester.”

Ryan Gressler, 30 Choate Street, Essex. Mr. Gressler reflected on cuts made to personnel through previous budgets and asked how the current budget would impact program, given that the superintendent had previously warned that there was no longer room left to trim. Superintendent Beaudoin said that a lot depends on factors outside the districts control. If healthcare breaks positively, the district would be able to get very close to the 2.5% budget without program cuts but would not be able to manage investments, with the exception of reallocation. With unfavorable healthcare numbers, the offsets would not be possible.

The conversation led to discussion of attrition at the elementary level where teachers have not been replaced following retirement, leading to a net loss of five FTE classroom teachers at Memorial Elementary. This lead to an exploration of class size controversy at the high school. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that it is difficult as a small school to offer the breadth of program necessary to be competitive with neighboring districts without having some small class sizes and that is valuable objective. The superintendent stated that the high school program subcommittee has been working diligently and is committed to reducing class sections with fewer than ten students by about 50%. The superintendent was clear that the intent of these courses has always been to get the students what they need for their post high school ambitions. Superintendent Beaudoin said the district has not attempted to add teachers to drive high school class sizes down. It is a byproduct of attempting to increase breadth of course opportunities to meet student choice. Mr. Gressler remarked that there are voters of the district as a whole and not just those particular to one town. Ms. Koch-Sundquist commented that class sizes, as a whole, are up to 23-24 at Memorial Elementary.

Principal Sgroi explained that there are many reasons that a class may have fewer than ten students enrolled in a particular section. Currently, she has a world history section that has nine students because there happen to be other electives during that block. This always happens at the high school level because the schedule comes with choice. Superintendent Beaudoin asked Principal Sgroi if reducing staffing by 3 FTE at the high school would eliminate the under ten sections. Principal Sgroi said it would not. She said it would not because scheduling is more impacted by the way student electives impact their schedules. The superintendent asked about the implications of a class size policy canceling any class section without a minimum of ten students. Principal Sgroi said that the high school would lose some classes and those students would need to go somewhere.

Robbie Bilsbury, 126 Eastern Avenue, Essex. Mr. Bilsbury is a teacher and community member and expressed his dismay at the worsening budget situation the longer the budget crisis is put off. He emphasized the need to educate students and give them best educational possible. Mr. Bilsbury sympathized with residents as a taxpayer but firmly advocated for the needs of students.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester. “I think what is weighing on my mind tonight is....”where do we want our public schools to be in 10 to 15 years from now. I ask this question for my two sons, ages 9 and 6. But I also ask this question as a former social studies teacher and a person who values public education as foundational to our way of life and democracy. Under Superintendent Beaudoin’s leadership, this district has achieved academic excellence with reasonable growth in the budget year after year without the support of consistent overrides. You may wish she had done things differently, and maybe you ran for school committee to make that point and make a change. Thank you for caring, thank you for running, and thank you for giving her feedback on the superintendent evaluation. That job is done and now we need to focus on a budget, which will in all likelihood determine the longer term outcomes for MERSD, after Superintendent Beaudoin is gone.

So we return to the question: What course is this group setting for our schools on for 10-15 years from now? I think it’s clear based on my participation here that I care a whole lot- maybe too much. And I get buried under all of the facts, and all of the politics, and all of the “he said/ she said.” Should we change the apportionment formula? I like the idea of giving it a “collar”/ guardrail? Should the district have an audit? Is a Super Town Meeting actually disastrous to the district? What does it do to Essex? Why can Essex afford \$260,000 on streetlights and \$1,000,000 on a real estate purchase but not fund the schools? Why did a high school principal leave? Why did Avi Urbas leave? Who is going to leave next? How is the morale for the teachers? Why are crucial collaboration meetings stalled and why are they not open meetings when transparency is a central issue? Why is there always silence at School Committee meetings when members are asked a question? I think you’re all buried too. So I give you this question: Where do you lead MERSD schools to 10-15 years from now? Without an override, the town of Essex is not going to be able to pay for the natural budget growth. Not this year, not next year, and not the year after. They have not passed an override for the schools since 2006. It’s time to stop thinking about education from a place of scarcity (and nickel and dining every line item) and move back into a place of responsible fiscal management while pursuing academic excellence. I trust Superintendent Beaudoin to effectively lead this work, as she has for the past 10 years. She is your superintendent, you already gave her feedback, so you should too. I want to see MCAS scores in Essex addressed. I want to see district wish list fulfilled and instructional coaches for elementary schools hired to help with that. Given what the Town of Essex has communicated, that can only be accomplished with the full budget, which requires an override. An override resets our finances and helps us chart a course now in the right direction for the future. Please, let’s stop this decline. Lead us into the future on the right course with the right expectations. Solve this problem by working together in good faith and staying in your lane. Facilitate the educational program that is led and run by the expert you have hired and paid- there is no one more qualified. If you don’t understand their choices or their needs then learn enough about it to the extent that you can educate others: community members and town leaders - tell them why they should support the superintendent and her choices. Say it loud and proud. And take a stand for a fully funded budget and a desperately needed override to fund that budget. I will be standing alongside you, as will the many, many school supporters in both Manchester and Essex. We need you to pass a school budget so that 10-15 years from now, you can be proud to say you were part of getting this district back on track. Thank you.”

Sarah Wolf, 4 Soginose Creek Road, Essex. Ms. Wolf, a past SC member and educator for over 30 years, advocated for a reasonable budget that meets the needs of all students and supports the vision of the regional school district. At a minimum, the district must meet the needs of the diverse student body. Schools need tools and technology to deliver instruction, enough highly skilled teachers to keep class sizes reasonable, and a high school program that provides students with access to a variety of courses and opportunities that will allow them options for post-secondary choices. The district must maintain enough resources to ensure flexibility because the needs and demands of our communities can change quickly (or a truck can hit our pedestrian bridge). Franklin Roosevelt said, Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education. We need to prepare our children with the best education so they are prepared to participate in the complex world of today. I understand that you are trying to meet the needs of the students while honoring the limits of town finances. I believe that if you keep the students at the center of the conversation, the citizens of Manchester and Essex will find a way to provide the resources our kids need to succeed.

Ms. Whitman reminded participants that comments would be prioritized for those in person followed by online participants. Ms. Whitman also encouraged participants of all viewpoints to take the opportunity to share their perspectives and emphasized that the SC was ready to listen.

Sarah Stone, 69 Pleasant Street, Manchester. “I feel it is important to share my professional knowledge and experience while the MERSD School Committee engages with the budget process. I am concerned about some of the remarks that have been made during School Committee meetings regarding the budget, and I worry that some of our Manchester representatives may have some misconceptions about the current needs of schools. We all want the very best for our children and their education, and I appreciate your desire to be fiscally responsible, however it seems to me that your fiscal concerns are not met with a full understanding of the resources that are necessary to meet the needs of today’s child.

As both an educator, and a parent of emerging readers, I specifically feel it is important to voice the enormous impact both the pandemic and technology has had on our children’s reading and writing skills. Educators need additional training and support to keep up with constantly evolving instructional approaches, strategies, interventions and research, specifically when it comes to the science behind reading.

According to an October 4, 2023 article in the *Boston Globe*, the complex nature of addressing the literacy needs in our schools is highlighted: “A better curriculum... is just a start; the state also needs teachers trained in the latest instructional methods... At the same time, the state has not invested in roles like literacy coaches, which experts say are crucial for sustaining lasting change, especially among the students lagging furthest behind.” Instructional coaching allows professional learning to be executed in the classroom in a practical and impactful way. Coaches also provide teachers with an expert in literacy (and math) who can help solve problems in practice, provide ongoing professional development on a lesson by lesson basis, and align teachers across both of our elementary schools, as well as across grade levels, in how curriculum is being taught.

I would argue that in the long run, an investment in instructional coaches, who would work directly with our district curriculum director, building principals, and teachers, would be more cost effective than other types of professional development, as the support and growth of teaching and learning is targeted and ongoing.

Given the declining MCAS scores in the district, the downward trends across the state in literacy growth, and the national teacher shortage, I think it is imperative that we distinguish between frivolous spending and impactful spending. I would argue that new decorative lampposts in Essex might be considered frivolous spending and an investment in our children's literacy essential spending. Instructional coaches are impactful spending and our education professionals are requesting it in order to give our students what they need. We cannot be ignorant and think Manchester and Essex are immune to the literacy crisis our teachers are facing each day.

I believe we all want to be a school district that attracts and retains talented educators. If MERSD becomes a district that is cutting essential literacy roles, be it instructional coaches, classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, or interventionists, we are going to be less appealing to talented educators, who we know play the most significant role in student achievement. Therefore, I want to see a budget that funds not only instructional coaches, but literacy and math interventionists, as well as a renewed commitment to restoring a middle and high school librarian. Thank you."

Ms. Stone asked if the SC members had gone into school buildings to observe or if their comments as recent SC meetings were based on assumptions. Ms. Whitman said the SC has walkthroughs of each site a couple times per year with the administrative team during which they witness classroom interactions and engage afterwards in discussion with administrators leading the tour. In the spring, the principals provide a report-out to the SC about their program year. Ms. Spencer said that all SC members have students and also take advantage of opportunities to participate as volunteers in the school system, for instance with DECA, to get into the school environment. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the school site tours were a powerful opportunity to see what 24 students in one room looked like. She stated that she and Mr. Foster also have backgrounds in education. Ms. Stone reiterated that the decisions made by administrators are in the best interests of students. She said that schools are not run like corporations. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the SC trusts the principals and that she does not think there is a glaring disconnect.

Donna Furse, 8 Blossom Lane, Manchester. Ms. Furse said that she also believes that education is a high priority at the highest level possible. Ms. Furse recalled that Sarah Mellish of the Manchester Finance Committee stated that Manchester and Essex cannot function without each other. This was followed by Mr. Buttrick stating that Essex cannot do more than 2.5%. Ms. Furse questioned where the current road is leading and what possible solutions could be found given that Essex has said they cannot go beyond the levy limit. Ms. Furse wondered if there could be additional revenue sources. Ms. Furse expressed concern that Essex is cast in a negative light for their inability to pay more and worried about how that perception would increase over the next few years.

Annie Cameron, 23 Pickering Street, Essex. Ms. Cameron said that Essex has a math problem and a showing up problem and stated that she does not know how to get them to care. Ms.

Cameron said that not enough Essex parents were in the room and not enough would vote. Ms. Cameron asked Superintendent Beaudoin and Mr. Urbas to review what cuts to administration would look like, rather than cuts to program. She said that people want to see administrative positions justified and the roles explained. She said that principal Sgroi did a good job explaining what happens if you get rid of French 5. Ms. Cameron also said that taxpayers are not obligated to provide a sports program, suggesting it should be on the chopping block. Ms. Cameron suggested Ms. Mitchell bring an advertising proposal to the SC and said that she would be happy to help with that work. Ms. Cameron suggested bucketing some health care items to reduce the policy premium and said she would take that suggestion offline with the superintendent.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that even cutting half the administrators, or any number of staff, does not solve the problem except in the current year because the problem is the percent increase next year. Unfortunately, increasing classroom sizes also tend to increase out of district placements as they compound behaviors. MERSD is not alone in the current budget problem. This is a statewide structural dilemma. MERSD has 200 employees with eight administrators – a Superintendent; Business Manager; Director of Student Services (compliance-driven state regulation, civil rights position), four Principals – standard in every building. The principals' duties include everything for their building from budget to daily management of students, safety, improvement planning, to student achievement. In addition, there is a High School Assistant Principle. A middle school Dean of Students was added to assist with proactive student management. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she believes the district achieves a lot with a lean administrative team. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district could look at returning to a junior high school model with sixth grade back at the elementary schools. However, a lot of energy went into adoption of the middle school model. Another area of re-examination is the stipended curriculum support positions. It is in the bargaining agreement and provides support to principals. The regional office has a few support staff that might not be seen in a non-district school system. The MERSD office mirrors similar districts, like Hamilton-Wenham. It has payroll and HR coordinators. However, where Hamilton-Wenham has two secretaries in every building, MERSD makes do with one. MERSD is not overloaded with staff. Other areas that have been outsourced to save are custodial and kitchen staff. Superintendent Beaudoin mentioned that the district is a 7 day per week operation. Facilities keeps the building open and safe for use, whether by students or community members, including most holidays, between 6:00 am - 10:00 pm every day.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that there can be a tendency to cut the things that are not as visible but she highlighted the impact of the administrators sitting on the side of the room. Not all of their contributions are as visible, but they may be the person available to drive to a student's home and coax them to come to school. Their's is the decision to keep a section of six students on the course schedule because they know students need the class for college.

Ms. Spencer moved to extend the School Committee Meeting to 8:30 pm Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.

The motion unanimously

Mr. Urbas added that transportation services have also been outsourced by the district. When the custodial service was outsourced, some of the savings was used to invest in a maintenance position allowing better care of the middle/high school building. Mr. Urbas also stated that, through the history of the district, previous external audits of the district were not favorable because the auditing entity criticized the district for having too small a business office staff. The audits were not favorable about the internal controls that the district had at that time. The district needed better oversight over taxpayer funds. MERSD had fewer positions than similarly-sized districts had in their business offices. MERSD had to invest in order to build up to match other comparable communities and provide needed transparency and best-practice reporting.

Sarah Conway, 7 Rocky Hill Road, Essex. Ms. Conway offered her voice as an Essex resident and stated that 2.5% growth would be an inadequate budget and a disservice to the students of the district. She stated that it would further erode the breadth and depth and quality of the education of the schools. Ms. Conway said she would vote in favor of the override, as she did last year. Ms. Conway said she was encouraged to see the possible return of the foreign language program to the middle school and the return of a vibrant library program. Dipping below the 3.4% level risked these necessary components. Ms. Conway requested that the Essex Board of Selectmen, and certainly the Manchester Selectors and School Committee, increase their financial commitment to the Manchester Unified School District, even if an override is required, and provide students with an excellent education, not a baseline education, robust enrichment and opportunities, competitive administrative and teacher pay, and necessary special education services.

Nina McKinnon, 1 Lowland Farm Road, Essex. Ms. McKinnon reminded the SC about enrollment at Essex in the past when a grade had three years of a bubble with 50 students before they were finally broken into three classrooms. Ms. McKinnon said it brought to mind parity when considering that currently Memorial's first grade has three class for 42 students. Ms. McKinnon stated that she is concerned about adding twenty school choice students because she believes there are hidden costs. Ms. McKinnon asked for consideration of class size when looking at options for problem solving. Superintendent Beaudoin responded that 2013 was a surprise year for growth and the current trend is very different. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if there are any sections that combine CP and honors. Principal Sgroi confirmed that there are. Superintendent Beaudoin said that returning to a Junior High model and moving grade six back to the elementary school, with the best possible model, would still result in growth over 2.5% the following year. It is a perpetual state of reduction to fund.

Greg Federspiel, Manchester Town Administrator. Mr. Federspiel stated that there is a cost to running things. Proposition 2.5 is an artificial cap. Mr. Federspiel said that it would be beneficial to pursue an audit that may reinforce what the district is doing well and may also identify areas for improvement. Such an audit could be pursued through the state. Mr. Federspiel said that he believes in frequent overrides of smaller scale to meet anticipated needs in excess of the Prop 2.5 limit. Mr. Federspiel stated that part of the problem is the vagaries of the apportionment formula and said that the towns may want to consider placing guardrails that limit the maximum that either partner's percentage could increase in a given period.

Antonella Muniz, 20 Harlow Street, Essex. Ms. Muniz said that it is concerning that the communities should be unified, however she keeps hearing calls from one community for 4% while the other says they can only do 2.5%. Ms. Muniz said that the district is trying to tax people out of their homes. She said it feels divisive and that an operational audit might provide a fresh set of eyes. Ms. Muniz also asked for clarification regarding a personnel reduction from the last budget cycle FY23. Superintendent Beaudoin was able to pull the relevant material to confirm these numbers but Ms. Muniz had left after making her comments. Ms. Muniz commented that Memorial Elementary was looking to look for data on students from Essex attending Memorial. Ms. Muniz asked about “French 5” enrollment and asked how access to a class like this increased the quality of education in the district. Ms. Muniz stated that these tough questions need to be asked.

Superintendent Beaudoin spoke first to cross district programs for students. Specialized education programs include the IRWL, SAIL, and SWING programs at the elementary schools. Students from one school can be town can be bused to the other once they qualify for participation. The superintendent demonstrated where those students are represented on the enrollment chart. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that Memorial Elementary is not “busting at the seams” though some grades are averaging 24 students in each of their classrooms. She stated that either principal could speak to how sometimes 14 students can sometimes feel like 25 and vice versa. It is the job of administrators to determine what a particular cohort needs. So far, they have managed to keep things largely between 18-25. Essex did have a boom period when they lacked the funding to add the desired teacher right away. Speaking to personnel tracking in the budget, Superintendent Beaudoin it is tracked in the budget in terms of who is getting paid and necessarily tracked strictly by classroom teacher versus teachers aid or other position. This information should be more easily tracked for those attempting to make sense of what is being cut year to year. Therefore, budget has historically been a tougher place to track teacher attrition as it would show the larger fluctuations for special education changes. That is why the district has started to show a staffing report chart to show exactly where everyone is in recent years. It goes position by position.

Principal Sgroi spoke to the success of the French 5 program, which has grown to fifteen students, out of a possible 89 students completing French 4. The principal described this as “fantastic.” The program has grown steadily and their scores are very strong. Principal Sgroi urged care and consideration by community members using the program as a way of attacking low enrollment courses without understanding the work or the instructor or the unique accomplishments of the course in comparison to other districts.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to extended in-person comment. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

The SC members discussed extending the meeting time to accommodate online participant comment.

Josh Cohen, 8 LedgeWood Road, Manchester. Mr. Cohen stated that although the SC is talking about supporting the performing arts program in the future, the program has suffered in the

present. Last year, twenty-six students participated in the musical. This year, only 14 did. That is a reduction of 46%. Mr. Cohen said he is happy to see that there is a Performing Arts Director in the budget for 2027, but he fears there will be no performing arts program by 2027. By that time, all current participants in the high school musical will have graduated. Mr. Cohen asked that the SC prioritize the program for younger kids and move the position of Performing Arts Coordinator to an earlier budget. This would benefit the elementary students who are just discovering their love of music and performing arts and the middle schoolers who are beginning to decide if they will participate in the performing arts.

Caroline Coshow, 86 Old Essex Road, Manchester. Ms. Coshow said that she hears people speak of an audit, but as a resident and teacher she would prefer to invest \$80K in the school directly than to get nothing. Ms. Coshow is a resident of Manchester and a teacher. She teaches several classes, including the aforementioned French 5. Ms. Coshow said that a great way to see where tax money goes and what is happening is to come into the high school building to see the students. They are a delight. Ms. Coshow said that when small sections result, students are able to have a very special relationship with their teachers. She said that we do not question the expertise of pilots and doctors in their work. Ms. Coshow said that the community needs to find a solution for the next five to seven years.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to take two the online commenters posted in the chat. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Eric Bradford, 32 Old Essex Road, Manchester. Mr. Bradford lives in Manchester and his parents are in Essex. He mentioned that he moved from Burlington, Vermont where school budgets are anticipated to rise next year by 18.5%. Mr. Bradford said he is astonished at the ability of MERSD to rein in costs as successfully as they have. Property taxes in that area have also soared at three times the rate of inflation. Mr. Bradford stated that, in the decision to regionalize, it should have been implicitly understood by all parties that any increased cost, with regard to apportionment, would not force a compromise in district quality. Mr. Bradford likened it to a variable interest loan. Mr. Bradford said that continuing to go year to year without seeking a solution will erode the quality of the school district. He said that 2.5% is untenable.

The remaining online participant did not respond.

Superintendent Beaudoin took the floor to share the 6/3/2023 reconsidered budget chart, to address Ms. Muniz's questions regarding FTE positions. The superintendent stated that the graphic was accurate for the timeframe at which it was presented. Ms. Whitman said that she has a write that goes through the chart in question and is happy to share it with anyone interested.

D. Adjourn

Ms. Spencer moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:51 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- December 19, 2023
- January 9, 2024