



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

*December 5, 2023*

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	December 5, 2023
<b>Location:</b>	MERMHS Learning Commons
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Anna Lin Mitchell Chris Reed Erica Spencer
<b>Absent:</b>	Kate Koch-Sundquist, Diego Sanson
<b>Guests:</b>	
<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 6:02 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)** – Ms. Whitman broke public comment into two sections. The initial section featured comments from many participants who came to bid farewell to outgoing MERSD Business Manager Avi Urbas. Mr. Urbas has served the district since 2009. The School Committee did not solicit complete addresses from public speakers for this meeting.

Caroline Weld, Manchester. Ms. Weld wished to send Mr. Urbas off with thanks for all he has done for the school district. She joined the School Committee a year after the hiring of Superintendent Beaudoin and Mr. Urbas to their posts with the district and complimented Mr. Urbas on transforming the central office by organizing it with needed policies, procedures, and professionalism. Mr. Urbas took time to teach successive members of the

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SC about funding and school district budgeting. She complimented his unwavering commitment to the best interests of the children from Manchester and Essex. Ms. Weld applauded Mr. Urbas's calm demeanor. She said that Mr. Urbas was a key driver in the success of the Memorial building project.

Alva Ingaharro, Essex. Ms. Ingaharro, former Essex BOS member, said that she was present when Mr. Urbas was hired to do contract work for the High School building project. She said Mr. Urbas's presence would be missed by multiple boards, not just the School Committee. She mentioned his calming presence and ability to make the person he spoke with feel special. Ms. Ingaharro said that the first year that they received the Powers and Sullivan audit report there was three pages of needed district improvements in the business office. Within a year, Mr. Urbas had reduced that list to half a page. This accomplishment stuck with Ms. Ingaharro.

Susan Coviello, Essex. Mrs. Coviello, former SC member, said that Mr. Urbas brought stability to the business office. Where the SC was previously intimidated by the management letter generated by the yearly audit they knew they had found a real gem when that stopped being a worry. She spoke of his calm presence at SC meetings and how he has always spoken respectfully, even when he has not been respected in turn. Ms. Coviello said that the district is currently in a good and solid state in large part because of the efforts of Mr. Urbas.

Ben Buttrick, Essex. Mr. Buttrick read first from a statement from Jeff Soulard, outgoing Essex Town Accountant and Former Chair of the Essex Finance Committee. Mr. Soulard described Mr. Urbas as a helpful partner in working through budgets during Mr. Soulard's time on the Finance Committee. During this time, they worked to create a collaboration group to look holistically at challenges facing the district and towns, and Mr. Soulard described Mr. Urbas as a driving force behind this approach who always brought an open mind and new suggestions. Mr. Soulard expressed his gratitude for having Mr. Urbas through two building projects, a pandemic, and many budget seasons. Mr. Buttrick expressed his own gratitude to Mr. Urbas for his service to the school district. He described Mr. Urbas as a helpful partner and expressed appreciation for his objectivity and open-mindedness when addressing questions.

Sarah Wolf, Essex. Ms. Wolf thanked Mr. Urbas as a parent, community member, and past SC member for all his work. She said Mr. Urbas not only got the district on the right track with procedures and spreadsheets but also with many cost-saving initiatives. She described Mr. Urbas as one of the most patient people she knows, always ready to answer a call to explain a spread sheet or the many intricacies of budget drivers, apportionments, and assessments. This was done many times as new SC members, and finance committee members, and town select board members have cycled through their terms. Ms. Wolf said that she has seen Mr. Urbas handle many difficult situations with integrity, respect and a smile. Ms. Wolf said she valued Mr. Urbas's wise counsel and insight and learned so much from working with him for seven years.

Sarah Creighton, Manchester. Ms. Creighton served on the School Committee and both the High School and Memorial building committees. Mrs. Creighton composed a special

holiday tribute to Mr. Urbas's legacy at MERSD that should be viewed via the recording to be best appreciated.

'Twas 2009 and school committee was meeting  
Issues were stirring, Annie's cookies we were eating;  
The budgets were prepared by the team with great care,  
In hopes that town meeting votes would soon be there;

Our children were nestled all snug in their beds;  
While visions of homework danced in their heads;  
And Judy in her seat and the rest at the table,  
Heard the word that we had an consultant, oh so able,

The District welcomed him without much chatter,  
Avi sprang to the tasks – embracing the matter.  
Then away from the District Judy went with a flash,  
Avi mastered the job, from bonds to the cash.

He was dressed in a suit, from his head to his foot,  
And his clothes were never tarnished with ashes or soot;  
With a mastery of Excel, he made the budgets right ,  
And he knew the answers of most thing in sight.

More rapid than eagles his knowledge it came,  
And he whistled, and solved problems he call by name:  
"Now, Joe! Now Jason! Now let's gets stuff fixed  
On apportionment! On Chap 70, health rates are licked!"

From the Essex to Manchester he was always on call!  
What's A&D? What's the circuit breaker? He answers it all!"

Up to the MSBA Avi and Pam they flew  
With the Habib report and needs assessment too—  
They made the case for more than a roof  
A new school and a second are in the proof.

Rain gardens, tennis courts, and solar PPA,  
Turf fields, HVAC and rebates that pay.  
Avi mastered construction and getting bonds rated,  
Saving millions – taxpayer should be elated.

Avi speaks few words, but goes straight to his work,  
And solves all the problems – he is never a jerk,  
He has helped the students in so many ways;  
He will certainly be missed in just a few days.

But we all exclaim, as he drives (his EV) out of sight—  
"Best wishes Avi, you have been just right!"

Annie Cameron, Essex. Ms. Cameron expressed her heart felt opinion that Mr. Urbas has often saved the district and said that she will miss him.

Susan Beckmann, Manchester. Ms. Beckmann said that the preceding comments were totally accurate. She thanked Mr Urbas for the legacy he leaves for the district.

Avi Urbas: Mr. Urbas responded to the outpouring of affection and praise with his own abundance of emotion and gratitude. Mr. Urbas said that he appreciated the challenges of the position, but it was the relationships he formed that made it truly special, which he had not expected. Mr. Urbas thanked all present for coming out to wish him well.

Ms. Whitman opened the floor to public comment on agenda items.

Antonella Muniz, Essex: Ms. Muniz stated that she has heard many versions of, “we are not settling for less of an education or reduction in the program.” Ms. Muniz said that years of MCAS scores and state Accountability ratings of Essex Elementary indicate that Essex is already receiving less of an education. Ms. Muniz said that the MCAS scores of Essex are more comparable to the scores of Gloucester. She said that Manchester Memorial is knocking it out of the ballpark, but that the program is less in Essex and questioned what more money would do for Essex students. Ms. Muniz stated that Essex students were not getting an equitable education. Ms. Muniz asked for a definition of the program and clarification of what is meant by level services. She compared the confusion to being asked to vote on an audit without understanding the scope of work. As a voter questioning whether to support the budget, Ms. Muniz said that she needed to understand whether Essex would receive comparable funding and equal opportunity with Memorial students and whether the district program would meet and support Essex students in their learning as opposed to some other start line that would not meet their specific needs.

Lindsay Banks, Manchester: Thank you to Avi for your steady hand and stewardship of this district.

Thank you all for your service as School Committee members. I’m grateful for your hard work on challenging budget issues. I am particularly impressed by our Manchester members reaching across the aisle and entertaining requests from the town of Essex. Yet, Manchester voted against the audit. Town leaders in both towns have tried to cast blame on this committee for the audit vote but that’s incorrect. The voters in Manchester rejected the audit.

If the purpose of the audit was “to better serve our students” I would be all for it. We have learning needs identified particularly in Essex. The stated purpose was not to better serve students, but to find further “efficiencies”- likely more cuts. The best people to make these decisions are our elected School Committee officials, not some third-party consultant. I’ve appreciated the thoughtful conversation about class sizes and program offerings as the policy & programs subcommittee works to find efficiencies.

Continuing to talk about an audit, and using limited school resources to fund it, prioritizes the wishes of one town over another. By no means should we be dipping into the school’s

limited resources to pay for an audit despite the wishes of Manchester voters. In my comments at Manchester's town meeting, I said we should put the money to the students, not an audit. Use it to pay our teachers or instructional coaches.

While admirable, your efforts at partnership are not being reciprocated. The audit was proposed to address a perceived "lack of transparency," yet the open collaboration meeting requested by this committee is being declined by town leaders. This is the opposite of "transparency." Our town leaders need to do better.

This committee's role is not to manage either town's finances or spending priorities. It's to center student interests as they are your primary concern. Spending time in your meetings nickel and diming every budget line item is prioritizing one town over another and distracting from students, your core responsibility. We need you *all* to repeatedly state a commitment to students as your priority- never assume it is implied. We need you to educate town leaders about why the schools need to be funded in the interest of our students.

I want to be clear: beginning a budget conversation with a high water mark of 2.5% growth is unacceptable to Manchester voters. Manchester voters will reject any budget that does not prioritize students. We need you *all* to center students in every meeting, every comment, and every conversation you have as a SC rep. Thank you.

- 2) **Chairman's Report** – Ms. Whitman met with Tom Zupa from the PR firm to discuss how to respond to newspaper and social media dialogue. Ms. Whitman will write up ideas for short and long-term dialogue and share with SC members. Ms. Whitman received communication from a community member with a policy adoption request. The community member has shared her story via email with administration. Ms. Whitman will share information with members and add to the agenda for the School Committee Business Meeting agenda on December 19<sup>th</sup>. At that time, the SC will vote on whether to send the issue to the policy subcommittee for further determination specific criterion, on a case-by-case basis, for students not in-district to participate in district athletics programs.

Ms. Mitchell read from the "School Committee Operating Protocols:" Attend meetings on time and be well-prepared to discuss agenda items. Members who are unable to attend a meeting shall notify the Chair in a timely fashion. A quorum of four (4) members is required in order for the School Committee to meet.

- 3) **Student Report** – Diego Sanson – No Report

- 4) **Consent Agenda** –

- Acceptance of Warrants: No Vouchers
- Minutes for approval: November 21, 2023

*Mr. Foster moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed 5-0, with Ms. Spencer abstaining because she did not receive the meeting packet.*

## 5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Finance Committee/Collaboration Group** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman reported that following the last meeting she sent an email to members of the collaboration group. One member responded stating that it was unfortunate. Though that individual would be amendable to the request, it was only one reply and not a public statement.
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Mr. Reed stated that the subcommittee held an executive meeting. Their next meeting is scheduled for December 12.
- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/John Binieris) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – Ms. Spencer reported that the subcommittee has made progress toward a reserve policy and anticipates presenting a draft policy to the SC board in January for input. A policy draft for class size is also under way but taking more time. Mr. Foster stated that they are limited in their exploration because the high school scheduling system is currently tied up with student schedules. Once student scheduling has concluded in the spring, the policy subcommittee will be able to test some theories with the system. A lengthier report will be available after that time to the SC board.

- 6) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin began by thanking Mr. Urbas for thirteen years of partnership and friendship. She also thanked the Spaulding Education fund for resurrecting their mission of support for the school community and their fantastic Night of Stars talent show that ran last weekend. Student performers and community supporters were out in force. The district recently received a DESE grant to fund a review of the Arts program and provide a framework for analysis of that program. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she is often asked how the district seeks out grants. She said that they look to fund things that are already planned. In this case, the district has long term plans for an arts directorship. The grant will assist the process of reviewing the district's current K-12 program by providing a framework as they bring together staff and community members and will provide recommendations about where the district can go moving forward. The current NEASC elementary school accreditation process is part of the goal to ensure that both schools are on the same playing field. Superintendent Beaudoin said that they had a successful interview in the replacement search for a district manager. The hope is to host a focus group by next week. If successful, the superintendent would bring a recommendation before the School Committee by the holiday. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that Program of Studies and Curriculum Guides are posted on the district website on the curriculum page as a good starting point for anyone interested in seeing how programs are structured. They are common to both elementary schools.

- 7) **Continued Business** – Ms. Whitman adjusted the agenda to facilitate discussion.

- School Committee Meeting Length – Ms. Whitman reminded SC members that agreement was reached at the September 5 business meeting to close meetings by 9:00 pm. Given the volume of work to cover and the rough end to the last business meeting, Ms. Whitman asked if the SC would like to change that expectation. After brief discussion, it was concluded that the expectation would remain in place. Should extra time be required, an SC member may move to extend the business meeting.
- Schools Committee Goals – as distributed by Mr. Foster in November:

### **Academic excellence**

Create an MERSD definition of **academic excellence**, identify relevant metrics, elicit community engagement on these, and relate these to the *Strategic Plan*.

- Define academic excellence (incorporating our *Vision of the Graduate*) and identify metrics which can be used to monitor progress relative to the definition by June, 2024.
- Solicit community input on the definition of **academic excellence**, key metrics, and strategic educational program priorities through 10 regularly scheduled informational and listening events (e.g., “SC office hours”, open sessions hosted by community members or organizations, SC attendance at community organization meetings), from December, 2023, through May, 2024.
- Complete the review of scheduling practices and low enrollment classes; present recommended next steps for SC consideration by March, 2024.
- Enable district-wide implementation of the *Strategic Plan* by communicating how it contributes to academic excellence, advocating for the resources necessary to implement it, and passing a budget to enable implementation of the *Plan* by Spring, 2024.

### **Budget**

Pass and communicate a **responsible budget** that reflects funding necessary to advance our *Strategic Plan* and fulfill our responsibilities to engage and prepare our students to meet our *Vision of the Graduate*.

- Develop and adopt a reserve policy by January, 2024.
- Solicit community input on strategic educational program priorities that impact the budget through 10 regularly scheduled informational and listening events (e.g., “SC office hours”, open sessions hosted by community members or organizations, SC attendance at community organization meetings), from December, 2023, through May, 2024. [*Note: these are the same events as for the academic excellence goal.*]
- Create a budget narrative by Spring, 2024, that:
  - relates budget requests to educational program elements and goals, and
  - includes multi-year budget planning projections based on past spending data, projected enrollment trends, and anticipated capital needs.

- In Spring, 2024, explore the potential impact and value of setting a high water mark/rate of growth for FY25 and beyond, including whether SC reserves should be part of a long-term strategy; articulate a recommendation for SC consideration by June, 2024.
- Evaluate and propose communication processes with our town partners, including evaluation of the Collaboration Meeting format and process, by Spring, 2024.

*Mr. Foster moved to accept the SC goals, as drafted, around academic excellence and the district operational budget. Mr. Binieris seconded the motion.*

Clarifying Questions: Ms. Whitman clarified that these are new SC goals for FY24. Mr. Foster stated that the SC had a workshop around SC goals. These goals are smart goals and measureable. His intent in producing the goals document was to capture the essence of that work. The goals listed are substantively larger than most goals, having several bullet points each.

Discussion: Ms. Whitman stated her support for adopting the goals as drafted. Ms. Mitchell recommended not adopting the goals presented by Mr. Foster, because they do not represent the full list of goals for the School Committee for the fiscal year, and the SC has not finished its discussion of these topics yet. Ms. Spencer and Mr. Binieris had no comment. Mr. Foster stated that the drafted goals are not the full picture but they are a start. Mr. Reed had no comment.

*The motion passed 4-2. Ms. Mitchell and Ms. Spencer were opposed.*

- FY 25 Tentative Budget –

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this preliminary presentation is meant to provide an early look at key drivers of the FY25 budget. The intent is to provide early visibility into budget projections and highlight any known key changes from FY24. The attempt is not to delve into line items. Superintendent Beaudoin asked that the SC and public take the opportunity to direct the district administration in what they desire to see represented by the budget. The superintendent worked to define what is meant by “level services.” A level services budget provides same program scope, class size, course offerings, and services from one year to the next. There is not substantive change, though cost may increase as the cost of service increases. Teachers may also be in different places.

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 soon to predict. 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.

Superintendent Beaudoin presented a continuum with preliminary figures representing district growth at 2.5%, at level services, and at a higher level that reflects investment in programs to meet requests from the principals and director staff plus capital requests reported per direction from the School Committee. The SC asked administration to provide insight into needed staffing and facilities needs following public input and the release of MCAS and Accountability scores for the district. These requests include input on both budgetary and offset means of funding the requests and details about why the items are needed and how the requests will impact students. Each school presented requests, as did the special education, curriculum & instructional technology, and facilities departments. MERSD has deferred several updates to instructional equipment, including interactive whiteboards for the high school to bring them into alignment with elementary tech. Curriculum review also indicated the need for updates to writing and history/social science curriculum materials. Facilities has had Essex as a top priority and is awaiting a response from the MSBA about whether the district has been accepted into their pipeline for a construction project. A response is anticipated within the next few weeks. The needs of the middle/high school building, which is approaching its midlife, are becoming pronounced. Facilities staff has been diligent with upkeep, but increased funding is needed to preserve its condition. Total impact of program investment requests was \$1,040,787, with \$313,785 in offset or relocation and \$425,583 from reserves. The impact to the FY25 Operational Budget would be \$300,419. The superintendent presented a three-year projection of staffing needs across all school buildings and student services. Projections include a librarian and performing arts coordinator at the high school, middle school world language and learning center support, and an elementary world language teacher, math interventionist, and instructional coaches for math and ELA to serve both elementary schools. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that previous budget reductions to the library and world language programs were presented with the thought that they could be brought back better aligned to the standards. The superintendent said that the goal is to form a library task force by January to determine the direction of the library program. Its conclusions would impact the projects for library staff. Likewise, actual enrollment would determine whether or not the district needs to add staff to meet student growth.

Questions: Ms. Whitman clarified that the School Committee's task is to determine where on the budget spectrum presented by Superintendent Beaudoin the tentative FY25 budget should be.

Mr. Foster stated that, when looking at the budget in terms of program needs, the requests feel less like a wish list than a response to challenges. Mr. Foster said that a challenge of a level services budget is that it does not highlight where change is happening. Things are changing as reallocation happens and this was highlighted in the current presentation. Mr. Foster asked how much of district reserves could be utilized to keep the assessment down and said that a three-year reserves projection would be helpful. He also asked what a reasonable school choice admittance number would be without overtaxing the Memorial population which has high classroom enrollment at two classes per grade. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that school choice would be opened only for students in grades 6-10.

Mr. Reed stated that Essex Elementary appears to be the most expensive to run in the district. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this fluctuates over time. There is a state report that can show the per pupil cost in Essex. The superintendent said that when looking at per pupil expenses, it would be necessary to consider district-wide programs that are housed in one school. For instance, Memorial has extra staffing to house district programs that support students from both towns and tend to have high numbers of one to one teacher aides.

Ms. Whitman stated that she would like to hear how town partners would prefer the district approach health care estimates when constructing the tentative budget. Should the administration use the higher estimate recommended by its health insurance broker? Alternatively, administration could choose to use a tighter estimate. Ms. Whitman asked how much feedback the superintendent was looking for regarding the principal requests. Superintendent Beaudoin said that feedback was welcome, with the understanding that for any final allocation received via the budget, it is the building principals who will make the determination of how it is invested. Ms. Whitman stated that the outcome of the MSBA application would affect how much of the reserves could be committed to the budget.

Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification on the budget threshold that would result in an override to the Town of Essex. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the exact number is hard to pinpoint. However, the 2.5% budget represented tonight is meant to meet that criterion. Superintendent Beaudoin urged the SC to focus on the actual school budget and not predictions of assessment levels. Ms. Mitchell asked about looking at increased revenue from fees and advertisement. She said that health insurance has come in less than preliminary estimates in previous years. Superintendent Beaudoin said that historically this is the high mark for the budget, and it is whittled down as it goes. In a previous year, a 10% estimate for health insurance was used, and then the actual increase was 28%. In order to use a tighter estimate, the superintendent would hope for assurance from partners that they would be willing to adjust this line item later to reflect the actual figure when it is released in February. Mr. Reed pointed out that the district cannot refuse to pay our health insurance bill or get more money for expenses after the budget is passed. Superintendent Beaudoin offered to use the updated figure from USI's next estimate. Ms. Mitchell stated that the cost per pupil in FY24 is \$23K and will be \$24K in FY25. She questioned asked what kind of service is being provided and how the district would sell it.

Ms. Spencer asked how the superintendent arrived at the contribution figure from reserves. Superintendent Beaudoin said there was little rationale behind it other than a round increase. Mr. Urbas said the E&D has not been certified yet but is expected to come in at \$1.2M. Ms. Spencer stated that school choice needs more study to make sure that it is a revenue source. She noted that enrollment numbers in the IRWL program indicate there are seats available. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district does make seats available via tuition-in programs between other districts. With these agreements, the district is not bound to keep the student for their entire education. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she is currently working with a collaborative group of superintendents to create a database of programs because they are all running into similar problems. Ms. Spencer noted that Essex and Memorial Elementary Schools have the same number of interventionists requested as last year, and that the principal requests were for instructional coaches. Ms. Mitchell echoed surprise at this ask given low test scores with existing intervention services. Superintendent Beaudoin said that

increased scores may be a byproduct of the requested instructional coaches. The superintendent explained that the primary function of the role is to address desired changes as outlined in the school and district improvement plans in terms of instructional practices in the classroom. With improved instructional practices in tier one, the byproduct is intended to be increased student achievement. That is the coaching and instructional growth of tier one classroom teaching. A second component is intervention support that is data-driven identification of students who need remedial support in a particular area. Remediation is assigned to the classroom teacher to remediate first. That is a component of the district's big push to emphasize that children's progress is first and foremost the responsibility of the classroom teacher. Coaches will focus on technique improvement. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the prescription for real improvement is change in the classroom. Ms. Spencer expressed surprise that Essex was not looking for more in light of the data. The superintendent said that she was not surprised because the prescription for real change is change in the tier one classroom, not sending students out of the room. Ms. Spencer noted that the Memorial principal, after commenting on the difficulties posed by rising class sizes, did not request additional staffing. She asked for insight into how he had been able to get comfortable with those staffing levels. Superintendent Beaudoin said that student enrollment is at an awkward point where going lower results in classes that are a little too small. Principal Willis is comfortable using the one "extra" teacher strategically.

Comment:

Ms. Whitman stated that she is not in favor of cutting to meet a perceived requirement. However, she would like to see a number closer to 3.0% growth. Ms. Whitman said that asks from the principals should be incorporated into the budget through offsets where possible, she cautioned that the SC runs the risk of losing support should they reduce the scope of the program.

Ms. Mitchell commented that classroom size issues are hard but that many SPED staff are in the classroom and can help. Ms. Mitchell said that if the budget is at 3.0% or 3.4%, she does not see a way of avoiding a super town meeting. Ms. Mitchell said the SC needs to be reasonable and that the district is sitting on reserves. Superintendent Beaudoin said that even if the district funds something with fees or reserves, it does become part of the funding formula. That cost is passed on to the towns eventually.

Ms. Spencer said she is interested in looking more at the principal asks. However, although 4% growth is not sustainable, the SC does need to address challenges to the academic program. Ms. Spencer said that the SC has been asked by its town partners to offset necessary growth by looking at declining enrollment numbers. She said the SC must address that issue when they next speak to their town partners. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that the high school had few staffing requests. Incoming principal, Julie Sgroi believes the high school is currently appropriately staffed and would like to re-distribute staff to address achievement needs. Ms. Spencer stated that the decisions of the SC should put students at the forefront, but that it is not good for anyone to end up at a super town meeting.

Mr. Binieris stated that the tentative FY25 Budget should start with the carry forward outline and that he would hope it could then incorporate some of the reasonable administrative

requests. Mr. Binieris said that, at the same time, it is important that administrators maximize efficiencies with the staff that they have.

Mr. Foster lent his support to the questions and intentions of Ms. Spencer.

Mr. Reed said that his initial thought is to support the level services budget because the district needs at least that much. Mr. Reed recounted that he joined the School Committee during the Covid pandemic, and they discussed the potential for learning loss. Though they were not able to identify how that loss would present itself, the SC is seeing it now. Mr. Reed emphasized that the district needs to address that learning loss, and a level services budget does not do that. Mr. Reed said that how the district accomplishes that is up to the staff. Unfortunately, it is not accomplished as quickly as desired. Mr. Reed also said that class size considerations depend a lot on the make up of the kids in the particular class and grade. He said he trusts the principals to determine the best configurations for class size. Mr. Reed said that COLA for administration have been capped at 2.5% for several years, and they have been essentially taking pay cuts. Mr. Reed worried that MERSD is becoming less competitive, in general.

Superintendent Beaudoin, with direction from SC members, summarized their feedback. The SC would like the administration to present a tentative FY25 budget that is as close to 3.0% as possible. For now, they will use the 14.5% estimate for health care increase. Ms. Whitman stated that at the December 13, 2023 meeting, Superintendent Beaudoin and Mr. Urbas will present the Tentative FY25 budget and the School Committee members will listen to community input. Mr. Binieris commented that he appreciated the way they had presented the key drivers to growth. He thought it would resonate with everyone's experience in their own personal and business lives.

- Continued Discussion and Evaluation of budget related suggestions/ideas from 9/19/23 All Boards Meeting – Ms. Whitman resumed consideration of proposed budget-related suggestions proposed at the All Boards Meeting. Ms. Whitman is working from a summation of the many topics and suggestions raised during the all boards meetings. Ms. Whitman grouped them and asked SC Members to prioritize them so that the board could address each and decide whether further action would be taken.

<b>Budget/Revenue Ideas and Suggestions</b>		
<i>Priority</i>	<i>Quick Check</i>	<i>Reductions in Budget</i>
1	4	Class size
2	3	Cost-sharing efficiencies: healthcare
2	3	Enrollment trends

2	3	Costs designated "Non-Instructional"
2	3	Costs that are "non-teacher"
2	3	Administrative structure
3	2	Cost-sharing efficiencies: facilities
3	2	Cost-sharing efficiencies: services
4	1	Community partnerships
5	0	Volunteers
		<b><i>Increased Revenue</i></b>
1	4	School choice
2	3	Fees
3	2	Grants
4	1	Fundraising
		<b><i>Other</i></b>
1	5	Understand "level services"
2	2	3rd party consultant/operational audit (define objective?)
2	2	Define excellence
3	1	Understand growth trends/historical lookback
4	0	Revisit regional agreement
4	0	Regionalization options

Class – Size Reduction – In Process: The Policy Subcommittee is currently reviewing best practices. Mr. Foster pointed out that no policy conversation will take effect for this budget cycle. He stated that the superintendent and the administrative team are hearing requests and are planning for that in directions going forward. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district is currently targeting a 50% reduction in sections with less than ten students. Principal Sgroi and her team will have to look at what those courses are and make decisions on a case by case basis, considering options for online opportunities or value in allowing students to finish a series.

#### Increasing Revenue – School Choice: Currently in Process

Understanding Level Services – Discussion continued about perceived ambiguity in the term. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the term “level services” is defined in all budget-related materials. The current SC packet contains a glossary of frequently used budget terms which defines level services as, “Carry Forward: Provision of the same program scope, class size, course offerings, and services from one year to the next. For service provision to be level (same range of services) from year-to-year it may be necessary to increase the number of staff to meet the need.” In addition, the cost of level services may increase due to inflationary increases.

Operational Audit - Ms. Whitman broached the topic of an operational audit, to be pursued by the SC. This generated confusion given the recent warrant items by each town on the same topic. However, Ms. Whitman pointed out that the list of suggestions was generated before the town meeting warrants were proposed. The Town of Essex has continued to speak about a potential audit at their Board of Selectmen meetings. Ms. Whitman said that the SC needs to decide what their position is on an audit. Mr. Binieris said that he thought the SC was looking into options for reviews via the NESDEC and DESE. Mr. Foster asked if there are questions from which the SC can benefit from an outside perspective and if the district is in a position to fund that. Mr. Reed said that timing was paramount as starting the process now would not help this year’s budget. Ms. Whitman stressed that, because it is an item on the list, the SC must take it up for consideration. Mr. Foster stated that, because the Town of Essex appropriated monies, they would be the ones to put out an RFP. The SC would decide to participate or not. Mr. Binieris said that the situation is more complicated because the towns decided to pursue the matter without the School Committee.

*Mr. Reed moved to table the conversation until after the public presentation of the tentative FY25 Budget. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed unanimously.*

- 8) School Committee Comment** – Mr. Foster said that he had recently read an article about the uptick in airplane altercations. Increasingly squeezed by airline constraints – into tinier seats, with tighter ticket pricing and luggage constraints and fewer perks,

passengers are more easily triggered. Literal fighting in the aisles is more common. Mr. Foster said that the district is in the same situation. He shared that School Choice reimbursement limits were set at \$5k per student in 1993 and that the Carnegie System of higher education (the basis for college units) was instituted in the early 1900s. Mr. Foster urged his fellow SC members to view the squeeze they and community members are under. He said that tension is not always personally directed and expressed the need to find balance to that tension. Ms. Spencer stated that the community wants to hear more from the SC and suggested posting in The Cricket. Ms. Whitman said that this is a topic recently covered in her discussion with the representative of the PR firm and will be included in the 12/19 meeting. Mr. Foster said that they SC just voted for goals that include public outreach. Mr. Reed publically thanked Superintendent Beaudoin for putting together the current budget presentation that does what the SC asked.

### **C. Adjourn**

*Mr. Reed moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

*Meeting Adjourned at 9:05 pm*

### **School Committee Future Meetings**

- December 13, 2023 (Wednesday)
- December 19, 2023
- January 9, 2024