



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

November 21, 2023

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	<i>November 21, 2023</i>
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, 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 6:05 p.m.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

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

Antonella Muniz, 20 Harland Street, Essex: Ms. Muniz repeated MCAS and DESE Accountability scores for Essex and Memorial Elementary school shared at the previous School Committee meeting. Ms. Muniz said these scores are representative of a multiyear trend and questioned whether the School Committee is concerned about the difference in scores between the two elementary schools. Ms. Muniz wondered if the experience of Essex students is leading to an increased need for SPED services and

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out of district placements later. Ms. Muniz asked why Essex residents should support the district budget if Essex students are not being supported in the same way as Manchester students. Ms. Muniz thanked Essex Elementary teachers for their work.

Nina McKinnon, 1 Lowland Farm Road, Essex: Ms. McKinnon spoke as a parent and not as a representative of the Essex Finance Committee and implored the School Committee to understand its place in the current conversation and to ensure that the communities are not pitted against one another. Ms. McKinnon stated that the SC knew of the outside audit, if not the specifics. Ms. McKinnon said that the statement that MERSD has to compete with private schools has to stop. Ms. McKinnon stated that the enrollment in Essex has dropped by 12.4 % between 2013 and 2023 and that Manchester's enrollment has dropped by nearly 25%. Ms. McKinnon said that for the FY21 budget, Manchester asked for a budget reduction of \$150K and that she could not recall if a similar amount of noise was made because Manchester had asked for a reduction. Ms. McKinnon said that the apportionment split to Manchester has never been above 4% in the last ten years. Ms. McKinnon read from previous budget goals presentations, "to develop and deliver a fiscally responsible budget that maintains educational quality, supports district goals, aligns with multiyear budget commitments to work within the confines of proposition 2.5 [sic]." Ms. McKinnon said that this statement was included in budget presentations until FY22 and FY23. Ms. McKinnon urged the SC and staff to work together. During the failed budget override last year, Ms. McKinnon said it was communicated to students that it was Essex's fault that it failed, and she urged a goal of working as one community.

Jay Tetzloff, 98 Western Avenue, Essex: Mr. Tetzloff stated that the School Committee does not seem to feel accountability to the town committees because they know that they can ram something through via a super town meeting.

Sarah Pierce, 9 Friend Street, Manchester: Ms. Pierce asked for the reason why the School Committee has not had a third party audit.

- 2) **Chairman's Report** – Theresa Whitman: Ms. Whitman represented the School Committee at the Essex Special Town Meeting on Monday, November 13 and Ms. Mitchell represented the School Committee at the Manchester Special Town Meeting on the same evening. Ms. Whitman clarified that the School Committee did not oppose the town warrants related to appropriation of funds for the purpose of a third party audit of MERSD. Ms. Whitman said that the SC's official stance was that they had insufficient time to determine if they could collaboratively develop a scope of work; therefore the school committee did not take a position at the time of the town meetings. The proposed scope of work was brought to the School Committee on November 7, 2023. Ms. Whitman also attended the Student Advisory Council on November 15, 2023. The group discussed the student trajectory through the high school experience, including how classes are chosen. This led to a conversation about class availability and size limits. The group plans to delve into grading next.

Mr. Reed read from the “School Committee Operating Protocols:” Agree that our positions will not be used for personal or partisan gain. Conduct business through meetings with a set agenda that is tied to district goals. Emerging items shall be addressed in subsequent meetings through planned agenda items.

- 3) **Student Report** – Diego Sanson. Mr. Sanson discussed the concerns of students around class enrollment discussions. The Student Advisory Council has been discussing topics around the student high school trajectory. Mr. Sanson said that planning a course of study is difficult if you do not know which classes will be running two to three years on. This is particularly true with AP courses. Mr. Sanson also expressed concern for teachers who may not be sure of what they will teach year to year.

Questions: Ms. Mitchell broached the concept of level services and asked if, as a strong student, Mr. Sanson currently has enough opportunities. Mr. Sanson replied that he is currently happy with his coursework. Looking back, the time that he felt limited was as a freshman and sophomore when there were fewer opportunities for differentiation in coursework and each class would have a wider range of students enrolled.

4) **Consent Agenda** –

- Acceptance of Warrants - Avi Urbas: AP Warrants 1026-1028. Mr. Urbas noted that expenses for curriculum and instruction include payment to Culture7 for planning and professional development services with Michael Eatman, funded by FY24 Title IV (\$10k) and FY24 Safe & Supportive Schools grant (\$6.2K), and \$2K to NEASC for a December leadership conference in preparation for the upcoming elementary accreditation process with NEASC. Mr. Urbas also reported that, following approval in Essex of turf expense reimbursement, the district will revisit necessary one-time capital investments through the replenished reserves fund.
- Minutes for approval: November 7, 2023
- Donation from Manchester Booster Club

Mr. Reed moved to approve the Consent Agenda, including acceptance of a donation in the amount of \$6,200 from the Manchester Booster Club for the purpose of purchasing a high jump pit for the track and field program; Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. Ms. Koch- Sundquist seconded the motion.

Ms. Molinari was in attendance at the School Committee meeting and clarified that the donation is anonymous and earmarked for a high jump pit.

The motion passed unanimously.

Superintendent Beaudoin asked if the SC wished to leave such donations as part of future consent agendas or have them pulled out into continued business in the meeting agenda. Ms.

Whitman stated that they could be left in the consent agenda section as done traditionally. The SC members want to make sure that they have an opportunity for discussion of donations as part of approval. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that a letter of acceptance and gratitude would be generated on behalf of the School Committee and delivered to the Manchester Booster Club.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman reported on the collaboration group. She stated that the collaboration group members received an email questioning whether the group is observing open meeting laws. The group decided not to hold subsequent meetings until they receive the advice of counsel. The collaboration group has not met since.

Ms. Whitman moved to suspend participation of the School Committee in closed collaboration group meetings until such time as the committee decides by majority vote to recommence participation in closed collaboration meetings. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Whitman stated that there is ongoing concern about open meeting law. She said that the purpose of the collaboration meeting was to ensure that all stakeholders understood the limitations of their partners. It was intended as a no-surprise approach to problem solving and a place to vet ideas. To make the group more transparent, the group added a meeting summary and planned All-Board meetings. Ms. Whitman said that the limitations of the town partners are now known and the problem solving aspect of the group is at a standstill. Ms. Whitman stated that the issues being raised could have been done in an open meeting and stressed that how these conversations are happening is as important as what is being discussed. Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification on the purpose of the motion, and Ms. Whitman responded that the closed meetings are doing more harm than good. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the collaboration group formed fourteen years ago with board chairs. They positioned themselves to formalize support for upcoming overrides at the time. The group operated informally until last year. Originally, it was information sharing. Each town could share its upcoming financial obligations. Ms. Mitchell said that seemed like a good idea and noted that the current SC budget calendar only has the boards together on two dates before completion of the budget. Ms. Mitchell stated that if the collaboration group decides to meet, it would be bad for the SC to not join. Ms. Mitchell advocated for open meetings. Ms. Mitchell stated that more time is required to work together, and there are only two joint meetings on the budget calendar. Ms. Whitman stated that the collaboration group does not have a set schedule for meetings. Rather, someone calls for a meeting and seeks a time that works for everyone. Often, this would happen before a meeting like the joint budget meetings. Ms. Spencer read from the meeting notes of the last collaboration group meeting, “the meeting ended and will not reconvene until a determination about the group being subject to open meeting law is made.” Ms. Spencer asked if it would be better to propose having an open meeting format for the collaboration group when it reconvenes and said this would best serve to move the budget forward. Ms. Whitman said that it is important that the superintendent and the town administrators are able to meet and work on their own. Superintendent Beaudoin said that is happening. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed concern regarding open meeting law and that the collaboration group was functioning in an advisory

capacity as a subcommittee. She said that information is needed to make informed decisions and that she does not have access to the discussion that went into the proposed recommendations. Ms. Koch-Sundquist agreed with Ms. Spencer in the approach of the School Committee because the group is currently viewed as non-collaborative and it is important to establish that the SC wants to collaborate. Ms. Koch-Sundquist considered amending the motion to have the SC only participate in open collaboration meetings. Superintendent Beaudoin said it would be a departure from the original intent of the group to inform each other. It was not a group that made recommendations or took actions. It was a group that crunched numbers and shared information versus developing concepts or creating proposals. Ms. Spencer asked if the SC would be barring themselves from the group if counsel returned the advice that the meetings do not need to be open. Ms. Whitman said this would be the case. Ms. Mitchell asked why this decision needs to be made now rather than after the legal opinion. Ms. Whitman said that the SC wants to participate but also communicate that there is harm when the meeting is closed and all do not have a chance to understand the conversation taking place. Mr. Reed said that there is only harm to the SC from the closed sessions. Ms. Spencer said that open meetings are better for the SC and the public but questioned the wisdom of making a statement that removes the SC from the meetings when collaboration is paramount, particularly if given legal blessing.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist amended the motion to state that the School Committee will continue to participate only in open collaboration group meetings. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Ms. Spencer proposed requesting that meetings continue in open session. Ms. Whitman said that was done in September and the response was no. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the collaboration board received the email concerning open meeting law twelve days ago and has not responded. Ms. Mitchell said that the town administrator said they have 30 days to respond to an official complain. Ms. Whitman said that it was not an official complaint yet. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she could ask for counsel within a day or two.

Mr. Foster moved the question. It passed unanimously.

The motion passed 5-2. Ms. Spencer and Ms. Mitchell were opposed.

Superintendent Beaudoin asked who would communicate the School Committee's stance to the collaboration group. Ms. Whitman said that she would.

- **Finance Committee/Collaboration Group** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) –

Ms. Mitchell moved to re-activate the finance sub-committee. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

Ms. Mitchell stated that, with Mr. Urbas transitioning and the tight budget schedule, there is not enough time at the SC business meetings to address all issues. She said that potentially a communication plan will be needed and that many components can be discussed at the sub-committee level. Ms. Whitman said that she is mindful that the SC has not discussed that the Director of Finance is moving on. Mr. Urbas's last day will be December 15. Ms. Whitman said more time will be needed for the superintendent to support the interim finance director and that the finance sub-committee will need to meet on an as-needed basis, as they previously did. Mr.

Whitman stated that the temporary suspension of the finance sub-committee was intended to allow all SC members to participate in budget conversations. Mr. Foster said that he appreciated that concern but pointed out that it is November and the SC has not yet had time in the agenda to cover budget issues. Mr. Binieris and Ms. Spencer agreed. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked the superintendent for a picture of her time commitments with the finance committee, collaboration group, and the hiring process for the Director of Finance position. Superintendent Beaudoin reviewed her commitments with principals and subcommittees. For every one-hour meeting, about three hours of preparation are needed. She did not have an opinion on the finance subcommittee. Currently, the superintendent is prioritizing work in the office to build out the budget. In addition, they have the ongoing search for the interim and permanent Director of Finance. The advice of MASBO (Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials) was to post both positions as quickly as possible. Presently, there are five similar positions listed with no applicants. The district is working to recruit for this position and plans to have an interview team convened after the Thanksgiving holiday. If a successful candidate is found they will need about 30 days to get up to speed. Delays can be expected for budget work as well as management of staff and office functions. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the finance subcommittee should be tabled until after the new Director of Finance is hired. Ms. Mitchell said she thought that was a mistake since hiring could require several months. Ms. Whitman stated that she sees the purpose of the finance sub-committee differently because of her training and does not see it as an exploration subcommittee. Superintendent Beaudoin said that, although she is disappointed to lose Mr. Urbas, it presents an opportunity to simplify. The superintendent stated that the budget issues are being overcomplicated, and there are really a few levers, including healthcare and personnel, of consequence. In these areas, the district is already spending more that they will take in because the annual inflation rate of these key drivers exceeds the limits of prop 2.5. Regarding the finance subcommittee, Superintendent Beaudoin said it is not helpful to meet just for the sake of meeting.

Mr. Foster moved the question. Support was unanimous.

The motion passed 5-2. Mr. Reed and Ms. Whitman were opposed.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved that Ms. Mitchell and Ms. Whitman continue as Finance Subcommittee members. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Ms. Mitchell recommended increasing the number of members to three. Mr. Foster stated that the time was short for getting three people together.

The motion passed unanimously

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that negotiations are ongoing. The subcommittee plans to meet again on December 12, 2023, and they hope to have an executive session to discuss the most recent association proposal. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that a meeting proposal would go out by the holiday. Ms. Whitman said that SC members are invited to participate as silent observers in the negotiations, as are collaboration group partners. Mr. Reed highly recommended participation.

- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – No Report

- 6) **Superintendent's Report** - Superintendent Pam Beaudoin. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district is currently working with MASBO to assist with recruiting for the position of Director of Finance. The district often uses MASBO, particularly when searching for mid-year openings, because they are tied into the field and those in the state with the required experience. The elementary schools are currently beginning the NEASC accreditation process, and staff worked on this during the last early release day. The high school already went through this process with NEASC. It is a ten-year review cycle involving self-evaluation against learning standards, which are aligned to state expectations. A visiting team will come in to check this work and provide recommendation. The middle school had a similar accreditation. To align the entire district around the work of the vision of the graduate, MERSD has included in the Strategic Plan interest in having the elementary schools go through the process as well. This ties to the district's desire to ensure that the elementary schools have an equitable experience. Ms. Mitchell asked if Mr. Bergevin, recently appointed district treasurer, will be utilized while Mr. Urbas is transitioning. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that Mr. Bergevin is fully committed to retirement and not available to take on additional responsibilities. Ms. Mitchell asked how the MCAS results would be addressed. Superintendent Beaudoin said that these issues were discussed by the principals at the last SC business meeting and could be revisited if SC members have further questions. The superintendent said that Covid gave a pause and slow down that should be taken into account. Going forward, the district needs to make more connections to the kids that need more in the classroom. Ms. Spencer stated that the SC was very concerned by the presented elementary school MCAS challenges and asked that the SC circle back to look at forward progress. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the Director of Finance has been present at all School Committee meetings, but the Director of Curriculum has not. The superintendent said that the SC could look to add this to provide regular updates. A concern would be the need to create space in the SC agenda for a weekly update. Mr. Foster said that the update that Ms. Spencer was discussing was very specific versus the general update proposed by the superintendent. Superintendent Beaudoin said that regular reports would allow for more detailed updates. Ms. Spencer stated that she would like a placeholder in the meantime for an update in six months. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that there are several meetings coming up through the end of the year during which updates could be provided. At the end of January, High School Principal Julie Sgroi will present on the program of studies and could provide a general progress report on the high school. Curriculum Director Heather Leonard will give curriculum presentations in each discipline area, and then the administrative team will return at the end of year for the DIP update. Ms. Koch- Sundquist said that it was great to have the elementary principals present at the last SC meeting. She stated that it was even more impactful to have been on the walk through at Essex Elementary, which occurred after MCAS scores were released. Principal McAdams released an email communication to all Essex Elementary families about changes as a response to the MCAS scores and she discussed these with

everyone on the walk through. Ms. Whitman said that she was also very alarmed the day that scores were released and received an email from Principal McAdams the next day that addressed the issue head on and invited attendance at the upcoming school council meeting. Ms. Whitman stated that there is multi-year work to align the elementary schools, with last year as the first that their schedules were aligned to support cross-district support services. Ms. Whitman stated that Principal McAdams was very forthcoming about what she believes can be done better. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the principals will be called back if the SC wants an update at that time. The superintendent also said that it is problematic to compare Essex Elementary directly to Manchester Elementary. DART comparables for Essex paint a slightly different picture, though there is still work to be done. Superintendent Beaudoin suggested questions be directed to building principals to get specifics about how the issue is being addressed.

7) Continued Business –

- Outcomes from Special Town Meetings
 - i. Field Funding – Essex passed the full amount of apportioned field funding. MBTS had already approved \$800K. Mr. Urbas stated that the SC should amend the FY24 capital budget so that an assessment charge is made to the towns. The plan is to put money back into the district reserves, if the SC so chooses. If the assessments are changed, the towns would have to vote on that in the spring. An amendment needs to happen to charge that money to the towns and collect it.
 - ii. MERSD Operational Audit – The Town of Essex passed their warrant article. The Town of Manchester rejected their article.
 - iii. Town of Essex Article 20 – Appropriation of \$200K from free cash to apportionment stabilization fund: Failed
- FY25 Budget Discussion – Superintendent Beaudoin supplied a MERSD budget calendar and asked the SC for parameters they want to establish for the budget knowing that this is typically the high water mark budget. Two date typos were pointed out. Mr. Foster noted that the budget calendar does not account for engaging with the public in conversation. The superintendent said that the calendar is the SC deliverables.

Superintendent Beaudoin presented preliminary assumptions at this earliest stage as they are likely to be applied to the tentative budget presented on December 5, 2023. These figures are traditionally the most conservative estimates. Usually, figures have not gone up from this point, only down. At this point in the budget process, the building principals have been building their school budgets, looking three years out at staffing. The district starts with FY24 Actuals and assumes a growth rate cap of 2.5%. This yields a gap of \$636,976. Personnel accounts for 61%, with the unit A teacher salary, between COLA and STE, growth yielding a 3.75% growth. Ms. Mitchell asked how many retirees were anticipated for the next year. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the current assumption is that all staff are returning to their current position. Retirees have not started to present themselves yet. Savings

from retirees is highly variable. The current year's enrollment, as of October, is used to estimate for FY25. Mr. Urbas stated that standard procedure has been to first lay out a high level budget with the major areas and what increases look like. A tentative budget is then created. From there, the district goes through scenarios with more specifics as information is made available. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district will have to change the process this year. While starting with the current high level budget, the superintendent said the district would like to decrease the number of scenarios.

Superintendent Beaudoin said the principals were likely to present flat staffing with resource allotted to address performance issues. The superintendent said the SC needs to decide if they want a budget that includes level services. For unit B staff, Superintendent Beaudoin said a conservative increase of 2.5% is in the budget. Mr. Urbas shared that the initial health insurance estimate assumes the same number of employees and is anticipated to be a 14.5% increase this year, up from 4.93% last year. Usage was up a bit, and claims, but the medical field is trending up as a whole. Superintendent Beaudoin said that OOD will increase, although transportation costs are expected to decrease at about 1%. These costs are wildly variable to the district since they hinge on the needs of individuals. There is a dip in utilities due to usage. All other categories are assumed to increase at 2.5%. Superintendent Beaudoin suggesting increasing school choice revenue by 25%, citing historically higher admittance at the district's inception. In addition, the superintendent said that use of district reserves could be increased to \$350K. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the challenge will be to find the cuts that have public support.

Questions: Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked what 2.5% would look like to Essex. Mr. Urbas said Essex has estimated it at about an additional 1.5 points. Ms. Mitchell noted that the budget gap assumes the highest health care estimate. Mr. Urbas said that health care is part of bargaining and cannot be changed. Therefore, there is not much the district can do to control the final number except wait for it to come in. Mr. Reed asked where school choice students would be placed. Superintendent Beaudoin said they would go to the middle and high schools.

School Committee Member Priorities:

- Ms. Whitman stated that her priorities for the December tentative budget are to maintain a sustainable multi-year operational budget and capital improvement plan. This should seek to preserve the scope of progress, incorporate a plan over the next few years for supporting world language and creating a performing arts coordinator position; address the non-META 2.5% COLA; and take a more aggressive approach with OPEB. In addition, Ms. Whitman would like to explore what reserve use would be required to get the district out of override territory.

- Mr. Reed stated that the district has made reductions and program cuts every year. Mr. Reed noted that the SC members are almost all new since those cuts were made. He asked to see what a high water mark of put-backs would look like, even if it is not a good time for those programs to return. Mr. Reed said those cuts could have impacted the program at Essex Elementary. Mr. Reed stated that the budget should start at a level that puts students first then take into account other stakeholders.
- Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that in the past the SC saw columns and had to choose between them. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that a lot relies upon the definition of “level services,” and that term has not been clearly defined. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she defines level services to mean the same breadth of program and support as the previous year, though not necessarily the same number of staff. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she wants to see a budget that meets the needs of our students, and she believes the superintendent and principals can provide the best guidance as to what students need. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said it is reasonable to think that the needs we are seeing now may not be the same as the needs of students several years ago, and those trends may be concerning. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said services may be needed to meet those needs and, therefore, level-services may not bridge the gaps. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed confusion at hearing criticism of performance and spending at the same time because they are often closely linked. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she would like to see the budget linked to the needs of the students this year.
- Ms. Spencer stated that she would prefer to build the budget to what the district wants to accomplish rather than the growth rate, which both does too much and too little. Ms. Spencer said that much of the presented data justifies budgetary needs, like interventionists, and that narrative can inform the community. Ms. Spencer said that she wants a budget that speaks to what the data shows, and that she would like to see a budget with foreign language included. Ms. Spencer expressed support for school choice expansion as a revenue source and said that school choice can have other benefits, including increasing learning opportunities in the high school setting.
- Mr. Foster suggested that the budget be based on the educational program and vision to help frame for the public what is actually being funded. Mr. Foster said that starting from a percentage issue automatically puts the district in a gap conversation without grounding in what that means for programming and students. Reframing is needed to demonstrate how the budget supports the educational program and our core educational program.
- Ms. Mitchell said that she would like to see a budget that is not so aggressive with health care assumptions and that incorporates updated

enrollment estimates. For revenue, she asked to see increased revenue opportunities, including fees.

- Mr. Binieris stressed the importance of maximizing the resources the district currently has by utilizing current staff without increasing expenditures. Mr. Binieris said there are changes that can be made within the current day, like fewer videos or more homework, to address learning needs.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that when principals talk about Tier 1 interventions they are speaking about maximizing resources in the classroom to service differently. The superintendent said she heard the feedback about construction of the budget to a percentage and shared that this arose from previous direction that administration not present a pie-in-the-sky budget but instead acknowledge financial limitations. Percentages act as guardrails on the district's ask. The superintendent asked how the administration should govern their budget requests. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district received negative feedback when they last presented a list of perceived needs to bring back, including the language program and late bus. Previously, the district prioritized student input regarding class offerings and availability. The superintendent asked how the SC would support the administration presenting those kind of needs. Mr. Foster stressed the need for the SC to figure out how to engage the public in these conversations so that they do not hear about cuts in the eleventh hour. Ms. Spencer said that attendance at budget hearings has been encouraged with few resulting participants. She asked about using wider outreach, possibly through survey tools. The superintendent stated that surveys were utilized during formation of the Strategic Initiative Plan. Ms. Spencer said that was a very broad approach and that something more specific might be successful. Superintendent Beaudoin said that things like the late bus will never survey high because they benefit a small group. However, that group tends to be lower income and their numbers are growing. The superintendent said that at some point the district needs to advance services in the interest of granting access to all students. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that a late bus would allow students to access after school help from teachers not just allow them to participate in sports. Ms. Whitman also spoke to the question of community engagement. She said that it would be most helpful to have a high watermark budget with administrative feedback, based on their work with building staff, on student needs. From there, community input could be received. Ms. Spencer expressed that it is helpful to know how data justifies the programs that are being recommended for reduction. For example, if only two of eight comparable districts have foreign language in grade six. Mr. Reed pointed out that the superintendent listed staffing as a priority and noted that the class sizes at Memorial have risen for the last two years. Superintendent Beaudoin said that is the challenge of enrollment

management as the cusp of what is palatable is reached. Two classrooms of 21 students can be difficult depending on the makeup of those students, but three classrooms of 14 students may seem like low numbers. Ms. Mitchell pointed out that the Taiwanese system regularly has 60 students per teacher. Mr. Foster said that the SC is hearing primarily from community members with the means to support an override while town leaders are hearing from a group that feels differently.

- Ongoing Evaluation of Budget Suggestions/Ideas List – Ms. Whitman compiled a list of SC Member input for suggestions that they believe should be pursued further. Ms. Whitman shared these suggestions and possible avenues for moving forward:
 - i. Define Level Services – address now for FY25 budget
 - ii. Explore Class Size Options – address now for FY25 budget
 - iii. School Choice Revenue – address now for FY25 budget
 - iv. Third Party Operational Audit of MERSD – While only two SC members wanted to address now, Ms. Whitman stressed the importance of consideration of an audit, in whole or in part, in which the SC would take part. Ms. Whitman said the SC could find room in the budget to self-fund an audit, could explore the DESE review as an alternative, or could develop target items for an audit that the district would engage in at a future time. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she has followed up with DESE and requested consideration for the next year's review. The representative suggested reviewing their reports to see what the district could learn. If accepted, they would come in the following year, between October and March, with a report to follow. DESE would bring in their knowledge about the things the district is supposed to be doing and what the responsibilities are to different groups of students. They would not propose a model but instead provide feedback on what the district is doing well and upon what the district could improve. There would be no cost to the district, though it is about a \$55K service. Alternatively, NESDC (New England School Development Council) has a research and target support division. If the district were to rejoin this association, they would provide a number of complimentary reports to target program, scheduling, etc. Superintendent Beaudoin did not know if either of these groups typically make recommendations about budget efficiencies. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the district is allowed to spend the Essex-approved audit monies. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that those funds are only available through a budget amendment or if the town purchases services independently. Ms. Spencer stated that it is important for the SC to focus on what is in the best interests of passing the budget without having one town feel coerced. She stated that the DESE review was unlikely to satisfy the Town of Essex. Ms. Spencer said Essex has asked for a review of class size, administrative

expenses, and overhead. Ms. Spencer asked if the SC could create a list of items that they are committed to reviewing. Ms. Whitman agreed that these would be helpful questions to answer and stated that she would want to see the administrative comps. Ms. Whitman said it might also provide insight into how to increase the fee structure and incorporate school choice successfully. Ms. Spencer suggested that any review be done collaboratively or by an independent third party. Mr. Foster distributed a document with options for a district review utilizing only the funds approved by Essex voters. This document was not reviewed due to lack of time. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that, if the district is facing a time of review for the purpose of restructuring, she was unsure of the value in building up the budget. Ms. Whitman suggested tabling the conversation until the next business meeting.

- 8) School Committee Comment** – Ms. Whitman stated that the SC will need to commit to the tentative business meeting on December 19, 2023, if a quorum can be reached. Mr. Reed thanked all Essex voters for addressing the field issue, which was a huge commitment from the district's reserves.

9) Adjourn

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

Meeting Adjourned at 9:02 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- December 5, 2023
- December 13, 2023 (Wednesday)
- December 19, 2023