



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

*November 7, 2023*

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| <b>Meeting:</b>                          | School Committee   |
| <b>Date:</b>                             | <i>November 7, 2023</i>  |
| <b>Location:</b>                         | MERMHS Learning Commons  |
| <b>Attendees:</b>                        | Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent<br>Avi Urbas, Director of Finance<br>Theresa Whitman, Chairperson<br>John Binieris<br>Jake Foster<br>Kate Koch-Sundquist<br>Anna Lin Mitchell<br>Chris Reed<br>Erica Spencer |
| <b>Absent:</b>                           |  |
| <b>Guests:</b>                           | Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum and Instructional Technology<br>Sheila McAdams, Principal EES<br>John Willis, Principal MMES<br>Joanne Maino, Principal MERMS<br>Julie Sgroi, Principal MERHS           |
| <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 **6:06** 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)** - none
  - 2) Chairman's Report** – Ms. Whitman stated that she met with the Student Advisory Council on October 18. Eight students are part of this advisory group, in addition to

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SC Chair, Ms. Whitman, and Superintendent Beaudoin, Principal Sgroi, and staff liaison Ms. Erin Fortunato. Ms. Whitman also met with Dorothy Presser from MASC to clarify process issues regarding a third party evaluation. Ms. Whitman stated that the agenda for the evening does not include time for discussing School Committee goals.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist read from the “School Committee Operating Protocols:” Recognize that authority rests only with majority decisions of the Committee and make no independent commitments or take any independent actions that may compromise the Committee as a whole.

- 3) Student Report – Diego Sanson:** Mr. Sanson said that the Student Advisory Council discussed how to deal with artificial intelligence (AI) in school. The topic is not covered in the handbook, and this topic will need time to sort out. Students also discussed the SCORE project and the difficulty of securing a meaningful experience with a heavy AP load. Each AP class that a senior carries deducts weekly hours from the SCORE project. Mr. Sanson said that students were recently reminded of MERSD attendance policy. The MERSD Handbook outlines instances in which students may lose credits for unexcused absences and tardies. Mr. Sanson asked that the high school make additional efforts to inform students about the consequences of tardies and absences. Mr. Foster asked about causes for the high number of absences. Mr. Sanson replied that it may be influenced by the “senior slide,” but he thinks that things became lax during the Covid timeframe. Some do not feel it is important to come because work is posted on Google Classroom. Mr. Binieris asked if teachers have become more lax. Mr. Sanson responded that teachers are keeping track of tardies and absences, and allowing homework makeup, but they are not having the tough conversations with students about how it impacts learning for the individual and the greater class.

**4) Consent Agenda –**

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1021 - 1025
- Minutes for approval: October 17, 2023

*Ms. Spencer moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Reed seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

**5) Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman) – The facilities subcommittee had no report. Mr. Urbas provided a summary of the now completed turf field replacement projects. Mr. Urbas expects all remaining items to be completed shortly, releasing the remaining 5% retainage payment. The project budget-to-actual report Mr. Urbas presented has a final estimate of \$1.427M, a savings of \$103K. The savings are the result of a mostly unused contingency line item of the budget and a state grant in the amount of \$25K. Mr. Urbas stated that the final expense to each town will be

split according to the established lease agreement on Brook Street field and the apportionment agreement. All documents will be sent to the town administrators.

- **Finance Committee/Collaboration Group** (Anna Lin Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman stated that the School Committee would hold on the collaboration group discussion until later in the meeting.
  - **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Mr. Reed stated that negotiations are ongoing and included silent observers at the last meeting. Ms. Whitman stated that members of the collaboration group were invited to be silent observers at the negotiation meeting.
  - **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – Mr. Foster discussed their work on classroom size policy. Mr. Foster stated that the policy sub-committee met with Principal Sgroi and Principal Maino regarding scheduling decisions, the thought process behind them, and the impact on students of those decisions. The sub-committee is considering running scenarios to examine the impact of a policy decision for class enrollment. In addition, they would like to explore whether students are currently able to take courses outside of the building and if there are current policies that impact their ability to do so. Ms. Mitchell said that she is committed reviewing a few more reserve policies from area schools and to reaching out to other municipal groups to seek alignment with a proposed reserve policy for MERSD. Ms. Mitchell said she is committed to presenting a draft at the next subcommittee meeting and then to the SC business meeting. Following SC meeting feedback, they proposed reserve policy would need to go through legal counsel.
- 6) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district is taking advantage of a funded opportunity through DESE for high school staff to visit Casco Bay. It will be an opportunity to view their practices for innovation in support of the Strategic Plan. Principal Sgroi commented that this trip was planned before either she or Ms. Leonard had joined the district. They are excited to approach the visit with fresh eyes. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the leadership team is working to get into each building and into classroom more. Having recently visited the elementary schools, they will proceed with visiting the middle school. The leadership team will share their observations and continue their work to identify cores for cultural competency and looking at instructional practice. The superintendent also stated that the district will again receive the safe and supportive schools grant. Superintendent Beaudoin acknowledged Ms. Collins and Mr. Urbas for presenting at the DESE Special Education workshop. They were asked to present on best practices in special education. The superintendent stated that the district has completed a webpage to house reports conveniently, including the DESE end of year financial report and the annual financial audit. The district is also developing a warehouse page of programmatic reports.

## 7) Continued Business –

- a. Annual Student Assessment Report –Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum and Instructional Technology. Ms. Leonard stated that an index was attached to her presentation to respond to the inquiries of the SC. The strengths and growth areas presented by each principal will set up each building for their next steps. Ms. Leonard described this as “forever work” because the district continually strives to do better, and the students, and their needs, will continue to change. Ms. Leonard referenced work on the educational data landscape by Nancy Love, who presents a pyramid of assessment data from formative at the base to annual summative reviews at the peak. Ms. Leonard stressed that assessment data is only one component of the data gathered to make decisions. All data is used in concert, from these assessments to formative input teachers take in during their daily work with students.
  - i. MERSD Student Population: Ms. Leonard said that the MERSD student population has changed rapidly over the last 5-10 years. Almost 30% of the MERSD population is currently included in the DESE category High Needs Population. This group includes low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Student need may overlap. The district has a responsibility to make sure that all students can access the educational program. Ms. Leonard said that when the data indicates that practices need to change it could be because the students being served have different needs than their predecessors.
  - ii. Absenteeism: Ms. Leonard stated that the district is seeing a decrease from the absenteeism spike from recent years. However, frequent absences and tardies are reason for concern. Students miss the interaction and discussion that is a critical component of the learning environment, and their classmates are impacted because their voice is not part of the class.
  - iii. VOCAL Data: DESE conducted a student survey at the conclusion of the MCAS test window for each student. The compiled VOCAL (views of climate and learning) data includes student reported experience of school climate. Questions were asked across the categories of school climate, engagement, safety, and the environment. The state aggregate was used to assign districts a grade. Ms. Leonard commended MERSD staff for the results which indicate a high level of safety and acceptance.
  - iv. I-Ready K-8: Ms. Leonard said that I-Ready is a new tool that will enable staff to have a conversation in a consistent way between grades. I-Ready uses a grade level band to measure student performance. It stretches from greater than one year below grade level (red) to end-of-year or over (green). There is a skew to the spring assessment when material is still new. The goal is for students to achieve grade level mastery over the course of the year.
  - v. Accountability: DESE conducts a survey of district accountability that includes multiple measures, including achievement, growth, high

school completion (graduation rate, engagement, dropout rate), progress to English language proficiency, and additional indicators (including advanced coursework completion and chronic absenteeism). DESE Accountability challenges districts to continually improve. They take where schools were and provide a new target. Schools are rated on a point system from 0 to 4 for target goals across data sets. MERSD has not been rated since FY 2018-2019. MERSD was on target for 64% of the referenced criterion. This data can be found on the DESE website.

- vi. Advanced Placement – Ms. Leonard said the advanced placement tests are a culmination of the student learning experience. In 2023, 355 AP tests were taken by MERSD students. Eighty-six percent of students passed with a score of 3 or higher, 6 courses had 100% pass rate, and 79 tests received a score of 5. Further breakdown of results are in the appendix for review.
- vii. High School Assessment Report – Principal Julie Sgroi. Strengths of the high school include a 5% increase in passing AP scores, school climate and safety, and meeting or exceeding 78% of DESE accountability targets. Student passing AP scores have improved consistently since 2019, with the exception of the taken-from-home test in 2020. VOCAL data is a cause for celebration and loops back to the district's SEL work, U Block teachers, and ALICE training. Principal Sgroi also review data from a core competency survey given to students years from grade six. Students showed significant growth over their educational career in the middle/high school building. For example, 95% of current seniors reported that they can find ways to resist peer pressure. This speaks to progress toward the goal of the strategic initiative to celebrate and nurture an inclusive and diverse school culture that recognizes the contributions of all. Areas for growth include attendance (where absences and tardies have increased since last year) and performance on the Math MCAS. The high school has attendance and tardy working groups looking at the current trends and examining the policies of other district and looking for ways to increase attendance. This work goes into Strategic Initiative II. Performance in the Math MCAS showed some dips. Students must be present to help them with social-emotional needs. Results can be broken out by standard. This will help to pinpoint areas that need focus and drive the learning. In addition, staffing has been adjusted to put teachers into their strongest areas. The high school is also looking at the formation of academic intervention programming to bolster and support student needs. In addition, they are seeking innovative learning tools, including at the upcoming trip to Casco Bay. Principal Sgroi said they will also look to utilize stipends to reorganize support to students.

- viii. Middle School Assessment Report – Principal Joanne Maino. Principal Maino shared that middle school SPED and high needs subgroups exceeded the MCAS target and credited the accomplishment with the restructuring of service delivery several years ago. Content area specialists in humanities and STEM now serve as co-teachers within the general education classroom, applying Tier 2 expertise to bolster Tier 1 support. VOCAL data was another strength, as was consistent growth in science and reading and math. Absenteeism is an area for growth. Lowest performing students garnered 0 out of 4 on attendance. District attendance letters have gone out, and many parents have responded that they were unaware of tardy instances. Principal Maino has also had meetings with parents of these students. For continued attendance issues, the principal will meet with families with a probation officer in attendance to explain the school's responsibility and the process should an SRA (student requiring assistance) be required. To improve student comprehension of informational texts, the middle school is working to lay a foundation of tools in grade 6. In Me blocks, students are challenged to drop everything and read. Assessments like MCAS and I-Ready require students to work for up to a two hour test. To build stamina, the middle school will look to information from formative assessments and increase the number of shorter assessments to determine where students are day to day. The middle school is also looking to increase vertical and cross team consistency, increase vocabulary instruction, address different standards needs at different times in the year, achieve content area progress in STEM by building analytical and critical thinking skills. To meet these challenges, the middle school hopes to utilize the stipend structure to increase support to Tier 1 environment.
- ix. Essex Elementary School Assessment Report – Principal Sheila McAdams. Principal McAdams pointed to a strong SEL and school climate as a strength of the school. It lays the foundation for kids to feel safe and be capable of learning. Students also demonstrated strength in phonological awareness and conceptual math understanding. Areas for growth include vocabulary development, attendance, and meeting MCAS targets. Action steps include adding a goal to the Strategic Improvement Plan, identifying expectations for mastery of writing standards across grade levels, concentrating resources at the point of need, increasing vocabulary exposure through play, and morphology across disciplines. Principal McAdams stated that she intends to request budget support to improve Tier 1 instruction via professional learning and instructional coaching.
- x. Memorial Elementary School Assessment Report – Principal John Willis. Principal Willis pointed to Memorial's improvement in the DESE accountability rating over the last five years, rising to the 94<sup>th</sup> percentile. There was an increase in the number of students receiving

“exceeds expectations” in ELA and Math MCAS scores across all grades. Growth areas include a decrease in students meeting/exceeding expectations in MCAS ELA and low essay writing scores that are off-trend for the school. To address these growth areas, the school will work on curriculum alignment to identify inconsistencies and target best practices district-wide. The NEASC accreditation process will assist in sharing best practices and achieving alignment to recognized accreditation standards. Memorial will increase myPath implementation and pursue a data-driven conversation about literacy and math Tier 1 instruction. Principal Willis stated that he will be requesting budgeting support to improve Tier 1 instruction through professional learning and instructional coaching.

Ms. Leonard stated that a goal for the district is to replicate success in high performing areas and programs as well as targeting specific deficits. Ms. Leonard applauded the team’s commitment to continuing to use data systems and other forms of information to going forward. Challenges include increasing the effectiveness of Tier 1 curriculum and instruction (in consistency and coherence) and bridging the opportunity gap of the high needs student group.

#### District Improvement Plan Next Steps

- i. Strategic Initiative 1 – Authentic Learning Environment
  - a. Build a system of coherent standards-focused authentic learning experiences through vertical and horizontal alignment, curriculum articulation, and meeting the needs of all learners.
  - b. NEASC elementary review
  - c. Differentiated Professional Learning Opportunities
  - d. District Data Protocols
- ii. Strategic Initiative 2 – SEI integration into all aspects of school day
  - a. Attendance analysis and action plan
  - b. SEL program audit
  - c. Implement SEL leadership structure
  - d. Integrate SEL into MTSS
  - e. Family Engagement
  - f. Professional Learning: RULER
- iii. Strategic Initiative 3 – Celebrate and nurture inclusive and diverse school culture that recognizes the contributions and uniqueness of all individuals
  - a. Analysis and action planning for impact of attendance on select students
  - b. Program Reviews
  - c. Integrate cultural competency efforts across educational programming
  - d. Professional Learning: UDL

Questions: Ms. Whitman noted that the increase in the high needs population from 5 to 10% has occurred at the same time as budget conversation about per student costs and asked about the sharp increase. Ms. Leonard stated that the highest increase has been for students in the low income groups. These students are in every class, and it is important to be mindful that the district cannot assume that the same delivery will continue to meet the needs of a changing population. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district needs to adapt its practice to the students currently in front of them. Mr. Binieris said that absenteeism could be impacted by families that may not understand the implications of late arrival or vacation absences and asked how these attendance issues were addressed. Principal Maino stated that the largest area for concern is with students whose absences are impacted by mental health issues. Ms. Maino said that these students need to be supported, but there are a lack of resources world-wide. The wait for outside support is often very long. Mr. Binieris said this highlights the role of school counselors. Ms. Maino stated that it is an area that the district has cut back on. The school psychologist used to help, but currently only completes testing. Principal Sgroi said that many high school drive themselves to school. Attendance letters provided a start to the conversation that communication with parents is critical for utilizing family support. Ms. Mitchell stated that she was surprised to see poor elementary school performance on the MCAS and questioned whether the district is doing enough to encourage improvement. Ms. Mitchell asked if the district is tying performance to teacher evaluations. Principal Willis reflected that the elementary schools did not see a drop in MCAS scores immediately following Covid, suggesting that older students were more resilient. Principal Willis said that the current scores reflect the impact on those in the younger grades during the pandemic. Principal Willis said that they are looking at instructional coaching to adapt learning to these students' needs. Principal McAdams said that not enough is being done and that it can be more difficult to close the gap for the older students. Twenty or thirty minutes weekly of meeting with a students will not accomplish it. Principal McAdams said that they are currently working to meet with students earlier in the day and exploring ways to extend the day. Leadership walk-throughs are providing talking points about expectations and what they are expecting to see. Principal McAdams addressed Ms. Mitchell's comment about teacher evaluations, saying that the walk through can inform that and help to reshape teacher ideas about what is possible. Ms. Leonard stated that the issue is not one thing. The big picture is to combine median needs with targeted support. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked what targeted supports look like for older cohorts where gaps have gotten bigger and bigger over time. Ms. Leonard added the questions of when, who, and what specific strategies. Tier 1 supports are classroom based. Tier 2 supports are more strategic, and Tier 3 are more intensive. The goal of closing the gap is to provide access to missing knowledge without that student falling behind in current instruction. Ms. Leonard said the district needs to grow the MTSS program. Principal Maino said that the middle school has six interventionists for students with supports. An additional budget ask would be to put back a TA for the learning center. Mr. Foster applauded the shift to address all students in core instruction settings. He said that opportunity gaps have long existed and that pulling students out of class for intensive support results in missed opportunities. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the change in practice arose from the special education review between 2016-2019. Ms. Spencer noted that the data shows that

SEL is not incompatible with rigor. Ms. Spencer noted the difference in MCAS performance between the elementary schools and asked how that impacted the pace of instruction in the middle school where most classes are not leveled. Principal Maino stated that it does have an impact. In addition, the middle school is challenged by students beyond grade level. I-Ready does not go beyond grade eight. Both challenges require teachers to support student needs. Ms. Leonard stated that high quality curriculum allows all students the opportunity to move forward from where they enter. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the class size reality is that when students reach middle school, each teacher has 90-100 students to get to know and support.

b. FY24 Fall Budget to Actual Report and Transfers

- i. Year-to-Date Spending - Actual FY-to-Date expenditures of \$6.9 million reflect spending through October 31. This amount represents 23.7% of the budget allocation for the year, as spent in the first 4 months.
- ii. Full Year Forecast – The current forecast provides good visibility for salaried staffing expenses and benefits, which represent the majority of MERSD budgeted expenditures. Exceptions to this visibility in the personnel categories are hourly services, substitute costs, stipends, and, to some extent, teaching assistant staffing levels which can change mid-year depending on student needs in special education. Operating Expense forecasts are subject to increased variability. Costs for utilities, OOD tuition and transportation, and special education contracted services costs are dynamic. The current forecast shows full-year potential savings of \$106K or 0.4% of budget. This will reduce the amount of E&D reserve use to \$181K. There is anticipated savings in personnel
- iii. Budget Transfer Request - With transfer requests, the total budget does not change, but budget authority is moved between categories to account for changes in forecasted expectations. For categories in which we expect spending to exceed budget, a transfer is required to increase our appropriation (i.e., our authority to spend). These increases are funded by reducing the budget in an equal amount in other categories, where savings are expected. Broadly speaking, transfers requested at this time utilize savings in personnel categories totaling \$104K to fund an equal increase in the budget for the Operating Expenses in the categories mentioned above. Mr. Urbas asked that the School Committee vote to approve a budget transfer of \$104K for operational expenses.

Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification on the anticipated property and liability insurance costs. Mr. Binieris states that the market is increasing everywhere for those. Mr. Urbas stated that, although the district has had low claims in this area, the broker warned that there is an anticipated market rate increase.

*Ms. Whitman moved to authorize the budget transfer as noted. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Mitchell stated that the FY23 final budget should be presented along with the budget to actual report and transfer requests. Mr. Urbas said that was possible. Ms. Mitchell asked that transfers be shown on the revenue side, as well. Ms. Mitchell said that if the budget for FY24 will be used to build the FY25 budget, it should reflect projections in every line of the budget. Mr. Urbas stated that the district builds the budget to actuals, not this year's budget. Mr. Urbas said that an important consideration is the requirement for statutory approval for any overages. Ms. Whitman stated that the current discussion should focus on approval of the transfers and not about the presentation method for information. Ms. Mitchell also questioned the forecast predictions for related health insurance cost given anticipated decrease in personnel. She said this potential savings is not reflected in savings. Only the increase in property insurance. Mr. Urbas explained where it is included and how the transfer amount is determined. Ms. Mitchell stated that the business office increase was already included as part of the budget. Mr. Urbas said he would double check that it is not currently in the budget. It was part of previous budget conversations.

*The motion carried 6 to 1, with Ms. Mitchell opposed.*

Mr. Urbas asked if Ms. Mitchell was opposed to the transfer or the data presentation. Ms. Mitchell said that she takes issue with the method of the transfers.

- c. Operational Audit Proposal – Ben Buttrick, Essex Finance Committee. Ms. Whitman shared that each town has placed a warrant on their upcoming Town Meeting warrant to request approval of money for an operational audit of the school district. Mr. Buttrick stated that he was not in attendance at the SC meeting as a representative of the Essex Finance Committee. Mr. Buttrick is the author of the statement of work (SOW) presented to the SC. Mr. Buttrick stated that the idea of a district review was born at the All-Board meeting and said that an audit has not been completed since the district was formed. Mr. Buttrick asked that the SC support the town warrants and said that he would like to have a couple of SC members on the audit steering group. Mr. Buttrick said that the SOW has three goals – to identify expectations among stakeholders about what is most valued, to provide a summary of what is actually representative of best/common practices, and to create a list of opportunities and considerations for the district. Mr. Buttrick stated that the audit makes sense because voters will be making a budget decision in the spring, the budget may go to a Super Town Meeting, and the budget may require an override. Mr. Buttrick said that the review would inform residents about whether the management of the district reflects best practices and whether the spend is within a range of reasonableness for a high-performing district. He said an audit would foster better alignment between town officials,

the school district, and voters. Mr. Buttrick said that he does not believe the specifics of the audit need to be fully articulated before the warrants are voted upon at the town meetings.

Questions: Ms. Mitchell stated that the voters want to see plans and not just a concept. She said that the idea of an audit needs to be complete enough to convince people to vote yes on the warrant. Ms. Whitman said that the summary Mr. Buttrick provided is different than what she expected following the collaboration group meeting. Ms. Whitman stated that she thought it had been clearly expressed at the collaboration group meeting that the School Committee would want to understand the audit's scope, procurement, timing, and expectations of the results in order to support it. Ms. Whitman said that it seemed premature to lend that support without that information. Mr. Buttrick said it was a chicken and egg issue and that he is seeking participation in defining those components. Ms. Whitman said the SOW is a different direction than what was discussed during collaboration. Ms. Spencer said that two months remain before the budget is first presented, and those months include holidays. Ms. Spencer questioned whether this was the right time to pull district resources for an audit given that they are also working on the budget draft. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the audit's deliverable may or may not be useful for this year's budget process and asked if this was rushing the process. Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted that the SOW also specifies meetings with students and staff. Mr. Foster said he was confused that Mr. Buttrick was not acting as a representative of the collaboration group while presenting the SOW document and asked if the collaboration group is in support of the SOW. Mr. Buttrick stated that he is not representing the SOW as supported by the collaboration group. Mr. Foster asked about the purpose of the interviews and focus groups mentioned in the SOW. Mr. Buttrick said that there are questions about class size versus the curriculum, cost, and how classes are run. Mr. Foster said that the SC has purview of the boarder educational program not what happens in class. Mr. Buttrick said that it is not known if the district is different from similar districts. Superintendent Beaudoin asked if the desire is to determine if the district should have a middle or junior high school structure, and Mr. Buttrick stated that he would not rule that out. He acknowledged that class-size is a component. Ms. Koch-Sundquist questioned the value of a third party recommendation and said that the issue is not just about structure. The district could run more cheaply by having one elementary school instead of two, but the community has not supported this idea. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if Essex would agree to bus their students to Memorial, building an addition there instead of pursuing a new build on the Essex Elementary site, if the consultant recommended that as a way to run the district at less cost. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that a feasibility study will happen as part of the building process if Essex Elementary is accepted into the MSBA. Ms. Whitman said that she would appreciate an outside perspective but had hoped to understand what information was sought to determine if it was already available through the district's other audits and reports. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that there is a DESE district-review process that is being re-introduced and could provide the desired third party review. It is a comprehensive review of the program. Mr. Foster stated that he has been a part of this review in another district and that it did not attach program to finances or yield recommendations for efficiencies. Ms. Mitchell said that she

welcomed a third party review and that all parties need to work together to create the deliverables. The process would help to build expectations. Mr. Reed stated that he has reservations at many levels. The district completes yearly reviews that compare it to other districts. As a taxpayer, Mr. Reed said that he would not want to spend his tax dollars on something already done. Mr. Reed said that the majority of constituents trust the district leadership and elected SC representatives to be responsible stewards to all stakeholders – students, staff, and taxpayers. Mr. Reed said that a third party review would be great because in his experience the results would be similar to data already available. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if, in the spirit of collaboration, the towns should also have operational reviews of similar scope to determine if they could better structure their operations to fund the district. Ms. Whitman stated that she would rather just be asked to reduce the budget by a target amount. Ms. Spencer said that there is clearly a lack of trust between stakeholders regarding transparency. The audit process could result in all reaching a consensus. Ms. Spencer noted that the amount Essex is proposing to spend on their portion of an audit is equal to the predicted budget shortfall which the Essex boards said they would not be able to fund. Mr. Foster said that the promise of the collaboration group was to discuss school and town needs and explore solutions. One group of constituents is expressing to the SC that they want to invest in education while another is telling the Essex boards that they feel pushed out of town because they are unable to pay taxes. By putting the audit on the warrant, it sets up the stakeholders to argue in public rather than finding solutions in the collaboration group. Mr. Foster questioned how this serves to fix the challenge. Mr. Foster agreed that this is about building trust between stakeholders. He said that the scope of the audit needs to be identified and that there should be assurance that all five boards will accept and act on the results, even if they mean further investment. Mr. Foster asked if the warrant would go forward without SC support. Ms. Whitman stated that at the collaboration group meeting it was suggested that the SC would be expected to take recommendations from the audit or they would have explaining to do. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it is important to keep in mind the hierarchy of decision making. A resulting recommendation could be that the district should make a 20% reduction in staffing. The administration team would determine how that is accomplished. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if Essex would commit to funding the budget if the audit found that MERSD is not unusual when compared to similar districts. Ms. Spencer said that the policy sub-committee has reviewed a lot of class size data, and she sees the benefit of a third party with ready access to additional data. Ms. Mitchell said that she thinks the process should be driven by all stakeholders who could work with the consultant to define the deliverables. Mr. Foster said that the SC will be asked for its stance. Ms. Whitman said that the SC could choose not to take a stand. Ms. Whitman said that it was made clear at the collaboration meeting that the SC has not moved quickly enough to act on the audit idea so the other representatives chose to act on their own. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that the SC would need to support any audit in order to direct the administration to cooperate with it. Mr. Sanson stated that he thought it was the job of the SC and administrators to review the district. He asked if they are not doing a good enough job. Mr. Sanson asked what the third party would provide. He also asked about the student and staff interviews. Mr. Sanson asked how Mr. Buttrick expects teachers and students to interact with the interviewers when the intent is to cut programs.

that benefit them. Mr. Sanson stressed that the district should be working to be different from others, to be exceptional. Mr. Buttrick stated that as a taxpayer he wants assurance that the district is applying best practice in how it is run and said that if there are unusual things he wants to know what they are. Mr. Foster had looked up information and said that the district review by DESE includes many indicators. He stated that all the boards may want to explore if this audit meets the desired criteria. If not, it could help to articulate the language needed to direct a consultant in a review. Mr. Binieris stated that nothing in the SOW points to ways the district can improve. It is an exercise in cutting money. Ms. Whitman said this conversation would not be happening if the budget were not an issue. Ms. Whitman said she takes exception to the level of distrust for the work the SC is doing, knowing the hours and level of care that SC members devote to the board. She stated that the SC is already trying for efficiencies. Mr. Binieris said that he has not seen what a sample report would look like and does not support the SOW. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she is concerned about how the SOW arose and that it is the result of closed door deliberation. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that these meetings should take place publically. She feels she is missing pieces of the conversation because she is missing pieces of background information. Mr. Urbas stated that during the collaboration group meeting, it was expressed that they hoped to develop the SOW collaboratively with the School Committee. Mr. Urbas asked if the Essex Board of Selectman and Essex Finance Committee had changed their minds about this goal. Mr. Buttrick reiterated that he is not representing the Essex boards, but that he was present to start a collaborative conversation. Mr. Urbas said support from the Essex boards for collaboration would affect many members.

*Mr. Foster moved to request that both towns delay their town warrants to allow for collaborative definition of the potential scope of the work. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the Essex boards thought the SC would delay the process and noted that there was a notable reaction when the motion was made. Mr. Foster stated that the SC does not know where the boards stand except through closed door meeting and hearsay. He said the SC could send the message that they are asking for a delay in order to make the process collaborative. Ms. Whitman said that, similarly to not wanting the town to tell the SC how to do their job, she does not want to tell the towns how to do their job. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the SC should make some type of statement. Although the SC was not consulted, the SC is responsible. Mr. Foster that the current motion would serve as the statement.

*The motion failed 1-6, with Mr. Foster voting in favor.*

Mr. Reed asked for Superintendent Beaudoin's input. The superintendent said that the statement should be very specific about what the SC wants reviewed. Superintendent Beaudoin recommended considering the DESE review option. Ms. Spencer said that it was difficult to craft a statement of support without knowing how the boards are presenting the warrant. Ms. Whitman said that the statement could be that the SC has not received enough information to create a statement of support but are open to the idea of an audit. Members debated the wording of a statement for neutrality. Ms. Mitchell said

that would be a good way to move forward. Mr. Urbas suggested expressing that the SC is in support of working collaboratively to develop a scope of work to benefit the district via an operational audit. Ms. Spencer said it is difficult to express an opinion without knowing how it is being presented. Mr. Binieris said that he is in favor of the standard no-position response.

*Ms. Mitchell moved that the School Committee take a no-position stance for the warrant item. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Superintendent Beaudoin asked the SC members to consider if they would be comfortable, should both towns pass the warrant, reaching a position that may be in conflict with that outcome. Ms. Whitman stated that, if the motions pass, the SC will be responsible for finding the best way to complete the charge. Ms. Spencer said that Mr. Buttrick's stated interest in collaboration allows her to believe that the SC will not be handed an RFP that does not involve the collaborative inclusion of the SC. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if this is a beneficial use of administrative time. Ms. Mitchell said that could be determined. Mr. Foster stated that the SC was abdicating advocacy for what they believe is best by taking themselves out of the discussion by having a no-position stance on the warrant. Ms. Whitman said that if the School Committee adopts a no-position, no SC board member should speak at a town meeting as an SC member. Ms. Whitman stressed that the SC should act as a body. Ms. Spencer suggested that the SC statement be that they have had insufficient time to fully evaluate the merits of the proposal presented to them but would seek to work collaboratively on a scope of work going forward should the funds be approved.

*The motion failed 1-6, with Ms. Mitchell voting in favor.*

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved that the School Committee stance on the warrant shall be that they have had insufficient time to determine whether they can collaboratively develop a scope of work therefore the school committee does not take a position at this time. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.*

Discussion: Mr. Foster said he would be happier saying that the SC does not support the warrant. Ms. Mitchell stated that she thought the tone of the motion was still a little negative and that keeping the town neutral would allow the will of the town to be expressed.

*Mr. Reed moved the vote. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed 5-2, with Mr. Foster and Ms. Mitchell voting against:*

- 8) School Committee Comment** – Ms. Whitman reiterated that this is the official stance of the SC. Ms. Whitman said the discussion and evaluation of other ideas generated at the All Boards meeting would be postponed until the next meeting. Ms. Koch-Sundquist reiterated her desire for the collaborative group to consider an open meeting format. She said that it feels uncomfortable having these conversations without knowing where the guidance is coming from. Mr. Foster said that he met with Ms. Leonard to discuss the curriculum review process occurring and said that the SC needs

to have Ms. Leonard present on what that process is. Ms. Spencer said that the SC needs to think about how to approach the All Boards Meetings. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the next three SC meetings would focus on the budget process.

## **9) Adjourn**

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

*Meeting Adjourned at 10:39 pm*

## **School Committee Future Meetings**

- November 21, 2023
- December 5, 2023