



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

September 17, 2024

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	September 17, 2024
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Chris Reed, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Anna Mitchell, remote attendance Erica Spencer Theresa Whitman
Absent:	
Guests:	Kim Provost, Principal Essex Elementary John Willis, Principal Manchester Memorial Elementary
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

A. Call to Order of – Mr. Reed called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:04 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) Chairperson's Report – Mr. Reed stated that the year was off to a great start throughout the district.

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3) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1012 and payroll warrant for September 12, 2024.
- Minutes for approval: September 3, 2024

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

The motion passed unanimously.

4) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) – No Report. The Essex Elementary Building Committee will meet next week and have a tour of the Essex building.
- **Finance Committee** (Anna Mitchell/ Jake Foster) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/ERICA Spencer/Theresa Whitman) – General Update. Ms. Whitman stated that the subcommittee met and reviewed a few points of discussion.
 - Policy updates and revisions that the subcommittee will undertake
 - Technology updates that have been handed to the tech team for review
 - Update recommendations from MASC regarding revision to sexual harassment policy. These recommendations have been sent to district council, Colby. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there have been changes at the Federal level that impact Title IX at the state level. Colby will provide district training over the next couple of months, allowing the district to review the changes and update as necessary. Ms. Whitman said that these changes are expected by the end of November. In regards to bullying prevention policy, the subcommittee was able to review proposed language changes. This included changing the use of the terms aggressor and target to perpetrator and victim, respectively. Ms. Whitman stated that the policy subcommittee is in favor of adopting these recommendations. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that this proposed update can now be submitted for inclusion in the next School Committee packet for a vote by the full committee.
 - Ms. Whitman shared that the subcommittee also had an informal discussion regarding student cell phone and device use in school. Committee members agreed that the elementary and middle schools have a clear philosophy to go with their procedures. The high school principal, Julie Sgroi, will brief the subcommittee in November about the approach used in that building. Ms. Whitman stated that the subcommittee needs more complete information before coming to any decision on cell phone policy.
 - Reserves Policy – Ms. Whitman stated that the subcommittee reviewed the May 21, 2024 policy draft submitted by the subcommittee to the full committee. Ms.

Spencer provided insight into the two highlighted components of that draft – a target percentage (in relation to the operational budget) for the reserves and clarity on the definition of reserves. When the draft was presented to the full committee, the subcommittee hoped to receive feedback. Ms. Whitman proposed taking a straw poll to determine if the SC is in favor of including a target number into the reserve policy. Ms. Whitman stated that the subcommittee had surveyed neighboring districts for precedent in this area and proposed 8% of the operating budget as a target number. Mr. Foster reminded the SC that last year the topic of a lower boundary to the reserve account was broached. Mr. Foster questioned if there should be a range. Mr. Reed stated that he would support a target number, but not if it was less than the mandated hard cap. Mr. Whitman said that the suggested 8% emerged from the subcommittee's thorough survey of other districts and that the administration is comfortable with the number. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that the district would take as high a number as the SC was able to provide. The original intent of a reserve target percentage was to codify for auditors that the district has guidance around how reserves are used and what the intent of the account is. The superintendent said that the 8% number is aligned with the town limits currently pursued by town partners. Mr. Reed stated that he would like to hear more about the pros and cons of the 8% target before endorsing it. Ms. Spencer shared that in their survey of other districts some had not set target limits on their reserve funds while others ranged from 5% to 10%. There is also a current opinion in the community that the district has some existing protection due to town reserve funds and that the district should therefore have a more conservative limit. The 8% number is considered a middle ground. Mr. Reed pointed out that reserves are needed for unforeseen limitations in addition to unexpected expenses. Mr. Foster stressed that a major component of the discussion is what is meant by "target." Mr. Foster said that the number could be viewed as an upper limit, implying that the district would apply any funds over this target percentage to the operational budget. In contrast, the 8% could be seen as a bottom limit that the district will seek not to fall below. Ms. Whitman said that the philosophy statement of the Town of Essex in their reserve policy allows them to utilize those funds in different ways. Ms. Spencer noted that they also use the words "will strive to maintain" in relation to their 10-15% general fund reserves target range, providing latitude. Ms. Whitman asked if the SC would like to use a range instead. A range could indicate when the reserves are getting too low or too high. Ms. Whitman suggested a straw poll on adapting a percentage range for the reserves, finalizing the language used in the May 21, 2024 reserve policy draft. Mr. Foster stated that he believes that 8% should be an upper limit for an adopted range. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she does not think a window is needed as the current wording leaves the policy open to a range. Superintendent Beaudoin pointed out that 8% equates to about three months of payroll, should the district run into a situation where it did not have access to funds. The superintendent reminded the SC that the district is obligated in any given year to return to town partners any E&D funds that exceed 5% of the operational budget.

Ms. Whitman called a straw poll to ascertain if the policy subcommittee would create language around the 8% number for a reserves policy target and received an affirmative.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report

5) Superintendent's Report – Pam Beaudoin

- Upcoming Open Houses – Memorial Elementary and the high school held successful open houses
 - Essex Elementary School – September 19
 - Middle School – September 26
- Superintendent's Coffee – Four coffees will be held this year.
- School Committee Building Tours – Building principals will host School Committee members for a tour of their facilities.
 - Manchester Memorial Elementary – October 2
 - The Middle/High School – October 5
 - Essex Elementary – October 16
- Continuous Improvement
 - NEASC – visit October 22 & 23 at both elementary schools. Feedback will be generated from a comparison of the self assessment completed jointly by the elementary school and NEASC standards. This feedback for growth and commendation will be instrumental in generating the new DIPs and SIPs for the elementary schools.
 - DESE District Review – The timeline and format are pending based on the district's submission. The district has highlighted community inquiry in the hopes that the DESE review will focus on administrative aspects, but the decision lies with DESE. The review will include surveys and focus groups in the areas of review.
- Technology and Facilities Improvement
 - School Committee Nook in the Learning Commons – dedicated technology and seating to maximize meeting efficiency and documentation
 - Interactive Board Upgrade – Previously, Essex Elementary received new interactive boards, using interest funding from the Memorial building project account, to support parity between the schools. New interactive boards for the high school will be leased, building their expense, and future upgrades, into the budget.
 - Test Launch of Raptor - school visitor check in. The system is being piloted at Memorial Elementary School. The computer system uses visitor identification to automatically perform a background check. District administrators can track visitors and receive alerts.
 - Laptop upgrades – district-wide
- Spring 2024 MCAS Results – Accountability data is scheduled for release on September 24. There is no date for score release yet. The annual MERSD assessment review will be November 5. Ms. Leonard works with the principals to create a high-level report for presentation to the School Committee.

- Essex SBC meeting – next Tuesday, 7:00 pm, Essex Elementary School. There will be a tour of the facility for committee members. The committee will review the MSBA letter regarding options for consideration going forward. It is expected that the committee will vote to approve the letter. The next step is for the district to go before the board to enter the feasibility phase. At that point, the district can bring on the OPM (owner's project manager).
- Fall 2024 Enrollment Report – Superintendent Beaudoin referred to the enrollment report contained in SC meeting materials. This report summarizes the current population in classrooms throughout the district, broken down by school and grade and includes classroom averages and benchmarks for class size at each grade. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that it does not include out of district placements (OOD). It does include school choice students. Cross-district placements (students from one town attending school in the other town) are included only in the school that they attend. The superintendent said that enrollment at the elementary schools is exceeding benchmarks in several classes. However, enrollment is not quite at the level where the district is looking to bring in more staff. The middle school is in the middle of its benchmarks. The high school is averaging 16 per class.

Questions: Ms. Spencer asked the superintendent to provide a median for enrollment in addition to the averages. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the drop in enrollment at Essex was predicted. The superintendent said that it was not. However, the MSBA sectioning study indicates that attendance should stay flat before trending upward. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that students may be cross-enrolled at the elementary level if the other school houses a needed program. Essex Elementary has accessibility issues that required a program to move to Memorial Elementary this year. Once the Essex building project is complete, that program is expected to move back to Essex. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that apportionment is not based off this enrollment report. For budgeting and apportionment, the DESE resident report is used.

Ms. Spencer noted that if an additional teacher was added to the Memorial grade 4, the classroom average would be 17. Ms. Spencer said that the parent perspective would favor classroom averages a bit below the benchmark. Mr. Reed asked about the impact of school choice students. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that all school choice additions this year were in grades 6-9 and are included in the current report. Adding staff at the elementary level would raise the question of the benefits of adding additional choice students at that level. The superintendent questioned community reception for having classes under the benchmarks or adding more choice students.

Ms. Spencer asked why students are not currently able to use the learning commons. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the space is transitioning from the learning commons model. The new TA is working to bring students into the library intentionally as part of the effort to revitalize the library program. Ms. Spencer said that she has heard that the library is no longer a place for use as an effective study area. The superintendent said that the auditorium is the location for study hall.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the new advertising banner launch raised about \$20K in revenue.

6) Continued Business –

- a. **Elementary School Improvement Update and 2024-2025 Outlook** – Kim Provost, Principal Essex Elementary School and John Willis, Principal Manchester Memorial Elementary School. The principals referenced materials included in the School Committee meeting packet. The principals have worked to align the two elementary schools and presented most of their accomplishments together. They also highlighted updates particular to each school. The principals focused first on closing out the previous improvement plan and then shared their plan for embarking on the new SIP.

2023-2024 Progress

Strategic Initiative 1:

Goal Area Highlights

- NEASC Process – described as a very thorough process that was aimed at bringing the two schools together. The administrators found that NEASC standards aligned well with what the elementaries are doing because the elementaries are preparing students for an accredited NEASC high school. Staff at both schools came together to write the report; it was an effort with all staff contributing. The NEASC site visit will be October 22 and 23. This team includes educators from all over the state. The MERSD process was unique in that it is one of the first elementary schools to engage in NEASC accreditation and the first district with two elementary schools completing it at the same time. Principal Willis said that staff most often found that the two schools were on the same page, but it was also an opportunity to examine areas of difference and implement the best of each.
- Authentic Learning Assessment – Each school created a common definition. Under the leadership of Curriculum Director Heather Leonard, a team of representatives from all four schools then synthesized a district definition of authentic learning.
- Congruent MMES/EES MTSS Model – Specialists are now district based and report to Ms. Leonard. There is a common model of services. The two added instructional coaches, one in literacy and one in math, have worked in this capacity in other schools. They are currently getting to know MERSD and formulating an entry plan while the district-wide model is being built.
- i-Ready Personalized Learning Activities – The my-Path module is a self-adjusting tool providing students with individualized lessons. Teachers are implementing it as they see fit.
- Curriculum Journaling – a review of what is taught, when and how. This led to the creation of family curriculum guides that are tangible and public-facing.
- Grade 5-6 Transition & Team Building – Several programs have fostered the connection between rising grade six students from the two elementary schools.
 - MMES/EES combined musical – Entering its third season, the fifth grade students from both schools work with their music teachers and staff director to put on a musical. Parents from both schools work on back end projects, including fundraising and costuming.
 - Freedom Trail - shared field trip to Boston
 - Project Adventure – team building field trip

- Essex Ship Building Museum – this opportunity, deriving from community engagement by Sheila McAdams, the interim principal at Essex Elementary, is still being pursued. The idea is to have grade five students from both schools participate in a two-part experience at the museum. In the fall, they would build green crab traps, which the museum will place in the river to catch invasive crabs. In the Spring, both groups will return to row out to the traps and bring them in. This authentic learning experience would have both educational and team building benefits.
- Project Adventure – PE equipment was upgraded at both elementary schools to ensure an equal experience for students whether at Essex Elementary or in the new Memorial Elementary building. Staff were trained on this equipment.
- Expand Community Partnerships –
 - Principal McAdams brought in the Open Door food truck for monthly free vegetable markets at all district buildings. The program is open to everyone, and the buildings have worked hard to normalize participation. Everyone is now comfortable with participation, and the kids are very excited to bring home produce.
 - Safe Routes to School – active partnership in both communities

Strategic Initiative 2: 2023-2024 Progress. Principal Provost explained that the overall goal is to incorporate SEL into all areas of the school day. The district uses RULER, the Yale-developed, evidence-based approach to Social and Emotional Learning, for Tier 1 instruction.

Goal Area Highlights

- SEL Leadership Model – appointed district leader to take charge, supporting staff to incorporate SEL into their day
- SEL Instructional Planning and PD – Created a scope and sequence based on the RULER curriculum to pinpoint what the focus should be and create lessons at each grade level. Through professional development, these lessons are shared with staff.
- SEL Instructional Scheduling, Implementation, and Remediation – Previously, an SEL block was built into the schedule, but it had mixed reviews from staff who wanted a more authentic experience. Currently, SEL lessons are integrated into the day and incorporated into all lessons.
- Family Engagement – The recent family survey indicated that families did not feel involved enough or invited to participate in SEL. Teachers are now using newsletters to keep families up to date and provide insight into the curriculum.
- School and Classroom Climate/Culture – Each class worked on a classroom charter to describe how they want to feel in class. Representatives from classes worked to create a school-wide charter.

Strategic Initiative 3: 2023-2024 Progress

Goal Area Highlights

- Representational Audit – of the website, etc., reviewing how information is presented, who is able to access this information, and who is unable to do so.
- Reintroduction of Understanding our Differences Model – following the disuse of this model during COVID.

- Staff Training: Diverse Characters in Curricular Materials – seeking to include mirrors and windows into diverse characters in school literature.
- Classroom Library Audits – assisting classroom teachers to review in-class collections to ensure there is wide-range representation.

Principal Willis summarized goal progress with a pie chart showing that most goals are complete. Those that remain “in progress” are ongoing things that should not have an end point, like parent engagement.

Comment: Ms. Whitman applauded the job done to normalize use of the Open Door food truck. Principal Willis stated that the service is open to all and shared that the food truck schedule is in the elementary newsletter. Superintendent Beaudoin added that the schedule will be added to the district website.

School Improvement Plan 2025-2026

District Strategic Initiative 1 (DSI:1) - Establish and foster an authentic Pre-K-12 learning environment.

1. Conduct external elementary school level assessments of current practice inclusive of authentic learning self-study. [Student Centered, Student Achievement]
2. Define “student centered authentic learning” and develop internal needs assessments for secondary level schools. [Student Centered, Student Achievement]
3. Map and deliver a developmentally differentiated professional development plan informed by the outcomes of school-based assessments.
4. Strengthen traditional academic program practices to ensure horizontal and vertical articulation. [Student Centered, Student Achievement]
5. Develop community partners to provide opportunities for students to connect learning to real-life application. [Family and Community Partnership]
6. Prioritize and support programming to promote creativity, innovation, and the arts. [Student Centered, Family Community Partnership]

Principal Willis stated that the principals will work collaboratively with their student councils to determine what they want to see change next. Two drivers for this process will be the NEASC accreditation and the goal of continued alignment between the two elementary schools. NEASC will identify priority areas of growth. The NEASC steering committee is comprised of Principal Provost, Principal Willis, and two staff members. The NEASC report will be shared with the community, and their recommendations integrated into the SIP for next year. The elementary schools will continue alignment work as they address the teacher assistance process, as each school currently has its own model. The updated model will be consultation-based. The school adjustment counselor will complete intake with the teacher and connect them with appropriate building supports. This process may lead to evaluation or to advice.

Mr. Foster asked if the teacher assistance process was about academics or was a more wholistic endeavor. Mr. Willis said that, prior to the integration of the MTSS model, the teacher assistance Team (TAT) encompassed everything, for example emotional or speech-language. Now math

and literacy academic concerns fall under the MTSS program while other areas fall under the TAT process. There are separate flow charts for MTSS and TAT.

Mr. Willis stated that the principals will be working with Ms. Leonard to develop the plan for what instructional coaching will look like, identifying coaching models and what the needs are at the elementary schools. The administrators will work with the two coaches to engineer a plan of program. They will be able to tailor the program to the specific needs of each school. The elementary schools will also look to the coaches to assist with authentic learning goals at each grade level. To foster community engagement, the coaches will plan family math and literacy nights.

Library access is increasing this year with the hiring of the new library TA, Kate Donovan, providing staffing when the district elementary librarian is not on site. Ms. Donovan brings experience from many years of substituting at both elementary schools and is familiar with the curriculum and expectations of the library program. Already, many ideas are being generating from the partnership.

Mr. Willis stated that the elementary schools received feedback about the differences in performing arts performances at the two schools. The principals will work this year to align the performances as a way to also align the curriculum.

Mr. Willis shared that Memorial Elementary school has a building-specific goal. This is a school-wide evaluation goal to support teachers in getting out of their classrooms and learning from one another. This would include both learning from others in the Memorial building and across the district through peer observations and also support them to do observations in other districts.

Principal Provost shared the Essex building-specific goal of continuing the after-school programs facilitated through community partnership. This partnership is credited with building a sense of connection with community members. Ms. Provost said they are soliciting for community members to share their talents by running an after-school club. Three sessions are planned for this school year, starting in mid-October and running for six weeks each session.

Strategic Initiative 2 - Integrate social emotional learning into all aspects of the school day.

1. Create a K-12 SEL Leadership model charged with training staff on ways to integrate a variety of strategies to help increase student availability for learning. [Student Achievement, Student Centered, Equity]
2. Create a Vertical SEL Team to support the implementation of SEL informed instruction. [Student Achievement, Student Centered]
3. Design an integration plan and rubric to use to measure effectiveness of SEL integration at the individual student and classroom level. [Student Achievement, Student Centered, Equity]
4. Involve families and the community in the SEL work that our staff and students are engaged in. [Family and Community Partnerships]

Principal Provost spoke to the aligned goals for the elementary school, including the implementation and alignment of SEL scope and sequence (ensuring that students have the same

experience by the time they reach middle school) and providing SEL resources to families. The SEL scope and sequence will require continual refinement going forward to keep the schools on task. Recently, the district invited a clinical psychologist to speak to district administrators about anxiety, which can lead to chronic absenteeism and school avoidance. To make this type of information available to families, the schools will include materials in the school newsletters.

Ms. Provost said that an Essex-specific goal is to increase family engagement around RULER. In addition to email and newsletter updates, Essex Elementary will have a RULER related activity at their open house. Next year, they plan to host a family charter night. Another Essex-specific project was to dedicate a “calm space” in the building for those needing a space outside of the classroom to be able to re-regulate. Principal Provost credited the school adjustment counselor and occupational therapist with the creation of the calm space.

Principal Willis shared that at Memorial they had engaged in the PBIS (positive behavior interventions and supports) path years ago. A large part of this approach is teaching students expectations and recognizing those who meet expectations particularly in relation to MMES core values. Although the core values remain as relevant today as when they were formulated thirteen years ago, MMES was looking to revitalize the program. The school adjustment counselor proposed measures to rejuvenate the program, including recognitions for exemplifying Memorial Elementary values, like core value bracelets and experiences with staff.

Strategic Initiative 3 - Celebrate and nurture an inclusive and diverse school culture that recognizes the contributions and uniqueness of all individuals.

1. Identify and hire a consultant/coach to support the district in achieving cultural proficiency in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion. [Student Centered, Student Achievement, Equity, Family and Community Partnership, Resources]
2. Conduct a cultural proficiency, diversity, equity, and inclusion assessment. [Student Centered, Student Achievement, Equity, Family and Community Partnership, Resources]
3. Build on and expand inclusion and cultural competence training for staff and students

Ms. Provost stated that the first shared goal is around implementation of the Investigating History curriculum set forth by the department of education. It was piloted by grade five last year. The curriculum provides inclusive perspectives and experiences for students. Staff was very positive in reviewing the curriculum. In addition, the elementary librarian will continue to take the lead in bringing in authors of diverse backgrounds.

In Essex, leadership is taking a considered look at the events hosted yearly to look at why they are being done and who benefits. A calendar will be created of events for families.

Mr. Willis shared a Memorial-specific goal around transitions for students in specialized programs. Principal Willis has worked with student services director Allison Collins to create specialized programs. This includes the IRWL (intensive reading and written language) program programs for grades 2/3 and 4/5, SAIL (social and academic integrated learning) in the upper and lower grades program, and the integrated pre-kindergarten program. These programs are highly successful, with many students graduating out of the service. The programs have also changed the landscape of the school, creating a more diverse and inclusive environment. Mr. Willis noted the increase of students on the autism spectrum that are aging into the program. The principal

stated that Memorial wants to be better at the transition when welcoming these students to Memorial, including offering short term counseling and longer-term mentoring. Mr. Willis noted that 37 of the total 304 students at Memorial do not live in Manchester and are attending through school choice, prekindergarten, or to participate in a specialized program. He said the school is also seeing more students with needs for movement breaks or incentives. With the support of the Manchester Memorial Parent Teacher Organization (MMPTO), Principal Willis acquired a range of gross motor activities, now housed throughout the building, that can be utilized by staff working one on one with students or by teachers as classroom rewards. This includes ping pong tables, air hockey, basketball, Jenga, cornhole, etc. Principal Willis received a lot of positive feedback from parents at the open house about how excited their students are to go to school.

Strategic Initiative 4 - Ensure funding for a stable, multi-year budget and capital improvement plan through collaboration with town and community partners.

1. Develop and pass a budget that maintains quality and forward progress maintaining efficient practices but shifting to greater advocacy for increased funding to the District.
2. Articulate large and small scale operational and facilities capital needs and obligations. [Student Centered, Student Achievement, Equity, Family and Community Partnerships, Resources]
3. Continue to evolve the central administrative organization structure to efficiently and effectively support district wide improvement goals. [Student Centered, Student Achievement, Resources]
4. Review personnel efficiencies to improve or adjust delivery of programs. [Student Centered, Student Achievement, Equity, Resources]

The principals will work collaboratively with the district administration and the School Committee to identify needs and present a responsible and responsive budget for consideration.

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked if there is a plan to launch the authentic learning inventory where it is accessible to community members. Principal Willis replied that it should be possible to put it on the website while also characterizing the inventory as a living document that frequently changes. Ms. Whitman asked for clarification about the peer observation at Memorial, and Principal Provost replied that it is currently a Memorial goal. Principal Willis shared that last year Memorial had embarked on phase 1 of peer observations by recruiting teachers to designate their classrooms as “transparent.” These classrooms have a beehive symbol on their doors and are welcoming of any staff member who wants to observe, whether for a few minutes or a longer period. The principal estimated that 90-95% of classrooms participate in this. Principal Willis utilizes building coverage blocks to allow teachers to observe for a longer period of time. Principal Provost said that Essex also has an opportunity to sharing valuable knowledge between classrooms. Ms. Provost said that they may begin with teacher lounge display boards to share what is happening in classrooms.

Ms. Whitman asked how visitors sign in using the Raptor system without a driver’s license. Mr. Willis said that the system allows for manual entry of visitor data. Raptor also allows administrators to add custom alerts into the system that will notify administrators. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that the middle/high school building does not have the vestibule that Memorial has.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about the principals' perceived needs for staff additions moving forward. Principal Willis said that the time constraints of budget collaboration require administrators to make a best guess about where to add extra staff in order to move forward. Generally, the goal is to keep class sizes lower at the younger grades, increasing them as students gain independence. The principal said that the current staff, utilizing coaches and interventionists, is able to meet the needs of students.

Principal Provost commented that it was hard for Essex Elementary to lose a specialized program to Memorial this year. The program move was the result of Essex's inability to meet ADA regulations. Ms. Provost was sad to lose the diversity of the program and the expertise of the staff that left with the program and stressed the need for the School Committee to lend its full support as the district goes through the school building process.

Mr. Reed followed up on the discussion of class size, observing that administrators must consider not only the numbers of students but also the unique make up of each grade of students. Mr. Reed asked if the principals have needed flexibility with current staffing numbers. Principal Willis replied that he does look at the configuration of each class. Some students come with support staff. All aspects are taken into account. The principal acknowledged that there are limits to flexibility with most grades having two classrooms. Principal Beaudoin stated that the classroom configurations are made in May and June. This year, the summer brought several new students into grades that were already a bit heavy. Principal Willis added that first grade is where a lot of early literacy work takes place, so that was where he assigned a third teacher. New students arrived mostly in other grades.

Mr. Foster requested that the SC receive the definition of Authentic Learning finalized by the district so that SC members could establish that they are on the same page as the district and can advocate for that definition. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that Ms. Leonard presented the definition to the SC in the spring. However, the superintendent agreed to make it more visible.

Ms. Spencer noted that grades 4 and 5 are above benchmarks and emphasized the need to be mindful of the growing trend for students to have high needs. Ms. Spencer also expressed her appreciation of the community partnerships in Essex and the goal of family literacy and math nights.

Superintendent Beaudoin asked both principals to comment on cell phone use by students and cell phone practices in their buildings. Principal Provost said that cell phones are kept in backpacks, turned off. If a student has a phone watch, it must be in school mode. Parents receive a call if these practices are not upheld. Ms. Provost said it is a breeze compared to her experience at the middle school. Principal Willis said that the same practices are in place at Memorial. Although COVID resulted in high use of all devices, the school is now working to limit device use.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared with the SC that her earlier estimate of funds raised by the new advertising banners was inaccurate. The total is \$26K via athletic ads. Ms. Whitman acknowledged the instrumental role of parent and booster Donna Furse who worked with the district to make this program a success.

- b. **School Committee Goal Development** – Mr. Reed began a discussion of proposed SC goals and suggested that the committee attempt to define two goals as a starting place. Additional goals could be revisited throughout the year and year to year. Mr. Reed asked how the SC goals would impact the committee, whether they are intended to help the SC to work more effectively as a unit or whether the goals would be tied to the current year as a target for the working sessions.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she thought the goals were tied to this year and about tangible outcomes. The SC took a straw poll and confirmed this definition of SC goals. Mr. Reed asked for input as to which goal the committee should strive to define in the current session.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist suggested “academic excellence” as a manageable goal to tackle. Ms. Spencer pointed out that the SC in entering budget season and advocated for the SC to determine its approach and how to work with its community partners. Mr. Binieris stated that he is focused on the budget plan more than the narrative surrounding it. He said that he is also focused on the EES building project. Ms. Whitman stated that she believes a first goal should be to provide the superintendent and business manager with early direction for the budget. In addition, she is concerned about progress on the EES building project timeline. Finally, Ms. Whitman thinks that the SC should work to establish norms for the SC and charges for the subcommittees. She would like these to be in place before any changes to the committee membership as a result of upcoming elections. Ms. Whitman stated that clear expectations and charges could ease the potential transition. Mr. Reed said that the budget is the main focus of the committee and that providing district administration with guidance is the most important component. Ms. Whitman said that she believes the biggest gift to town partners would be to provide area insight very early. Ms. Whitman defined “area” as the target percentage or the level of budget for which the SC is advocating. Ms. Whitman said it did not have to be the final number. Mr. Foster said that the district usually has a very early estimate. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said early figures contain a high degree of uncertainty because of unknown factors, like the health care costs. Ms. Spencer said that it is difficult to provide direct when the district is in a vacuum waiting for the final numbers. Ms. Whitman agreed, but said that she has seen town partners opening the discussion about where the natural growth is coming in. Mr. Foster also supported the idea of early direction to the district, but he said that much of the budget conversation is about the relationship to the towns. Mr. Foster advocated for making that collaboration effective and public as a means of successfully passing the budget. He said that the sticking point is creating something the town can stand behind. Mr. Foster suggested that the SC also look to three-year planning, because that is something the towns are pursuing. Mr. Foster emphasized that whatever stand the SC takes will be dependent on the relationship with the towns. Mr. Reed said that even simple guidance could be helpful for the district, whether advocating for “the leanest budget possible,” a level services budget, or a budget that reverses the

previous trend of cuts to re-invest in the district. Ms. Spencer questioned the time needed to articulate the goal of providing district direction and suggested that the SC instead consider the goal of collaborating with town partners around budget planning. Ms. Spencer asked where the SC currently stands, having asked its town partners about reforming the collaboration group as a public body. Ms. Spencer said that the SC should provide direction to the administration but stated that more consideration is needed of how best to do so. Ms. Spencer asked the committee to look at specific measurable goals and whether any progress has been made.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for and received informal consent from the committee that it should provide clarity and time-bound guidance to the district administration on the budget direction. Superintendent Beaudoin told the committee that preliminary growth expectations are in the 4.3% to 4.5% range over the next 3-4 years. Ms. Spencer stated that she had recommended turning to the collaboration portion of the budget goal in the interest of making forward progress. The superintendent asked what it means to collaborate with the towns. Ms. Whitman stated that the SC goals need to be under their control. Ms. Whitman clarified that the letter was sent to town partners on May 2. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there was no reciprocal interest in the formation of a new public body. Without a collaboration group, all partners will rely on the chairs to communicate with each other and report back to their respective groups. Ms. Spencer asked for a definitive response from town partners about their interest in re-instating the collaboration group, and Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that it must be communicated that the SC wants an open meeting format. Mr. Foster asked if there has been reported discussion among the town boards about a multi-year planning process. Ms. Whitman stated that this was mentioned in the heat of the budget presentation meetings. Once things calmed down, it was not brought up. Superintendent Beaudoin suggested that the SC reset its thinking around the budget process and start fresh in its work with the town boards. The superintendent cautioned against the SC becoming a mediator between the two different groups with very different budget concerns. The superintendent said that the most efficient budget would be the most palatable to both towns, but they are in very different places. Manchester is opposed to cuts to the program while Essex wants growth limited to as close to 2.5% as possible. Ms. Whitman pointed out that the reserves have been used by the district to draw down the budget growth. Mr. Foster stated that the importance of the budget narrative is underscored by the towns' disagreement on what the district wants versus what it needs. The narrative could do more to articulate this. Mr. Binieris commented that the responsibility for determining what is needed should come from the school principals and teachers. Ms. Spencer agreed, stating that she wants to know what the buildings believe is most important to support academic excellence so that the SC can advocate for it, within the confines of what the towns can afford.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that there is a perception that more teachers would be helpful at Memorial school. She contrasted this with community concern two years ago that the district was overstaffed. The superintendent asked how this request would be framed to promote the needs of the program, given that there is not really data to support the need. Mr. Foster stated that the SC should have a way to talk about this kind of issue. Mr. Binieris said that a solution might be to hire more TAs to mitigate the student-teacher ratio. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the SC has experts to advise on what is needed and does not need to create that narrative itself. By understanding the district's perspective, SC members can explain it to the communities. Ms. Whitman spoke to the importance of a philosophy of the School Committee as a body and whether the SC will back its district experts or accept what the towns would prefer to provide and force the district to fit that mold. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the inconsistencies between what the two towns ask for makes it hard to find the right approach and felt the SC should be an advocate for the district's perspective. Ms. Whitman agreed. Mr. Foster agreed that the SC has a responsibility to articulate the needs of the schools, based on input from staff, and to support that as best they can. He said that the challenge is in always having to make choices. Mr. Foster stated that what should empower those choices goes to the negotiation among SC members with town chairs because the towns cannot always meet the district's requests. Mr. Foster said that the SC will have to help the district navigate where the budget goes. Ms. Whitman said that her belief is that the role of the SC is to hear what the administrators bring forth based on the work that they have done (the best program within the confines of town constraints) and to say whether that program is in alignment with district policy. Ms. Whitman said she feels the SC's role is less about helping to navigate where the money comes from. Mr. Reed cautioned that he does not think that "negotiation" should be used to describe the SC's role in the budget process and that it is not within the School Committee's charge. Mr. Binieris agreed.

Superintendent Beaudoin described the budget priorities. The district has to roll forward its financial obligations to the next year. At this point, it is already 2% points higher than the 2.5% mark. The district must then account for mandated spending for students or risk financial liability elsewhere. Then the district must ensure that the core has reasonable class sizes. Finally, the district looks at how it can expand and grow the program. Much of this has focused, in the last few years, on growing the craft. Further investment will be difficult until the communities are able to support a correction in the 8-9% range. Last year, program growth was largely realized by reorganizing the budget. The superintendent said that the frustrating thing is that the core existence outstrips the growth of town funding. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that it is important to minimize conflict around the budget in order to maximize the success of the Essex Elementary building project. Ms. Spencer said that she believes it is important that Manchester voters not feel that the district is stalling on programming needs in order to support the building project. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that priorities must be weighed and noted

that EES currently lacks the space to accommodate items like the new gross-motor purchases at MMES. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that growth does not always equal additional spending. Ms. Spencer agreed, but said that community members will continue to point to previously lost programs. Superintendent Beaudoin assured SC members that the district has a path forward for the library and world language programs. Mr. Foster accepted that the funding formula for the schools requires a periodic correction, but he was hesitant to think that would result in an 8-10% ask. Mr. Foster asked who was planning with town partners around that number and stressed that the backing of the towns was critical to an ask. Mr. Reed limited further discussion around budget items. Superintendent Beaudoin said that a long-term solution for the Essex building project would equal a budget gain for the district because the district lacks the reserves to manage the deteriorating facility. In addition, the project is the final component of a long-term plan and commitment made to the towns.

Ms. Koch proposed that the budget goal for the School Committee include, “to understand and articulate the needs of the district based on feedback from the district’s professionals and approve a budget to meet those needs.”

Ms. Whitman proposed a goal including, “to develop the School Committee’s philosophical approach to the budget and engage in that process according to the regional agreement based on the philosophical approach developed.”

Ms. Spencer expressed concern with the concept of consensus, because members must represent the voices of their constituents and this approach might imply having a consensus before hearing what constituents want.

Mr. Reed stated that he would speak more to the superintendent and place the issue on a future agenda for further consideration. Superintendent Beaudoin asked that SC members email her their conceptualization of an articulated budget goal and asked if there were other unmet program needs being discussed in the community. Ms. Spencer mentioned the performing arts.

School Committee Comment

Ms. Koch-Sundquist noted the smooth start to the school year and that the energy finally seems to be closer to pre-Covid.

Ms. Whitman noted that the MCAS is on the ballot at the state level to determine if it will remain a graduation requirement. Ms. Whitman said it would be helpful to know what district professionals think of the issue. Ms. Whitman also praised the counselor corner at the high school which will hold several sessions to introduce families about what they do.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that a parent education series will be coming out in the next district newsletter.

C. Adjourn

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

The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:44 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- October 1, 2024
- October 15, 2024
- November 5, 2024