



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

September 3, 2024

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	September 3, 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, Co-Chair Theresa Whitman
Absent:	Anna Mitchell (remote attendance) Erica Spencer
Guests:	Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Technology
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) –

Steve Davis, 11 Lowland Farm Road, Essex. Mr. Davis spoke to the issue of cellular phone bans in the school district, stating that numerous recent studies outline the detrimental effects of allowing cell phones in school. Mr. Davis stated that the town of Ipswich banned cell phones this year. Although Superintendent Beaudoin previously

September 3, 2024

stated that the district would not act on this issue this year, and would explore the issue further, Mr. Davis said that the fix seems easy to implement. Mr. Davis asked if the district plans to issue a ban and questioned why a ban, in part, could not be implemented sooner rather than later. Mr. Davis stated that Ipswich is employing Yondr pouches and has replaced student use of private devices with district-owned Chromebooks. Chromebooks can limit student online access. Mr. Davis stated that MERSD is behind when compared to half the state which already has some type of phone ban.

2) Chairperson's Report – Mr. Reed shared that the annual School Committee retreat yielded positive work and that the SC has made significant progress on the Essex building project.

3) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1010-1011 and payroll warrant for August 29, 2024.
- Minutes for approval: August 6, 2024

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

Discussion: Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that while reviewing line items on the vouchers for instructional supplies she noticed differences in the line items and did not see many items coming across for Essex Elementary School. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked how the budget is allocated at the school level. Superintendent Beaudoin replied that at the school level the principals are the day-to-day managers of the budget. Each teacher has a budget for instructional supplies. The way orders are placed may vary between buildings, with some ordering by teacher and others by grade. In addition, the principals have some discretion year-to-year for specific needs.

The motion passed unanimously 4-0. Mr. Binieris was absent for the vote.

4) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities Sub-Committee / Essex School Building Committee (ESBC)** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman stated that the Essex School Building Committee met, and she was pleased to report that the group is fortunate to include members with experience with the MSBA process and professional expertise in the field. The committee reviewed its charges and responsibilities and updates to open meeting law, which have changed since the Memorial building project. The committee reviewed the design enrollment projection letter from the MSBA. The goal was to vote on acceptance of that report. However, the group decided to hold the vote until the full report can be reviewed since the letter is a summary. The committee would like to ensure that it accurately reflects recent housing development proposals in the town of Essex. Ms. Whitman said it is unlikely that the ESBC would challenge the report but may choose to include an addendum regarding a new housing development in the town.

- **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Anna Mitchell) – Mr. Foster stated that the finance subcommittee met that afternoon and deferred to Ms. Mitchell to share their progress. Ms. Mitchell, via remote attendance, said that the subcommittee reviewed a few issues for consideration. They would like to review budget transfer submissions to ensure that they do not alter the original intent of the budget. Ms. Mitchell said that the quarterly budget-to-actual report dates will be added to the SC calendar. The subcommittee plans to review the finance subcommittee’s bucket list in order to prioritize and achieve its short- and long-term goals. In addition, the subcommittee looked at current challenges of the business office’s data sets. Data currently resides in several different systems, making it difficult to produce the kind of reports that are being sought by the finance subcommittee. The group will consider what can be improved over the next several years and the pros and cons of doing so. Mr. Foster stated that the group talked about what the focus and charge of the finance subcommittee is and whether it includes budget formulation and looking ahead to future years or if the subcommittee is expected to focus only on the current year. In Mr. Foster’s experience with other boards, the finance committee has always looked ahead. Mr. Foster said it would be helpful to clarify this subcommittee’s charge.
- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Erica Spencer/Theresa Whitman) – No Report

5) **Superintendent’s Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin spoke first to the issue of cell phone bans. She stated that the devil is in the details, particularly the language used. The idea of a ban invokes strong emotions in many. The superintendent said that what some other districts are calling “bans” are standards already in place at MERSD. For example, Newton is requiring students to keep phones in lockers and MERSD has already implemented this directive. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it will be best to look at the issue at the individual school level. Principal Sgroi has already started this work at the high school. These conversations will include input from students, staff, and the school council, and they will yield recommendations for next year’s district handbook. The superintendent will ask the principals to present these updates to the School Committee. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there are policies in place to minimize use of cell phones at each school. However, a problem that emerges is that this puts teachers in the position to enforce them. Superintendent Beaudoin drew a parallel with the issue of artificial intelligence and determining a path forward for the district. While staff and administration are generally knowledgeable, no one is an expert. The superintendent shared that the district has been called by DESE to join their group exploring the issue of AI. MERSD will be a participant in the process and recipient of resulting guidelines from DESE.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the school openings were fun and festive and that the year ahead will be focused on the learning piece. Boston school rankings are released in the fall, and MERSD has remained in the top five. All schools have

upcoming open houses, and Superintendent Beaudoin said that this is a good venue for concerned parents to ask teachers about their experiences with cell phones in the classroom and the policies currently in place. Superintendent Beaudoin shared insight into teacher days preceding back-to-school. The district's new staff orientation went well. In addition, staff at each school have met to engage in training and grade-level meetings, as well as classroom preparation. The all-district gathering highlighted the FY25 focus on the strategic initiative on authentic learning, challenging staff to increase opportunities for students to engage in active and meaningful learning. The district continues to build connections across the schools, breaking down silos and working as a district-wide team. The current focus is to create connections between levels and not just at the elementary level. Superintendent Beaudoin shared that she seeks to build a district identity as a united team to support outcomes for students. The all-district gathering was also an opportunity to recognize staff with longevity in the district.

Superintendent Beaudoin presented a look ahead at the FY25 school year. Enrollment data is not currently available given many last-minute enrollments. Those numbers will be presented at the next SC meeting. Superintendent Beaudoin provided a summary of items presented in depth at the last SC meeting:

- FY 25 Concurrent Program Evaluations
 - Coordinated Program Review – now called the Tiered Systems Review. This is a compliance review of all things student services.
 - NEASC – the accreditation team will conduct site visits in October, following submission of the year-and-a half self-study by the elementary schools. The self-study completed in tandem by the elementary schools will be a guide for the team as they visit classrooms and interview constituent groups to evaluate the district's assumptions. They will generate a study report that compares the elementary schools to a set of standards. This information is available on the website.
 - MERSD DESE District Review – The district will engage in self-study this month in preparation for the DESE district review. Since acceptance, the district has been notified that DESE may only conduct a partial review. DESE will choose to focus either on curriculum and instruction or on governance, HR, and systems. The district will note what it hopes to gain from the review, sharing the motivation generated by the community. DESE will decide whether that review will include the administrative or programmatic portions. The district anticipates that DESE will be on site in the spring. Prior to this, the district office will be focused on the major deliverables this fall including the end of year report audit and building the initial budget. The district office also anticipates some staffing shortages that will further tax their resources.
- District Improvement Plan Goals and Three-Year Update – on docket for this year. Superintendent Beaudoin expanded on the issue of finance systems raised

by Ms. Mitchell. The superintendent stated that the data systems in the business office have been added “ad hoc” over the years and are not integrated systems. This limits the reporting that can be done. Ms. Cresta evaluated the current system capabilities and validated that it will require a substantial investment of man hours and resources to integrate the system. Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the district previously conferred with the Triton district on their approach and determined that the district will require a multi-year phase in of a data system to support the desired reporting levels. This could be included in the next round of the District Improvement Plan.

- Leadership Team Focus – on observation and analysis of teaching. Six to seven days will be devoted to reviewing the research for better teaching protocol on observing and analyzing teaching. There is a new rubric that needs to be used in evaluations for next year, and this effort will pave the way for its implementation.
- Library Task Force – Superintendent Beaudoin said this group should be up and running this fall and will work to reimagine the library spaces to build forward to present day needs. The district has hired new TAs this year to staff the library spaces.
- Continued From FY24
 - Arts Council
 - Health Advising Committee
 - Middle/High School Schedule Study

This year, the district welcomes 21 new staff members, including ten teachers to replace retirements/resignations, two new instructional coaches, nine teaching assistants, and two library teachers aids in the new district roles.

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked if the district would have a choice about which aspect the DESE review covered. Superintendent Beaudoin responded that the district has indicated its interest, but the final decision will lie with DESE, based on the district’s self-assessment. The superintendent was hopeful that the original solicitation by the district and its reasons for seeking a review would influence DESE’s decision.

Superintendent Beaudoin updated the SC on the Essex Elementary building project, stating that she shared the Enrollment Report Design/Letter with the Essex Building Committee and SC members. This document provides an enrollment number for building the schematics of the project. This number was 250 students for Essex Elementary or 550 students for a combined elementary school. In initial meetings, the district had no cause to question those numbers. Since that time, the district has become aware of a proposed Essex housing development, and this has been reported to DESE. At the most recent meeting, the district acknowledged that much has changed since the Memorial building project within the communities and proposed also

exploring other build options, including merging the two elementary school at the Memorial location or splitting Essex so that their grades four and five were housed at Memorial. The MSBA has given permission to include:

- a. The original submission, including replacement or remodel of Essex Elementary
- b. A combined elementary school, located in Manchester. Reimbursement would only be possible for alterations to Memorial that accommodate the incoming Essex Students.
- c. The split model, with Essex students in upper grades attending Memorial Elementary

Superintendent Beaudoin said that many of the SBC members were not aware about the existing conversation surrounding the desire to explore these other options and time was devoted to updating them. They seemed comfortable with the path that has prompted the question and the wisdom of addressing the ramifications early rather than lacking information when bringing the full design to the public. The superintendent said that they should be able to vote to move forward, receive approval at the October MSBA meeting to go to the next level, and in December/January initiate the OPM process. Superintendent Beaudoin said it was reassuring to hear from some of the SBC experts that moving through the merger options and examining site space should be fairly quick. Ms. Whitman agreed that it is was interesting to hear that many SBC members did not know about the community push for these options. The superintendent said that once the OPM is on board, they will hire the architect who will lead the district through that exploration. The superintendent looks forward to having this objective perspective to report to the SBC with its experts. Ms. Whitman reminded the SC that SBC meetings are public and minutes will be posted. Superintendent Beaudoin also said that site selection for new construction in Essex will also be included in the process once the team is on board.

6) Continued Business –

- a. **Curriculum Update** – Heather Leonard reported that there was a lot of positive energy around school opening and shared the work that happened over the summer and is planned for this year.

Summer Work – a large number of staff opted in to this additional work and training.

- i. Teacher Curriculum Work – including high school AP psychology curriculum mapping and alignment; collaborative curriculum development in ELA grades six and seven; implementation of writing professional learning into specialized special ed programs; and interdisciplinary curriculum development in grade five. In order to do this work, staff must submit their plan and receive approval and return with evidence of the work completed.

- ii. District Supported Professional Learning and Summer Work – a full PD day offered around teaching with inquiry, elementary through high school and across all content areas. Staff examined how to include student inquiry during lesson development and how to use the inquiry cycle to drive learning. Staff also participated in a Teaching with Equity course, a book study group, and an attendance working group.

Induction of New Staff –including teachers, TAs, and student teachers and fellows. Staff gathered to build connections and learn about the district’s strategic plan. New staff received safety training from Principal Maino and SRO Andrea Locke, SEL training from Kim Provost, and technology information. In addition, they learned about mentor/mentee and induction programs. Administration from all buildings was on-site to support them.

Instructional Coaches – Hana McGowan (mathematics) and Beth LeDoux (literacy) have joined the district as instructional coaches and will shift the district’s professional learning framework, internalizing previously externally provided training while working within our structures and alongside our educators. They will:

- Target and address areas of academic need based on student performance data,
- Support implementation of adopted high quality curriculum materials,
- Improve instructional practices leading to deepened opportunities for rigor in literacy and math learning,
- Support vertical and horizontal alignment of curriculum,
- Embed educator professional learning, thoughtfully and intentionally, into daily teaching and learning cycles

The instructional coaches will provide targeted training/professional learning opportunities, collaborate with teacher groups, and provide 1:1 coaching and support. Additionally, they will play a role in onboarding new staff to ensure implementation of curriculum continues beyond the initial adoption years. Both coaches have been in classrooms, meeting with teachers, and attending MTSS planning meetings. Ms. Leonard stressed that this experience would be reciprocal so that educators and leaders are a part of the process of developing goals and pushing the educator practice. Ms. Leonard remarked on the work put in by the teams involved in the hiring process for the new coaches.

Curriculum Review – exploration of comprehensive programming around content areas, including what is being taught and when, what resources are being used, what instructional practices exist, and pacing. Focus this year will be on the three areas of SEL (with a new framework from DESE released last year), Science and Technology (K-12), and World Language (in its second year of review), to align with new standards.

Implementation of program review recommendations and field testing will continue work from last year in History/Social Science and Art.

Continuing Committee Work

- Wellness Committee will meet four times annually with the goal of providing recommendations for the Wellness Policy. It will explore the comprehensive health and PE framework and curate supports and resources for the community to support wellness.
- Arts Council will share its findings from participation in the Arts and Cultural Vitality Index. The council will build an action plan to respond to the findings and will continue networking and collaboration with other districts. The art leadership is seeking additional funding for year two to support further collaboration.

Website Update – The district’s website host merged with another company, requiring a website update. The district will use this opportunity to gather information from the community about what it would like to see in the website. The shifts will be primarily visual and organizational.

Focus for the Upcoming Year –

- Authentic Learning
- Professional Learning
 - Intentional Connection Building
 - Professional Development that creates vertical cohort
 - Building structures for vertical and horizontal collaborative learning with a focus on content, practices, and interdisciplinary opportunities

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked if there is anything needed from the School Committee to forward these initiatives. Ms. Leonard stated that her work reflects the priorities of the DIP and SIP. She said that the best part is sharing the work and progress with the School Committee. Mr. Foster stated that the SC is aware of what is going on but does not have a connection to a budget line item. He said that the job of the SC is to advocate for resources. Mr. Foster asked what the administration learned from the social studies review. Ms. Leonard clarified that the SC will receive a summary of the review, including findings and steps for implementing the conclusions. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there is no single line item. Usually, expenses will emerge during implementation years when the district may see a large scale capital purchase, which will show in the capital improvement line item. Ms. Leonard said that there are two buckets of funding where this work is concerned – stipends and professional learning. The district also pursues grant funding, including the grant awarded to support the work in history/social studies. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the budget previously contained a \$100K annual small cap line to support this work. This line item should be there so that the district does not face years with a large bump in the budget as the result of this work. However, historically it is one of the

items most often trimmed from a budget. Mr. Foster asked if the instructional coaches are working only at the elementary level, and Ms. Leonard confirmed that they are only working in K-5, general and special education. They are working at both elementary schools.

Ms. Leonard said that coaches tend to be less successful as they are asked to do more. In working with the elementary staff, they will use a layered approach. All teachers will be engaged through professional development events, and all will work with coaches during data meetings. Smaller groups will result from targeted requests. Finally, one to one work with individual teachers will occur via coaching requests from teachers. Coaches will build out those components that match the district's staff and routines. This year, coaches will focus on becoming partners as instructional leaders in the building.

- b. **School Committee Goals** – Mr. Reed said that the School Committee worked on identifying goals at the summer workshop. Based on the document that was shared between SC members, Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for clarification between the priorities generated and the term “SC Goals.” Mr. Reed stated that the SC needs to reach consensus on how to formulate the final goals. He suggested condensing SC member’s individual priorities and identifying the top goals for the year. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the top priorities seemed to be 1) Budget Narrative, 2) Collaboration with the towns on the budget, 3) School Committee Goals, and 4) Academic Excellence. The superintendent said that these priorities were not formulated as action items. Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized that the Essex building project was not on the list of priorities but will be a major component of budget considerations and work for the district. Mr. Foster summarized that the SC had generated topics but not goals. Mr. Reed stated that a goal should be for the SC to agree, early in the budget process, regarding what the SC wants to see in the budget and to agree on how this will be communicated to both communities. Mr. Foster emphasized the importance of the budget narrative. He stated that previously the discussion has been driven by percentage limits and this adversely impacts its acceptance. Mr. Foster advocated for a narrative centered on the program instead to provide the community with context for budget expenses. Mr. Reed pointed out that the SC can offer initial guidance but a lot of the budget has to do with administration. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the budget starts with the principals at the school level. Usually, asks for greater resources come in the form of personnel. The initial budget from the principals is reviewed by the Director of Finance. Needs are prioritized and the district generates a tentative budget. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that there is a pattern of community members voicing surprise and concern because they do not know that certain staff will not be included in the new budget. She stated that the district also is likely to see people panicking if that information is released early. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that it is important for the public to understand the delicate nature of the budget work. Mr. Foster said that the SC must be careful not to make it a personnel discussion and should speak to the program. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked Mr.

Foster how he defines the SC role. Mr. Foster said it should link the budget narrative to the program. Mr. Binieris provided the example of when the principals notes that a) a cohort was falling behind, and b) they asked for clear resources to enact a solution. That was an easy budget item to understand. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked what members envision going out. Mr. Reed stated that the SC did not currently have the time to go into these details and conceded that it has not been the best process over the last few years. Mr. Foster stated that the SC needs to figure out a strategy and pointed out that nothing on the SC calendar functionally provides them the opportunity to do so.

Superintendent Beaudoin suggested that the SC define, as a team, what the priorities mean to them. The superintendent summarized the desire for a budget narrative as wanting to change the language about how the district discussed the budget to focus on what it is trying to achieve. The superintendent said that the SC needs to prioritize its goals. For instance, without the successful conclusion of the Essex building project, the district will drain its facilities and operational budgets in maintenance of the present, deteriorating Essex Elementary building. The superintendent also asked the SC to consider what are reasonable expectations around budget growth. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that decisions about the operational budget can impact the willingness of the community to support the building project. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that, while she would like to focus a budget on how students learn, the SC must make mindful decisions in order to prioritize the building project. Mr. Foster clarified that developing a budget narrative linked to the program does not equate to advocating for growth. Mr. Foster suggested setting an SC task to tackle some of this debate in order to be ready to discuss it at the next business meeting. Mr. Reed said that he would take on the task of facilitating these topics and send a note to the team. Superintendent Beaudoin offered to distribute the list of priorities to members. Their assignment would be for each SC member, by the end of the following week, to take the four priorities and articulate how those would translate into goals. This insight would be synthesized into a Google sheet for discussion.

- 7) School Committee Comment** – Mr. Reed stated that he is excited about the work that has been accomplished including the long-term capital plan. Ms. Koch-Sundquist received confirmation that the public would be included in SBC tours of Essex Elementary and suggested that tours include the basement. The superintendent said the tours will be held the half hour before the SBC meeting. Ms. Koch-Sundquist advocated for SBC meetings to be held in Essex. The superintendent stated that, during the Memorial building project, there was an intentional choice to hold meetings at the high school to emphasize the district-wide nature of the process. Mr. Foster also advocated for holding meetings in Essex. Both SC members pointed out that the middle/high school building is located within Manchester town limits and Essex families spend a lot of time driving to this location.

C. Adjourn

Mr. Foster moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

The motion passed 4-0. Ms. Whitman was not present for the vote.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:34 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- September 17, 2024
- October 1, 2024
- October 15, 2024