



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

April 1, 2025

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	April 1, 2025
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 Erica Spencer Theresa Whitman
Absent:	
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)** – Mr. Reed asked that all participants limit comments to two minutes in length. Mr. Reed clarified that the School Committee has already passed a level-services funded budget. This budget is now before the towns for approval.

Josh Cohen, 8 LedgeWood Road, Manchester – Mr. Cohen, a senior at the high school, spoke of the tremendous gifts he has received from the district and said that it hurts to see the sense of

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confusion and uncertainty moving through the student body. Mr. Cohen shared that there is pervasive speculation about which teachers will be on the chopping block and which classes will still be available. Mr. Cohen said that there was a sense of pessimism two years ago when the override failed. That pessimism is here to stay and has been coupled with a sense of resentment for the situation. Students left in the program have no say in the matter. Mr. Cohen shared the story of a high school staff member, recently returned from maternity leave, notified that they may not be returning next year because they are the most recently hired. Mr. Cohen emphasized that these actions, and the agenda items for the current meeting, breed resentment.

Harper Jay, 4 Pine Ridge Road, Essex – Mr. Jay, a senior at the high school, said he wanted to speak for all the students who will remain after he graduates and emphasized the seriousness of the budget situation, stating that important classes and teachers will be cut. Mr. Jay shared the impact of Madame Coshow from the French department. As a French person, Madam Coshow brings a unique perspective to the program while teaching both the fine points of the language and about the people and history of France. Mr. Jay said that the French program opened his eyes to many opportunities as he prepares for university and provided the tools to continue his education and study abroad. Mr. Jay shared that his experience with Ms. Coshow yielded the kind of personal connection between students and staff that is hard to find in other schools and credited these relationships with pushing students to give their best effort to their studies. By cutting a teacher from the department, class sizes will increase, and it will be hard to cultivate these relationships. Mr. Jay worried that potential budget cuts would prevent the students coming behind him from enjoying the same benefits from which he has benefitted. Mr. Jay said that he understands concern over tax increases and stated that investing in education equals an investment in the towns and the greater world. A quality education is essential in the development of a functioning adult entering society. Mr. Jay stated that the current program works well to prepare students for the greater world but worried that the budget cuts would negatively impact the district's ability to continue doing so.

Erin Greenwood, 27 Norwood Avenue, Manchester – Ms. Greenwood provided the following comments: I want to bring attention to something I learned just today. I want to start to personalize this reality. BJ Weed was told today that if the override does not pass he would lose his job. Let me just explain who BJ is. BJ is the health and P.E. teacher in the high school. In addition, he is the V and JV Baseball Coach. For those of you not aware, he has helped Manchester/Essex Baseball bring home not one, but TWO State Championships. This is astounding for a district our size. (I am biased as I have two baseball players in my house who cannot wait to be a part of BJ's legacy in the future.) I have met BJ just recently, and I can tell he is a humble guy. Although my boys are younger, I know BJ is well loved by his older students. If he lost his job, it would mean that high school students would get 1 day a week of P.E. taught by the middle school teacher. I believe if he loses his job as a teacher, he will be forced to leave his coaching position too - as he will need to find a job that literally "covers all the bases..." (sorry- had to put that in there!). He is a father of two children also desperately wanting to choice into the middle and high schools. BJ's family's story is one of many teachers and their students who will be devastated if this override is not passed. Teachers and coaches like BJ do their jobs because it is in their blood, their DNA, to pass on their gifts to our students. Let us give them the chance to give our kids their gifts. We will ALL be better for it.

I urge everyone to deeply consider the small monthly price of increased taxes it would take in order to have massive rewards for our education system. Students who are listening: I have no doubt your adoration, admiration and love for these teachers run deep. You have power. You are leaders with a voice. Please, gather together, make a plan, and spread the word. Tell your neighbors who your favorite teachers are and why. Please. Ask them to vote for the override.

Sarah Davis, 11 Highland Avenue, Manchester. Ms. Davis shared that she overheard students talking earlier in the day, discussing if students could raise \$100 each to support the budget. Ms. Davis said that she is eager to hear about the district's contingency plan, should the budget fail, and intends to support the communication campaign, ensuring that residents fully grasp the consequences should budget approval fail. Ms. Davis stated that the loss of 22 teaching positions would fundamentally alter the level of education provided by the district and damage teacher and community faith in the district's commitment to support teachers and create a stable working environment. Ms. Davis shared that she has followed the situation in Duxbury where their override failed at the ballot. She said parents there were distressed to find that there was nothing further they could do at that point. Ms. Davis said she is interested to hear about the district's communication plan with 41 days until the Essex ballot vote.

Erin Fortunato, MERHS World Language Teacher – Ms. Fortunato provided the following comments: “Good evening, Superintendent Beaudoin, School Committee members, community members and all.

My name is Erin Fortunato and I have taught French and Spanish in this district since 2011. In addition, I have run the French Ublock and led or chaperoned several international trips, acted as DramaFest and Robotics Advisors, been a Class Advisor, and have spent the last three years as the HS Student Council Advisor, in charge of organizing elections for Class Officers and for the Student Advisory Board.

Through the years I have taught every level of French, including AP for many years, and I have taught Spanish levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 CP. My assigned courses have frequently changed from one year to the next, as department needs have fluctuated. During that time, since the MS/HS schedules had split, one of our department's full-time teaching positions was split - sending .4 to the MS for 6th grade language and keeping the other .6 in the HS. This meant that we needed TWO part-time teachers to fill those roles because they are on different schedules - one teaching roughly two classes a day (MS) and the other, three classes a day (HS). Both, with rotating schedules.

As you can imagine, filling these two positions was nearly impossible. In the High School, the position became known as “Defense Against the Dark Arts”, in reference to the teaching position in the Harry Potter series that had a new teacher every single year, and this is no exaggeration - between 2014 and 2021, I taught beside SEVEN different part-time French teachers in the HS, and during that same time we had nearly as many MS French and Spanish teachers move through.

During those years we were hit with more challenges - the district first drastically reduced and then cut completely our elementary WL program and then eventually the 6th grade as well; but then also kept a teacher in a 7th grade French position for a few years who did not even speak the

language. Finally in 2021, we were able to change the HS part time position to a full time and bring Caroline Coshow onboard. And just as we started gaining momentum in the program, in 2023, impending cuts and a vote forced Ms. Coshow to apply out of the district. Thankfully we were able to bring her back, but now, two years later, we AGAIN face the same strain. How can we be expected to build a strong program with such inconsistency?

This history has had severe effects on the number of students enrolled in French. We are seeing the effects in the sophomore and junior classes now, which has led to the low enrollment that you see in the current HS French numbers, but which is growing significantly when you look at French enrollment in the Middle School.

Despite these dropping numbers, students still find our courses important and frequently continue through all four years - in fact, since 2018, I have written 70 letters of recommendation for seniors from our French program applying to college. That means 70 students in the last 8 years found that our French classes had helped them show growth and personal development - so much so that they chose it as one of only two or three recommendation letters to represent their entire HS career. They felt I had watched them overcome challenges and seen them truly grow and develop in a way that would show them off well to their future college prospects.

Even while hobbled, our program is strong and successful - each year we graduate 15-20 students who qualify for the State Seal of Biliteracy - meaning that they have proven proficient levels in all 4 language skills - Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing, in both English and either French or Spanish - and occasionally, BOTH French and Spanish.

I bring up all of this background because, at the March 18th meeting, there was a vote on a recommended budget to the towns, and there was included one FTE from the HS to be moved to an "MS WL" position. This is background information that I hope you and the community had when choosing to move a full-time member of my department - likely me, being dual certified - to this undetermined "MS WL" position.

I know that you have interest in bringing back the 6th grade WL program, and I laud and appreciate the want and attention to that end.

I very much understand that this is something that is contingent upon the towns' votes and support of the budget, and I know there are many people who will be getting cut should the votes not pass.

But, I have great concerns that there is not currently room in the 6th grade schedule for a full-time WL course, and we have been told that it would likely be added back as an exploratory, requiring only 0.4 FTE - that is TWO classes a day. It is currently unclear how the other 0.6 would be used... and there seems to be little plan to clarify that anytime soon.

It would be a sincere shame to move a full-time teacher from the HS, where they have a full 5-course load, to a position where they may be used as a **non-language** teacher for 3 out of 5 classes. I understand that the shadow of the impending override vote looms over us, but we in the buildings still need to plan schedules for this coming fall and to try to anticipate what student needs will look like - and thus we are in need of some more specific guidance.

With this in mind, I ask you to consider:

1. That the 6th grade World Language be made a core course, meeting daily. While the HS courses would still take a serious hit, this would be a real and true way to bring back the 6th grade WL course and would have lasting effects on the development of the program. If this is not possible, or in addition to this option, I suggest that
2. META and the teachers be urged to accept the combined schedule proposal, and that the budget wording be allowed some flexibility, permitting a shared MS/HS position - allowing one person to split the TWO MS classes and three HS classes. This would also help avoid returning to the revolving door of part-time teachers that we experienced in the past.
3. Either way, as you look at possible options for what the override failure may include, please consider that cutting these staff and programs would affect our students in myriad ways - both in their development as humans and learners, and in how they see themselves being prepared for their futures.

Thank you for your time.”

Maggie Whitman, 8 Lufkin Street, Essex. Ms. Whitman said that she feels fortunate to have a unique perspective on the budget situation. Ms. Whitman shared that she thinks students and teachers do a wonderful job of being impartial in terms of political standpoints at the national level. However, when things hit closer to home everyone becomes more vocal. Ms. Whitman asked that clarity be brought to the budget discussion so that staff and students are able to keep the focus of the school day on education rather than whether teachers will be able to keep their jobs. Ms. Whitman urged all eligible members of the towns to attend town meetings and be vocal in their support for the schools. Ms. Whitman trusted that voters would do the right thing to pass the budget and allow student education to move forward.

Brian Gressler, 30 Choate Street, Essex. Mr. Gressler provided follow up to previous comments made to the School Committee. Mr. Gressler asserted that the town and school district are both affected by the entire budget process. Mr. Gressler stated that, because of the structuring of the vote, the Town of Essex is able to support the growth of the town’s operational budget, which is at 5.6%, under the levy limit. The town’s operational budget has been similarly hit with growth including an insurance increase of nearly 20%, 17% increase in the fire department, 7.5% increase in the ambulance department, and 5.5% increase in municipal utilities. Mr. Gressler stated that this correction for the town needs to happen, and it is being facilitated by the override for the school district’s budget. Ms. Gressler said that this is not one big ask for the school district but rather is a vote that will provide benefits for both the town and schools. A failure of that override will similarly impact all.

Jennifer Coleman Michaud, MERHS Social Studies Teacher – Ms. Coleman Michaud provided the following comments. “My name is Jennifer Coleman Michaud. I have been a social studies teacher in the district for 15 years. I am here tonight not to bring attention to a “what if” if the district is forced to implement the Override Contingency Plan. I am here to discuss an

actual harm to students in the budget approved by the Committee on March 18th to be sent to the towns for approval; the elimination of a high school social studies teaching position.

Some context: A high school student typically enrolls in 6-7 full time courses each school year due to our 7 block, A-G schedule. If a student fills all 7 blocks their freshman, sophomore, and junior year and only 6 their senior year (Got to have that senior study hall), that student would take 135 credits in their high school career. Our program of studies mandates 92.5 credits worth of graduation requirements. This leaves 42.5 credits that students have a choice in what classes they can enroll in. Freshman and sophomores have less room in their schedules to choose classes due to the need to complete graduation requirements, but juniors and seniors have a lot more freedom in how they fill their six or seven blocks.

For example, juniors are required to take US History I, English 11 or AP, a math class and a science class. This leaves 3 blocks (15 credits) that students have choice in how they fill. Seniors are only required to take English 12 or AP and math, leaving 4 or 5 blocks in their schedule to fill. The program of studies has to include non-required courses to fill these gaps in scheduling.

Over the last few weeks, students in grades 8-11 have been requesting the courses that they would like to enroll in next year, and department heads have received these numbers in order to determine how many sections of each course to offer. For example, if 78 students request World History II Honors, the department head would choose to run 4 sections of the course, averaging 19 or 20 students in each section. Each teacher can teach 5 sections, except department heads who only teach 4 due to their other duties.

The social studies department head received the course requests for our department for next year recently. If every student got the social studies class or classes they requested to enroll in, she would need 35 sections to do. This is the equivalent of 6 teachers and the department head, and we still would be one section short. Currently, the high social studies department has 5 teachers and the department head.

The budget proposed by this School Committee to the towns eliminates one high school social studies position, leaving our department, which already cannot meet the requests of students, in my opinion, understaffed. With this proposed cut, our department only has 24 sections total to schedule classes in. In our courses which are graduation requirements, class sizes are going to be close to 25 students. 25 student high school classes does not reflect best practices. Two of your own children are in a 25 person US History I class this year and I can honestly say that they are not receiving the same quality of education of students in a smaller class. More students in a room means more behaviors to manage, which cuts into class time. It's more questions that are asked and answered, which cuts into class time. It's more papers to read and tests to grade, which slows down the rate at which feedback can be given. More students makes it harder for me to build relationships with each student in the class. In a large class I cannot meet the students' individual needs like I can in a smaller class. Large class sizes are bad for educational outcomes.

In order to meet the requests of our core classes and to keep sections at 25, requires **16** of our 24 sections. This leaves **8** sections for non-required courses.

If the social studies department can only run 8 sections of non-required courses, 60-100 students will not be able to take a requested class. These 60-100 students are overwhelmingly juniors and seniors. Classes like Evidence Based Argumentation, Current Global topics, and Diverse American Stories, won't be able to run at all. United States Government and Politics, Comparative Government and Politics, psychology, sociology and 9/11 and the War on Terror will be run, but unable to meet the high enrollment demand.

When juniors and seniors can't get into a requested class because it fills, and this is going to impact juniors more since seniors get scheduled first, this puts pressure on the other non-required classes. When those courses hit their 25 seat maximum or a course does not "fit" into a student's schedule, there is going to be nowhere for them to go but a study hall. In this scenario, it is feasible that students could be scheduled for two study halls in a day and still have U Block. When they text you and say they have nothing to do at school, they are actually going to mean it unlike they do now.

When I spoke at the February budget hearing, I cited the MERSD mission statement in my argument, "The Manchester Essex Regional School District (MERSD) provides a high quality, comprehensive, student-centered educational experience that supports students' academic, social, and emotional development and prepares them for a post-secondary educational or service experience, a career, and life as an engaged member of society." The intent of social studies classes, like the ones we attempt to offer, are meant to equip students with the knowledge and skills to be informed, responsible, and engaged citizens in our world. A world that is becoming more diverse and interconnected every day. A world that needs a new generation of leaders. Our classes foster critical thinking skills and teach students how to function in society. Now more than ever, we need students to enroll in the social studies.

High student requests for social studies courses are not unique to this upcoming school year. I had to turn away a lot of students from taking US Government and Politics this year because two of the three sections were full. Many could not take it during the section that did have a space because they had to choose between government and chemistry. In an already small school, the fewer teachers we have, the more conflicts in the schedule and fewer opportunities for our students. Based on the consistent popularity of social studies courses, I am honestly baffled at how the decision to cut this position was made...

Often when making debating decisions this committee comes back to what is best for students. This decision, and I do not understand the logic behind how it was made based on the data that exists, is not what is best for students. I beg the committee and school leadership to find a solution to this error in judgement."

Robbie Bilsbury, 126 Eastern Avenue, Essex. Mr. Bilsbury is a teacher in World Language at the high school. Mr. Bilsbury stated that the Town of Essex is also experiencing extreme inflation, with healthcare costs rising at nearly 20% for the town. Essex has not passed an override in a long time. Mr. Bilsbury stated that the Town of Essex has been proud to keep its spending very trim but in the meantime the town and district are battling rising costs across categories. Mr. Bilsbury stated that Essex needs to catch up, allowing firefighters to earn more than \$20 per hour. He said town items are also represented by this budget.

Fiona Dooley, 173 Washington Street, Malden. Ms. Dooley is the Elementary Music Teacher for MERSD and also leads the chorus and rock band programs. Ms. Dooley said that the rock band program is important because it appeals to a wider range of students than those who fit into an ensemble program. Ms. Dooley said that without this program, elementary students would have fewer opportunities in the arts and fewer opportunities to express emotions.

Lindsay Banks, 40 Forest Street, Manchester - Ms. Banks provided the following comments: “These comments are for any residents of Manchester and Essex who are listening. I don’t know about you but to say I am feeling budget fatigue is an understatement. We’re hearing it from these students. Even my 5th grader is talking about it. We are a tough time where it feels like a lot is out of our control. One way that we can take control over the LOCAL issues that affect us most is to VOTE. The SC has already passed a “level services” budget. Now we need residents of Manchester AND Essex need to VOTE to pass it. Or the cuts we hear about tonight go from a contingency plan to a reality. Voting is a political act, and politics feel scary right now. But voting for our schools doesn’t have to be. Voting is simple, it’s free. Both towns will have free childcare. Town Meeting doesn’t make it easy. But it’s WORTH IT for our kids. Because our kids need great teachers. And their great teachers are sitting here, fighting for their jobs and their livelihoods.

Town Meeting in Manchester on 4/28 and any other town meeting needed after that to get this done - please make a plan to show up and VOTE. Town Meeting in Essex on 5/5 and then AGAIN at the ballot of 5/12 - make a plan to show up to BOTH and vote. And every other town meeting and ballot vote after that. And when you go to vote- make a goal to bring at least 3 or even 10 friends.

Because this is what it means to live in a democracy. This is what it takes to ensure we have quality public schools that we have equity between our towns, that we fund rich educational experiences like foreign languages and art, and music and rock band, whatever lights them up, that we ensure students have what they need to learn. Your kids, our kids, the children of Manchester AND Essex - and their coaches, their teachers, their mentors, they are worth it.”

Keith Stefanek, 107 Holten Street, Danvers. Mr. Stefanek has been the grade seven math teacher for MERSD for 19 years and is the president of the Manchester Essex Teachers Association. Mr. Stefanek spoke with pride about the students providing comments and about the lasting impression Ms. Dooley has on her students. He pointed to the passion of teachers who have watched years of budget battles and cuts to their departments. Mr. Stefanek said that the repeated cuts have chipped away at once strong programs, like world language, and admonished listeners that they are responsible for the cuts that are eroding the uniqueness of the district. Mr. Stefanek emphasized that every person listed on the cuts list is a talented educator with a story. Mr. Stefanek stated that repeatedly making cuts is not the dialogue of a world class district. Mr. Stefanek said that the district was in the same position only two years and it should not be a recursive situation. Mr. Stefanek advocated for the restoration of the district to high-quality, stating that students deserve a fully funded budget, and the cuts need to stop.

Hannah Davis, 48 Forster Road, Manchester. Ms. Davis shared that she wrote an article on MERSD’s rank at third in the state of Massachusetts and said that if the budget does not pass there will not be additional articles to write. Ms. Davis stated that students are stressed that they

will not get the classes they need and called it shameful for the district to allow this when students should be focused on their schoolwork rather than worrying about budget cuts. While acknowledging that some have a real concern about paying rising taxes, Ms. Davis urged voters to think about their time in school and the teachers who impacted them when voting.

Sarah Stone, 69 Pleasant Street, Manchester. Ms. Stone spoke as a seventh-grade teacher and parent. Ms. Stone said that she has been able to trust that her children are loved and inspired when sent to school and she feels heart-broken that the district returns again and again to the conversation about budget cuts. Ms. Stone said that the teaching profession has become demoralizing, with educators asked to live in a gray area of uncertainty about their jobs. Ms. Stone asserted that everyone should care more about teachers because they are the backbone of society. Ms. Stone shared that her students recently analyzed the book Triangle Shirt Factory and were stunned by the greed in the book. Ms. Stone pled with her neighbors to vote for the town's children and the teachers who have devoted themselves to the profession. Ms. Stone said that she does not want the towns to return year after year to this problem.

Caroline Chrzanowski, 21 Harold Street, Manchester. Ms. Chrzanowski is a senior at MERHS and shared that she has also been admitted to her dream school, as shared tonight by other students. Ms. Chrzanowski said that students have many opportunities because of the quality of education at MERSD and stated that the override failing is the same as failing the students. Ms. Chrzanowski said that the children coming behind her deserve the same opportunities and strong foundation and that their future starts here.

Donna Furse, 8 Blossom Lane, Manchester – Ms. Furse asked whether the district would be in the same position next year if the current override passes in Essex this year. Ms. Furse also asked whether, in the event of a failed override, the district would again be in this position next year having made all of the proposed cuts on the contingency plan. Ms. Furse said that the current budget feels like a band-aid approach.

- 2) **Chairperson's Report** – Mr. Reed clarified where the budget process stands, repeating that the School Committee has passed a carry-forward/level services budget and sent that budget to the towns of Manchester and Essex. The towns will now decide how to fund the district budget and present to their voters at their respective town meetings. In addition, the Town of Essex currently plans to present an override solution to their voters. If the proposal passes at their town meeting, it will need to be placed on their ballot. Mr. Reed stated that the purpose of the contingency plan is to share the impact of the situation with the voting population and to provide courtesy notice to employees impacted by necessary cuts should the override fail. Mr. Reed urged supporters to do what they are able to support the override campaign.
- 3) **Student Report** – Stella Straub. Ms. Straub echoed the sentiments of the students who provided public comment. Ms. Straub said that she wishes to hear more from the other side of the issue in order to have those view points heard and to engage in conversation across the aisle. Ms. Straub asked that Essex voters engage in discussions with each other. Ms. Straub urged students of voting age to register and show up to vote.

4) Consent Agenda -

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1058-1060 and payroll warrant for March 27, 2025
- Minutes for approval: March 18, 2025

Mr. Reed moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed 6-0. Ms. Whitman abstained from the vote.

- Donation – The Friends of Manchester Essex Performing Arts (FOMEPA) is donating approximately \$13,500 worth of sound equipment—including microphones, headsets, receivers, and storage racks—to the Manchester Essex Regional School District. This donation follows a successful fundraising effort in support of improving audio quality in the Middle High School Auditorium.

Mr. Reed moved to accept the donation. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Discussion – Mr. Davis Bradford, treasurer of FOMEPA shared that the organization began fundraising in support of the MERSD performing arts program following an audit of sound equipment in the auditorium. They were able to purchase the equipment following their efforts. Mr. Foster stated that the original audit included speakers, as well, and the district had planned to purchase those themselves. Ms. Cresta reported that the speakers are now part of the capital plan. The original audit estimated the cost of speakers in the range of \$30K. However, actual bids came in in excess of \$100K. The district then had to choose between the speakers and other large projects. Ms. Whitman noted that the new equipment from FOMEPA has made a big difference in the auditorium’s sound quality, as will be evident in upcoming shows. Mr. Reed thanked the volunteers for their fundraising efforts.

The motion passed 7-0.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman reported that the facilities subcommittee met. The Owners Project Manager (OPM) is not able to join them until after appointment approval by the MSBA on April 7. The subcommittee discussed an issue of a sewer-like smell at Essex Elementary School and forward progress on the Essex building project. Superintendent Beaudoin shared that the Request for Service (RFS) will go out at the beginning of May. The process will be similar to that for hiring the OPM. Two board meetings are planned for July with a kickoff meeting in the fall. Ms. Cresta provided insight into the sewer smell in Essex. The odor seemed to move around the building and was difficult to pin down. Several solutions were tried. Recently, a leak in a steam pipe was discovered. While peeling back insulation, etc., a cracked sewer pipe was uncovered, and repair work was done. The total cost is approximately \$10K.
- **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Anna Mitchell) – Mr. Foster reported that the subcommittee met earlier in the day. They examined the budget to actual report and

discussed the budget approval process. Clarification was given that the SC provides an initial budget in January. The subcommittee also looked at questions regarding the necessity of a ballot measure in the event of a super town meeting.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Erica Spencer/Theresa Whitman) – No Report

6) Superintendent's Report – Superintendent Beaudoin provided insight into the DESE review timeline, sharing that the district's DESE representative said that the final report should be presented in June or July. The superintendent expressed gratitude for the work of Ms. Umile and all those who participated in and attended the STEAM night. It was an uplifting evening.

7) Continued Business –

- a. SEPAC Update – No Report.
- b. Curriculum Update – Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Instructional Technology
 - i. ESSA Title Grants – monitoring review
 - ii. MCAS – Up and running. New technology updates.
 - iii. Parent/Caregiver Math/Literacy Learning Events
 - iv. Essex Grade 2 & 3 Family Math Showcase
 - v. SCORE Projects starting for high school seniors
 - vi. High School Jazz Night – March 13
 - vii. MERSD Robotics Team 2084 – The C Monster did well in competition in Revere.
 - viii. World Language International Week – March 12 – Community members with global experience shared ways to interact with culture and international opportunities.
 - ix. Middle School March Madness – community competition
 - x. 2025 Congressional Art Competition at Montserrat College of Art – Congratulations to August Capotosto for garnering recognition.
 - xi. PD Day – March 17. Taking Theory to Practice – Using what learn: Practical ways to implement authentic learning experiences. The day included a student panel and resource fair with representatives from community partners.
 - xii. STEAM Showcase – March 27. Cross integration between content areas highlighting what happens in class. Kudos to Mrs. Umile for her intentional, thoughtful work to coordinate this event.
 - xiii. Arts Showcases Coming Up
 - 1. Grade 5, District-Wide Musical April 3-5
 - 2. High School Spring Concert April 10
 - 3. High School Art Show – on display April 20 - May 10
 - 4. A Capella Night – May 8

5. Middle School Art Show – May 13 - May15
6. Elementary Art Show – May 28 - May 20
7. Elementary Spring Concert – May 29

c. Stabilization Fund Appropriation for Network Technology – Vote to Approve.

Mr. Reed moved that the School Committee authorize an appropriation from the Stabilization fund up to \$110,970 for the purchase and installation of a replacement of network switch. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

Discussion – Ms. Cresta reported that the district currently has two network switches that have reached the end of their useful life. Network switches remain important despite utilizing the cloud. The district has the opportunity to purchase one new switch via the E-rate federal discount program, if purchased this year. Ms. Cresta said this program may not be renewed. The total cost of a replacement network switch with a proposal using the Massachusetts State Contract pricing is \$110,970. The approximate E-Rate funding available is \$44,000 which will result in a net cost to the district in the amount of \$66,970 for the replacement switch. Ms. Cresta requested that the authorization be made in the full amount of the contract which the district will need to sign in order to move forward with this project. Ms. Cresta said that this upgrade was scheduled in the capital plan for next year but has been moved up to take advantage of the discount program.

Ms. Whitman asked if anything else was being deferred because of moving up the network switch replacement. Ms. Cresta said that the district has not moved forward with any capital plans this year due to budget concerns. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the contingency budget plan discussed at the current SC meeting includes freezing the capital plan. Additional reductions from the contingency plan will result in reduced network support within the district. Upgrading the switch will provide needed assistance to the remaining network administrator.

The motion passed unanimously.

- d. FY 25 Budget Winter/Spring Budget to Actual Report – Ms. Cresta supplied the SC with a budget-to-actual report for the second quarter (ending December 31, 2024). Ms. Cresta pointed out that there are different spending calendars – the fiscal year, the school year, and some costs that are back-loaded because a lump sum is paid at the end of the year. As a result, percentages of funds spent versus the percentage of how far we are into the fiscal year are skewed. As of December 31, the district is 50% of the way through the fiscal year and 40% of the way through the school year. Ms. Cresta categorized the current fiscal year as in good order, but she said that she is monitoring some costs projected to result in deficits. These include utilities, health insurance, and special education out of district transportation. At the current time, the district expects to run short in the areas of health insurance and out of district transportation. Ms. Cresta expects to bring budget transfer requests to the School Committee for consideration with the next quarterly update.

Ms. Cresta reported that the cash summary from district treasurer Glenn Bergevin indicates that, at the end of December, there was \$12.6M on hand. Mr. Bergevin’s report summarizes all funds and bank accounts that are managed by the district treasurer. The accounts are broken into three categories: operational funds, OPEB funds, and student activity funds.

Ms. Mitchell shared that the finance subcommittee recommended adding reserve implications to the budget-to-actual report. Ms. Mitchell noted that there is a projected budget surplus of \$93K and said that the finance subcommittee discussed where this will go. The district plans to use most of this surplus to cover a shortage in OOD budget line. Ms. Cresta said that the current projected balance is tighter than budgets in previous years. Ms. Cresta expects the E&D balance to fall this year. Superintendent Beaudoin commented that it is the tightest it has been in fourteen years and characterized this as a combination of tightening budgets and inflationary issues. The superintendent said that, in response to public criticism, the district trimmed healthcare estimates in the budget for the current fiscal year. The district now finds itself underfunded in this area.

- e. FY 26 Budget
 - i. Override Contingency Plan – Mr. Reed stated that the School Committee hopes that the override contingency plan will not be implemented and asked that SC members limit the current discussion to clarifying questions rather than debate about its components.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that she would briefly explain the why and process behind the current contingency budget plan and address Ms. Furse’s concerns. At this point, the School Committee has adopted a level services/carry-forward budget. The funding mechanism for that

budget requires that the SC now send the budget to the two towns for approval at Town Meeting. In addition, depending on the funding method selected by each town, a tax increase may be required to pay the bill. In the current year, Manchester intends to fund the increase without an increase above the 2.5% levy limit using excess capacity. Essex has chosen to put the school district's operating budget under an override. This will require a 2/3 approval at the Essex Town Meeting in order to send the override to the ballot for the Essex election on May 12. If the override does not pass, the district will have a couple more opportunities to make its case. The district may choose to reconsider the budget by raising it or reducing it or may choose to leave it as is. The budget will then be sent back to a special Essex Town Meeting for passage to another ballot, if it requires a tax increase. A second failure at the ballot would lead to a Super Town Meeting. At that point, the towns step out of the process. The Regional School Committee is a municipality in its own right and would call the towns of Manchester and Essex together for a meeting with one item on the agenda – the school budget. The will of the joint town meeting would determine the budget implemented. Each town would need to reconcile that budget with their own town operating budget. The timeline for this process could go until August.

Budget deliberation for FY27 is set to commence in the yearly calendar during October. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district is already looking to projections for next year and is already able to provide a budget estimate. The healthcare increase is expected to remain in the double digits, and the district is estimating an increase of 15%. Contractual obligations will be approximately 5%. In total, district administration is expecting budget growth in the realm of 5-7%.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district introduced the concept of a budget crossroads in 2021. At that point, reserve use was high and budget trimming had begun to exceed the zone of opportunity and best practice. The district is now at the point where there are no cuts to be made without compromising the quality of the program.

The superintendent said that if the budget fails the district would be level-funded until a budget is passed. Budget reductions to meet the \$2M deficit (\$2.9M without reserve use) would be necessary. They would require significant adjustments across MERSD operations and will impact the district's capacity to yield a quality education. Impacts will be broad, long-term, and systemic, and all schools and grade levels will be affected by structural reductions. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this would not be a temporary disruption. It will be a shift in the district's capacity and mode of operations.

As an example of the long-term impact, Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district has been off the hiring cycle for the last few years because of budget uncertainty and timing. In a typical year, the district would want to start looking for new hires in March. Instead, it has had to delay staff searches until the summer when the hiring pool is much diminished. The superintendent said that it will be two to three years before the district is able to get back on track to build out for the future. Some of the impacts of the budget will be most evident down the road. The contingency plan calls for the elimination of coaching support. Superintendent Beaudoin expects that there will be questions down the road about why the district is not improving in certain areas.

In summarizing the impact of the override contingency, the superintendent said it would diminish academic quality, decrease student support, stall district growth, and increase barriers to participation via new fees and the movement of activities outside of the school day. Superintendent Beaudoin said that instruction will suffer from the loss of 22 FTE positions equating to 25-26 people. Instructors remaining will have an increased workload and less time for planning. The superintendent predicted this it will negatively impact hiring and staff retention. Should the district gain a reputation as an undesirable place to work, it will show in the pool of candidates.

Superintendent Beaudoin commended the leadership team on their work to create the contingency plan. They began with the deficit of \$2M. After calculating the percent of the total budget for each school, administrators strove for an 80:20 split between personnel and other budget areas. Where possible, leadership maximized savings through retirement. Superintendent Beaudoin pointed out that between FY19 to FY24, 15.85 FTE positions were reduced from the budget.

MERSD Override Contingency Plan to Reduce FY26 Budget by \$2M Reduction Impact Summary

Professional Staff

- ELL Teacher (0.5 FTE) – \$56,328. May result in non-compliance with mandated services for English Learners. Reduced staff may not be able to meet state mandated testing, screening, and monitoring requirements. A stipend or tutorial model may be needed to maintain basic coverage.

- Elementary Instructional Coaches (2 FTE) – \$227,565. Eliminates the embedded instructional coaching model that supports teachers in improving core instruction. This removes job-embedded professional development to improve instructional practices and instructional support for onboarding new teachers. This also eliminates in-house training and implementation support for new curriculum materials and current research-based instructional practices.

- Elementary Music (0.7 FTE) – \$51,512. General music will continue (shared between EES and MMES), but instrumental lessons will shift to a fee-for-service model. Chorus, concert band, and rock band will move to after-school, stipend-based activities.
- Elementary PE (0.9 FTE) – \$66,683. Reduces physical education to once per week, limiting regular physical activity and health instruction for elementary students. Can't meet contractual prep time requirements. *See System Wide Adjustments / K-5 Wednesday Early Release.*
- Elementary Reading – MTSS (0.6 FTE) – \$51,000. Reduces literacy intervention capacity by approximately 13%. Decreasing our literacy specialists on the elementary Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS) team decreases intervention time and support available to students K-5.
- Essex Classroom (1 FTE) – \$96,887. May result in multi-grade classrooms and grade-level shifts each year as this cohort progresses, affecting continuity and social-emotional learning. Reduces capacity for new enrollments and school choice.
- Memorial Classroom (1 FTE) – \$83,142. Reduction may increase class sizes and limit flexibility to address enrollment shifts.
- HS BRIDGE Counselor (1 FTE) – \$83,541. Eliminates dedicated counselor for students transitioning back from hospitalization. Responsibilities will shift to school adjustment counselors within the academic center, reducing individualized support.
- HS Content Teachers (3.5 FTE) – \$303,255. Reduces the number of course sections (by 17.5), leading to larger class sizes and fewer scheduling options for students.
- MS Academy (1 FTE) – \$114,909. MS Academy will be eliminated. Grade 6 will be divided into four sections, with each teacher working with their team to provide a trimester of interdisciplinary, project-based learning experiences for students. This will reduce grade-wide academic support in the areas of reading, writing, and math, increase class sizes, and weaken the ability to provide MTSS to Grade 6 students.
- MS ACE Teacher (1 FTE) – \$75,120. Reduces specialized instruction and support for highest-need middle school students, despite anticipated enrollment growth in the program.
- MS Health/Wellness (1 FTE) – \$100,035. One teacher will teach both content areas (PE and health) reducing dedicated instructional time in both health and wellness and increasing class sizes for all middle school exploratory content areas.
- MS Principal Position (1 FTE) – \$100,000. Restructure will reallocate \$40K for reorganizing administrative roles to support both middle and high school operations. This will result in a decrease in specialized leadership focus at both the middle and high school levels.
- MS Reading Specialist (1 FTE) – \$75,120. Reduces reading intervention and support services by 60% for middle school students.

Administrative/Support Staff

- Central Office Admin Assistant (1 FTE) – \$56,375. Restructuring will reduce business office capacity, limiting administrative support.
- Computer Technician (1 FTE) – \$67,306. Reduces technology support and maintenance capacity across the district.
- Kindergarten Teaching Assistants (2 FTE) – \$71,530. Less classroom support for our youngest K-5 students who are transitioning to elementary school. Lead teachers will have less support to aid in student behavior, student needs, and supervision/safety.
- Library TA (1 FTE) – \$31,882. Reduces support for elementary library operations and coverage to building where librarian isn't assigned on a given day.
- HS BRIDGE TA (1 FTE) – \$36,451. Position eliminated; coverage will be shifted to main office administrative assistant duties.
- HS Admin Assistant (0.5 FTE) – \$31,332. Reduction in guidance administrative support.

Expenditures / Contracted Services

- Crossing Guards – \$1,500. Elimination of service; safety coverage may be reduced.
- Facilities Small Capital Plan – \$50,000. Capital plan frozen; stabilization funds will cover urgent annual maintenance needs.
- North Shore Consortium Connections Program – \$27,500. Eliminates access to wrap around support for high need families coping with children's mental health and behavioral needs, school refusal, and risk and safety issues. Counselors from Connections work with these families on a short-term basis to deliver individualized parent training and consultation, counseling, and connection to community resources.
- Professional Development Reduction – \$6,750. Reduces our flexibility and range of providing necessary professional learning to staff across all roles, departments and levels. Limits PD to high-priority strategic initiatives only and eliminates opportunities for external conference participation.
- Reduce a Bus Run – \$75,000. Consolidates Manchester bus routes, increasing travel time for some students.
- Athletics – \$39,000. User fee increase of 8%. Elimination of JV2 Basketball, 1 MS Golf, 1MS Field Hockey, MS Boys Basketball, and HS Strength & Conditioning. Introduction of uniform/sock fee. Middle school students may play on HS teams under a unified principal.

- School Resource Officer (50% Reduction) – \$32,500. SRO will be part-time at MHS. Reduces daily safety oversight and emergency readiness.
- Eliminate MS Chromebooks (effective FY27) – \$38,000. Starting Spring 2026, families of incoming Grade 6 students will lease devices instead of receiving schoolissued Chromebooks. This could impact the technology department’s ability to effectively manage and oversee student devices for developmentally appropriate access and ensure students are complying with the Middle School Chromebook Contract.
- Instructional Software – \$15,000. Reduction in supplemental software (e.g., IXL, i-Ready MyPath), limiting supplemental targeted, adaptive online practice and content application in the areas of math and reading in K-8. Core instruction not affected.
- HS General User Fee – \$TBD. User fee structure to be adjusted; details pending.

System Wide Adjustments

- K-5 Early Release Every Wednesday – \$25,000. Necessary to accommodate PE staffing cuts. Teaching assistants' hours reduced by 1 hour weekly.
- SAIL Program Relocated to Essex – \$N/A. Program predominantly serves Essex students. Staff will be reassigned to Essex Elementary School. Provide additional adult presence to assist with building coverage

Questions: Ms. Whitman noted that the facilities manager position is not on the contingency list. The superintendent said that the reduction of the facilities manager position is included in the passed budget. Ms. Whitman asked about the two high school teachers. The superintendent clarified that in the passed budget, 2 FTE positions were reallocated to the middle school language program and Memorial Elementary, respectively. In the contingency plan, these positions would be cut rather than transferred. In addition, Memorial Elementary will lose a teacher from its current roster as well. Ms. Whitman confirmed that the high school will lose two teaching FTE positions even if the override passes. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it is a way to address the world language problem. She has encouraged alignment of the schedules between the middle and high schools to facilitate sharing staff between the buildings. Regarding the anticipated loss of a social studies position, the superintendent said that this would bring the department in line with the science and math departments which have five teachers each. The English department has one additional teacher, and they would likely be next up for a cut.

Mr. Foster clarified that this contingency exercise allows the district to notify staff affected by potential cuts. The superintendent said that the district is obligated to notify staff by June 15. This exercise addressed the district’s obligation to make clear what is at stake. Mr. Foster asked for clarification on healthcare implications from staff reductions.

	Est. Unempl Liability	Est. Health Care Savings	Unfunded Unempl Liability
Health Care Savings to Offset Unempl Costs	\$849,500	\$463,873	\$385,628 <i>Reserves</i>

Superintendent Beaudoin said that if all employees fail to find alternate employment, the full unfunded unemployment liability would be \$385,628. The superintendent said that common practice is to cut enough positions to account for any unemployment benefit liability not offset by healthcare savings. Rather than doing that, the district would ask the School Committee to apply additional reserve funds to the unfunded balance.

Ms. Spencer noted that the reduction of an EL teacher could put the district into non-compliance. Superintendent Beaudoin said that could happen if additional EL students moved to the district.

ii. Budget Approval Timeline

1. April 28 – Manchester Town Meeting
2. May 5 – Essex Town Meeting. Approval by 2/3 vote would move the budget to the ballot
3. May 12 – Essex Election Day
4. Failure will return the budget to the district for reconsideration and another round of town meeting and ballot.
5. A second failure could lead to a Super Town Meeting during the first week of August.

Mr. Binieris asked if the Super Town Meeting requires a 2/3 approval. The superintendent will look up the answer. The School Committee members discussed opportunities to move up the specified dates of the budget timeline, as the above schedule assumes each party takes the maximum time allowed at each phase, and considered adding an additional SC meeting to the calendar.

Ms. Whitman moved to reserve May 13, 2025 at 6:00 pm for a tentative budget workshop. Ms. Spencer seconded the motion.

The motion passed 6-1. Mr. Reed voted no.

- 8) **School Committee Comment** – Mr. Foster advocated for the SC to advance the discussion on defining “excellence” and stated that a definition would be beneficial in these moments.

Ms. Whitman expressed her appreciation for the hard work that went into what she characterized as a “garbage” proposal. Ms. Whitman said that past school committees worked to avoid nickel and diming families with fees. The contingency proposal brings that back. Ms. Whitman said this will disproportionately impact those families feeling the economic pinch who do not qualify for support, and it will increase inequality. Ms. Whitman expressed her concern for freezing the capital plan while also eliminating the facilities manager position. Ms. Whitman urged the Town of Essex to consider the school district when they meet to decide what to do with the town’s free cash.

Mr. Binieris said that, when examining why families would choose to leave the district, it must be considered that there are those with resources who do not want to deal with persistent budget concerns and educational inconsistency.

Mr. Foster broached the topic of planning for a superintendent search. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that a discussion should wait until the SC has received official notice from the superintendent that she is leaving the district. Mr. Foster also asked for a discussion of the math data.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist urged parents not to pass their anger on to their students, reminding everyone that the students are listening and repeating things that adults would not want them to say. Ms. Koch-Sundquist recommended channeling those emotions into a call to action.

Ms. Mitchell stated that it is critical to start budget work earlier and said the SC needs a summer workshop. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the administration could provide the SC with next year’s budget model by their next SC meeting.

Mr. Reed stated that the contingency plan is intended to provide visibility to citizens so that they understand where the district is. Mr. Reed said that there is no area left to cut that will not impact the quality of education. Mr. Reed said that the intention of Proposition 2 ½ was not to preclude overrides. It was supposed to give citizens input on how their taxes are spent.

Ms. Spencer asked parents to remind their students who are eligible to vote to do so.

C. Adjourn

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

The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:23 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- May 5, 2025 Monday
- May 13, 2025 tentative
- May 20, 2025
- June 3, 2025