SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES September 16, 2025

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	September 16, 2025
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Lindsay Banks John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Nadia Wetzler Theresa Whitman
Absent:	Chris Reed, Chairperson
Guests:	Kim Provost, Principal Essex Elementary John Willis, Principal Memorial Elementary 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 – Ms. Koch-Sundquist called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

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

Ann Harrison, 13 Tuck's Point Road, Manchester – Ms. Harrison appeared on behalf of the Manchester Select Board to request that the School Committee revive collaboration meetings in order to promote communication. Ms. Harrison also passed along a request for the SC to start budget discussions as soon as possible.

Nina McKinnon, 1 Lowland Farm Road, Essex – Ms. McKinnon urged the School Committee to remember that they represent the communities in their entirety and encouraged new SC members to stay curious. In response to positive comments made following presentation of finding by the district's auditor, Ms. McKinnon said that the ease of working with the district's administration

depends on the questions being asked. Ms. McKinnon asked for information that was to be garnered in 2022 from an exit survey for families leaving the district and stressed the importance of finding out why families leave the district. Ms. McKinnon addressed class size at the high school, emphasizing that enrollment over twenty students is not acceptable and said that there are levers to pull to address this. Ms. McKinnon said that, as the district strives to provide the best school program possible, these are the types of topics that are not addressed by a financial audit and suggested that curiosity in the program will drive finding these answers.

2) **Student Report –** Maggie Whitman. Ms. Whitman reported that the Student Advisory Board has not yet met and shared insight from her interactions with fellow students. The ninth graders are particularly unhappy with the "off and away" phone policy instituted this year, with some complaining that it is difficult to tell time on the building's clocks. Some upper class students were surprised by AP course fees associated with AP exam administration. This component of the exams is covered in the program of studies, but Ms. Whitman suggested providing additional updates to students.

   Ms. Koch-Sundquist confirmed that AP exams are administered by the College Board and that the AP exam is not a required final for the class. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there is tuition assistance available for testing fees. Ms. Whitman stated that she has not heard complaints about class size from her peers. The superintendent said that the add/drop period has just ended, and class enrollment will now start to settle.

3) **Chairperson's Report –** Ms. Koch-Sundquist reported that she attended the middle school open house and noted the cost-neutral impact of schedule alignment between the middle and high school. Staff is able to deliver interventions outside of core instruction or electives. Ms. Koch-Sundquist shared that Google classroom now has parent accounts that allow insight into student assignments. Ms. Whitman noted that the weekly Google summary may not accurately reflect what students have turned in via other methods.

4) **Consent Agenda –**
   - Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1012-1014 and payroll warrant for September 11, 2025
   - Minutes for approval: September 2, 2025

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

The motion passed 6-0.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Theresa Whitman reported that the designer, JCJ, reviewed the work schedule for the next four months. The SBC communications subcommittee has three planned community meetings. The education vision process started, with two upcoming sessions open to the public on September 22 and October 22. Site evaluation will include Apple Street, the current elementary school location, and Memorial Elementary. The designers reviewed draft criteria and took input. There is a rubric for site evaluation, and the team will also evaluate the merits of renovation versus new construction. Mr. Foster shared that there was discussion about other town-owned sites for a potential build. In order to defend the current site choices under consideration, the SBC plans to update the design team on other properties, allowing them to be included in the narrative about selecting the best site. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there are several tracks of study in the feasibility study. In addition to site and build goals, the team will consider grade configurations. They will consider Essex PK-3 grades houses in Essex, with older students housed at Memorial; Essex PK-5 in Essex; and all Manchester and Essex PK-5 housed at Memorial. Two of these options, moving Essex students to Manchester, will require the School Committee to hold a vote before moving forward. In those cases, the School Committee will need to vote to change the program and redistrict students. Additionally, the SC will have to vote to open and amend the regional agreement. It is hoped that the SBC will reach a determination on whether either of these tracks will be pursed by October for an SC vote. If these tracks are pursued, Phase II would include determining if Memorial can absorb the proposed students as is or whether construction would be necessary.

- **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Chris Reed) – No Report

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

- **Policy/Advocacy Sub-Committee** (Lindsay Banks/Nadia Wetzler/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Theresa Whitman shared that the wellness policy committee, led by Ms. Leonard and Ms. Provost, brought together members from the district and community to completely reformulate the district's wellness policy with modern standards. The draft policy will be brought forward for an SC first read at the next School Committee meeting.

  Ms. Whitman said that the "advocacy" portion of the sub-committee's charge has not yet been defined. The idea of a newsletter was proposed. Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed the hope that advocacy would stretch to the state level. Ms. Banks advocated for both local and state-level impact.

  The School Committee reviewed procedural considerations for the subcommittees and participation in the November MASC conference.

6) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin invited the SC to attend the remaining open houses at the elementary schools and shared that the SBC upcoming community meetings will begin with a tour of the building at 4:30. The superintendent said that she would provide additional updates during the continued business portion of the agenda.

7) **Continued Business –**

a. Elementary School Improvement Plans: FY25 progress report and FY26 outlook & NEASC report. (Kim Provost, Principal Essex Elementary and John Willis, Principal Memorial Elementary). The principals presented in tandem, emphasizing the alignment of many of their goals and noting when a goal was school-specific. The elementary schools are midway through a two-year School Improvement Plan. They have achieved a lot of progress in creating alignment between the school experiences at the two elementary schools. Principal Willis said that the elementary program has achieved just over 50% of its goals.

i. NEASC Process – Input from the NEASC review has been utilized to inform the new School Improvement Plan. NEASC has an accreditation visit scheduled for October 2026.

ii. Shared MERSD Elementary Teacher Assistance Team model – The TAT model for collaborative problem solving for student needs has been redesigned over the last two years. A consultation model now leads to immediate support with the appropriate colleague rather than waiting for a planned group meeting with the entire team.

iii. Instructional Coaches – In their first year, instructional coaches focused on training and integration into the school system. In the current, second year, the elementary schools are implementing a coach residency model, ensuring more equitable access for all teachers across both schools. They will alternate residency weeks in each school. Using a ten-week cycle, coaches will use data across school years to provide imbedded coaching to staff and will track growth across each residency cycle.

iv. Authentic Learning Activity – goal to expand experiences at each grade level.

v. Family Literacy and Mathematics Nights – Organized by instructional coaches, the goal will be to increase family participation.

vi. Library Teaching Assistant – The library TA has been successful in increasing access to the library and absorbing workload to keep the library functioning.

vii. Align Performing Arts Curriculum and Performances – Alignment has included combining the elementary evening performances and creating parody for daytime concerts. The next step for Essex will be to open the daytime concert up to all families given their space constraints.

viii. Staff Observation of job-alike peers in and out of MMES to enhance practices (MMES) – Principal Willis underscored the value of each

school's unique culture while also seeking alignment. Memorial established a school-wide evaluation goal for peer observation. In its first year, staff visited each other at Memorial. In subsequent years, staff has pursued peer observation across the district and in other communities. This generated both new ideas and positive affirmation about their own practices. There has been reciprocation with other districts.

ix. Expand Community Partnerships for after school clubs (EES) – EES expanded the after school partnership with community organizations like the Council on Aging and the Shipyard Museum.
x. Implement Developed Scope and Sequence – Use of the RULER program for SEL. RULER provides tools and a curriculum which is constantly revised and expanded. District SEL coordinators developed a broad scope and sequence to build foundational skills. Future work will include integrating with teachers .
xi. Family Resources in collaboration with outside resources – collaborated with a local child psychologist to share resources via the principal's newsletter.
xii. MTSS PBIS (MMES) – The MMES adjustment counselor created a PBIS (positive behavior intervention and support) student recognition program based on a ticket system. Prizes include experiences and school swag, including t-shirts created with an MMPTO grant-funded t-shirt press.
xiii. Family Engagement via newsletter and community SEL (EES) – SEL activities are included as part of the open house, a practice to be replicated at MMES. Essex Elementary plans to hold a family charter night so that the community is aware of their on-going work.
xiv. Calm Space (EES) – Friends of EES funded the outfitting of a calm space room.
xv. Investigating History Implementation – Grade five completed implementation of the program. The district was not awarded the grant for third and fourth grade but is awaiting DESE curriculum release and hopes to bring the program to the third and fourth grades.
xvi. Diverse Author Visits - aligned
xvii. Family Outreach for Specialized Programs (MMES) – Includes outreach by adjustment counselor for students transitioning to MMES from EES.
xviii. Calm Spaces/Physical Movement Spaces (MMES) – Identified spaces within the building to increase physical movement. These are used for rewards, indoor recess, and movement breaks.
xix. Review and Evaluate School-Wide Traditions (EES) – This School Council audit will consider traditional events and whether they are equitable.

b. NEASC Report
    i. Commendations
        1. Focus on SEL in both buildings
        2. Teaching is differentiated and student-focused

3. Professional Learning and Collaboration provided
4. Collaborative school goals and elementary alignment
5. MTSS and Intervention work
6. SPED program
7. Community and Family engagement
8. Resources and Facilities (consideration was given for the EES building project being in the pipeline.

ii. Recommendations – Principal Willis noted that all recommendations are in process
1. ELA - clear articulation of the program across all subjects and grades. Parent guides are available at the schools
2. Vision of the graduate represented at the elementary level
3. CORE Values – Although the elementary schools have developed character values for students, teaching values need to be developed for staff at both schools.

Questions/Comments: Mr. Foster expressed concern about authentic learning being reduced to a list and expressed interest in understanding how it is expressed in the daily classroom experience. Principal Willis explained that authentic learning is expressed differently depending on the age of the student. In elementary classrooms, one component of student-directed learning is their ability to take learning deeper after demonstrating understanding. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that it can be difficult to quantify authentic learning because it happens organically, and she shared the breadth of the experience contained in one of the items from the list that has many authentic learning components. Ms. Banks stressed that there are many elements imbedded in the list, and Mr. Foster stressed that he would like to see that made visible. Mr. Foster questioned the equitable distribution of instructional coaches and suggested that coaches could be directed where data demonstrates greatest student need. Ms. Banks said that the coaches are intended to improve the practice of all teachers. The MTSS model is utilized for intervention. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the DIP shows that the district is in the beginning stages of authentic learning and stressed the importance of building relationships for the work of the district's instructional coaches.

c. District Improvement Plan 2025-2028 preliminary draft presentation – Heather Leonard. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this is an opportunity for SC input before the document is released for public comment. The superintendent reminded the SC that the DIP lives within the larger, ten-year Strategic Plan. The DIP creates a construct and informs school level planning, which informs educator plans. There are three DIPs within the Strategic Improvement Plan. The current draft builds on the 2022-2025 plan, incorporates student performance data, recommendations from external reviews, such as NEASC and DESE, and state and national requirements. It is a living document, and its objectives and action steps shift to reflect needs and future priorities.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district had previously prioritized the whole child and moved away from score-driven measures. The superintendent asked if the district should remain on this course.

The superintendent said that SC comment will be incorporated into the draft before it is released to the community in the district newsletter. A new version will come to the SC in October.

Discussion: School Committee members generally approved of the format of the DIP. Ms. Koch-Sundquist wondered weather goals would be less about inclusion in the current climate and referenced the district survey in which students did not report seeing themselves in materials. Ms. Banks said that empowering students is well-represented in the strategic priorities. Ms. Whitman said that questions about scores may be budget-driven as the community looks to identify the value of its educational program. Ms. Whitman suggested that budget implications should be included in the action steps. The superintendent stated that hotlinks could link to budget information and to definitions. Mr. Foster questioned the use of language that is foundational instead of indicating forward progress, and Ms. Wetzler agreed that the district is not starting from zero. Superintendent Beaudoin reiterated that it is a document that works to build capacity across all the buildings. Ms. Koch-Sundquist compared the draft to the current DIP and said that these are areas of new growth. Ms. Whitman recommended a brief summary of the previous DIP to introduce current goals. The superintendent said that the reality is that some aspects have been a challenge to implement and the district is not as far from foundational elements as it would like. Ms. Banks urged honesty in sharing that assessment and said that the document captures what the community is asking for. Ms. Leonard concurred that the district is still at a foundational level for authentic learning. In other areas, like cultural competency, a re-start may be necessary as the district broadens its scope beyond race to inclusion for multi-language learners or those with learning disabilities. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the current document does not include deliverables as in previous iterations in order to improve clarity. Those goals will be presented at year end.

d. Graduation and Competency Determination Recommendation – Pam Beaudoin. Following last year's statewide vote eliminating MCAS as a graduation requirement, Massachusetts high schools are now required to establish a local Competency Determination (CD) process. In addition to meeting local graduation requirements, students must demonstrate mastery of the core skills and competencies in the subject areas previously assessed by MCAS. This is achieved through the successful completion of district-certified coursework and assessments aligned with the state's academic standards and curriculum frameworks. The superintendent presented a draft CD policy based on the MASC policy template. It specifies the specific classes which meet CD requirements. Some of the classes listed are available only to SPED students and do not appear in the program of studies. Principal Sgroi will present the graduation requirements in full to the SC.

Mr. Foster noted that the policy references a district grading policy, but the district does not have a grading policy. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the grading policy will be presented shortly. Ms. Whitman suggested expanding the phrase "end of course assessment" to define what that means, including projects or final exam. Ms. Leonard clarified that this list only refers to those classes that are equivalent to what was tested on the MCAS. Therefore, AP classes would not be included.

There will be public input for the CD policy and the final version is planned for October 21.

e. Finance and Operations Director Update – Michelle Cresta
    i. Audit Firm Discussion – The district was notified of an increase to auditing costs by the parent company that absorbed the previous auditor. Previously, the district contracted for an end of year, base audit and an E&D audit. Ms. Cresta reached out to two companies for new quotes. Ms. Cresta had several recommendations. As a prior auditor with experience, Ms. Cresta can perform the E&D audit herself, saving the district approximately $6K annually. She also recommended remaining with the previous company for this year, because the audit is scheduled to begin in two weeks, and the other companies could not guarantee that they could have it done by March. The district has a March deadline because of borrowing requirements. The district would contract now for next year's audit with the lowest bidder, Roselli-Clark. A three-year contract is standard.

    Superintendent Beaudoin suggested that Roselli-Clark meet with the SC finance subcommittee before formalizing the relationship at a future SC meeting.

    ii. Reserves/OPEB – Ms. Cresta provided an update on balances for the two reserve funds – E&D and Stabilization and an update on the OPEB balance. Comparison to targets of the new reserve policy will be available after E&D certification:
        1. E&D: approximately $1M pending E&D finalization
        2. Stabilization: $904K
        3. OPEB: $7.2M. This leaves approximately $24.5M in unfunded liability.

    iii. Preliminary Enrollment Report – The superintendent said that the final numbers are official in October when the district submits to DESE. Course changes have just closed at the high school and enrollment numbers will settle down now. The report is done manually and requires removing study halls, etc.

    The superintendent explained that, for SPED students who tuition into the district, OOD placement is facilitated by the district but paid by the home district.

Ms. Cresta reported that the IRS audit is due to a box that was not properly checked by the district's payroll service provider. This designation is required because staff pays into the state retirement fund rather than Social Security.

8) **School Committee Comment** – Ms. Whitman stated that there has been a persistent question of right-size in the district and what that means. Ms. Whitman urged sharing the DESE report with town partners and community members. Ms. Whitman urged SC members to come to an early consensus about the budget path they will endorse. Superintendent Beaudoin said that she is waiting for a list of possible meeting dates from Essex Finance Committee chair, Ben Buttrick. The superintendent said that most numbers are available, but healthcare again looks to be problematic. Ms. Banks urged the School Committee to complete the superintendent's evaluation and contract indication. Ms. Whitman promised to pass the issue to the Chair and Co-Chair.

C. Adjourn

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

Meeting Adjourned at 8:49 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- **October 7, 2025**
- **October 21, 2025**
- **November 4, 2025**
- **November 18, 2025**
- **December 2, 2025**
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