SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES October 7, 2025

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	October 7, 2025
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Chris Reed, Chairperson Lindsay Banks Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair (remote) Nadia Wetzler Theresa Whitman
Absent:	John Binieris
Guests:	Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Technology Julie Sgroi, High School Principal Elizabeth Taylor, Middle School Interim Principal (remote) Samantha Pindara, Guidance Director (remote)
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) –

Dawn Burnham, County Road, Essex. – Ms. Burnham reported that several years ago a donation was made to the district by June Fulton, former teacher at Essex Elementary School, for the purpose of a scholarship for the advancement and degrees for teachers. Ms. Burnham and Sue Lufkin were established as scholarship administrators. Ms. Burnham was concerned that the funds had not yet been utilized as intended. She provided administration with related documents.

2) **Student Report –** Maggie Whitman. Ms. Whitman shared that the Student Advisory Committee has not yet met, but they did hold elections for members from the ninth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. Sophomore participants will be solicited. Ms. Whitman stated that the end of the first term is at the end of the month.

3) **Chairperson's Report –** Mr. Reed made no report.

4) **Consent Agenda –**

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1015-1017 and payroll warrant for September 25, 2025

Ms. Whitman moved to approve the AP warrants; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that wood refinishing at Memorial Elementary is part of normal maintenance and included on the maintenance schedule.

The motion passed 5-0.

- Minutes for approval: September 16, 2025. A correction was requested for the minutes to update SC subcommittee membership.

Ms. Wetzler moved to approve the minutes; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

The motion passed 4-0. Mr. Reed abstained from the vote.

5) **Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) –SBC Roster Update - Vote to Approve. Ms. Whitman reported that the updated roster for the Essex Elementary School Building Committee includes the addition of three teachers, one as a voting member and the other two in an advisory capacity. In addition, Steven Hunt replaced Jason Waldron as a non-voting member. Adam Zaiger was removed from the roster, because he moved out of town. Ms. Pereen resigned from the committee and was removed from the roster. The SBC reviewed guidelines about membership balance between each town and the district on the committee. They chose to maintain the current number of voting members. Ms. Whitman shared that the visioning group met with district leadership, including Mr. Foster, and conducted school visits. They are looking at ways to bring the Essex building into alignment with current educational programs across the elementary schools. The SBC discussed site selection criteria and input they have received. A rubric exists for each item on the criteria list. The SBC will assess each item across each site. At the last meeting, they discussed "Walkability" and will need to give each of the other ten items on the list the same in-depth examination. Ms. Whitman said that the committee plans to do an initial assessment of each item on the criteria list and will bring this back to the full group. The SBC received an introduction on sustainability and the MSBA reimbursement. There are requirements for sustainability and additional

opportunities for further savings if the district pursues further sustainability measures. Ms. Whitman said that the first community meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, October 8, 2025, and it was widely publicized.

Ms. Whitman moved to approve the revised Essex SBC roster as presented. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Discussion: Mr. Foster requested that Ms. Cameron be listed as an Essex selectman and the superintendent will make that update.

The motion passed 5-0.

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

- **Policy/Advocacy Sub-Committee** (Lindsay Banks/Nadia Wetzler/Theresa Whitman) – General Update

    - Wellness Policy – First Read. All districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program are required to develop and maintain a Local School Wellness Policy (LWP). These district-developed LWPs are intended to promote student health, well-being, and readiness to learn by supporting healthy eating, physical activity, and social-emotional development and to align to state and federal guidelines. The updated MERSD Wellness Policy was drafted by the Wellness Committee and reflects these requirements. First read, no vote is required. Committee feedback will inform the next set of revisions prior to a second read and adoption at either the 10/21 or 11/6 meeting.

Ms. Whitman moved to accept the LWP as a first read. Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

Discussion: The superintendent said that all comments will be taken back to the wellness advisory group for re-writes. The School Committee discussed wording in several sections for clarity. The superintendent will confer with Ms. Cresta regarding the free lunch program and how it should be incorporated into the LWP. Mr. Foster expressed concern regarding the section on physical and wellness education, because it references the entire framework for comprehensive health and physical education K-12 but speaks only of physical education. Mr. Foster stated that two of the nine topics in the framework relate to PE. Mr. Foster said that the language seems inconsistent with the intent of the framework to address other aspects of wellness.

The motion passed 5-0.

    - Communications – Ms. Banks proposed two motions regarding communication and the charge of the Policy/Advocacy subcommittee. Ms. Banks said that these motions are relevant in the policy manual around operations and procedures to keep local citizenry informed about the schools. Ms. Banks referred to Section

KA and noted that the SC is charged to provide timely and appropriate information to all stakeholders in the Community under the section on fiscal management. Motion 1 is about charging the policy and advocacy subcommittee with creating a road map for the SC to advocate for public schools by communicating with all stakeholders. Motion 2 would allow this committee to immediately generate written communications that include topics such as meeting summaries, future meeting agendas, district initiatives, budget development and student life.

Ms. Banks moved for the SC to officially charge the policy and advocacy subcommittee with the task of generating a communications plan to be approved by the SC.

Discussion: Ms. Whitman expressed concern about delivering the subcommittee a charge before the committee had internally created a list of all its goals for the year. Ms. Banks advocated for the SC to grant the charge to allow the subcommittee to take communication on as a goal. Ms. Whitman suggested a change to the charge to allow flexibility. Mr. Foster advocated for the motion, noting the importance of addressing communication quickly. Mr. Foster expressed concern about "advocacy" by the School Committee. Ms. Banks clarified that the emphasis is intended to be factual communication about the actions of the School Committee, not advocacy.

Mr. Foster moved the question. Ms. Whitman seconded moving the question.

Moving the question passed 5-0.

The original motion passed 3-2 with Mr. Reed and Ms. Whitman voting against.

Ms. Banks moved that the school committee issue a monthly written communication that contains a recap of previous meetings and agenda announcements for future meetings, with Ms. Banks designated as the SC member accountable for this, for FY25/26, working in conjunction with the Superintendent. Mr. Foster seconded the motion

Discussion: Ms. Banks clarified that she intends to send a condensed version of meeting minutes. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that a key variable for the district regards legal requirement for neutrality any time there is a ballot initiative. Mr. Reed stated that the full SC will vote on material to be released. Ms. Banks stated that the information will be disseminated monthly via local print media, email, and the district's social media feed. Content will be limited to factual summaries of SC activities and actions. Ms. Whitman noted that inclusion in local news outlets may have to be in the form of a letter to the editor. Ms. Banks said that she will utilize samples from other school systems.

The motion passed 5-0.

Mr. Foster commented on recent news about teachers in other districts being put on leave for social media comments. Mr. Foster said that this practice would not be supported by MERSD's technology policy. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that the district does not constrict first amendment rights. However, staff employability could be impacted for any staff member advocating violence or harm to children. The superintendent said that people can have political lives outside of work.

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

6) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Pam Beaudoin stated that the Superintendent's Coffee is scheduled for October 23 at 8:30 am. The ESBC community meeting tomorrow will focus on responding to public questions. MCAS reports will be mailed to families this week and the accountability report will be available. On November 4, Ms. Leonard will present the Annual Assessment Report to the SC looking at an overview of how the district is performing, areas for growth, and a plan for the year.

   Superintendent Beaudoin reassured Ms. Burnham that the district has been working to determine the status of the donation about which she inquired. The superintendent said that the donation was initiated in 2002 or 2003, under a previous district administration. It was deposited for safekeeping and is intact. However, the district does not administer scholarships directly. The district will work with Ms. Burnham to identify an appropriate channel for oversight of the scholarship and will disperse the funds, with interest, to the determined organization. Options include The Manchester Essex Education Fund, which distributes scholarships to graduating seniors, and the Friends of EES, which provides staff grants for continued education. Ms. Cresta stated that administration will bring the identified option to the School Committee for final approval and disbursement.

   a. Class Size/Section Report – delayed until October 21, 2025
   b. Campaign Finance Complaint Resolution – Superintendent Beaudoin shared that there was a complaint filed last Spring related to communication from the district regarding the override vote. The district had posted and emailed to alert the school community to the final step necessary in the process. The Office of Campaign and Political Finance (OCPF) reviewed the complaint and determined that some of the wording in district communication could be considered not fully neutral and the district used an internal distribution list to send this communication. There was no penalty assessed, and the OCPF encouraged MERSD to send them any content for evaluation in these instances. The matter is closed. Superintendent Beaudoin shared that MGL 5318 B permits mailing of a voter booklet, giving the district an opportunity to distribute neutral information about a ballot measure. If the SC desires, the superintendent will confer with counsel to see if there is an avenue for this.

7) **Continued Business –**
    a. SEPAC Report – No Report
    b. Middle & High School Update– Middle School Interim Principal Elizabeth Taylor, High School Principal Julie Sgroi, Samantha Pindara, Guidance Director.
        i. Improvement Plans FY25 Progress Report & FY26 Outlook

High School Principal Sgroi inherited the current School Improvement Plan (SIP) two years ago.

- Strategic Initiative 1: Establish and foster an authentic Pre-K-12 learning environment. School-wide PD for interdisciplinary lessons. Principal Sgroi said that the previous year focused on creating interdisciplinary courses.
    a. Photo/Web design – created an app to showcase student photography work. Students did not need to be enrolled in both courses.
    b. Drawing to Learn – collaboration with the ACE program to demonstrate what they learned.
    c. Math/Science – created an escape room for use as a culminating activity at the end of the year. It was called "Go Big and Go Home."
    d. SEL – English and Special Education collaboration
    e. Math/Art/Psychology – explored the golden ratio
- Strategic Initiative 2: Increase understanding of SEL and Trauma Informed Practices connected to meeting the needs of individual learners as defined in Student Centered Learning Definition
    a. Specific PD for counselors
    b. Reduction in office/counselor referrals
    c. Improved attendance – Principal Sgroi highlighted the work of Dean of Students Drinkwater to build relationships and address underlying issues that impact attendance.
    d. YRBS survey conducted spring 2025 - Develop and implement faculty advisor to provide opportunities for connection to a trusted adult with the goal to review, discuss and reflect on learning and development and skills of the Vision of the Graduate
    e. U block - maintain same teacher, providing a consistent connection to a staff member. The principal compared this to the role of a faculty advisor. The pilot year of this yielded unanimous approval from faculty and staff.
    f. 9th grade U block changes – working to define and limit cellphone use and instill good habits. The principal said that ninth graders have slightly different needs than the older students, including internalizing mechanisms for best utilizing the block.
- Strategic Initiative 3: Review curriculum to expand content and authors that include underrepresented groups to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.
    a. History/social science – Garnered and utilized a genocide education grant to fund professional development for genocide education and provide supportive resources which are revising the curriculum implementation.

b. World language – New standards available from the state are proficiency-based and centered throughout the whole curriculum. Principal Sgroi said that teachers are exploring how to build a curriculum with an equity lens and to ensure that their content and instructional routines are free of bias. Students will have access to a broader range of literature and curriculum. This work is an ongoing process of continually determining how to provide the best curriculum possible.

- Bridge Plan - Maintain momentum while preparing next SIP in alignment with DIP and working closely with the school council. Principal Sgroi said that this will be her first year building a new SIP, which will be done while the new District Improvement Plan is crafted. Principal Sgroi plans to work with her school council, community members, parents, and students to build an SIP based on the DIP. Consequently, the principal plans a one-year bridge plan during which the high school will focus resources on two high-leverage areas:
    a. Deepening instructional innovation and student voice
        i. Establish student feedback structures – Principal Sgroi described students advocating for Marine Biology as a course. The principal wants to build structures that allow students to give this kind of feedback, including student surveys.
        ii. Incorporating further project-based and service-learning opportunities. Principal Sgroi would like to take this beyond the service requirement and senior SCORE project.
        iii. Support teachers in designing opportunities for students to demonstrate higher-order thinking
    b. Advancing curriculum review and alignment
        i. Continue curriculum reviews
        ii. Attention to vertical alignment & alignment with state standards
        iii. Build stronger instructional practices using formative & summative assessment data
        iv. Integrate responsible AI practices

Discussion: Principal Sgroi said that the high school has not yet surveyed students on AI use. However, returning students are sharing the college approach of embracing AI as a starting point while pushing students to go deeper. Mr. Foster stressed the importance of defining which of the many large endeavors (project-based learning, service learning, authentic assessments, etc.) will become central to the high school's work. The principal said that the bridge plan will afford the opportunity to examine the merits of each. Ms. Whitman said that she is seeing interest from juniors and seniors in connecting with school structures and learning in authentic ways. Ms. Whitman asked about U block for music students, who use the time for music instruction, and instructional content they may miss during this time. The principal clarified that U block is not considered instructional. However, last year staff determined that grade nine students would benefit from greater structure during this time to make the best of the block. Band and chorus students meet every other day for music, so they do have the opportunity to visit U block on alternate days, if they choose. Mr. Reed asked about including AI in the computer

science curriculum and taking advantage of community expertise to support that. Superintendent Beaudoin said that education is always chasing technology and emphasized the increasing importance of the vision of the graduate and the interpersonal and soft skills that it addresses as a counterbalance to the world students enter after graduation.

Middle School Principal Taylor said that her job has been to continue the work of retired Principal Maino while preserving options for the next principal. Principal Taylor shared accomplishments for promoting diversity, including a Terizim performance, funded through a grant, focusing on the holocaust; diverse book choices for grade seven DEAR program; and completion of RULER visuals and a school charter. The principal commended the exploratory team on imbedding these principals from the beginning of the year.

- Strategic Initiative 1: Identify and implement opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and assessments.
    a. MCAS ELA – Continue with implementation of targeted writing instruction
    b. MCAS Math 2025 – Develop and begin implementation of math interventions
    c. Authentic learning – Examine elements of authentic learning and viable teaching strategies to implement authentic learning via professional learning communities. The data will prepare steps for the next principal.
- Strategic Initiative 2: Integrate social emotional learning into all aspects of the school day.
    a. Midyear Assessment – Examine how SEL is being used and how it is successful.
    b. Parent Outreach - provide insight into what the school is doing.
- Strategic Initiative 3: Celebrate and nurture an inclusive and diverse school culture that recognizes the contributions and uniqueness of all individuals.
    a. Create workshops to foster leadership skills for student council members. Employ guest speakers to address standing up for others and the concept of being an "up stander" rather than a bystander. Articulate and advocate for the needs of their student community.
    b. Review and increase diverse resources for curriculum – in coordination with Director of Curriculum and department chairs
    c. Provide informational session on special education for staff. This will include information on different learning styles and disabilities and the process for tapping into the district's programs and resources.

Questions/Discussion: Mr. Foster stressed that math interventions alone will not address math gaps and should not absolve the district from looking at the core system as a whole and making needed changes. Principal Taylor said that she intends to review the core curriculum to identify standards that need additional support. Ms. Whitman asked for insight into the current structure of math intervention. Principal Taylor said that intervention begins with the grade team who works with the SPED liaison, if appropriate.

The team reviews iReady and MCAS data and the standards to identify weaknesses. Students may be referred to the student learning center for support. Principal Taylor said that she is working on a multi-tiered systems of support approach so that referrals include a specific goal that is measurable. Ms. Banks asked for insight into where math vertical alignment lives, and the superintendent said that they could prepare that information for a future meeting.

ii. YRBS Report – Samantha Pindara, Guidance Director. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is a voluntary, national survey developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Given to middle (grade seven and eight) and high school students nationwide, it is designed to provide insight into the choices and challenges of young people today. Questions target nutrition and physical activity; safety practices, mental health, substance use, bullying and violence, and injury risk. The survey is anonymous and voluntary. Results are reported as group data. The data gathered helps districts to support students as they access curriculum and as they continue post-graduation.

    Ms. Pindara said that the YRBS was administered during U block at the high school but at the beginning of a middle school academic block. It had a strong completion rate among middle school students, and a large number of seniors chose to participate. Ms. Pindara reviewed areas of concern and compared them to national levels. Ms. Pindara highlighted areas where students may not understand specific language, for instance questions related to prescription medication. Although district numbers compared favorably to national averages, Ms. Pindara stressed the importance of working to meet the needs of those students with concerning data. She said it will inform professional development choices and support practices. There are no plans to share this data with students directly. To develop relationships between a trusted adult and students, the counseling department is committed to having 1:1 meetings with all ninth graders by November. Principal Sgroi said that previous surveys helped drive the current cell phone policy. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the survey highlights the fact that the district cannot control student behavior outside of school hours and is prompting the district to open conversations with families about providing equally supportive structures outside of school. Principal Sgroi said that the drop in sexual coercion among high school respondents may be the result of a shift in the student population or the greater culture. The superintendent stated that some data from the VOCAL survey does not correlate with data in this measure. Superintendent Beaudoin underlined the importance of the SEL approach based on building better relationships between

students (empathy, copying skills, reporting options). The School Committee explored differences in instructional approaches between the elementary and high schools. Mr. Foster cautioned against tying any response to one measure, and the superintendent said it is important not to overanalyze any specific question. Ms. Banks broached the topic of school start times and adolescent sleep patterns.

c. Public Hearing: Competency Determination (CD) Policy – Public input on proposed CD policy. Following the statewide decision to eliminate MCAS as a graduation requirement, all high schools must adopt a local Competency Determination process. The draft MERSD policy, based on the MASC model, outlines coursework requirements, evidence of mastery, and multiple pathways for students, including supports for students with disabilities, English learners, and late enrollees. This step provides an opportunity for public input before the policy is finalized and brought forward for adoption at the 10/21 meeting. There was no public feedback from those in attendance in-person or online.
d. Curriculum & Instructional Technology Update –Director Heather Leonard. This is a recurring, informational report scheduled for the first meeting of each month.
    i. Summer Work - Ms. Leonard praised the work of several staff members for serving on panels in the greater area.
    ii. New Staff Orientation – included the Mentor/Mentee Program
    iii. 2025-26 Curriculum Review Areas – Timeline is posted on the district website and include a curriculum and programming review of the Multilanguage Learner program; English 6-12; and mathematics PK - 12.
    iv. 2025-2026 Professional Development Program Updates –
        1. Content Driven Focus – Embedding efforts into content specific efforts.
        2. Responsible AI Integration – Ms. Leonard is entering her second year on the DESE AI task force, working across the state and different departments, plus different school districts, to examine varying approaches to AI. The district is partnering with MIT for a "Day of AI" professional development.
    v. Quick Updates
        1. DESE grant for early literacy tutoring, targeting grade one. It will start next week.
        2. RAISE/MIT Day of AI
        3. Cross-District Networks – To support staff adapting to curriculum. This includes support for "singleton" staff, like exploratory teachers who are the only person across schools implementing robust and dense new standards.
        4. Multilingual Learner Curriculum & Program Review
        5. Implementation (year 1) K-2 history/SS Curriculum (Private I History detectives

6. Vertical Expansion of MTSS (MS/HS) – Ms. Leonard stressed that the goal of the MTSS approach is to develop a proactive support system, using data to identify needs. Ms. Leonard acknowledged that a Tier 1 problem is not solved via intervention, but it does address needs while Tier 1 capacity is built. Work is being done collaboratively with the middle and high schools to be more consistent with that articulated routine – data screening from multiple data sets and targeted support.
7. Continuing: Wellness Advisory Committee
8. Continuing: MERSD Arts Council

Questions/Discussion: Ms. Leonard addressed Mr. Foster's questions about the curriculum review timeline. The components of the timeline are phases that do not necessarily equal a year in length. Mr. Foster expressed interest in determining the direction of recommendations so that the SC can determine whether they fit with the vision or require resources. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that items requiring a major adoption or financial investment come before the SC. Other items are presented informationally if they do not require a vote. Ms. Leonard committed to keeping the SC informed about the processes and implementations. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that Ms. Leonard represents the overall district cohesion. There are variations at each level and the classroom based on local needs.

8) School Committee Comment – Ms. Banks inquired about proposed collaboration meetings. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the Essex Selectboard is waiting for input from its FinCom. She will reach out again. The superintendent said that the district is working on the end-of-year report.

C. Adjourn

Ms. Whitman moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

The motion passed 5-0.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:48 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

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