SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES October 21, 2025

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	October 21, 2025
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Chris Reed, Chairperson Lindsay Banks John Binieris (remote), non-voting Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Nadia Wetzler Theresa Whitman
Absent:	
Guests:	Allison Collins, Director Student Services
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 6:05 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)** – none

2) **Student Report –** Maggie Whitman. Ms. Whitman reported that the SAC has not yet met. She has met with Principal Sgroi. Ms. Whitman shared that the high school had a successful spirit week; students completed the PSAT; the high school music programs will perform at the elementary schools this week, and the end of the quarter is approaching.

3) **Chairperson's Report –** Chris Reed. offered a brief report, noting the positive start to the school year across the district. He acknowledged the valuable

curriculum and program updates the committee has received and highlighted the critical Special Education presentation scheduled for later in the meeting.

4) **Consent Agenda –**
   - Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1018 - 1021 and payroll warrant for October 9, 2025.
   - Minutes for approval: October 7, 2025

Mr. Foster moved to approve AP Vouchers 1018-1021 and the payroll warrant for October 9, 2025; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

The motion passed 6-0.

- Out of State Travel - The HS Social Studies department is requesting approval for a one-day field trip to the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City on October 29, 2025. The trip runs every other year as part of the *9/11 and the War on Terror* elective.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the request for out-of-state travel; Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

The motion passed 6-0.

5) **Sub-Committee Reports**

- **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Chris Reed) – Mr. Foster reported that Ms. Cresta will prepare the first quarter report for FY26 and the FY25 closeout overview by the beginning of November. The E&D will be submitted by November 4, with a current estimate of $300K, bringing the serves to approximately $1M. The FY26 audit is currently underway. Mr. Foster reported that it is expected that the district will bring initial budget assumptions to the November 18 meeting.

  The number-crunching group plans to meet on October 30, 2025. The finance subcommittee worked on a draft agenda that includes:

  1. School Finance Communication – The SC will query how the towns approach communication.
  2. FY27 Budget – The subcommittee hopes to share broad overviews of the major factors for the district and both towns.
  3. DESE Audit results – Review results of the audit and determine if it speaks to the questions posed by the town partners.
  4. SPED presentation summary
  5. Schedule next meeting of the number-crunching group

  Questions: Ms. Whitman expressed the hope that the town partners will present high-level budget numbers to the joint meeting, and the SC discussed the order of the proposed agenda.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the proposed agenda for the number-crunching group meeting on October 30, 2025. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Discussion: Superintendent Beaudoin mentioned changing the name of the number-crunching group.

The motion passed 6-0.

- Public Hearings to Review Statewide K-12 School Finance Formula - DESE and the Department of Revenue's Division of Local Services are conducting a statewide review of the Chapter 70 school finance formula. The Committee discussed whether it would like to submit formal written comments as part of the public hearing process. Mr. Foster reported that about 11% of the budget is from Chapter 70. Mr. Foster said that the School Committee would need to move quickly to draft and vote on a final statement to submit it by the deadline.

  Superintendent Beaudoin said this could be added to a future agenda. In the past, these hearings have resulted in some funding relief. However, MERSD is seen as a high socio-economic district and does not receive a high level of state aid. Budget finance is driven by real estate. The review is an opportunity to advocate for a more favorable redistribution formula that could bring some relief. Ms. Wetzler noted that the review is seeking input from municipalities about how it affects town spending. Mr. Foster stated that statements will be accepted through November with public sessions through November 19. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she would be interested in a virtual workshop on the topic. Ms. Whitman expressed interest in an open collaborative meeting to review how the town would like to respond to this request. Ms. Whitman noted that state representatives used to attend budget meetings but have not done so in some time. Ms. Whitman said it would be good to renew attention to their stewardship of the area and what is important to the community. Ms. Koch-Sundquist characterized the forum as an opportunity for town leaders to advocate for what the town needs. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that, as a regional district, Chapter 70 funds go directly to the district not to the towns for allocation to the schools. Mr. Reed said that this is not on the town agenda. Mr. Foster stated that the subcommittee will forward the proposed number-crunching agenda to town partners to facilitate discussion of the topics.

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman reported that the first community meeting was attended by an OPM representative and a representative from the designer (architect). The meeting had a very strong turnout, estimated at over 40 in attendance and another 20 virtual attendees. The next community meeting is November 20. The full SBC committee met on October 14. They approved invoices and received an update on the education program and visioning work. Most of the meeting was devoted to a report from the site selection group. This

group continues to work through a criteria list for each of the three sites. The group is close to removing the Apple Street location from the list of potential sites. Although this site is town-owned and of adequate size, several safety concerns were validated, including the road width for cars and walkability. The site is isolated from the rest of the community, and its infrastructure is offsite and within the town's responsibility. Improvements, including road widening, bridge reinforcement, and an enlarged water main, would be the responsibility of the town and not eligible for reimbursement through the MSBA. An SBC vote will be held October 28 to remove the site from consideration. The group will now turn its attention to evaluation of MMES as a site. Superintendent Beaudoin said that a key issue with Memorial School is the infrastructure below the parking area that deals with water. This limits buildable space. Adding additional structures would likely require lose of the tennis courts. MMES has significant environmental challenges and is an already overdeveloped site. Ms. Whitman stated that she reported out to the Essex BOS regarding the Apple Street site. Ms. Whitman shared that the SBC would like to add additional EES tours and tours of MMES. They meet next on October 28.

- **Policy & Advocacy Sub-Committee (**Lindsay Banks/Nadia Wetzler/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Banks said that the subcommittee plans to review the fundraising policy in the near future. The subcommittee invested time in formalizing the newsletter format, which will be crafted by Ms. Banks and sent to the full SC for approval before distribution. Ms. Banks characterized the SC newsletter as a summary of meeting minutes with live links to relevant materials (including the minutes and reports), top issues for the SC, and ways for the community to get involved. Ms. Koch-Sundquist suggested including a list of upcoming events to build connection with the community, and the SC considered the parameters for this. The superintendent recommended limiting calendar listings to local civic and booster organizations. Ms. Banks suggested including only events that are open to the public. Superintendent Beaudoin recommended distribution of the newsletter via a tool already owned by the district which includes analytic functions. Ms. Banks will explore using the Smore platform.

  Mr. Reed moved to approve the proposed newsletter format. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

  Discussion: Ms. Banks will continue to take feedback for potential updates to the newsletter format.

  The motion passed 6-0.

  Ms. Whitman advocated for allowing room in the newsletter for Ms. Bank's voice and enthusiasm. Superintendent Beaudoin cautioned about creating a publication in the voice if only one member as it must represent the entire School Committee. The superintendent said that a joint newsletter subcommittee could weather the turnover of SC members.

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

6) Superintendent's Report –

a. Superintendent's Coffee – October 23 at 8:30 am. Attendance is usually six to ten people. The SC is welcome to attend but not required to do so.

b. Class Size/Section Report – Superintendent Beaudoin reviewed the latest class/section size numbers. The two elementary schools have similar class enrollment, with MMES slightly higher despite three sections in two of the grade levels. There is greater variability in section enrollment as students age. Starting in seventh grade, students may participate in an advanced math class. This adds to the complexity of section sizes and results in some distribution imbalance. Principals at the middle and high schools continue to work to increase distribution evenness as they identify enrollment patterns. The middle and high schools now have aligned schedules, with a seven-day rotating drop. This necessitates the current number of sections. The superintendent clarified that a "section" is not a "course." Some courses are offered in multiple sections. There are singleton courses restricted to one offering. There are also combined sections where two different course levels are with the teacher at the same time, like art, language, or a combined CP/Honors class. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that some sections are smaller by design, for example when administration is trying to maintain or build a course. Despite student interest in a given course, final enrollment is driven by conflicts with other course needs. The superintendent said that administrators are looking to implement a soft minimum enrollment of ten students, pointing to section enrollment as a perceived indicator of overstaffing. Administrators will further study the ramifications of discontinuing any course and plan to release the program of studies before the holiday to give students more time to plan.

Discussion: The superintendent clarified how multi-section classes are represented in the report. Ms. Whitman said that the enrollment pattern is a normal bell curve with most enrollment clustering in the middle. She is comfortable with the spread and said there is value in the outliers both for smaller and larger classes. Mr. Foster expressed gratitude for the district's response to community concerns about section sizes. Ms. Wetzler pointed out that some of the smaller classes are what make the district attractive. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this is also a concern for staff. Mr. Reed inquired about the middle school classes at an enrollment level of 24 and 30 students. These are chorus and band sections where there is only one available teacher in the subject. School Committee members, noting the low enrollment in kindergarten and first grades at both schools, asked about the percentage of families choosing public education. Superintendent Beaudoin will bring DESE statistics on the subject to the SC. The superintendent said that the

decline is linked to decreasing population, and surrounding districts are experiencing the same trend.

c. District Improvement Plan – The DIP was sent out to over 700 households. Twenty-four respondents, most from Memorial Elementary, returned feedback on the DIP in the following areas:
   i. Academic Focus -
   ii. SEL & DEI
   iii. Communication and Transparency
   iv. Community Connection
   v. Accessibility

   The superintendent stated that common themes of this feedback expressed concern about SEL & DEI being expressed in the DIP and advocated for focus on core instruction and measurable academic outcomes. Some respondents said that schools should not be involved in SEL & DEI. Feedback also suggested that the DIP is difficult to follow and suggested a one- or two-page summary or infographic to precede the full document. Superintendent Beaudoin asked for SC direction given the feedback.

   The superintendent recounted that construction of the DIP involved a Strategic Plan steering committee that started before Covid and restarted in spring of 2022. It was comprised of teachers, parents, and community members. Information was gathered from all program reviews and third-party assessments. Over 700 respondents participated via community outreach. Mr. Foster expressed hesitancy about backing away from SEL & DEI objectives after three years of DIP focus, particularly with so few respondents in the current outreach. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that it is important to emphasize that SEL/DEI does not take away from the academic focus, and research shows that it leads to better academic outcomes. The superintendent said that the plan is focused on cultural competency. SEL training is adult training, allowing staff to understand the complexity of the audience before them and to best meet their students' needs. It leads to instructional change and improved instructional delivery. Ms. Whitman agreed that the district should not shift gears and framed the current input as a great exercise in understanding how a certain group feels. Ms. Wetzler stated that the DIP language is "equity lens" not "DEI." Superintendent Beaudoin will bring the final DIP to the School Committee on November 4.

7) Continued Business –

a. Competency Determination Policy – Vote to approve. The final version of the MERSD Competency Determination Policy was presented. Updates were made based on the committee's previous feedback. The vote will finalize MERSD's policy in accordance with new state regulations following the

elimination of MCAS as a state graduation requirement. The policy includes considerations for students with disabilities, English language learners, and late-enrolling students. It also details the appeals process for students and families to challenge a GCD decision.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the Competency Determination Policy. Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

The motion passed 6-0.

b. Special Education Program Review – Allison Collins, Director of Student Services. The SPED review for the School Committee occurs every three years and provides a programmatic and financial overview of special education across the district. It includes a summary of current services, trends in enrollment and placement, and cost drivers that influence the budget. The review provides information on how programs are structured to meet student needs and how fiscal decisions align with service delivery.

   Ms. Collins characterized Special Education as the most volatile component of the budget. It accounts for 26% of the budget, which is in line with surrounding districts. The district has 231 students in SPED. This number has been consistent over the last several years. However, the total enrollment in MERSD has decreased, making this group an increasingly larger portion of the student body. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this trend is also consistent with comparable districts. Ms. Collins said that PK needs are trending up, more students with needs are moving into the district, and the 18–22-year-old population is growing.

   Data for the review is from ASPEN, the DESE website, and local databases. Ms. Collins reviewed the following topics and provided insight into relevant trends.

   - Types of Support Provided
   - Specialized Programs – Most implemented since Ms. Collins joined MERSD.
     - Preschool – SWD and Peer Pals
     - RISE – Complex Needs. ABA Methodologies
     - IRWL – Dyslexia. Grades 2-12.
     - SAIL – Autism and Emotional/Behavioral Needs. Grades K-8.
     - ACE – Neurological and communication. Grades 4-12.
     - Transitions – Autism and Social/Emotional Needs. Grades 9-12.
   - Out-of-District Programs – 21 Students. Programs include collaboratives, private day, other public schools, and residential programs
   - SPED Eligibility – regulations (Federal and State), procedures, and parent rights (student rights are embedded in parent rights). Ms. Collins explained that to qualify for SPED a student must have a disability

resulting in lack of effective progress that requires specially designed instruction. Students in the SLD category (Special Learning Disabilities) frequently end up exiting SPED, and their population is small by high school.

- SPED Finance – budget process, spending breakdown, staffing trends, revenue sources
    - SPED starts with a zero-based budget. Ms. Collins reviews data to determine specific staffing needs for the coming fiscal year.
    - The district has invested in internal SPED programs to reduce costs and best provide services to students.
    - Staffing and support from Teacher's Aides fluctuate with student need.
    - Revenue sources outside of the operating budget include school choice, non-resident tuition, preschool tuition, grants, and Circuit Breaker state funding. Circuit Breaker provides partial reimbursement for high cost OOD placements that exceed the state-established threshold. This threshold changes yearly, and the reimbursement percentage is variable. Ms. Cresta stated that reimbursements are received a year after and must be used within an additional year. For tuition-in students, the district is able to set tuition based on staffing costs and can reject applicants who are not a good match for the program. Tuition-in is not offered in highly enrolled programs.
- Out of District placements – trends, analysis, cost avoidance. Almost three-fourths of the SPED budget is for OOD placement for students with developmental and severe disabilities and those in age 18-22 programs.
- School Choice and Tuition Students – The district is obligated to educate all students accepted via school choice. Their sending district reimburses MERSD for their education. Tuition students are not part of the school choice program.
- Cost Avoidance Via In-District Programs – Ms. Collins detailed the current savings to the district for students in programs this year rather than OOD placement and provided a sample projection comparing costs over a student's career at MERSD. Ms. Collins emphasized that OOD costs for tuition and transportation are volatile and have been rising sharply. Ms. Collins also spoke of the social and emotional benefits of keeping students in their communities and of the benefits to instructors from having SPED staff available in their buildings.
- Next Steps – Future needs and goals. This includes distributing specialized programs between EES and MMES once the building project is complete. Ms. Collins emphasized the importance of strengthening Tier 1 instruction and maintaining a robust MTSS program. SPED is planning to expand the RISE program to prepare for students with autism and developmental disabilities to move from preschool to the larger program.

Questions/Comments: Ms. Banks highlighted the benefits for other teaching staff because of in-district programs and referenced Universal Design principles. Ms. Collins replied with the example of the SAIL program for students with emotional regulation and behavioral needs. This is a high inclusion program. Teachers gain in experience with these students, and they gain new skill sets from consultation with SAIL staff. Across all programs, SPED expertise is shared with classroom teachers. SPED staff are also able to do functional behavioral assessments.

Ms. Wetzler asked about long-term Covid impacts. Ms. Collins pointed to missed socialization for some pockets of students and resulting lags in social maturity and self-regulation which might otherwise have been surmounted with minimal accommodations. The biggest impact to the district from Covid has been steep escalation in OOD costs.

Ms. Whitman underscored that tuition students do not take the place of an in-district student who needs services, and tuition students pay based on the full cost of their placement. Ms. Collins said the program defrays costs for MERSD. Ms. Collins does not accept tuition students into high demand programs like IRWL. For school-choice students, reimbursement from their sending district follows a formula that allows less flexibility than the tuition program.

Ms. Whitman asked about the potential loss of federal funding. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the federal IDEA award is $450K for FY26. If that money is not delivered this year, the district would have to pull from reserves. Loss of IDEA is a potential large challenge for the FY27 budget.

Mr. Foster broached the topic of performance for students who have transitioned out of SPED, following up on his previous inquiry. Ms. Collins said that she is also interested in the topic of former SPED performance on the MCAS and participation in honors and AP courses. Ms. Collins stated that this may be a good area to examine for some exited students to see if they are closing the gap and able to take more challenging courses. Ms. Collins said there are many possible metrics for success, including exiting SPED, grades, enrollment in CP or AP classes, and admittance to college. Ms. Banks added that another metric for success is the ability of a SPED student to advocate for themselves in college. Ms. Collins confirmed that students in the special education program function as part of the team to identify their goals and communicate with their teachers.

c. FY27 Budget Calendar – Postponed to next meeting.

8) **School Committee Comment** – School Committee members discussed attendance at the MASC conference. Attendees will not participate as an official, voting representative. The superintendent said that their feedback from attendance will inform future participation. Ms. Banks wondered if the conference could be an avenue for advocacy. Superintendent Beaudoin said the SC can decide in the spring about attending future MASC conferences as a group.

C. Adjourn

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

The motion passed 6-0.

Meeting Adjourned at 9:27 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- **November 4, 2025**
- **November 18, 2025**
- **December 2, 2025**
- **December 10, 2025** **Wednesday**
- **December 16, 2025** **Tentative**
- **January 13, 2026**
- **January 27, 2025**
- **February 3, 2026**
- **February 10, 2026**