Merrimack School Board Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Merrimack Town Hall – Matthew Thornton Room
February 19, 2024

Present: Chair Ken Martin, Vice-Chair Laurie Rothhaus, Board Member Lori Peters, Board Member Jenna Hardy, and Board Member Naomi Halter. Also present were Chief Education Officer Everett Olsen, Assistant Superintendent for Business Matt Shevenell, and Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Amanda Doyle.

1. CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair Martin called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Timothy, a Junior at Merrimack High School, addressed the Board and said he was a friend of Ms. Agel, a Gifted & Talented Teacher, and had been a student of hers. He said she was in charge of Gateways at Merrimack High School and was also in charge of Advanced Placement (AP) Coordination, which impacted 143 MHS students. He said he was quite angry that the district had decided to remove such a core person from their education.

Trey, a high school student, stated that the decision to remove the Gateway Program at the high school left him in shock. He said the decision was cut with no student input, and it was fundamental to his education, as well as many others.

Erin, a Junior at the high school, stated that she felt the role Ms. Agel held was indispensable. She said the decision was abrupt, and she said she was appalled at the decision.

Matthew, a Sophomore at Merrimack High School, addressed the Board and said he felt that the district needed to ensure programs that enriched student life and student outcomes.

Ms. Chandra Hackenberg, 247 Baboosic Lake Road, stated that she was present in support of the Merrimack teachers and students for the French program at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School as well as the Gifted & Talented program.

Teana, a student addressed the Board and said she enjoyed French class very much and said she did not think it was fair to “get rid of French.”

Samantha, a student, addressed the Board and said she did not want to see the French teacher’s position eliminated to save money.

Mr. Tim Beaulieu, 3 Wild Cat Falls Road, addressed the Board and said he was not in favor of eliminating the French program.

Wolfram von Schoen, 4 Conservation Drive, addressed the Board and stated that he felt it was very important for children to learn new languages earlier in life. He also said he thought it was important to be mindful that there were people who could not afford to live in Merrimack any longer, in part because of the school district’s budget.

Ms. Heather Robitaille, 45 Springfield Circle, addressed the Board and said that the School Board had requested the administration to cut the proposed budget by $1 million, and the administration developed a list of proposed cuts. She said she felt it was very important for the administration and the Budget Committee to work together to maintain a constructive, respectful dialogue in order to conduct the budget process in a transparent and timely fashion.

3. RECOGNITIONS

There were none.

4. INFORMATIONAL UPDATES

a. Superintendent Update

Chief Educational Officer Olsen congratulated Ms. Laura King, Math Teacher, and Ms. Courtney LeFrancois, Math Teacher, both at the Merrimack Middle School, for being nominated to be candidates for the New Hampshire Teacher of Year.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the previous Saturday, 56 Merrimack High School musicians participated in the New Hampshire Music Educators Association Solo & Ensemble Festival.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen said Liz Dumais at the Merrimack High School had informed him that "Missy's Closet" was providing free prom dresses for teen events.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the Gifted & Talented students in the 7th & 8th grades visited the New Hampshire Aviation Museum.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen noted that the students at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School participated in the "Penny Wars," and the school raised over $2,500 for the school. He also mentioned that Merrimack TV had created a video of the Merrimack Police Department's Teen Academy. Additionally, he congratulated Alexis, who broke the Division I record for the 55-meter race in track at the State Meet.

b. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Update

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle stated that the previous week, they had discussed the assessment window, which was opened regarding access testing for students learning English as a second language. She said the New Hampshire Department of Education chose the Merrimack School District to be part of the five-year State Assessment Monitoring Cycle. She said she would keep the Board updated.

c. Assistant Superintendent of Business Update

There was no update to share.

d. School Board Update

Chair Martin said the Deliberative Session would be held on March 4th at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School APR at 7:00 p.m.

6. OLD BUSINESS

a. 2024 – 2025 Operating Budget Update

Chief Educational Officer Olsen explained that since the School Board last met, there had been another meeting with the Budget Committee. He said after much discussion, the Budget Committee voted the same way as the School Board. He said his job was to provide the best possible education to the students with the funds they had available. He added that the scores in the state assessments were not strong, and he did not feel that the district had met the progress they needed to make in recent years with budgets being near or at default budget level.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen stated that what was making the matter worse was the fact that there had been a decline in the commercial component of the tax base by approximately $74 million in value, and that figure needed to be made up, which meant the onus fell on the residential taxpayers. He added that the district could absolutely not have a curriculum that was over ten years old.

Chair Martin commented that the School Board members needed to make choices with their heads and not their hearts. He added that taking programs away was never easy.

Board Member Hardy clarified that the Board did not make the proposed cuts due to the proposed SAU Central Office project but because the proposed operating budget was far larger than any previous operating budget had been. She said while she felt that the district had made significant progress, they had to pay attention to how much money there was to spend.

Board Members Hardy and Peters suggested that the district keep the position but open it up to multiple languages.

The School Board collectively expressed their shared frustration and also their appreciation for the members of the public who had added their comments.

b. Proposed School District Sau Central Office Building

Chief Educational Officer Olsen explained that it was very important to have the space to hold in-person training for the staff as well as departmental meetings. He said they were not looking to build the “Taj Mahal” but wanted to have a functional building. He said if they did not do anything presently, it would just become more costly in the future.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen said information regarding the proposed new SAU was available on the website, and he was available to answer any questions people had.

7. NEW BUSINESS

a. Declaring Local Critical Shortage in Physics Certification

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle said there were multiple pathways to obtain licensure to teach in the State of New Hampshire. She explained that every year, the State Board of Education listed the Critical Shortage List, but additionally, RSA-189-39(A) stated if a district were having a difficult time filling certain positions, they could declare a Local Critical Shortage.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle said they had accepted a resignation from a Physics Teacher at the Merrimack High School, and despite posting the position, there were no viable candidates. She noted Ms. Liz Dumais, a long-time teacher in the Merrimack School District, was willing to fulfill the site-based learning plan with the School Board's support. She said while she met the minimal requirements, she does not hold a physics certification.

Board Member Peters noted that she was in full support.

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to accept the Declaration of a Local Critical Shortage in Physics Certification. Board Member Hardy seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

b. Review of the Draft 2024 – 2025 School Calendar

- Chief Educational Officer Olsen reviewed the proposed calendar, highlighting the following:

  - Alignment with the Career Technical Education Centers (CTE)
  - Guide to Religious and Cultural Observances
  - Reviewed 2024 – 2025 School Calendar Survey Results (Parent/Guardian)

Board Member Hardy asked if consideration had been given to having professional development days on Election Days. Chief Educational Officer Olsen replied it was an option that they could look at, but not for major elections.

Chair Martin expressed an interest in having more full professional development days rather than half days. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle replied all of the professional development days were negotiated in the contract.

MOTION: Vice-Chair Rothhaus made a motion to accept the 2024 – 2025 School District Calendar. Chair Martin seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

8. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. January 29, 2024 (Public Minutes)

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to approve the minutes from January 29, 2024, as presented. Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

b. February 5, 2024 (Bond Hearing Minutes)

MOTION: Chair Martin made a motion to approve the minutes from February 4, 2024, as presented. Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

c. February 5, 2024 (Public Minutes)

MOTION: Chair Martin made a motion to approve the minutes from February 5, 2024, as presented. Board Member Peters seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

d. February 13, 2024 (Public & Non-Public Minutes)

The minutes from the February 13, 2024, public and non-public meetings were tabled until the next School Board meeting.

9. CONSENT AGENDA

The Consent Agenda was tabled until the next School Board meeting.

a. Committee Reports

Board Member Halter stated that she had attended two Budget Committee meetings. She thanked the Budget Committee for all of the work they did in trying to come up with other cuts to meet the proposed budget amount. She said they explored other options, and they ultimately agreed with the original opinion of the School Board.

Board Member Hardy shared that she had attended the Merrimack School District Stakeholder Team meeting about grant management. She said the team discussed Academic Intervention and Safe and Healthy Schools by addressing bullying issues revealed by data.

b. Correspondence

Board Member Peters noted she and the Board had received correspondence regarding the following:

- Budget
- SAU Building (proposed new facility)
- Warrant Articles
- French Program
- Gifted & Talented
- Boys Basketball

c. Comments

The School Board collectively thanked the public for the great turnout at the meeting.

10. PUBLIC COMMENTS ON AGENDA ITEMS

Matthew, a student, addressed the Board and said he felt it was important for the School Board, the community, and the students to work together in the future.

Tim, a student, also said he looked forward to working with the School Board in the future.

Trey, a student, stated that he learned a lot at the meeting and was happy to have attended.

Erin, a student, said she felt like the School Board was not listening to the students 100%.

Wolfram von Schoen, 4 Conservation Drive, addressed the Board and noted that the Warrant Article would eventually add $7 million to the taxpayers. He said he felt that the Board should add an agenda item addressing "hardship" as well as community complaints.

Ms. Pam Smith, 95 Bean Road, addressed the Board and asked where she could find information regarding surpluses that had been given back to the taxpayers. She also asked about the tax rate and how much it would increase if the operating budget and Warrant Articles were passed.

Board Member Peters said the information regarding the dollar amount that each Warrant Article would impact per $100,000 of the taxpayer's home assessment.

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell explained that the surplus if there was one, was given back to the taxpayers as revenue and not in the form of a check.

Ms. Shannon Rand, 1 Blair Road, addressed the Board and said she felt it was imperative for all students to have a place to grow in the school system. She expressed concern about the tax rates going up. She also commented that she felt paraprofessionals were vital to the district and thought it might be wise to survey them.

Ms. Heather Robitaille, 45 Springfield Circle, addressed the Board and said she realized what a difficult time of year it was. She said, as a parent, she was in favor of the Reading Interventionist that was supposed to be added at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School in the next year.

11. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: At approximately 8:25 p.m., Board Member Peters made a motion to adjourn. Board Member Halter seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.