Merrimack School Board Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Merrimack Town Hall – Matthew Thornton Room
February 5, 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 Amy Doyle.

1. CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair Martin called the meeting to order at approximately 6:40 p.m.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were none.

3. INFORMATIONAL UPDATE

a. Superintendent Update

Chief Educational Officer Olsen said a Frequently Asked Questions document with factual answers had been prepared regarding the proposed new central office.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen also stated that the district was in the process of preparing the school calendar for the 2024 – 2025 school year.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen shared some district highlights that included:

- Merrimack High School's Granite State Challenge team was competing in their 42nd season.

- Two students were recognized by the New Hampshire Scholastic Art Award, Cameron, and Vanessa, who were among two of the best students recognized in the entire state.

- Sophomores Danielle and Lilly from Merrimack High School would attend the New Hampshire Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership Conference.

- More than one dozen Merrimack High School students who had an interest in law, policing, forensics, and community service had begun their first Merrimack Police Department Teen Academy, which would run for eight weeks. He said he hoped the program would be held again in the future and they would earn an elective credit.

- Mia, a member of the gymnastics team, was featured in a "Hometown Heroes" segment on WMUR and was hoping to qualify for the U.S. National Gymnastics Team.

- Six students will perform in the New Hampshire Music Educators Association Jazz All-State Festival, which will be held at Pinkerton Academy beginning at 3:00 p.m. on the following Saturday.

- Ten students from the Merrimack Middle School had been selected to perform in the chorus and band of the New Hampshire Music Educators Association South Central District Middle School Music Festival in May.

- National School Counselor Week – 2/5/24 through 2/9/24. He thanked all of the school counselors in the district.

b. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Update

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle stated that the New Hampshire statewide assessment window for access testing had opened as of February 1, 2024. She said the alternative access assessment was required for all English language learners and assessed reading, writing, listening, and speaking. She added that the results would be sent directly to students' parents/guardians.

c. Assistant Superintendent of Business

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell stated that he had reports regarding the air quality of the central office and the special services office. He said there were situations where mold was in the basement, especially in the special services offices, but it was remediated at the time, but he noted it was important to keep an eye on it. He recommended that those documents be published and made available to the public. He added that they were still waiting for the Fire Marshall's report.

d. School Board Update

Chair Martin stated that a mediation meeting regarding the ongoing MESSA (Merrimack Educational Support Staff Association) negotiations would be held the following week.

4. OLD BUSINESS

a. 2024 – 2025 Budget Update

Chair Martin stated that the School Board had charged the district with decreasing the proposed budget by $1 million at the last meeting.

Chief Educational Officer Olsen said the proposed reductions were very difficult to make but were as follows:

- Equipment/Repairs/Non-Instructional Equipment – Reduction
- Wit & Wisdom – Use Reserve Funds
- Mentors – Reduction
- Curriculum Instruction Assessment – Reduction

- Professional Development – Reduction
- World Language – Reduce by 1 Full-Time Position
- Merrimack High School Teacher (TBD) – Reduce by 1 Full-Time Position
- Reading Interventionist – Reduce by 1 Full-Time Position
- Gifted & Talented – Reduce by 1 Full-Time Position
- ISS in School Suspension - Reduce by 1 Full-Time Position
- Interim SPED – Move to Grant – Reduce by 1 Full-Time Position

Total Cuts: $1,004,981.29

Board Member Peters agreed to use the reserve funds for Wit & Wisdom and appreciated the administration's work in decreasing the budget.

Board Member Hardy also expressed appreciation for the administration's thoughtful work on the amended budget. She emphasized that French was not being cut at the middle school.

Vice-Chair Rothhaus said the School Board and administration had a goals meeting in August, during which they discussed some of the district's top priorities: the central office building and the MESSA contract. She added she did not support the police details at the upper elementary school and thought they could wait on the purchase of the electronic hall pass for the middle school until they had done further research.

Chair Martin commented that enrollment had decreased over the past few years, and the district had hired several needed positions. He also commented that he felt the police detail line item was quite high and questioned whether or not it was the right time to invest in the electronic hall pass.

Board Member Halter commented that she was not in favor of the electronic hall pass, and as a Board, they could vote not to include it in the budget.

Board Member Halter requested further information as to why the Gifted & Talented teacher at the high school was being removed. Board Member Hardy explained that differentiated instruction had already been built into the schedule. She added students could take AP classes and dual enrollment, and the foundational college prep level was always available.

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to decrease line item 100-2730-18-8591-18 (Police Detail) at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School from $4,503.00 to $1,000.00. Chair Martin seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

Vice-Chair Rothhaus commented that she would like to discuss the necessity of police details with the administration.

MOTION: Chair Martin made a motion to eliminate $2,165.00 from line item 100-1128-28-8610-21 (Electronic Hall Pass). Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Board Member Hardy said she felt the Electronic Hall Pass was a good idea and that it would not impact the bottom line enough to eliminate it.

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell commented that the line item was included as a free trial, and they did not have any recommendations yet. He said the money could be left in the budget in the event the program was successful, or they could wait an additional year and have the high school study it as well and bundle it.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

MOTION: Board Member Peters made a motion to accept the proposed budget, as amended. Board Member Halter seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell said the proposed budget had gone from 3.92% to 2.8% over the previous year's budget.

5. NEW BUSINESS

a. Other

Board Member Halter asked the following questions on behalf of the Budget Committee.

1. It appears that Unified Arts is not being offered uniformly at the elementary level but rather in a pattern that does not necessarily provide all grades with equivalent access. What are the School Board's priorities and perspectives regarding the provision of consistent Unified Arts access at the elementary schools? Does the current staffing request in the draft budget reflect those priorities, and if not, in what way?

School Board's Reply: The School Board's priority regarding Unified Arts access is that it should be equitable across the schools and in accordance with any state standards and requirements. The administration is responsible for planning and implementing Unified Arts schedules.

2. What is the Board's perspective, policy, and practice regarding support for gifted or talented students? Do current funding requests accurately reflect those priorities, and if not, in what way?

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle replied that they had reoriented the eligibility process for the students who qualified as gifted or talented. She said each student received 90 minutes per week with a gifted and talented teacher in grades 3 through 6, and whatever time was left over was used to provide enrichment groups in the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th grades.

6. POLICIES

a. Annual Review of Investment (DFA) Policy

MOTION: Board Member Halter made a motion to waive the first reading of the annual review of policy (DFA) Investment. Vice-Chair Rothhaus seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell explained that the purpose of the policy was to ensure that the district did not invest in anything considered to be risky.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.

7. OTHER

a. Committee Reports

Board Member Halter stated that she had attended the last Budget Committee meeting, where they discussed department reviews and would have a presentation regarding the budget at their next meeting.

Vice-Chair Rothhaus said she, too, had attended the Budget Committee meeting, where they discussed the average cost per pupil.

b. Correspondence

Board Member Hardy commented that she received correspondence from a constituent regarding the proposed reduction of a French teacher.

Chair Martin commented that he also received correspondence regarding the Foreign Language program.

Board Member Peters stated that she received a lot of correspondence regarding the proposed new central office building and budget questions.

c. Comments

Vice-Chair Rothhaus said she wanted the public to know how much the School Board appreciated and valued the administration.

Chair Martin also thanked the staff for all of their hard work in collaborating with the School Board regarding the budget.

8. PUBLIC COMMENTS ON AGENDA ITEMS

Mr. Tim Beaulieu, 3 Wildcat Falls, addressed the Board and stated that he was the founder of New Hampshire Poutinefest. He said he had two children in the Merrimack School District and appreciated the introduction of French that was offered at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary

School. He said he felt it was extremely important to include World Language for a well-rounded education.

Ms. Jeannie Wagner, 4 Cowan Road a resident, addressed the Board and stated that she had noticed that the school she worked in, the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School, had windows that were rusting, and she said she did not feel it was a safe environment for students. She added that the upstairs temperatures rose to the high 80s to low 90s regularly on warm days. She asked why a Superintendent's office for adults trumped the safety, health, and learning environment of students.

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell commented that approximately $200,000 was in the maintenance budget to address the rusted windows at JMUES.

Mr. Chuck Mower, 4 Depot Street, addressed the Board and stated that he felt the school district needed to move forward, and that included a number of initiatives that were both contemporary and visionary. He said that he felt staying static was not a good option.

Ms. Evelyn Abelleria, 11 Bowers Landing, addressed the Board and said her main language was Spanish, and her children were bilingual in English and Spanish. She said they were also taking French, and she was very in favor of keeping the French program at the high school.

Ms. Ophelia Alfakey, 442 South Baboosic Lake Road, addressed the Board and said she was not in favor of eliminating the high school's French program.

9. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: At approximately 8:12 p.m., Board Member Hardy made a motion to adjourn. Board Member Peters seconded the motion.

MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.