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To the Honorable, Members of the School Committee:

I am writing to communicate my position against the introduction and discussion of items at School Committee meetings that have not been published on the agenda. Specifically, I am speaking to the submission of late motions and requests to open public comment on those same items, or various other off-agenda issues through suspension of the rules. I believe the practice is not in keeping with either 940 CMR 29.00 Open Meeting Law or our own adopted School Committee Rules, and that it undermines transparency and accessibility in our public process.

Late Submissions

Allowing late submissions serves the distinct purpose of ensuring public bodies can respond to issues: 1) requiring urgent attention due to their timeliness; and 2) arising from emergency situations. The body should regard the necessity of taking up late submissions that do not fall into either of those categories with skepticism, lest the use of late submissions fall into regular practice. This is underscored by School Committee Rules Chapter II, Section 4.3(c), which states that "late orders [should] be reserved for motions that are ceremonial rather than substantive." The School Committee should also strive to mirror the practices of other public bodies in the city by refraining to take up substantive items when they do not appear on the agenda and are not urgent in nature. For example, the rules of the City Council state that "Late policy orders shall only be considered in an emergency or if action is required before the next regular meeting."

I request that School Committee members keep this in mind before introducing late submissions.

Public Comment on Late Submissions and Items not on the Agenda

School Committee rules require the timely submission of motions by noon the Wednesday before a meeting, and that the agenda be shared publicly 48 hours prior to the meeting. The Open Meeting Law 29.03(1) also provides guidance: "Except in an emergency, public bodies shall file meeting notices sufficiently in advance of a public meeting to permit posting of the notice at least 48 hours in advance of the public meeting." These rules exist to maintain transparency and equitable access to the business of the School Committee, and to ensure that the public shall be reasonably advised of the issues to be discussed at the meeting.

The public is already deprived an opportunity to participate when unpublished late motions come before this body, and that in turn is a detriment to our deliberation. When certain proponents are given notice of a late motion in advance, however, and the general public is not, our public process is corrupted.

Democratic governance is premised on the idea that all participants have equal opportunity to comment and have access to the same information. Circumventing the agenda process for non-emergency items can firmly slant conversations in favor of the few folks who are in the know. It is deeply unfair, opaque, and predisposed to bias. Before suspending the rules to allow public comment on late submissions, we should consider whether the general public has had an opportunity to review materials in advance.

Requests to Open Public Comment to Items not on the Agenda

Similarly, we should only open public comment to items not appearing on the agenda during extenuating circumstances. Allowing off-agenda discussion on substantive issues not only raises transparency concerns, it prevents robust public debate. We should adhere to the public process even when, and perhaps especially when, that opinion is shared by members of the School Committee. Doing otherwise invites an imbalanced perspective void of dissenting and/or inclusive viewpoints.

In closing, I ask that we collectively commit to remain focused and act judiciously as we strive to achieve the goals outlined in our District Plan. I look forward to a productive school year serving all our students and their families.

Sincerely,