

S.C. MINUTES

Hoosac Valley Regional School Committee
School Committee Meeting
Monday, February 9, 2026 - 6:30 p.m.
Hoosac Valley High School, Resource Center, 125 Savoy Road, Cheshire, MA

PRESENT: Erin Milne, John Duval, Robert Tetlow, Fred Lora, Tracey Tierney, Adam Emerson

ABSENT: Jen Solak

OTHERS: Aaron Dean

104422 **Call to Order**
Chairman called the meeting to order at 6:30 pm

104423 **Public Comment or Questions - None**

***Erin proposed to move 104427 Spotlight on Applied Learning to be next and then resume taking the rest of the agenda in order. ***

104424 **Approval of Minutes - January 12, 2026**

The January 12, 2026 meeting minutes were reviewed and approved pending minor corrections, including updates to titles, names, and subcommittee membership.

MOTION: On Motion of Tracey Tierney and second by John Duval

VOTED: To approve January 12, 2026 meeting minutes with corrections. The vote was unanimous.

104425 **Report of Business Manager - None**

104426 **Report of Sub Committees**
 A. NB Regionalization Steering Committee

The Steering Committee met for the first time with full membership to review the regional planning process and discuss next steps. The committee is exploring opportunities for increased collaboration and possible regionalization, particularly at the secondary level, to improve programs and long-term sustainability.

The committee reviewed submitted proposals and evaluation criteria. One proposal was excluded for not meeting requirements, leaving two proposals under consideration. Proposals will be scored primarily on non-budget criteria, with cost as a secondary factor. Available funding is currently below the estimated project cost, and adjustments to the project scope or additional funding may be considered.

The next meeting is scheduled for February 25 at McCann Tech, where proposals will be further reviewed and next steps determined, including selecting a consultant or potentially rebidding the project.

Committee representatives include members from the School Committee and participating towns. A chair (Aaron Dean) and recording secretary (Erin Milne) were selected.

104427 **Communications**
 A. Spotlight on Applied Learning - 3rd Grade Science

Elementary staff and third-grade students presented a science project demonstrating applied learning through the PhD Science curriculum. Students studied extreme weather, including the Galveston, Texas hurricane, and used the engineering design process to answer the question: How can we protect houses from hurricane water and waves?

Students brainstormed solutions, planned designs, selected limited materials, built model seawalls, and tested their structures. After initial testing with families, students made improvements and retested their models during the meeting. Both designs showed success in reducing water reaching the model houses.

The project integrated science with classroom learning and emphasized hands-on problem solving. Staff explained that the engineering project was incorporated throughout the unit to increase engagement and understanding.

Students presented their work, answered questions, and described the project as enjoyable and engaging. Parents participated in earlier testing sessions, strengthening home–school connections.

Students were recognized for their work and received certificates for their presentations.

B. FY 2027 School Choice Public Hearing

Administration reviewed current enrollment data and budget considerations and presented a recommendation regarding school choice for the 2026–2027 school year. A vote on school choice is required annually, and this year's recommendation reflects capacity constraints and financial pressures facing the district.

Enrollment across all grade spans is near capacity. Elementary class sizes are between 19 and 20 students. At the middle school, one section may reach 24 students, limiting flexibility, while other sections are balanced but full. The high school operates 17 sections with an average class size of 19, with some classes exceeding 20 students. Administration noted that adding additional choice students could require increased staffing if class sizes grow beyond manageable levels.

The district is entering a challenging budget cycle, with rising special education costs representing a significant portion of expenditures. Approximately 30% of the district's students are identified as high-needs. Of the 42 current choice-in students, 18 receive special education services, representing a higher percentage than the district average. While the district receives approximately \$5,000 per choice student, administration expressed concern that the revenue would not offset the potential costs of additional staffing, specialized services, or expanded programming.

It was clarified that closing school choice would apply only to new applicants. Current choice students would remain enrolled, and associated tuition revenue would continue. Choice-out numbers have declined in recent years, and administration emphasized the importance of maintaining available seats for resident families moving into the community.

After discussion, administration recommended setting school choice openings at zero for the 2026–2027 school year. A motion was made and seconded to close school choice to new applicants. The motion moved forward for a vote.

MOTION:

On Motion of John Duval and second by Adam Emerson

VOTED: To approve to close school choice to new applicants. The vote was unanimous.

104428

Report of Superintendent

A. FY 2027 Preliminary Budget Numbers and Challenges

The district presented the FY2027 preliminary budget, reviewing revenue updates and major cost drivers. Chapter 70 reflects a \$75 per pupil increase (approximately \$375,000). Transportation reimbursement declined due to prior bus reductions, and charter tuition and school choice costs continue to increase, with 72 students attending charter schools and 130 students choosing out. These figures remain subject to adjustment.

The preliminary budget totals \$23,677,381, a 7.4% (\$1.6 million) increase over the prior year. The district noted this level of increase is not sustainable for the towns and reductions will be required to reach a more realistic target, with a 4–5% municipal increase discussed as a potential goal.

Special education is the primary driver, projected to rise 22% due to mandated staffing additions, contracted and virtual speech services, increased out-of-district tuition (approximately \$305,000), and expanded substantially separate programming. Preschool costs will increase by approximately \$176,000 due to changes in grant reimbursement. Health insurance and retiree costs also rose significantly. The district emphasized that many of these increases are mandated or outside local control.

Committee members expressed concern about long-term sustainability and maintaining program quality as reductions are considered. The district will continue working collaboratively with the Committee and town officials to develop a responsible and sustainable budget that preserves core programming while addressing fiscal constraints.

B. Food Service Policy Updates

Meal modification meal charging policy

Need posting  Meal Modification.pdf

The district presented three food service policy updates required for compliance following a recent audit and changes in state and federal regulations: Civil Rights Complaint Procedures, a Meal Modification Policy, and a Meal Charging Policy. Approval and website posting are necessary to maintain eligibility for federal and state reimbursements.

The Meal Modification Policy formalizes procedures for medically required dietary accommodations. Committee members asked whether religious or other dietary needs should be more explicitly referenced. The district recommended adopting the policy as presented to meet reimbursement timelines and referring any revisions to the Policy Subcommittee for further review.

The Meal Charging Policy reflects the statewide free meal program, clarifying that each student receives one free meal daily and outlining charges beyond that, including account balance limits. Federal regulations require students to take all required meal components for reimbursement unless a documented modification is on file. The district confirmed that documentation processes are maintained by nursing and food service staff.

The Committee discussed implementation details and reimbursement requirements and prepared to take action to adopt the policies to ensure continued compliance and funding.

MOTION:

On Motion of John Duval and second by Fred Lora

VOTED: To adopt food service policies. The vote was unanimous.

104429

Chairman's Report

A. MASC Legislative Delegation Forum

Erin and Fred attended a MASC legislative forum with Senator Paul Mark and Berkshire County representatives, focusing on funding challenges. Legislators expressed little optimism about changing the Chapter 70 funding formula or securing specific earmarks, noting that significant changes haven't occurred since the 1990s and would require major political will. There are bills to study and possibly adjust funding, but any real change is long-term.

Local advocacy was emphasized as essential to communicate the district's needs, with ideas like framing education funding as vital to the regional economy. The legislators supported the Northern Berkshire regionalization study but stressed the communities must lead it.

Rising costs from out-of-district placements and health insurance were widely recognized, with no clear solutions from the panel, highlighting reliance on rural aid and the circuit breaker program.

Overall, the forum underscored the need for ongoing advocacy and strategic planning due to limited legislative flexibility and continued financial pressures.

104430

Unfinished Business - None

104431

New Business - None

104432

Action Items - None

104433

For the Good of the Order

The committee congratulated the third graders on their outstanding presentation, describing it as one of the best in recent memory, and thanked IBerkshires for being there to cover the event. Appreciation was also expressed for the athletic director, highlighting his versatile and positive role across two districts. His hands-on leadership, motivation, and dedication to supporting coaches and students were commended as a valuable contribution to the district. The meeting concluded with a brief informal discussion about regional connections and experiences.

MOTION:

On Motion of Adam Emerson and second by John Duval

VOTED: To adjourn the meeting at 7:59 p.m. The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully Submitted,

Aaron Dean, Superintendent

Mary Lisa Irizarry, Recording Secretary