

Cohasset Public Schools
143 Pond Street
Cohasset, MA 02025
Empower Students to Improve Communities

**MINUTES OF THE
REGULAR MEETING OF THE COHASSET SCHOOL COMMITTEE
February 04, 2026
6:00PM**

Cohasset Middle and High School
Learning Commons
143 Pond Street
Cohasset, MA 02025

Attendance

Committee Members in Attendance Jennifer Lesky, Chair
Craig MacLellan, Vice Chair
Lance C. Dial, Secretary
Corey Evans, School Committee Member
Jacob Squatrito, Interim School Committee Member

Others in Attendance Dr. Sarah Shannon, Superintendent
Dr. Leslie Scollins, Assistant Superintendent
Susan Owen, Director of Finance & Operations

Call to Order

Chair Jennifer Lesky called the regular meeting of the Cohasset School Committee to order at 6:02 PM.

**Roll Call: Mr. Dial-Present; Mr. Evans-Present; Mr. MacLellan-Present; Mr. Squatrito-Present;
Ms. Lesky-Present.**

Opening Remarks

Chair Lesky called the meeting to order and welcomed members and attendees, noting the full Committee presence and the breadth of important topics on the agenda. She acknowledged the continued public interest in both student wellness initiatives and the FY27 budget process, emphasizing that the evening's discussion would reflect the district's dual commitment to student well-being and fiscal responsibility.

She encouraged community members to remain engaged, ask questions, and utilize available communication channels as the district works through significant financial and strategic decisions.

Public Comment

Stephanie Saunders, 10 Strafford Terrace

Ms. Saunders commended the district for its work in student wellness and specifically referenced growing parent conversations around school refusal and school avoidance. She expressed appreciation for staff expertise in supporting students with anxiety-related attendance challenges and suggested broader parent-facing education opportunities to clarify misconceptions about these issues.

The Committee thanked Ms. Saunders for her advocacy and acknowledged the importance of equipping families with consistent language and tools to support student mental health.

Ms. Victoria Lattanzi, 125 Doane Street

Ms. Lattanzi referenced DESE report card data, noting Cohasset's strong academic outcomes relative to its per-pupil spending and staffing ratios. She urged the Committee to consider urgent action to preserve district strengths, including exploring override strategies sooner rather than later to avoid substantial staffing losses.

Committee members responded by outlining procedural limitations regarding override placement and reiterated the importance of building a sustainable, long-term fiscal plan before seeking voter approval.

Invited Guests

Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) Data Presentation

Mr. Brian Scott, Mr. John Scopelleti, and Mr. Ron Ford presented updated YRBS data, highlighting sustained declines in vaping, alcohol use, and other substance-related behaviors. Presenters emphasized longitudinal trends, comparing perception data versus actual usage rates, and credited district-wide cultural shifts, wellness education, and Safe Harbor programming for contributing to measurable improvements.

Committee members reflected on the importance of culture change rather than isolated programming, noting that sustained messaging around health, safety, and belonging appears to have influenced student decision-making. Discussion also focused on gender disparities in self-harm indicators and the impending expiration of Safe Harbor grant funding, underscoring the program's impact and the need to consider long-term funding stability.

Superintendent Report

Superintendent Update

Dr. Shannon thanked municipal partners — including DPW, Police, Fire, Emergency Management, facilities staff, and custodians — for their coordinated response following one of the largest snowstorms in Massachusetts history. She noted that reopening safely required significant behind-the-scenes work and expressed appreciation for the collaboration.

Dr. Shannon also reviewed the Assistant Superintendent search timeline and encouraged parent participation in the search committee. She reminded families of the February vacation schedule and reinforced her availability for community conversations regarding district initiatives and budget concerns.

2026–2027 CPS School Calendar – Second Read

Dr. Shannon revisited calendar considerations, including survey results regarding Good Friday scheduling and contractual language concerning the Friday before Labor Day. Survey data from the prior year showed divided preferences, with a plurality favoring a half day on Good Friday.

Committee discussion included snow day implications, early release scheduling, and the operational flexibility associated with determining the final day of school. A vote on the calendar is anticipated following a third reading.

Teaching and Learning

Academic Initiatives

Dr. Scollins reported on the recent half-day Professional Development session, emphasizing the district's continued focus on collaboration, belonging, and instructional alignment with the strategic plan. At Osgood and Deer Hill, educators participated in structured working groups centered on belonging, homework practices, and MTSS implementation. These groups are designed to create greater consistency across grade levels and to ensure that instructional practices reflect both academic rigor and student well-being.

At the middle and high school, departments used extended collaboration time to refine curriculum pacing, assessment alignment, and interdisciplinary coordination. This work supports the district's broader commitment to project-based learning and deeper learning experiences, ensuring that instruction remains engaging, relevant, and developmentally appropriate.

Dr. Scollins also previewed the second annual Collaboration Day, during which students across grade levels will engage in shared artistic projects facilitated in part by local artisans. The initiative reinforces creativity, cross-grade connection, and community engagement, while giving students a structured opportunity to work collaboratively in ways that differ from traditional academic settings. Artwork from last year remains displayed in district buildings, serving as a visible reminder of the program's impact and the district's emphasis on student voice and expression.

Finally, Dr. Scollins noted that upcoming curriculum work will continue to focus on the Visual and Performing Arts action plan, with faculty reviewing progress toward strategic goals and identifying next steps for strengthening instructional coherence across grade levels.

Student Services Update

Mr. Stapleton presented January student services data and discussed the importance of growth metrics in evaluating special education effectiveness. He emphasized that student growth percentiles provide a more meaningful lens than raw proficiency rates, particularly for students with disabilities.

He reviewed audit findings from the English Learner Education Program Integrated Monitoring Review and outlined corrective actions underway. Committee members expressed strong confidence in the department's transparent and improvement-oriented response to compliance findings, praising the professional, data-driven approach and collaborative leadership within Student Services.

Budget, Resources and Governance

Updated FY27 Budget Presentation

Dr. Shannon presented an updated overview of the FY27 budget, explaining that each budget presentation builds upon prior discussions, with new information highlighted while earlier materials remain available for reference. She noted that the presentation is publicly accessible through Facebook Live Stream, Cohasset Live Stream, and the district website. Dr. Shannon reiterated her commitment to transparency and encouraged community members to contact her directly with questions or to schedule meetings to review the budget in greater detail.

Since the January 21, 2026 meeting, the Governor's proposed budget was released, reflecting a 2.03% increase in funding for municipalities statewide. Dr. Shannon explained that this percentage applies to the entire municipality and must be shared across all town departments. Cohasset is projected to receive approximately \$104,700 in additional Chapter 70 funding for FY27. However, she emphasized that Cohasset receives no funding under the

Student Opportunity Act. While the Act has been fully funded for eligible districts, it does not provide financial benefit to Cohasset, limiting the district's access to additional state revenue streams available elsewhere.

In collaboration with the Interim Town Manager, the district now anticipates a 3.5% to 4% increase over FY26 funding levels, with a 4% increase equating to approximately \$993,233 in additional revenue. Dr. Shannon acknowledged that the Town has made efforts to increase support for the schools beyond recent historical patterns, though overall municipal revenue growth remains constrained. Even at a 4% increase, the district faces a projected level service deficit of approximately \$1,957,286.

Dr. Shannon reviewed that level service reflects the cost required to maintain current staffing levels and programming without enhancements. The projected gap is driven primarily by contractual salary obligations, rising special education tuition and transportation costs, general transportation increases, and other inflationary operational pressures. She reiterated that approximately 80% of district expenditures are personnel-related, meaning that reductions of this magnitude cannot be absorbed solely through non-staff line items.

Retirement projections remain a variable in the budget. Dr. Shannon explained that veteran educators retiring and being replaced at lower salary steps may generate savings, though final numbers will not be available until after February vacation. She cautioned that many moving pieces remain unresolved, and final staffing decisions cannot yet be specified with precision.

Under the draft "FY27 Budget Funding Gap Crisis" framework, Dr. Shannon outlined preliminary strategies to mitigate the deficit. Approximately \$200,000 may be reduced through deferral of certain strategic plan initiatives and operational adjustments. She noted that educators are exceptionally skilled at adapting and "making do," but cautioned that reductions, even when not immediately visible to the public, still affect instructional capacity and long-term progress.

At Mr. Evans' request, Dr. Shannon expanded on the importance of Professional Development. She explained that the district's new Strategic Plan includes ambitious goals related to project-based learning, grading reform, instructional alignment, and student well-being. Professional Development Days provide essential time for collaboration, training, and instructional improvement. Reductions in funding may slow or pause implementation of strategic initiatives, affecting the district's ability to move forward at its intended pace. She also noted that grant funding opportunities are limited for districts like Cohasset, in part because many competitive grants prioritize districts receiving Student Opportunity Act funding.

Dr. Shannon then provided an overview of Proposition 2½ operational overrides and debt exclusion overrides under Massachusetts law. She explained that annual property tax increases are limited to 2.5% plus new growth. An operational override allows a permanent increase to the tax base and must be approved by Town Meeting and then by ballot vote. Operational overrides are used to fund ongoing expenses such as staffing and services. In contrast, a debt exclusion override is a temporary tax increase used to fund specific capital projects, such as school buildings or infrastructure, and expires once the debt is paid. It also requires approval at both Town Meeting and ballot vote. Dr. Shannon emphasized that operational and capital funding mechanisms are distinct and cannot be interchanged. She noted that future financial planning discussions may include both mechanisms for different purposes.

Chair Lesky opened the floor for Committee discussion.

Mr. Dial stated that the financial picture presented was consistent with prior discussions and acknowledged the extensive work undertaken by the Administration to identify savings. He emphasized the structural imbalance between revenue growth and expense increases, particularly in areas outside the district's control such as transportation and special education. While recognizing the urgency of the current fiscal year, he expressed concern about pursuing short-term or partial solutions that could require repeated override requests in future

years. He stressed the importance of developing a comprehensive, multi-year plan that clearly articulates long-term needs before advancing a proposal to the community.

Mr. Evans distinguished between the district's immediate financial challenge and its longer-term structural funding issues. Drawing from experiences in other municipalities, he cautioned against framing an override as an emergency measure, noting that overrides presented as forward-looking strategic plans tend to have higher success rates. He suggested that early planning for a potential FY28 override be considered and emphasized the importance of collaboration with teachers, unions, and other municipal stakeholders. He referenced examples of towns that imposed caps within override agreements and later faced renewed reductions, underscoring the importance of careful design and long-term sustainability.

Mr. Squatrito observed that the district has moved beyond peripheral cost-saving measures and is now confronting core structural decisions. He noted that projected reductions of 15 to 20 FTEs represent significant operational impact and may not yet be fully understood by the broader community. He suggested that if an override were pursued, it should be narrowly defined and clearly communicated with specific, tangible outcomes so residents understand exactly what is being asked and why.

Mr. MacLellan expressed concern about reductions to student-facing positions and emphasized the importance of protecting district talent. He acknowledged that natural attrition, retirements, and adjustments to FTE allocations may mitigate some reductions. He also noted that a comprehensive, town-wide override package may have greater likelihood of passage than a school-only proposal, though timing relative to Annual Town Meeting presents practical limitations.

Chair Lesky emphasized the urgency of community engagement and encouraged residents to review the materials and participate in discussions immediately rather than waiting until formal votes occur in March. She highlighted the human dimension of staffing decisions, noting that educators and support staff serve essential roles in students' daily stability and well-being.

Chair Lesky invited public comment on the budget presentation.

Ms. Victoria Lattanzi, 125 Doane Street

Ms. Lattanzi referenced DESE report card data and district rankings, noting that Cohasset ranks mid-range in spending and teacher pay and lower in teachers per student, yet continues to outperform academically. She stated that these metrics demonstrate strong performance despite financial constraints and asked whether the Committee could pursue an override this fiscal year to prevent staffing reductions, questioning what additional information waiting another year would provide.

Committee members explained that only the Selectboard may place an override on the ballot and emphasized the importance of developing a comprehensive, sustainable multi-year plan before advancing such a proposal. Members noted that retirement projections, finalized deficit calculations, impact analyses, and longer-term financial modeling remain unresolved, and cautioned that pursuing a partial or rushed override could undermine long-term community trust and stability.

Ms. Stephanie Saunders, 10 Strafford Terrace

Ms. Saunders commented that the recurring budget discussions feel cyclical and stressed the need for a sustained and strategic community engagement plan beyond School Committee meetings. She stated that strong support for the schools exists across age groups in the community and emphasized that consistent, coordinated communication will be critical to maintaining visibility and momentum heading into the fall.

Committee members acknowledged the importance of broader outreach and agreed that proactive, ongoing communication efforts are essential. Members reaffirmed their commitment to transparency and continued public engagement as financial planning progresses.

Community Relations / Communication

Committee members reported on the launch of pre-meeting office hours to increase accessibility and encourage informal dialogue with families. Members discussed the need for a coordinated communication strategy to ensure broader awareness of budget challenges and to maintain momentum in public engagement efforts moving forward.

School Committee Governance

Approval of Minutes

There were no minutes presented for approval.

Executive Session

The Chair stated there was no need to enter Executive Session.

Adjournment

Motion made by Mr. MacLellan, seconded by Mr. Evans, to adjourn the meeting.

Roll Call Vote: Dial – Aye; Evans – Aye; Squatrito – Aye; MacLellan – Aye; Lesky – Aye. Motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:40 PM.

Documents/Materials Used

- YRBS Data Presentation
- 2026–2027 CPS School Calendar
- Student Services Update
- Updated FY27 Budget Presentation

Respectfully submitted,
Lance C. Dial
3.4.26