



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES March 3, 2026

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	March 3, 2026
Location:	MERMHS Learning Commons
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Lindsay Banks John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Nadia Wetzler Theresa Whitman
Absent:	Chris Reed, Chairperson
Guests:	Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Technology
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

- A. **Call to Order of** – Ms. Koch-Sundquist called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:04 p.m.
- B. **Business Meeting Open Session**
- 1) **Public Comment (Guidelines for public comment can be found in sections BEDH and BEDH-E of the School Committee policy manual)** – none
 - 2) **Student Report** – Maggie Whitman. Ms. Whitman reported that the Student Advisory Council has not met. Ms. Whitman thanked the SC for approving the school trip to London (next year) and said that preparations for this year's Spain trip are ramping up. Winter sports are well into playoff season, and spring sports preparations are already underway. Dramafest advanced beyond the first round, receiving many awards. Robotics is actively competing and DECA starts its state competition in the next couple of weeks. Ms. Whitman shared that the high school had a guest speaker who was a former major league baseball player turned agent. Students will soon begin course selection for next year. The STEAM showcase is coming up.

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3) Chairperson's Report – None.

4) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Voucher 1052 and payroll warrant for February 26, 2026
- Minutes for approval: February 10, 2026

Ms. Wetzler moved to approve the AP Voucher 1052 and the payroll warrant for February 26, 2026; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Questions: Ms. Koch-Sundquist confirmed that there will be a similar expense for snow removal from the Essex Elementary roof following the most recent storm. Mr. Foster asked about the payment to Educere, Inc. for six online classes. Mr. Foster asked if this online option is available to all students or a special circumstance. Superintendent Beaudoin said that this is a unique case. Educere has been used for those with alternative educational needs. MERSD is not currently part of Virtual High School and would need to buy into that program.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Whitman – Yes

Mr. Binieris – Yes

Ms. Wetzler – Yes

Mr. Foster – Yes

Ms. Banks – Yes

Ms. Koch-Sundquist - Yes

The motion passed 6-0.

Mr. Foster moved to approve the minutes from February 10, 2026. Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Whitman – Yes

Mr. Binieris – Yes

Ms. Wetzler – Yes

Mr. Foster – Yes

Ms. Banks – Abstained

Ms. Koch-Sundquist - Yes

The motion passed 5-0.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) –Ms. Whitman reported that the SBC met on February 24, 2026, and mainly discussed design updates. The building committee must continue to develop designs for all required options. This includes 1) Code Upgrade only; 2) Addition/Renovation; and 3) New Construction options. All designs will be sent to the cost estimators. Ms. Whitman stated that detailed presentations for all designs are available on the SBC webpage. Ms. Whitman said that two designs were presented for new construction that were similarly situated where the field and play areas are currently. This would permit construction in mostly one phase. These designs were characterized as having a neighborhood school feel. Ms. Whitman shared that a third design was also presented that would utilize the site's grading to create a very different design. The front entrance would shift to the Western Avenue side of the property, and the prekindergarten spaces and mechanical rooms would have a separate entrance to a below grade space. Challenges of this design include that it would require phased construction and consideration for how to preserve gym use during construction. This design has a smaller footprint and includes two U12 fields. The SBC will continue its work to refine all proposed designs before sending them to the cost estimators. The SBC is also working to refine a rubric for evaluating each option, similarly to the rubric used to review grade configuration options. The SBC has a community meeting planned for March 30. In order to have completed cost estimates for this meeting, it has been postponed until April 16. The SBC will host a public Gallery Walk on March 24 with detailed representations of each design.

Questions: Ms. Banks asked if future SBC meetings are planned for Manchester. Ms. Whitman stated that meetings have been planned to mirror the MMES building process. Most meetings have been held at EES, enabling tours of the site. As the vote approaches, Ms. Whitman anticipates more meetings in Manchester. Superintendent Beaudoin said that it is important for people to see the site and current building. There will likely be a Manchester meeting in the fall.

- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Jake Foster/Chris Reed) – No report. The subcommittee met and reviewed budget updates that will be reported later in the meeting.
- **Policy/Advocacy Sub-Committee** (Lindsay Banks/Nadia Wetzler/Theresa Whitman) – Approval of School Committee Newsletter. Ms. Banks said that the subcommittee did not meet, but they did complete a School Committee newsletter for approval. The goal is to keep the newsletter fact-based and highlight key themes. The current newsletter includes a budget overview, with live links to budget documents; an update on the middle school

principal search; and summary of changes to the high school Program of Studies and graduation requirements.

Mr. Foster recommended updating budget information and suggested empowering Ms. Banks and Superintendent Beaudoin to make these updates. Ms. Koch-Sundquist took a straw poll confirming that the SC supports this.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report

6) Superintendent's Report –

- a. Drama team advances in Dramafest – Congratulations!
- b. Middle School Principal Search – Site visits are concluded; Appointment expected March 12-18.
- c. STEAM – March 18, 2026, 6:00 pm, MERHS
- d. Contemporary Music Night – March 19, 2026, 6:00 pm, MERHS. Featuring the Jazz Band; HS Contemporary Ensemble, and the Middle School Rock Band
- e. School Building Committee – Current focus is the building design approach.
 - i. Design Gallery Walk: March 24, 6:00 pm EES
 - ii. Community Meeting: April 16, 6:00 pm EES
- f. School Choice Report – The superintendent reported that 204 applicants applied for school choice with the district, including 5 siblings of current MERSD students. Superintendent Beaudoin included enrollment predictions for next year. These predictions do not account for students moving back to MERSD from private placements, which frequently occurs in grades nine and ten. The predictions do include anticipated grade nine students who will attend Essex Tech in the fall, based on new admissions practices. The superintendent said that the district has been attempting to keep choice students to no more than 10% of a grade's population. Sibling applicants in kindergarten and grade six would replace the three choice students leaving the district.

Questions: Ms. Koch-Sundquist requested consideration for admitting the remaining two sibling applicants. Superintendent Beaudoin said that there is not an official policy regarding school choice admissions. Each class has unique needs to be considered. The superintendent asked for School Committee feedback on accepting the additional students into grade nine, bringing their total choice students to thirteen. Ms. Whitman asked if their enrolled siblings are older students. Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that the current process is to open slots in grades where there is space (lower enrollment). The district then looks for siblings in those grades to fill those spots. All other applicants are enrolled via lottery for slots.

The superintendent said that the district can monitor grade nine enrollment and determine if the remaining siblings can be offered spots. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the School Committee may want to review the school

choice program next year. In the past, the district carried 150 choice students, and it was an income driver. The superintendent offered to model increasing choice enrollment.

Ms. Wetzler advocating for admitting all sibling applicants, saying it would make logistics easier. Ms. Wetzler highlighted some of the non-monetary benefits of school choice, including increasing the diversity and perspectives of MERSD and enriching the academic experience. Ms. Wetzler suggested considering how school choice aligns with the district's Vision of the Graduate.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that she thought the 10% limit applied to the entire population, not each grade. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that adding students at the high school level leads to increased course offerings and schedule flexibility for students. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked that this benefit be reflected in any policy the School Committee creates for school choice.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that school choice has been governed reactively to public opinion. It would be possible to change the process to reflect the School Committee's position that school choice can benefit the district's goals.

Ms. Whitman said that accepting choice students at the high school level is a shorter commitment and avoids enrollment concerns at the elementary level. In addition, choice students at the high school level can help to maintain robust course offerings even during enrollment dips. Ms. Whitman suggested that the SC conduct an actual study of school choice and noted that other districts have done so. A study would give the district a point of reference for future discussions rather than being reactive.

Ms. Banks commented that, although a few loud voices have expressed concern about school choice enrollment, she has so far heard nothing but support for the program. Ms. Banks echoed the role of school choice in supporting course breadth and bringing diverse perspectives.

Superintendent Beaudoin said that school choice has historically been viewed positively and that both Hamilton/Wenham and Rockport have robust school choice programs.

Ms. Foster advocated for further discussion and tying school choice to metrics of success for the district.

7) Continued Business –

- a. Curriculum & Instructional Technology Update – Heather Leonard. Ms. Leonard noted that, with so much going on at the schools, her presentation is a

brief glimpse of the many exciting happenings. She has discussed, with the superintendent, planning next year for deeper dives and programmatic focus presentations.

i. Arts

1. Guest Workshop Performers – Altus, in collaboration with Shalin Liu Rockport music. The program brought in a professional New York jazz ensemble to work with the HS jazz band.
2. HS Drama Fest competition – congratulations and on to the next round
3. Cross-Schools Visual Arts Collaboration – The middle school arts teacher worked with the kindergarten classes. Kindergarten students designed their ideal “squishmellows” and middle school students brought them to life. Their work is displayed at the M/H School and district offices. Kindergartners will be able to keep their “squishmellow.”
4. HS Visual Arts & 1623 Studios Partnership: Digital filmmaking mini course. Professionals work with students in high school visual arts courses to create films using still images and film clips. Their final projects will be presented at a 1623 Studios showcase at the end of the month.

ii. World Language – Continued deep curriculum alignment in unit development and vertical assessment alignment. The team has worked to develop curriculum with regard to new standards and reevaluating how student proficiency is assessed. Ms. Leonard highlighted collaborative endeavors by staff as a department and through engagement with state networks.

1. MAFLA (Mass Foreign Language Association) Conference -
 - a. Summer Proficiency Academy
 - b. March Core Practices Institute
2. Curriculum Alignment, Unit Development
3. International Week 2026: March 18-20. The goal of International Week is to expose students to various cultures around the world through firsthand experiences

iii. Technology

1. Day of AI, with MIT
 - a. Keynote for PD
 - b. Staff Training
 - c. Student Learning (Elementary Level)
2. Student Video Game Development – Safe use of AI to create their own game. This is a collaboration between the Elementary Technology teacher and the Digital Learning Specialist.
3. PD Offerings

4. Vertical Department Collaboration: Digital Literacy Computer Science (DLCS) Alignment and Curriculum Material Review
- iv. Professional Development: March 16. Ms. Leonard said that, based on PD committee feedback, sessions will include both presentation time and a working block where teachers can apply what they have learned with the expert and their colleagues present to collaborate. Ms. Leonard invited SC members to attend the PD day. Ms. Leonard noted that there is a good balance between external and internal presenters, with staff running many of the sessions. Sample Sessions:
 1. From Hooks to Anchors: Driving Student Sensemaking
 2. The Neuroscience of Math and Teaching with Dot Patterns
 3. Speaking and Thinking – Increase Equity of Voice for Increased Student Learning
 4. Identifying Anxiety and Supporting Effective Regulation
 5. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Lesson Planning Workshop
 6. Teaching Number Stories: Effective Word Problem Instruction
 7. Restorative Communication – The Language of Connection
 8. Finding Focus: Unlocking Engagement through Executive Function
 9. Maintaining Rigor through Scaffolding
 10. Small Shifts, Stronger SEL

Questions/Comments: Ms. Banks suggested the district create a reel of highlights to inform the greater community, particularly the work being done during professional development. Superintendent Beaudoin said the suggestion should go to the PD committee for feedback.

Mr. Foster asked for an update on the science curriculum review. Ms. Leonard said that she is working with the superintendent to develop a strategic schedule of in-depth reporting. Ms. Leonard said that the review work is ongoing, and she would want to include the voice of all educators involved in the review process beyond herself.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist commented on recent MAP testing by the eighth graders and asked how the school was selected to participate. Ms. Leonard said that schools are opted-into testing. MAP is designed to be a sampling of schools around the country from diverse demographics. Students selected to participate may complete math or ELA tests. Mr. Foster said that this data is not reported out by schools. It becomes part of a greater test set. Massachusetts participates more than most states and is reported out as a state because its sample is large enough to be compared to other countries.

- b. Budget Update –** Superintendent Beaudoin reported that the final premium renewal increase is 8.4%. The Superintendent stated that this number reflects updates to the district's usage. Last year, members had catastrophic events that increased utilization. Currently, the district's usage has fallen, over the

last several months, leading to a better renewal rate. The superintendent asked the School Committee to consider three possible scenarios for the budget because of the lower health insurance costs.

Ms. Cresta provided a detailed breakdown of the three scenarios:

- A. Maintain Approved Budget without change – Savings would be applied to OPEB. Assessment to the towns remains at an overall increase of 3.85% from last year. OPEB contribution would be \$541,127.
- B. Apply saving to the operating budget to bring the total to 3.44%. The remainder would be applied to OPEB, in the amount of \$425,000.
- C. Apply all savings to the budget, reducing the assessment increase to 3.11% overall. OPEB contributions would remain at \$300,000. Ms. Cresta characterized this option as falsely lowering the budget and said that it would increase the gap for next year.

Questions/Discussion: Ms. Wetzler said that maintaining the budget as it is would be fiscally responsible but noted that EES leaders asked for further reductions. She expressed support for Scenario B.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that Scenario A represents the safest option but also gave support to Scenario B in the spirit of being good partners.

Mr. Foster said that none of the scenarios removes Essex from override territory.

Ms. Whitman noted that the SC was not provided with a figure to avoid an override. The difference between scenarios B and C is \$50K. Ms. Whitman said this is not enough to suppress the growth rate. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that there will be an impact to next year's perceived growth rate if the SC puts savings back into the budget. Ms. Whitman acknowledged the value in taking the middle ground.

Mr. Foster expressed support for Scenario B and stated that the School Committee has articulated the intention to return savings from healthcare to the towns in the past.

Mr. Binieris supported Scenario B.

Ms. Banks expressed concern about artificially suppressing budget growth for next year. The superintendent detailed how reducing this year's budget will exacerbate the growth rate next year. The superintendent said that Scenario B provides all parties with a benefit. Ms. Banks said that she has attended the finance collaboration meetings and said it is difficult to see the SC work to remain at a reasonable growth rate while town partners continue to make

unreasonable and inconsistent demands. Ms. Banks said that the spirit of collaboration should be matched on all sides. Ms. Banks expressed doubt that the district will be bailed out in the event of an emergency.

Mr. Foster shared that Essex views \$200K as the amount needed to avoid an override. Ms. Banks said she does not want Essex to need an override during the school building project period. She was hesitant to lower the budget if it would not get Essex out of override territory. Ms. Whitman expressed optimism that Essex will appreciate the district increasing funds to OPEB as they have also prioritized funding their OPEB account. The district's commitment to funding OPEB will benefit the towns in the long run. Ms. Wetzler stated that communicating this will be important.

Ms. Whitman moved to amend the FY27 Operating Budget to \$33,737,241. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

Discussion: Mr. Binieris stated his support for Scenario B.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Banks – Yes

Ms. Whitman – Yes

Mr. Binieris – Yes

Ms. Wetzler – Yes

Mr. Foster – Yes

Ms. Koch-Sundquist - Yes

The motion passed 6-0.

- 8) School Committee Comment** – Ms. Whitman stated that the MASC Day on the Hill has been moved earlier, to Monday, March 30, and shared the highlights of the event. It is an interactive day that allows attendees to hear about common concerns with other districts and also gives insight into MERSD's unique privileges. Attendees may also schedule a meeting with state representatives ahead of time. Student representatives are also present. Ms. Banks wondered about going as an official delegation, and Superintendent Beaudoin said that they could attend with a platform. The superintendent could provide input from the superintendent council, likely centered around Chapter 70 advocacy, increasing circuit Breaker funding, and bringing awareness about municipal aid. Ms. Whitman said she would want to discuss going as a delegation further, because she enjoys participating as an individual and focusing on

learning, growing, and connecting. Ms. Banks suggested utilizing the policy/advocacy subcommittee, and the superintendent noted that they have an upcoming meeting on March 17, 2026. Mr. Foster noted that the regional MASC meeting will be held this year in Danvers and is therefore easier to attend for SC members.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the tentative last day of school is June 24. However, the official determination will be at the end of March. The superintendent complimented the hard work of the DPW and their partnership in advising the district about road conditions throughout the storm season.

C. Adjourn

Ms. Wetzler moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Banks – Yes

Ms. Whitman – Yes

Ms. Wetzler – Yes

Mr. Foster – Yes

Mr. Binieris – Yes

Ms. Koch-Sundquist - Yes

The motion passed 6-0.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:54 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

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| ➤ March 17, 2026 | |
| ➤ April 7, 2026 | |
| ➤ April 27, 2026 | Monday |
| ➤ May 4, 2026 | Monday |
| ➤ May 19, 2026 | |
| ➤ June 2, 2026 | |