



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES February 10, 2026

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	February 10, 2026
Location:	Remote
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Chris Reed, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Nadia Wetzler Theresa Whitman
Absent:	Lindsay Banks
Guests:	Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Technology Julie Sgroi, Principal MERHS Lauren Woodcock, High School Teacher Courtney Brown, High School Teacher
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/785

A. **Call to Order of** – Mr. Reed called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:05 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) –**

Annie Cameron, 23 Pickering Street, Essex. Ms. Cameron said that she was speaking as a private citizen and expressed appreciation for the district's budgetary efforts. Ms. Cameron expressed doubt that the district could garner town approval for the three-year plan and an off ramp to its cost-savings measures. Ms. Cameron underscored the importance of passage of the Essex building project and said that she would like to see the FY27 Budget come down a little more.

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Ann Harrison, 13 Tucks Point Road, Manchester. Ms. Harrison also expressed gratitude for the work that went into the budget and the hope that the budget will come down further, making it easier for the towns to balance their budgets.

2) Student Report – Maggie Whitman. Ms. Whitman stated that the SAC was unable to meet as planned, but they will meet before the next SC meeting. Ms. Whitman highlighted upcoming extracurricular activities, including post season play for athletics and intensifying competition for drama, robotics, and debate. Report cards were distributed earlier in the day. The superintendent asked about the reason for the SAC meeting delay. Ms. Whitman said that it was a combination of conflicts for SAC members.

3) Chairperson's Report – Chris Reed echoed appreciation for the work that district administrators have put into budget construction.

4) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1043-1047 and payroll warrant for January 29, 2026
- Minutes for approval: January 27, 2026
- Out of State Travel: Request for approval of out-of-state travel for the high school London trip. All required paperwork has been submitted, and the trip has been initially approved by the principal and superintendent. The trip will focus on student leadership and is organized through ACIS, a reputable tour company out of Boston. Staff members, Courtney Brown and Lauren Woodcock, are running the trip. This trip aligns with every aspect of the Vision of the Graduate. Through this trip, students are provided with the opportunity to experience other cultures and will collaborate and problem-solve with peers while traveling.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the AP Vouchers 1043-1047; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Mr. Binieris - Yes

Ms. Kate-Sundquist - Yes

Ms. Whitman - Yes

Ms. Wetzler - Yes

Mr. Foster - Yes

Mr. Reed - Yes

The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the School Committee meeting for January 27, 2026; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Whitman - Yes

Mr. Binieris - Yes

Ms. Kate-Sundquist - Yes

Mr. Foster - Yes

Ms. Wetzler - Yes

Mr. Reed - Yes

The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the request for out-of-state travel for a trip to London; Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Discussion: Ms. Woodcock, a math teacher at the high school, said that this trip has been in the works for some time. The trip is open to all upper classmen, juniors and seniors next year. The trip will have a focus on female role models, including women in parliament and a female athletic trainer for a premier league team.

Mr. Reed confirmed that the trip is scheduled for February break 2027. Ms. Woodcock said that she saw many of these trips while employed in the Beverly school district and chose to work with a travel company who had this leadership trip offered.

Mr. Foster asked for clarification of the trip's relation to the district program. Ms. Woodcock said that the trip is not associated with a class or club. It is an opportunity for all students with leadership skills, and it will provide an opportunity for students to travel outside of the country.

Courtney Brown stated that, although the trip is not associated with a class or club, it is aligned with every aspect of the Vision of the Graduate. It is hoped that the experience will spark curiosity, innovation, and leadership in student participants.

Principal Julie Sgroi said that she is pleased that the trip is not directly related to a specific course or club. Instead, it brings together students from diverse areas of the school who have an interest in leadership, without the prerequisites that can come with other trips, to learn about leadership.

Superintendent Beaudoin clarified that the trip is a voluntary trip with a fee-for-service model.

Mr. Foster expressed concern about accessibility and asked if there is support for students to pay the over \$5,000 cost of the trip. Ms. Woodcock said that they have assembled several potential fundraising plans to offset the cost of the trip and referenced the travel company's online tools, including a fundraising link for family and community support of individual travel objectives. Ms. Brown stated that the travel company has scholarships and payment plans. Mr. Foster asked about the structure of fundraising efforts. Ms. Woodcock stated that their approach to the program includes grant writing, and they will explore how to distribute funds to student accounts. There is a precedent for fundraising.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked about the implications of the legal age in countries of travel, particularly as it relates to drinking. Ms. Woodcock was clear that the trip would remain school-sponsored, with all implied behavioral expectations. The travel company is also explicit in its strict rules which emphasize the school-based nature of the trip and requires adherence to district policies. Mr. Reed confirmed that there is no cap on enrollment in the program.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Whitman - Yes

Ms. Kate-Sundquist - Yes

Ms. Wetzler - Yes

Mr. Foster - Yes

Mr. Binieris - Yes

Mr. Reed - Yes

The motion passed unanimously.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated that any family interested in the trip who has financial concerns should contact the high school principal, Ms. Sgroi, for assistance. The superintendent expressed gratitude to the staff coordinating the trip. They have worked through many requests for revisions to bring the best trip to the students.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the Payroll Warrant for January 29, 2026; Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Whitman - Yes

Ms. Wetzler - Yes

Ms. Kate-Sundquist - Yes

Mr. Foster - Yes

Mr. Binieris - Yes

Mr. Reed - Yes

The motion passed unanimously.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) –Ms. Whitman stated that the SBC met the previous evening and approved design team and OPM vouchers. They received an introductory report from the mechanical/electric/plumbing group. This was the first consideration of options for these kinds of systems. Once the Preferred Schematic Design is accepted, these options will be further considered. There was also a geo-tech report with results from preliminary boring that hit ledge. This information has been forwarded to consultants. Additional testing will be completed once the preferred schematic design is chosen. The bulk of the meeting was concerned with discussing the path toward the Preferred Schematic Design. Information from the reports will be used to inform creation of the Preferred Schematic Design report. In that report, the SBC will need to submit a design, upon which they have reached consensus, for each of the three targeted build options – code upgrade; renovation plus addition; and new build for PK through grade five. The report will include design layouts and cost estimations for the grade configurations that were previously eliminated by the committee. The SBC reviewed possible renovation/addition proposals, and these designs can be viewed on the district website. Ms. Whitman noted that a proposal for a three-floor design would take advantage of the site's fourteen-foot grade drop and be more cost effective due to the smaller footprint. The SBC will meet again following the February break.
- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Jake Foster/Chris Reed) – Mr. Foster and Ms. Banks attended the Town Collaboration Meeting. Mr. Foster reported that, having reviewed the district's current budget proposal, Manchester is likely to avoid an operational override. Essex is still concerned about needing an override. Mr. Foster said that town partners are on board with the district's strategy in the short term but were not comfortable committing to an off-ramp of reserves use. Both towns are focused on meeting their obligations yearly and are concentrating on meeting their OPEB obligations. Manchester will reach that goal in FY27 and Essex in FY28. This should help them in future years once it is off their operational budgets. Town partners expressed the desire for the district to play out its three-year strategy. They are aware that the district would have to go to the town in an emergency situation. Mr. Foster said that town partners would like to see the budget come down more but made no specific requests.
- **Policy/Advocacy Sub-Committee** (Lindsay Banks/Nadia Wetzler/Theresa Whitman) – No Report

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

6) Superintendent's Report – General Update.

- Rising Star Award – Rebecca Xiarhos, MMES Adjustment Counselor, received the award from the Massachusetts Association of School Psychologists/Therapists. This award reflects her outstanding work on behalf of the district's students and the broader community.
- Middle School Principal Search – The search committee identified four finalists to advance and expects to announce them by week's end. Site visits should begin the week of February 23. Visits will be extended day and include meetings with students, faculty, the School Committee, and community members.
- FY27 Enrollment Report and School Choice Recommendation – To be presented at the March 3 School Committee Meeting. The district anticipates limiting new choice students to the two spots vacated by graduating seniors.
- Essex Tech New Enrollment Process – The district is monitoring the new Essex Tech lottery-based enrollment process. Essex Tech previously had a private-school style admissions process that was more labor-intensive for students. The new process has an allotment for each town and does not require an extensive application. Ten seats were allotted to Manchester and five were allocated to Essex. Therefore, potentially 15 students could leave Manchester to attend Essex Tech for high school.
- STEAM Showcase
- Essex Building Project – The district is in the Feasibility Phase, which is the phase of determining what should be built.
- School Delays – a reminder that the district sends out community communications.

Questions: Mr. Foster asked if the district is following up to see why students are applying to Essex Tech. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the vocational school program is a very different issue than students leaving the district for private school. The district is required to submit plans to the state outlining how they will promote the vocational program to students. The superintendent said the district would not be able to compete with Essex Tech for the breadth of its vocational program. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said the simplified admissions process encouraged many families to apply in order to keep options open. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that all communities are adjusting to the shift. Originally, Peabody was given 130 slots, and Manchester was set at 5, based on historic attendance. Following interdistrict lobbying, the numbers were shifted.

7) Continued Business –

- Curriculum & Instructional Technology Update – Heather Leonard: Content-Area Efforts. Ms. Leonard said that a lot of work has been done this year around Artificial Intelligence – learning about AI and learning with AI.

- i. Curriculum
 - 1. Data Collection and Vision Development in ELA 6-12 and Math PK-12
 - 2. Curriculum Tool Narrowing and Field Testing in ESL K-12
 - 3. Alignment of revised assessment practices: World Language
 - 4. Instructional Practice PD/Training: Science
 - 5. Reading Assessment Book Study PD: Special Ed
- ii. Curriculum Articulation
 - 1. Scope and Sequence, Curriculum Mapping, Vertical Alignment, Assessment Development
- iii. Mid-Year i-Ready Diagnostics Complete (Grades K-8) – Parent letters going out soon.
- iv. MTSS Program Development Efforts in K-5; 6-8; and 9-12
- v. Professional Development Committee – planning for district-wide PD day on March 16. The keynote speaker will be Jeff Riley of MIT’s Day of AI to explore AI challenges and opportunities
- vi. STEAM Showcase March 18, 2026, 5:00-7:00 pm, Middle/High School

Questions: Mr. Foster asked for clarification on the status of the science curriculum review. Ms. Leonard said that the planned PD was informed by the data review from the initial review phase. This phase exposed the importance of calibrating teaching practices. Ms. Leonard mentioned centering instruction on phenomena driven unit design. PD is geared towards empowering instructors to work beyond traditional scaffolding. This is working toward instructors using driving inquiry to center the learning structure.

Mr. Foster asked about how instructional coaches are being deployed. Ms. Leonard stated that the district has two elementary coaches, one for math and one for reading, to provide support to prekindergarten through grade five. In their second year, Ms. Leonard reported a deeper integration and positive reception by staff. Coaches are providing personalized coaching with grade level teams, meeting with individuals, providing classroom feedback, and modeling in classrooms. They are examining student data and partnering with teachers to implement strategies and review results. The coaches alternate between buildings and also work with SPED educators.

- b. Memorial School Building Project \$650,000 Bond Anticipation Note (BAN) – *Vote to Approve*. This ban provides temporary funding for the Manchester Memorial Elementary School construction project. On February 26, 2026, payment is due for the outstanding \$1.1 million Bond Anticipation Note (BAN) that was borrowed one year ago. This payment is included on voucher 1044 in the amount of \$1,144,000 and includes interest of \$44,000. This note provides temporary funding until the final audit is completed by the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) and reimbursement is received by the district. Currently, the district is in the pipeline for the MSBA audit, with anticipated completion later this year. The reimbursement from

MSBA is expected to cover the outstanding balance of the BAN which will be due in February 2027. The new BAN was publicly bid on February 3, 2026, and the lowest bid came in with an interest rate of 3.25% from Stern Brothers. The proceeds of the new BAN along with a premium in the amount of \$265.85 will be distributed to the district on February 26, 2026.

Mr. Reed moved to approve \$650,000 Bond Anticipation Note (BAN) via the language outlined in School Committee business meeting materials. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Ms. Cresta stated that this should be the final BAN necessary before MSBA reimbursement. Without the updated BAN, the Department of Revenue would withhold part of the district's E&D.

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked about the "premium." Ms. Cresta said that, in addition to the 3.25% (about \$21K), the lender gives a premium to offset the cost. In this case, it is only \$265. It will go back into the construction account and be used in the final payoff in a year. Ms. Cresta said that interest paid by the district is not reimbursable.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Koch-Sundquist – Y

Ms. Whitman – Y

Mr. Foster – Y

Ms. Wetzler – Y

Mr. Binieris – Y

Mr. Reed - Y

The motion passed unanimously.

c. FY27 Budget Adoption – *Votes to Approve.*

- i. Budget Recap – The proposed FY27 Budget maintains current services and course offerings. It supports the district's Strategic Plan and the District and School Improvement Plans. Total budget is \$33.85M.
 1. Health Insurance increase estimates have moved from 20% to 17% to the current 14%. This is a change of \$258,358
 2. OPEB contributions decreased by \$500K
 3. Additional funds of \$250K from Circuit Breaker OOD expense reimbursement
 4. Increased Retirement Savings of \$70K
 5. Overall Budget Reduced by \$1.1M, equaling 3.85% from last year

6. General Fund Revenue expected to increase 3.87%
7. Reserves consistent with FY26 level at \$600K for E&D
8. FY27 Operating Assessment equals 3.85% with Manchester at 3/74% and Essex at 4.03%

Superintendent Beaudoin recommended accepting the January 27, 2026, version of the FY27 Proposed Budget.

- ii. Capital Budget – This budget totals \$3,856,437 and represents debt service for the middle/high school and Memorial building projects. It included the anticipated BAN renewal and is apportioned to the towns.
- iii. Looking Ahead – Preliminary consideration of strategy should the district realize additional savings to healthcare insurance. The superintendent said that the SC should consider whether it would apply additional savings to reduce the budget, increase the OPEB contribution, or decrease the amount of reserve fund use. The superintendent said that the district will plan to model out Student Activity fees for the next budget cycle.

Discussion: School Committee members expressed appreciation for the work of administrators to craft the budget. The district will have depleted its rainy-day fund.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the FY27 Operating Budget in the amount of \$33,853,368. Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

Ms. Wetzler said that program maintenance is a priority and expressed concerns about reserves use.

Ms. Whitman expressed full support for the budget and gratitude for the open nature of the collaboration meeting attended by SC representatives. Ms. Whitman stated that the district's strategy has been to keep growth stable and predictable and is committing reserves to continue this. The SC committed to providing early budget notice this year. Ms. Whitman said that she favors applying additional healthcare savings to reduce the assessment to the towns.

Mr. Binieris expressed support for the proposed budget.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist expressed pride in the proposed budget and support. Ms. Koch-Sundquist is concerned with reserve use while appreciating that town partners are accepting the risk that the towns may have to support the schools in a crisis. Ms. Koch-Sundquist prefers that additional budget savings be returned to the towns only up to an agreed upon date so that town budget procedures are not disrupted. After that date, savings would go back to the district.

Mr. Reed expressed support for the proposed budget and said that it makes sense given current financial pressures. Mr. Reed was doubtful that additional savings will be realized and is concerned about reserve exhaustion in as little as two years.

Superintendent Beaudoin thanked the SC for their support and emphasized that the district targets restricting growth to 3.5%. The district will work to model out additional budget strategies for presentation to the SC in March, at which time the School Committee can give further consideration to the use of additional savings. The superintendent said that there could be additional retirements or staff moves, but those do not usually present themselves until April or May. Replacement staff are estimated in the budget at the M5 level. This would result in salary savings if the teacher is at the top level of the pay scale. However, this number can change based on the person hired.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Wetzler – Y

Ms. Whitman – Y

Mr. Foster – Y

Mr. Binieris – Y

Ms. Koch-Sundquist – Y

Mr. Reed - Y

The motion unanimously.

Mr. Reed moved to approve the FY27 Capital Budget in the amount of \$3,856,437. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Mr. Foster confirmed that the Capital Budget is as expected. Ms. Cresta said that it includes the latest BAN and the \$50K repayment from the towns. The towns will not be charged the full amount until the MSBA reimbursement is complete.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Wetzler – Y

Ms. Whitman – Y

Mr. Foster – Y

Mr. Binieris – Y

Ms. Koch-Sundquist – Y

Mr. Reed - Y

The motion passed unanimously.

- 8) **School Committee Comment** – Mr. Reed stated that this has been one of the smoothest budget processes since he joined the School Committee. He expressed appreciation for the work of Superintendent Beaudoin and Ms. Cresta and thanked the School Committee members for their professionalism and insight during the process.

C. Adjourn

Mr. Foster moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Roll Call Vote:

Ms. Wetzler – Y

Ms. Whitman – Y

Mr. Foster – Y

Mr. Binieris – Y

Ms. Koch-Sundquist – Y

Mr. Reed - Y

Meeting Adjourned at 7:32 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

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| ➤ March 3, 2026 | |
| ➤ March 17, 2026 | |
| ➤ April 7, 2026 | |
| ➤ April 27, 2026 | Monday |
| ➤ May 4, 2026 | Monday |
| ➤ May 19, 2026 | |
| ➤ June 2, 2026 | |