

DRAFT MINUTES OF THE REGULAR SESSION OF THE MALDEN SCHOOL
COMMITTEE

Monday, March 2, 2026

Herbert L. Jackson Council Chamber Room #106 - 215 Pleasant Street Malden, MA and
Virtual Meeting

Mayor Christenson called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Mayor Christenson read docket items for the meeting.

Mayor Christenson led the committee in the Pledge of Allegiance followed by a moment of silence for those who have served our country and for those who continue to do so.

Roll Call

The following attendance was taken:

Mayor Christenson - Present

Mr. Drummey - Present

Mr. McCarthy - Present

Ms. Spadafora - Present

Ms. Macklin - Present

Ms. Hortie - Present

Mr. Piazza - Present

Mr. Bernard - Absent

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg - Present

Superintendent Sippel - Present

Mayor Christenson acknowledged that the Vice Chair, Ms. Spadaforaa would be filling in as clerk, as the clerk was unable to attend.

Consent Agenda

Mayor Christenson brought forth the matter of the adoption of minutes for the Approval of January 28, 2026 Special Meeting Minutes, February 2, 2026 School Committee Meeting Minutes and February 18, 2026 Special Meeting Minutes. Ms. Spadafora made a motion to table all of the minutes as the Committee was not in receipt of the minutes within the 48 hours required by policy. Mr. McCarthy seconded the motion and so it was VOTED. The motion passed unanimously.

Mayor Christenson brought forth the matter of the February 2026 Warrants. Mr. Drummey made a motion to place the 2026 Warrants on file and authorize the Chair to sign. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg seconded the motion and so it was VOTED. The motion passed unanimously.

Public Comment

Molly Maxwell – 30 Wheeler St.

Ms. Maxwell approached the Committee to share her family's experience with Special Education in Malden. As a Special Education teacher, she is familiar with compliance and what appropriate services look like. Her experience has been that her teachers and ESPs have never been the issue. She finds that the problems have come from Administration. Including removal of services without notice, predetermination of services and unprofessionalism. Ms. Maxwell described concerns regarding the district's special education placement process for her son, stating that the family was presented with either a substantially separate first-grade placement with no inclusion opportunities or placement without adequate support. She alleged that other district programming options were not fully disclosed and expressed concern that families may be unaware of their rights under the IEP process. She stated that families who advocate for services often face repeated meetings, emotional strain, and financial burdens, including the need to hire advocates. She called for a comprehensive review of the district's special education department to ensure legal compliance, prevent predetermination, and promote respectful collaboration with families.

Bonnie Littlejohn – 127 Emerald Street

Ms. Littlejohn reported that her daughter's learning assistance class at the high school was previously out of compliance due to staffing levels and the absence of a required Education Support Professional (ESP). She stated that after raising the issue, an ESP was assigned, but she recently learned that the support staff member had been removed despite the class still exceeding the threshold requiring assistance. Ms. Littlejohn expressed frustration with what she described as a long-standing pattern of special education service noncompliance in the district and questioned how many other students may not be receiving legally mandated services.

Michelle Cox – 57 Seaview Avenue

Ms. Cox shared her experience as the mother of an 8-year-old son with multiple disabilities, including blindness and nonverbal autism, who requires an out-of-district placement. She stated that despite the appropriateness of a specialized placement being evident, the process was delayed for months and ultimately required mediation. Ms. Cox said the prolonged process caused emotional, financial, and professional hardship, including the loss of her employment. She also expressed concern about the tone and professionalism of district meetings and urged the district to improve how families are treated during special education decision-making processes.

Carriann DiCicco – 168 Madison Street

Ms. DiCicco spoke about her ninth-grade son's transition to Malden High School, stating that he has severe autism and has regressed during the school year. She reported that her son has not been receiving all services outlined in his IEP, including occupational therapy, and expressed concern about continuity of speech services due to staffing changes. Ms. DiCicco described the

year as extremely difficult and urged the district to address what she believes are widespread special education service issues across schools.

Rachel Running – 51 Bellevale Street

Written Public Comments Read into the Record

“Dear Ms. Langston and members of the School Committee, I cannot attend tonight's meeting but would like to submit the following comment. Thank you. My name is Rachael Running and I live at 51 Bellvale Street. I am a Linden parent of two middle schoolers. I write in strong support of the Proposition 2.5 override resolution on the agenda today and I urge every school committee member to vote favorably on the resolution. A strong, safe public school system requires a fully funded government. If Malden has to cut city services - such as police, fire, dpw, library and city hall staff - our schools will be less safe and our children and school staff will have fewer resources and support. If the override does not pass, the subsequent cuts would lead to a weakening of MPS for this and future generations. Malden is not alone - many cities and towns have been seeking overrides in recent years after decades under the restrictive proposition 2.5 law. Our students deserve fully funded schools; robust after school programs; a well staffed library; open doors at the teen center; quick response time from firefighters and police officers when there is an emergency; and so much more. They deserve to live in a community that supports each child's growth and potential. Please use your voice and position to support this resolution. Thank you.

Councilor Carrie McDonald – 33 Pierce Street

Written Public Comment Read into the Record

To the Members of the Malden School Committee: I write tonite in strong support of the resolution on the Proposition 2.5 override, proposed by SC Members Peter Piazza and Keith Bernard. The upcoming March 31 vote is a critical one for our community and its future. It asks voters to support an override to close our City's budget gap and avoid dozens of layoffs. It's important for our parents and educators to hear from the School Committee about this, as many voters are still learning about this special election. You have the opportunity to help them understand what's at stake. Our schools are the biggest part of the City budget. Compared to 2019, Malden now invests \$20 million more per year of our local funds in our schools, who have badly needed this support. This increase is alongside millions more in investment from the state, as part of the Student Opportunity Act. Our schools must have the resources they need for the teachers, reading specialists, paraprofessionals, special education and ELL personnel, and enrichment and activities our kids need to thrive, and I strongly support investing in our schools. However, a flawed local contribution calculation in our state's Chapter 70 school funding formula has meant that Malden has had to put in more than its fair share. We have to stretch every year to meet the state's required minimum school spending, which has gone up twice as fast as the 2.5% maximum property tax increase. This rise in required local school spending has been a major cause of the City's budget gap, alongside rapid inflation. We are now at risk of

losing 50-60 positions in the City if the override does not pass, across every other City department, a 15% reduction in city services. And the estimates for FY27 school funding from the state, which will only give us the minimum increase of \$500,000, are making the situation even worse. I wholeheartedly agree that the proposed override is in the best interests of our city and our schools. It is essential for continuing to fund increased school investments each year. In addition to great schools, kids need parks, public safety, public health, a library, a recreation department, and safe streets and sidewalks. If we want more for Malden for the next few years than simply doing the minimum and trying to dig ourselves out of a financial hole, then supporting this override is the path we must choose. As both an elected official, and a parent of two MPS students, I urge you to support this resolution, and to get as engaged as possible with the issue in the weeks ahead.

Respectfully,

City Councillor Carey McDonald
33 Pierce Street, Malden”

Bruce Friedman – 8 Marvin Street

Greetings: Please read this into the record and add to the permanent file of this meeting. This body should not take an official position regarding the proposed proposition 2.5 special ballot questions. The City of Malden MUST fund the schools at a level required by the State, this is not a choice, is not negotiable, and as this body recently found out, there are ramifications and penalties when the schools are not funded at levels at least at the minimums dictated by the state. NO monies can be stripped from the schools if Prop 2.5 fails, this fear mongering should and must stop. Your chair, The Mayor, is 100% responsible to you, to the city and to all the residents and taxpayers to provide a comprehensive plan regardless of the outcome of the Prop 2.5 vote this month. He has failed to outline specific cuts to the budget that must be reviewed and approved by the City Council, he has failed to provide anything of substance besides a \$1500 contribution to the Yes 4 Malden war chest. Any discussions about cutting the police, fire department, public works employees, the library or other services MUST start with the mayor, and he has chosen to be vague and instill fear instead of having the transparent and truthful conversations. If this body is TRULY interested in securing funding and preserving the educational opportunities of the children of Malden, it should start with a resolution to dismiss the lawsuits that it and the city have expended hundreds of thousands of dollars on and then begin settlement and healing with the families it has hurt. The ongoing litigation will continue to toll against the schools budget. The Massachusetts Court of Appeals clearly indicated on February 12th of this year that Malden has no right to initiate these lawsuits, the first one of which was filed by this School District on July 1, 2021, almost 5 years ago.”

Councilor Amanda Linehan - 83 Blomerth Street

Written Public Comments Read into the Record

Good evening, my name is Amanda Linehan, I live at 83 Blomerth Street. I'm the Ward 3 City Councillor and President of the Malden City Council and I'm speaking in favor of the resolve on Proposition 2 1/2. On March 31st we have a special election to vote on an override of Proposition 2 1/2, which is a state law limiting our ability to levy taxes adequate to cover city expenses, even amidst rising inflation and health care costs, and stagnating state aid. This year, the Council has partnered with our administration to implement numerous measures to address our budget shortfall, including a hiring freeze, major changes to our pensions and city health insurance, and department level cuts, all of which will bring several million dollars in savings. In addition, we've worked hard to achieve a solid bond rating, to realize a high return on our investments, and to conduct annual audits.

Our city balances our budget every year and fully funds our schools as required by law, but make no mistake – if this override fails, our schools that have such big goals will instead will be treading water and the many other city departments that wrap around and support our education system will suffer deep cuts, and our students and community will feel it.

Take, for example, the Facilities staff who clear snow from our school yards, or the DPW staff who maintain our school parks and playgrounds. Then, there's the nearly 50 crossing guards employed by our Police Department, who safely navigate our youth across city streets every day, and our Recreation Department which offers essential sports and arts programming after school as well as low-cost summer camps. Our Public Library and Teen Center both host middle and high school students every day after school, and then there's our Community Development office which has brought in every single grant dollar we've spent in recent years on flashing school zone signs, playground renovations at the ELC, Beebe and Forestdale, roadway improvements around our buildings, and energy efficiency upgrades that have made it possible for us to have air conditioning in each school.

We can't afford to go backward at a time when we are making great progress and our residents are counting on us to deliver stable services and high quality schools. If the override fails, it will have profound and lasting impacts on the health and wellness of our children. As a parent, I don't want this for my child, and as a property owner I do not want this impacting the livability of our city and the value of my home. I urge unanimous support of this resolve and thank the sponsors. Thank you, Amanda Linehan"

Report of the Superintendent

In the Superintendent's report, several announcements were made, including recognition of the district's Director of School Counseling, Erin Craven, for receiving a statewide Administrator of the Year award and the appointment of a new principal, Mike Sabin, for Malden High School effective July 1. The report then focused on district improvement efforts, beginning with a summary of mid-year academic data. The Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Komal Bhasin, presented key findings from literacy and math assessments across grades K–12, noting that students in kindergarten through grade 8 demonstrated average to above-average growth, with evidence of gap-closing progress. Kindergarten students in particular achieved the highest mid-year literacy scores in three years. In grades one through eight, both English language arts and math showed statistically significant improvement, including measurable gains among students with disabilities. At the high school level, improvement efforts are focused on curriculum alignment in English language arts and targeted professional development in mathematics, including additional after-school learning opportunities for teachers and co-teachers. The administration emphasized the use of collaborative planning time, structured intervention blocks, and ongoing data analysis to inform instruction. Educators are regularly adjusting student groupings and interventions based on both benchmark and formative assessment data. The report also included a review of student attendance trends, including chronic absenteeism, and outlined steps being taken to improve attendance outcomes.

As part of the presentation, a video highlighted instructional practices at the Beebe School, where fourth-grade educators demonstrated how structured collaboration and data-driven interventions are contributing to student growth. Following the presentation, School Committee members asked several questions to better understand the data and its implications. Members inquired specifically about which student demographic groups may not be meeting benchmarks, including English learners, students with disabilities, and other subgroups. The administration responded that performance varies by assessment and that no single group is consistently underperforming across all measures. Additional questions focused on how interventions are tailored to meet student needs, the timeline for implementing support strategies, and how student progress is monitored over time. Administrators explained that intervention plans were developed during January professional development sessions and are currently being implemented, with student progress monitored regularly through frequent formative assessments in addition to mid- and end-of-year benchmarks.

During the continued discussion of the Superintendent's report, the Assistant Superintendent Bhasin provided clarification on assessment terminology, distinguishing between "average progress" and "statistically significant growth." It was explained that for DIBELS, "average progress" is based on national benchmark comparisons and reflects gap-closing growth relative to students with similar starting points. Due to the district's testing schedule, this progress represents approximately two and a half months of instruction, making the reported growth notable. In contrast, "statistically significant growth," used for assessments such as i-Ready and

IXL, reflects changes that exceed what could be expected by chance, taking into account sample size and variability. Committee members asked whether growth measures account for smaller subgroup populations, expressing concern that statistically significant changes may not fully capture meaningful progress for smaller groups, such as English learners within a single grade. The administration acknowledged this limitation, noting that while district-level trends are useful for identifying systemic patterns, more granular analysis at the classroom and individual student level is necessary to guide instruction. It was emphasized that educators regularly engage in student-level data analysis during professional development and instructional planning to tailor supports.

Additional questions focused on the structure and purpose of the various assessments. The administration explained that DIBELS measures foundational literacy skills such as phonics and fluency, while i-Ready assesses reading comprehension, and IXL evaluates math skills through an adaptive, standards-based assessment. A Committee member inquired about parent access to student performance data, noting difficulty locating this information. The administration clarified that reports for elementary students are distributed via ParentSquare, while high school families receive access codes to review student performance through IXL.

Assistant Superintendent Macdonald then presented an update on chronic absenteeism. Year-to-date data indicates a decline in absenteeism rates compared to the previous year, with grades 1–8 decreasing to approximately 14% and high school rates decreasing to approximately 26%. Subgroup analysis showed improvement across most student groups, including students with disabilities. The administration outlined the district’s “attendance playbook,” a tiered system of support that includes universal strategies, targeted interventions, and intensive outreach involving attendance teams and external agencies. Committee members asked whether absenteeism trends among students with disabilities were being analyzed at a deeper level to identify underlying causes. The administration confirmed that attendance teams review individual cases to determine barriers and implement appropriate supports. Additional questions addressed potential changes in tardiness following scheduling adjustments at the high school, though administration indicated that data on tardiness had not yet been fully analyzed.

Further discussion explored support for middle school students at risk of academic failure and absenteeism. The administration described planned initiatives, including a Grade 8 “Get Ahead Academy,” summer bridge programming, and expanded academic and executive functioning supports to improve readiness for high school. Committee members emphasized the importance of addressing both academic gaps and student engagement to improve long-term outcomes.

The Superintendent also provided an update on strategic planning efforts, including stakeholder survey data used to inform district priorities such as equitable access, high expectations, and workforce support. Committee members raised concerns about survey results indicating that

fewer than half of educators believe school improvement plans adequately center the needs of multilingual learners and students with disabilities. The administration acknowledged this perception gap and noted that school leaders are analyzing the data to better align practices and improve communication and staff engagement.

An update was also provided on the ongoing special education program review, which includes both an external evaluation and an internal compliance review. The external review involves classroom observations, focus groups, surveys, and data analysis, with a report expected in April. Committee members questioned whether the review process should include direct observation of IEP team meetings, citing concerns raised during public comment. The administration expressed caution, noting that the presence of observers may alter meeting dynamics, but indicated that feedback from families would be captured through surveys and focus groups. Additional discussion included the possibility of implementing post-meeting surveys for families to gather immediate feedback on their experiences.

The Committee also discussed participation in focus groups, with administration noting efforts to include all interested participants, and raised the importance of incorporating student voice into future survey and planning processes. Overall, the discussion reflected a focus on improving data transparency, strengthening family engagement, and ensuring equitable support for all student groups.

Subcommittee Reports and Discussions

Finance Subcommittee - Ms. Spadafora

Ms. Spadafora reported that the Finance Subcommittee met on February 23, where members reviewed financial policies that were not aligned with Massachusetts law, discussed year-to-date expenditures, and received a preliminary overview of the FY2026–27 budget. She noted that planning is still in early stages, with further work expected in April.

Motions and Resolutions

Proposition 2.5 Resolution - Mr. Piazza and Mr. Bernard

Mr. Piazza introduced the Proposition 2½ override resolution, explaining the school committee's role in budget oversight. He addressed what he described as a misconception that schools would not be impacted if the override failed, outlining increasing local funding requirements alongside limited state aid. He emphasized that broader city budget cuts would affect students and families and stated that the resolution supports optimal learning conditions.

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg stated she had not received the resolution in time to review it and could not vote on a matter she had not read, though she expressed interest in reviewing it. Ms. Spadafora agreed, citing committee policy requiring advance review time. Ms. Spadafora made a motion to table the resolution. The motion was seconded by Mr. McCarthy. Mr. Piazza acknowledged the

timing concerns but emphasized the urgency given the upcoming vote and the Chair indicated a special meeting would be scheduled for further consideration.

Roll Call Vote

Mr. Drummey - Yes

Mr. McCarthy - Yes

Ms. Spadafora - Yes

Ms. Macklin - Yes

Ms. Hortie - No

Mr. Piazza - No

Mr. Bernard - Absent

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg - Yes

Mayor Christenson - No

The motion passes with a 5-3 vote.

FY 2025-2026 Calendar Amendment - Ms. Spadafora

Ms. Spadafora introduced the agenda item and deferred to the Superintendent, noting she had sponsored it to place it on the docket. The Superintendent presented a memorandum recommending that PreK–8 schools be closed on March 31 due to the special election. He explained that the district typically adjusts the school calendar for elections because six of the seven school buildings are used as polling locations, though this particular election was scheduled after the school calendar had already been set by the City Council. He stated that he had consulted with the Chair, Vice Chair, principals, district administrators, the police chief, and the teachers' association to assess whether schools could safely operate that day. Based on site visits and discussions, he expressed concern about buildings where public access to polling locations would require entry through main school areas, creating safety and logistical challenges, including disruptions to student movement and meals. While noting that some schools have more restricted access points, he ultimately recommended closing all PreK–8 schools for consistency and safety, with the day to be made up at the end of the school year. He added that the high school would remain open and that a waiver from the state may be needed for Salemwood School due to a prior emergency closure.

Mr. McCarthy asked for clarification regarding the calendar impact, confirming that the closure would utilize one of the built-in emergency days and extend the school year to June 23. The Superintendent confirmed this and noted that without a waiver, Salemwood School may need an additional half day. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg asked about the impact on out-of-district students, and it was clarified that those students follow their placement schools' calendars and would not be affected. Mr. Piazza asked about the timeline for receiving a state waiver, and the Superintendent indicated he would follow up with state officials for guidance. Ms. Hortie asked clarifying questions regarding the last day of school and contingency plans if the proposal was not

approved, to which the Superintendent responded that alternative safety plans would need to be developed.

Ms. Spadafora stated that the memo had been publicly available and expressed disappointment that the School Committee had not been consulted earlier in the election scheduling process. She raised concerns about the impact on families and indicated she did not support closing schools, suggesting that other districts have remained open during elections. The Chair responded by emphasizing prior discussions and ultimately stated that, in his view, closing schools was necessary for safety. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg acknowledged similar concerns about lack of input but noted that the decision on polling locations is controlled by the City Council and shared that feedback from parents regarding safety concerns influenced her position.

Ms. Macklin made a motion to approve the Superintendent's recommendation to close PreK-8 schools on March 31. Mr. Piazza seconded the motion. After brief additional clarification regarding waiver procedures, a roll call vote was taken as follows:

Roll Call Vote

Mr. Drummey - No

Mr. McCarthy - No

Ms. Spadafora - No

Ms. Macklin - Yes

Ms. Hortie - Yes

Mr. Piazza - Yes

Mr. Bernard - Absent

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg - Yes

Mayor Christenson - Yes

The motion passes with a 5-3 vote.

The Superintendent stated he would follow up with the state regarding any required waiver and report back to the committee.

Policy: DD - Funding Proposals and Applications - Ms. Spadafora

Ms. Spadafora introduced a financial policy identified by the Finance Subcommittee as not aligned with Massachusetts General Law. Ms. Spadafora made a motion to refer the policy to the Policy Subcommittee for review. The motion was seconded by Ms. Rose-Zeiberg and so it was VOTED. The motion passed unanimously.

Personal Privilege

Executive Session

Ms. Spadafora made a motion to table the Executive session minutes of February 2, 2026 as well as the February 18, 2026 Special Meeting Minutes. Ms. Macklin seconded the motion and so it was VOTED. The motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Spadafora made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Drummey seconded the motion and so it was VOTED. The motion passed unanimously.

Ariana Langston

Ariana Langston, Clerk