

Present: Andrew Herchek, Chair
Carrie Rankin, Vice-Chair
Tracey Marano
Sandeep Pisharody
Michael Williams
Ayesha Lawton, CCRSD METCO Representative
Michele MacDougall, CPS METCO Representative

Present from Administration: Dr. Laurie Hunter, Superintendent of Schools
Robert Conry, Assistant Superintendent
Shelly Chin, Assistant Superintendents

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Herchek called the Concord School Committee to order at 6:07 PM. Roll was taken: Herchek, present; Marano, present; Pisharody, present; Rankin, present; and Williams, present.

II. RECOGNITION - Alcott Community Connections with EL

Students from Alcott Elementary shared experiences with the EL Education curriculum that fosters impactful community partnership. By aligning grade-level topics, curriculum specialists have coordinated visits from high-level professionals, such as an inventor for students studying innovation, and a deep-sea scientist who explored the ocean via the Alvin submersible. By connecting textbook theory to professional practice, these firsthand experiences, from the perseverance of inventing to the technicalities of marine research, have inspired students to see themselves as future creators and made academic studies tangible.

III. SUPERINTENDENT AND CHAIR UPDATES

Dr. Hunter highlighted the recent professional development focused on literacy and the Middle School Playbook transition program. The district is nearing the conclusion of the Willard principal search, with three finalists undergoing site visits and community interviews. Dr. Hunter reported eighth-grade curriculum achievements, specifically a Holocaust and resiliency project showcase that demonstrated deep student engagement with difficult historical topics. This initiative will culminate with a visit from a Holocaust survivor on the 24th, an event open to the entire community. Dr. Hunter concluded by reaffirming the district's commitment to free speech, clarifying there have been no disciplinary actions or restrictions regarding student expression or symbolism.

Ms. Marano attended the recent Chair's breakfast, the PTG presidents meeting, and highlighted several community-wide initiatives, including the launch of a new public health Instagram account and the town now employing two full-time mental health clinicians.

A. METCO Updates

Ms. MacDougall shared recent METCO events including a successful ECHO event at Roxbury Community College that featured Concord alumni.

Ms. Lawton raised concerns about the size of the METCO population at CCHS, which stands at just over 30 students. To prevent the program's erosion, she made a request to maintain enrollment by consistently replenishing vacated seats across all grade levels rather than letting those spots remain empty.

Ms. Marano reviewed the upcoming schedule for community engagement coffees featuring a series of in-person and virtual opportunities for dialogue between school leadership and families. Notable dates include a session in Concord on April 3rd at the Fowler Library, and a meeting on May 1st at South Bay Panera.

IV. PUBLIC COMMENT

Aris Apollos, 1776 Wedgewood Common, Concord, alleged the administration violated his civil rights by requesting he stop wearing his Palestinian keffiyeh. On March 13th, he was told the garment could be considered a disruption if others complained, a justification he challenged by citing the *Tinker v. Des Moines* Supreme Court ruling. Mr. Apollos criticized the public denials of a ban, arguing while he hasn't faced formal discipline, the directive constitutes censorship and an unconstitutional overstep. Mr. Apollos created an online petition to support his right to wear the keffiyeh and concluded the committee has a duty to protect student freedoms, noting his learning environment was being disrupted.

Marilyn Frankenstein, retired professor and member of the MTA, condemned the restriction of students wearing keffiyehs, framing such actions as performative gestures that distract from addressing genuine antisemitism. Identifying as a Jewish educator, she criticized the weaponization of antisemitism by local leaders to justify infringing upon students' First Amendment rights. Ms. Frankenstein urged the committee to consider how their current actions will be judged by history. She concluded by calling for the record to reflect whether the administration chose to uphold constitutional rights or participate in the suppression of Palestinian identity and solidarity.

E.A. Thornton, 168 Cambridge Turnpike, expressed dismay over the keffiyeh incident. He criticized the administration for a perceived lack of ownership and transparency, arguing that denying the nature of the encounter only compounds the harm. Mr. Thornton emphasized admitting wrongdoing and practicing accountability are hallmarks of strong leadership. Mr. Thornton concluded with a plea to protect cultural and religious symbols and to take responsibility for the impact of their actions on the student body.

Linda Morrell, Chelmsford, addressed a student's right to wear a keffiyeh, framing it as protected symbolic speech under the First Amendment. Ms. Morrell stated students do not lose their free speech rights at the schoolhouse gate and such expression can only be restricted if it causes a substantial disruption to the learning environment. She expressed concern over potential viewpoint discrimination, asserting if other cultural or political symbols are permitted, singling out the keffiyeh constitutes unequal treatment. Ms. Morrell concluded by stating schools should remain neutral where diverse perspectives are engaged.

Nancy Aykanian, 19 Newtonville Ave, Newton, defended a student's right to wear a keffiyeh. Ms. Aikanyan stated by organizing collective action against perceived injustice, students demonstrate the high-level critical thinking and informed citizenship that Massachusetts' mandatory civics curriculum aims to cultivate. She asked the committee to recognize and deconstruct the manufactured racist reflex against the garment, urging leaders to act with courage to protect student expression rather than deferring to exclusionary pressures. Ms. Aikanyan suggested the district celebrate Aris Apollo's leadership by appointing him to DEI committees or involving him in high school civics programs.

Ali Soofi, an educator from Boston, linked his experience as a student after September 11th to the current challenges faced by students expressing their identity. Reflecting on the internal shame and anxiety he felt over his own name due to pervasive Islamophobia, Ali commended the courage of students currently wearing the keffiyeh in school. He stated the keffiyeh is a cultural symbol with a long history predating modern political conflicts, and it has been unfairly weaponized against the people it represents.

Josh Gidlowski, Power Road, Lincoln, advocated for the right of students to wear the keffiyeh without intimidation or censorship. He stated freedom of speech is most vital when protecting the oppressed and symbols of identity, grief, and solidarity should never require an apology or official permission. Mr. Gidlowski cautioned against allowing fear to recast the silencing of others as a form of safety or order. He concluded by emphasizing that true freedom necessitates the right to display symbols of struggle and resistance without shame.

Majd M, Weymouth, advocated for a student right to wear cultural and national symbols, specifically the keffiyeh. Majd stated under the existing dress code and civil rights policies, student expression should only be restricted if it causes a documented disruption or disorder, rather than discomfort. Majd called for the equal application of rules to all students to ensure Arab culture and expression are not singled out for different treatment.

V. CONSENT AGENDA

Mr. Williams moved and Ms. Marano seconded the motion to approve items B, C, D on the Consent Agenda with edits to spelling errors that Mr. Williams noted in items C and D. The motion was approved by roll call: Herchek, aye; Marano, aye; Pisharody, aye; Rankin, aye; and Williams, aye.

Mr. Williams addressed Item A - the January 21, 2026 minutes, noting that he wanted to be sure the records of the meetings reflected the events that took place. He presented the edits he had suggested in prior meetings and requested they be added back in the minutes:

Mr. Williams attempted to bring up recent comments by the Middlesex District Attorney concerning our community and was accused of breaching Open Meeting Law by Chair Herchek, Dr. Hunter responded on the matter.

A motion was made by Mr. Pisharody, seconded by Ms. Rankin, to approve the January 21, 2026 minutes. Mr. Williams made a motion to amend, seconded by Ms. Rankin. Mr. Herchek noted that the Select Board has three open meeting law complaints and stated that he supports the amendment. Mr. Williams suggested that there was no open meeting law violation and

urged the SC to unanimously approve the amendment. Ms. Lawton urged the SC to show respect towards each other and Ms. MacDougall stated that the SC is modelling behavior for the children in the district.

The motion to approve the January 21, 2026 minutes, with the amended language, was unanimously approved.

VI. CORRESPONDENCE

Ms. Marano reported CPS received three pieces of correspondence.

VII. DISCUSSION

A. EL Literacy

Ms. Chin presented an update on the EL Literacy program. She was joined by several educators in person and online: Thoreau Kindergarten teachers Johanna Ellis, Beth Helenius and Ashley Sivan; Willard 5th Grade teacher Katie Vaudrain; Alcott Principal Naomi Krakow; Thoreau Principal Justin Sparks; The district is in the initial phase of implementing the EL Education literacy curriculum, a rigorous, evidence-based program that has seen high engagement from an inaugural cohort of teachers. While quantitative data is being gathered, educators from kindergarten through fifth grade report significant qualitative successes, including enhanced student discourse, expanded academic vocabulary, and a more equitable level playing field where students build expertise on content topics like weather, trains, and human rights. While the transition required extensive professional development and material preparation, teachers found the structured approach manageable as they move through subsequent modules. Families are already noticing the program's impact through their children's increased enthusiasm for reading and their ability to apply core themes, such as perseverance and determination, across other subjects like math and social interactions.

B. CMS Building Project Update

Dr. Hunter shared a presentation on the CMS building project as it enters its final stages with successful financial and operational results. Phase one construction is finished with only minor commissioning and a small punch list remaining, while phase two demolition and field work are waiting on one final growing season for a scheduled fall opening. The project achieved an alignment with its original \$110 million authorization, and the town expects to rescind the second borrowing authorization at the 2027 Town Meeting, since those funds were not required. This outcome is notable given the significant cost escalations seen across the industry since the project's pre-COVID inception; the building was completed at \$560 per square foot, a figure now often exceeding \$1,000 in the current market.

VIII. EXECUTIVE SESSION

Ms. Marano moved that the Concord School Committee enter into Executive session pursuant to M.G.L. c.30A, §21(a)(3) to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining or litigation with the Concord Teachers Association Education Support Professionals if an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining or litigating position of the public body and the chair so declares, and not return to Open Session. Roll was taken: Herchek, aye; Marano, aye; Pisharody, aye; Rankin, aye; and Williams, aye.

IX. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Barbara Gilmore

Approved: May 20, 2026

CCHS Concord-Carlisle High School
CCRSB Concord-Carlisle Regional School District
CCSC Concord-Carlisle Regional District School Committee
CCTA Concord-Carlisle Teachers' Association
CMS Concord Middle School
CMSBC Concord Middle School Building Committee
COAR Communities Organizing Against Racism
CPC Community Preservation Committee
CPS Concord Public Schools
CSC Concord School Committee
CTA Concord Teachers Association
DEIB Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging
DHCB Department of Housing and Community Development
ESSER Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund
FINCOM Finance Committee
LEAP Learning Executive and Academic Processes
MTSS Multi-Tiered System of Supports
PD Professional Development
SC School Committee
SEPAC Special Education Parent Advisory Council
WRAP Writing, Reading, and Academic Processes
YRBS Youth Risk Behavior Survey