

SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

September 1, 2026

Meeting: School Committee

Date: September 1, 2026

Location: Virtual via WebEx

Attendees: Kate Koch-Sundquist, Chairperson; Chris Reed, Vice Chair; Lindsay Banks; Jake Foster; Nadia Wetzler; Theresa Whitman; Sarah Stone; Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations

Guests: Maggie Whitman, Student Representative; Cami Oringer, Athletic Director; Julie Sgroi, High School Principal;

A. Call to Order

Ms. Koch-Sundquist called the School Committee Business Meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

1) Public Comment

None.

2) Student Report

Student Representative Maggie Whitman provided an update as students prepared for the first day of school. She reported that fall sports and preseason activities were underway and that students were looking forward to the start of the school year. Senior activities, including senior parking space painting and Senior Sunrise, had been rescheduled due to weather.

Ms. Whitman also noted that, as a senior, she will continue in the Student Representative role for the first portion of the year while helping prepare a new student representative to transition into the role later in the school year.

In response to questions from the Committee, Ms. Whitman discussed student interest in the High School cell phone policy and noted that students are interested in participating in the policy development process. She offered to continue gathering student feedback and reporting on issues of interest to the Committee.

3) Chairperson's Report

Ms. Koch-Sundquist reported on the District's welcome-back breakfast and all-District meeting held earlier in the day. She described the event as positive and energizing and noted the enthusiasm of staff as they prepared for the return of students.

Subcommittee Appointments

Ms. Koch-Sundquist reviewed the proposed School Committee subcommittee assignments for the 2026–2027 school year:

- Elementary Facilities/ESBC: Theresa Whitman and Sarah Stone
- Finance: Jake Foster and Chris Reed
- Negotiations: Kate Koch-Sundquist and Nadia Wetzler, pending scheduling
- Policy: Theresa Whitman, Lindsay Banks, and Nadia Wetzler
- Communications and Advocacy: Lindsay Banks and Jake Foster, beginning in January

Superintendent Beaudoin reported that the Negotiation Team schedule is being finalized with counsel and that meeting invitations will be distributed once dates and times are confirmed.

Mr. Foster moved to approve the proposed subcommittee reorganization. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

A roll call vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.

Superintendent Contract

Ms. Koch-Sundquist introduced a proposed one-year extension of Superintendent Beaudoin's contract through June 30, 2028. She noted the Committee's positive evaluations of the Superintendent and the value of leadership continuity as the District moves forward with several significant initiatives.

Mr. Foster presented a timeline illustrating anticipated District initiatives over the next several years, including budget planning, the Essex Elementary School Building Project, collective bargaining, and an eventual superintendent transition. He raised the importance of considering how the timing of these initiatives may intersect with a future leadership transition.

The Committee discussed the timeline and agreed that long-term planning is important, while also recognizing that future budget and operational conditions remain uncertain. Members expressed support for maintaining leadership stability and noted that future planning with the towns may help provide additional context for the District's longer-term budget and leadership transition.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to extend Superintendent Beaudoin's contract through June 30, 2028. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.

The Committee then discussed the Superintendent's annual salary adjustment. Following discussion, the motion was clarified to extend Superintendent Beaudoin's contract through June 30, 2028, with a 2.5% cost-of-living adjustment retroactive to July 1, 2026.

A roll call vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.

Consent Agenda

Minutes for Approval: August 17, 2026

The Committee reviewed the August 17, 2026 meeting minutes. Minor amendments previously submitted to the Superintendent were noted and will be incorporated into the final document.

Mr. Foster moved to approve the August 17, 2026 minutes as amended. Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

A roll call vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.

The Committee also discussed the importance of members stating their names and votes during roll call votes to improve the accuracy of electronic meeting records.

Subcommittee Reports

Elementary Facilities/ESBC

Ms. Whitman and Superintendent Beaudoin provided an update on the Essex Elementary School Building Project. The project is moving through Schematic Design, with current design discussion focused primarily on the exterior façade and the comparison of arch and gable/pitched roof concepts. Updated renderings are being developed to better represent the actual scale of the proposed building, and additional community feedback will be gathered as the design continues.

Superintendent Beaudoin shared renderings of several developing interior spaces, including the Pre-K entrance, neighborhood gathering areas, classrooms, library/media center, and cafeteria/gym/auditorium space.

The District and Building Committee are preparing for a busy fall community engagement schedule leading to Town Meeting and the project funding vote. Ms. Whitman also reported that a community information group is underway to help increase public understanding of the project and upcoming decisions.

Finance Committee

The Finance Committee had not met.

The Committee discussed the future structure of the collaboration group involving representatives from the School Committee and the Manchester and Essex Select Boards. Members discussed whether the group should continue the more finance-focused format used

during the prior year or return to a broader regional collaboration model addressing financial planning and other issues of shared interest.

There was general support for broader, proactive communication among the three entities while maintaining financial planning as an important component. The Committee also discussed whether representation should include board chairs or vice chairs to ensure appropriate leadership participation.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist agreed to contact the chairs of the Manchester and Essex Select Boards to clarify proposed representation, meeting schedules, and the intended agenda and scope of the collaboration group and report back to the Committee.

Policy Committee

No report.

Negotiation Team

No report. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that proposed meeting dates are being coordinated with counsel and will be shared with the Negotiation Team.

Superintendent's Report

General Update

Superintendent Beaudoin reported that the District was ready to welcome students back the following day. She provided an overview of the all-District welcome-back program, which included recognition of employees reaching service milestones, introduction of new staff, and a keynote address focused on meeting the challenge of change.

The District hired 16 new staff members, including five teachers and ten teaching assistants. Recruitment remained underway for several late Middle School vacancies, including Health, Middle School Academy, and sixth-grade math. Superintendent Beaudoin also recognized new Middle School Principal Matt Roy and reported that the leadership transition had gone smoothly.

The new EES Morning Movers program will provide a flexible before-school drop-off option for Essex Elementary families. Thirty-six students had pre-registered for the program prior to its launch.

Superintendent Beaudoin also reported positively on the transition to the District's new transportation provider. Planning is underway to restore late-bus service in mid-September.

The District again received funding for high-dosage tutoring at the elementary level, with 21 seats available across Essex and Memorial Elementary Schools. ParentSquare is also being expanded to include additional communication and payment functions.

Cell Phone Policy

High School Principal Julie Sgroi provided an update on the development of a bell-to-bell cell phone policy for Manchester Essex Regional High School. A teacher committee developed an initial proposal during the spring and consulted with a neighboring district that had implemented a similar approach.

Ms. Sgroi explained that the next phase will broaden the process to include students, teachers, families, administrators, and other stakeholders. She noted that students have expressed significant interest in participating and have provided thoughtful feedback regarding the issue.

The current High School practice requires students to place phones in classroom storage during instructional periods but allows access during passing periods, lunch, and other non-instructional times. The proposed bell-to-bell approach would address phone use throughout the entire school day.

The Committee discussed consistency across grade levels, student and family communication, research regarding the impact of cell phone use, and the possibility of eventually considering a District-wide policy. Ms. Sgroi plans to begin the stakeholder process early in the school year, with the goal of implementing a revised High School approach around Thanksgiving. This would provide several weeks to identify and address implementation issues before the December break and moving into January.

Legislative/Policy Update

Superintendent Beaudoin also provided a brief update regarding recently enacted state requirements related to immigration enforcement and student protections. She noted that the District has had procedures in place since 2024 based on guidance provided by school counsel for responding to potential immigration enforcement activity in schools.

The District will review its existing procedures against the new statutory requirements and bring any necessary policy work forward in the coming weeks.

Continued Business

Co-Op Hockey Proposal

Athletic Director Cami Oringer presented a proposal for Manchester Essex Regional High School to serve as the host school for the cooperative boys hockey program for the 2026–2027 season as a one-year pilot. The cooperative includes students from Manchester, Essex, Hamilton, Wenham, Ipswich, and Rockport.

The pilot is intended to preserve the existing cooperative program while providing administrative stability and an opportunity to evaluate its financial and logistical sustainability. The proposal is contingent upon participation by at least ten Manchester Essex student-athletes and will be reviewed by the participating districts following the season.

Ms. Oringer reviewed the approximately \$70,000 operating budget, which is expected to be supported through a \$650 user fee, gate receipts, contributions from participating districts, and fundraising support from the Viking Boosters. Financial assistance will remain available to ensure that students are not excluded because of an inability to pay. Based on current projections and commitments, the program is expected to be cost neutral to MERSD.

The Committee also discussed development of a shared team identity representing all six participating communities. The intent is to strengthen the cooperative identity, support continuity with youth hockey programs, and allow the identity to remain with the program if the host school changes in the future.

Ms. Oringer reported that family feedback collected over the summer was generally supportive of the proposed fee and shared identity. She will continue conversations with participating families as the District evaluates the pilot and longer-term sustainability of the program.

The existing coaches are expected to continue but will become Manchester Essex employees and will be required to complete the District's standard hiring process, including application, CORI, and fingerprinting requirements.

Mr. Foster moved to approve the proposed cooperative hockey program as presented. Mr. Reed seconded the motion.

A roll call vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.

ESBC Roster Update

The Committee reviewed an updated Essex School Building Committee roster. The changes included the addition of Sarah Stone, removal of John Banerus, and redesignation of Annie Cameron from community representative to town representative.

At Mr. Foster's request, the roster was further amended to identify Ms. Cameron's title as Essex Selectman.

Ms. Whitman moved to approve the updated Essex School Building Committee roster as amended to reflect Annie Cameron's title as Essex Selectman and the membership changes noted above.

A roll call vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.

Continued Work – Goal Development

The Committee continued its discussion of School Committee and Superintendent goals for the 2026–2027 school year.

Members discussed several areas of potential focus, including supporting opportunities for District leadership to maintain a presence in schools, preparing for the eventual superintendent transition, and developing a clearer and more consistent way to review student outcomes and District progress.

Mr. Foster discussed the importance of long-term planning for the superintendent transition and ensuring that the Committee is prepared well in advance of the anticipated search process.

Ms. Banks proposed developing a consolidated District data summary or report card that would bring together student outcomes and other measures of progress currently reported at different points throughout the year. The Committee discussed the potential value of aggregating measures such as academic performance, student well-being, and other indicators aligned with District priorities so that progress can be considered over time.

Members agreed that identifying the appropriate measures would be an important first step and discussed the need to balance District-level measures with the District's emphasis on individual student growth. The Communications and Advocacy Subcommittee may assist in exploring how this information could be organized and presented.

The Committee agreed that additional discussion was needed before finalizing the goals. Ms. Koch-Sundquist will continue the discussion with members by email and bring the work back for further consideration.

School Committee Comment

Ms. Banks requested additional information and community input regarding student fundraising as the Policy Committee begins considering a District fundraising policy. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that the work will include financial compliance, organization, and appropriate management of funds and that Director of Finance & Operations Michelle Cresta will be an important resource in the policy development process.

C. Adjourn

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

A roll call vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:30 p.m.