AMESBURY SCHOOL COMMITTEE

SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

August 24, 2026

Present were Mayor Kassandra Gove, Ian Gillis, Chris Hunt, Abigail Jurist Levy, Deb Manseau, Brock Omohundro, Brooke Woodsom

A recording of this meeting can be viewed here:
https://cloud.castus.tv/vod/amesbury/video/6a95a15c6649380002fbe46d?page=PLAYLIST

I. Call to Order/Mission Statement/Pledge of Allegiance – Mr. Gillis read the mission statement and led the committee in the pledge.

II. Comments by Visitors & Delegations (1:30)

- Matt Lipson, Main St. - Addressed the committee regarding the use of the term "reteaching" in student handbooks. He cautioned against applying the term broadly to practices that simply require students to repeat tasks or lose recess time—such as requiring young students to independently dress for outdoor play. Emphasizing that speed and repetition do not equate to actual instruction, particularly for students with motor, sensory, executive functioning, or developmental delays, Mr. Lipson urged the district to ensure that true reteaching involves identifying lagging skills, providing explicit instruction and accommodations, and avoiding consequences that could inadvertently penalize students for disability-related challenges.
- Hillary Fraize, Main St. - Addressed the committee regarding Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative practices, and behavior intervention flowcharts in the Cashman and Shay elementary school handbooks. While thanking Principals Dr. Mitchell and Mr. Obremski for their transparent communication, she urged the district to clearly define terms like "restorative recess" and "restorative lunch" in the handbooks to ensure interventions do not lead to student isolation, loss of recess, or shame—particularly for students with disabilities. She requested that behavioral flowcharts referenced in handbooks be made accessible to families and that clear policies be established regarding parent notification when behavioral interventions occur.
- Heather Lull, public comment attached.
- Amesbury SEPAC, public comment attached.

III. Communications & Reports (15:33)

A. Q4 Budget Report

- Fiscal Year Closeout & Cost Savings: Acting Director of Finance & Operations, Mr. Grayton, presented the FY26 Q4 budget report (for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2026), highlighting significant district savings across four key areas: health insurance, special education transportation, special education tuitions, and McKinney-Vento (homeless) transportation.
- School Choice Revolving Account & Budget Offsets:
    - Thanks to realized operational savings, $632,823.68 in salaries was moved back to the main budget, leaving a carryover balance of roughly $1.4 million in the School Choice revolving account.
    - Responding to Mayor Gove regarding offsets used to balance the FY27 budget and retain teaching positions, Mr. Grayton noted that nearly $900,000 of that balance is committed to FY27 teacher salaries. He added that School Choice revenue has become less predictable due to lower incoming enrollment and varying state supplemental funding for specialized services, meaning no year-end turnbacks are anticipated.
    - In response to Dr. Jurist Levy's question regarding the financial loss from students choice-funding out of district, Mr. Grayton confirmed that choice-out dollars recently exceeded choice-in dollars and committed to providing the exact assessment figure.
- Athletic Revolving Account & Student Fees:
    - Mr. Grayton reported a higher-than-usual carryover in the Athletic Revolving account, explaining that outgoing AD Glenn Gearin deliberately deferred purchasing decisions to incoming AD Craig Genualdo.
    - Mr. Omohundro suggested evaluating whether a portion of these surplus athletic funds could be used to provide financial relief to district families through fee reductions.
- Utilities & Revolving Accounts Analysis:
    - Utility expenses stabilized following previous years of volatility. Electricity spending closely matched budgeted estimates, while heating costs slightly exceeded the line item but aligned with the $462,000 budgeted for FY27.
    - A comparative analysis of revolving accounts outlined revenue budgeted versus received. Future quarterly reports will be expanded to include expenditure data for a more complete financial overview.

B. Q4 Facilities Report

- Mr. Grayton presented the Q4 facilities update on behalf of Director of Facilities Jim McCarthy, detailing summer maintenance (floor

stripping/waxing, room painting, and fire department inspections) alongside building-specific projects:

- Shay Elementary School:
    - Warning Surfaces & Water Heaters: Outreach is underway with the design team regarding premature deterioration of detectable warning surfaces installed on sidewalks three years ago. A second hot water heater was replaced, restoring full operational capacity.
    - Fire Alarm Signal Delay: Fire department inspections revealed a signal transmission delay from the building alarm to dispatch due to poor reception. The district is securing quotes to install an antenna on the firebox to resolve the issue promptly and avoid a required fire watch; Dr. Zadravec and the fire chief are meeting to review interim remedies. Mayor Gove noted this has been a persistent issue since construction.
- Cashman Elementary School:
    - Kitchen Serving Line Project: Following an August 3 RFP, the district is awarding a contract funded by the School Lunch Revolving account to install two identical serving lines over a long weekend. The project aims to double line speed and ensure students have adequate time to eat.
    - Rooftop AC & Asbestos Encapsulation: Replacement under-warranty compressors for rooftop AC units arrived and await installation via a scheduled crane lift. Additionally, removing a chalkboard revealed asbestos behind a wall in an office space; the city health inspector approved an encapsulation plan (placing a board over the area and painting) with no disturbance to students.
- Amesbury Middle School:
    - Performance Center & Athletics: The Performance Center is open, operational, and actively being rented out (with renters providing proof of insurance); sound and lighting upgrade quotes came in high and remain on hold. A replacement part for the girls' softball scoreboard was identified and is being ordered for fall troubleshooting.
    - Safety, HVAC & Facilities: Quotes were received for aging fire alarm strobes, with timing being evaluated alongside a future fire panel replacement. Technicians are investigating rooftop AC units affecting the library and principal's office due to cooling and odor issues. Floor stripping and sealing for the large gym will occur in the coming weeks, and new fire doors were successfully installed.
- Amesbury High School & Innovation:

- Concrete Repairs & Tennis Grant: Free Cash-funded concrete and step repairs were completed at the front entrance, loading dock, and middle school grounds. Mayor Gove and Mr. Grayton noted that new curbing and parking lines will be painted yellow before school starts. The district received a $35,000 athletic grant for temporary crack repairs on the tennis courts, which Mayor Gove noted will come before the committee for formal acceptance.
- Diamond Field Project: The baseball/field hockey field project is roughly one year behind schedule. Sand injections were delayed due to wet field conditions caused by sod watering, but injections and paving are scheduled for the current week to finalize the project.
- Innovation Academy: Leadership is evaluating existing surplus cameras from COVID funding to upgrade the building's camera system without additional expenditure.

C. Requests of Committee

- Dr. Jurist Levy requested a presentation of the regionalization study.

IV. New Business (43:13)

1. SY 2026-2027 School Handbooks

- District-Wide Consistency & Revisions: Dr. Manseau presented the updated school handbooks, highlighting efforts to establish district-wide consistency through standardized cover pages, unified calendars, anti-discrimination statements, phone-free expectations, and the integration of the "Vision of the Graduate" framework.
- Policy JKAA Integration: Dr. Manseau and Superintendent Dr. Zadravec addressed concerns raised by SEPAC regarding Policy JKAA (Physical Restraint, Timeout, and Seclusion). They clarified that full state regulations and procedural text have now been directly embedded into the body of each school's handbook rather than relying solely on external links.
- Living Documents & Future Review:
  - Framing the handbooks as flexible, "living documents" published virtually, Dr. Manseau recommended approving the current drafts with the understanding that administrative updates will occur as needed. Mayor Gove requested that the School Committee be routinely notified whenever handbook updates are issued to families.
  - Dr. Jurist Levy noted she would forward minor proofreading notes to Dr. Zadravec for school principals.

- Following a suggestion from Mr. Omohundro, the Policy Subcommittee agreed to schedule a three-month check-in to review any subsequent substantive updates or corrections prompted by community feedback.
  Dr. Jurist Levy motioned to approve the handbooks with the understanding that they are living documents and they will evolve, continue to evolve over time, seconded by Mr. Gillis. Passed unanimously.

2. SY 2026-2027- District and School Committee Goals
   - School Committee members Dr. Manseau and Dr. Jurist Levy compiled the district and School Committee goals into a unified document following the committee's workshop. Presented by Mayor Kassandra Gove, the framework establishes a top-down hierarchy: high-level district goals guide the School Committee's targets, which will subsequently inform Dr. Zadravec's individual goals and the upcoming school improvement plans. The four primary district goals focus on advancing student outcomes via the K–12 "Vision of the Graduate," modeling strong leadership and a collaborative culture, making strategic resource decisions for long-term district sustainability, and promoting academic excellence through equitable learning opportunities. To support these, the School Committee outlined four corresponding goals: enhancing communication and transparency to build public trust, establishing clear leadership roles for effective governance, navigating fiscal challenges through student-centered planning, and monitoring academic achievement outcomes.
     During discussion, committee members commended the document's unifying direction. Mr. Hunt highlighted the importance of leveraging district expertise to support Dr. Zadravec's administrative team despite limited resources, while Mr. Omohundro noted that subcommittees are actively aligning their work with the new goals—including Curriculum Subcommittee plans to present student achievement data to the public in a clearer, more accessible format. Dr. Jurist Levy reaffirmed that keeping the K–12 Vision of the Graduate as the district's "north star" brings clear purpose and alignment across all grade levels.
     Dr. Jurist Levy motioned to approve the goals, seconded by Mr. Omohundro. Passed unanimously.

3. Whittier Regional Agreement Amendment Committee (RAAC) Update
   - Mayor Gove provided an update on the Whittier Regional Agreement Amendment Committee (RAAC), which was established after the February 2024 regional building project vote failed. Following the vote,

the 11 member communities re-engaged with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) and were invited back into the building process under the key condition that a new regional agreement be established—a task that has proven difficult due to varying municipal structures, budget cycles, and community interests.

- The advisory subcommittee, composed of an appointee and alternate from each of the 11 communities (with Mayor Gove serving as Amesbury's primary representative and City Councilor Frederique as alternate), has reached consensus on several foundational policy updates. These include clarifying school committee appointment processes, term lengths, and start dates; adjusting committee representation (currently two seats for cities, one for towns); standardizing operating and capital budget submission timelines; and reviewing lottery and admissions language. Consensus recommendations are determined via straw poll votes before going to the full Whittier School Committee, DESE, and eventually local legislative bodies (such as Amesbury's City Council) for formal approval.
- Key Challenges & Current Status:
    - Capital Cost Apportionment: The primary point of contention remains how capital costs are divided among member communities. The existing 50-year-old agreement bases capital apportionment on total school-age population, while several communities advocate for shifting to an enrollment-based model. Because the current agreement requires a unanimous vote for any amendment, negotiations reached a standstill over proposed compromise formulas (such as a 50/50 split between school-age population and enrollment).
    - Northern Essex Community College Proposal: To reduce total project costs and lower non-reimbursable MSBA space requirements, the committee is exploring moving certain district facilities to the nearby Northern Essex Community College campus, which could also unlock alternative funding avenues.
    - Next Steps & Costs: The advisory group is working to package its straw poll recommendations for the Whittier School Committee, which must decide how to proceed with MSBA feasibility funding. Mayor Gove noted that current feasibility work is being co-funded by Whittier and Northern Essex without requiring direct municipal appropriations from member cities and towns.

V. Consent Agenda (1:14:35)

A. *Dr. Manseau moved to approve the warrant August 20 $433,081.64, seconded by Mr. Gillis. Passed unanimously.*

B. *Mr. Omohundro moved to approve the $1,000 donation from the Civic Star Essay Contest for 8th grade social studies, seconded by Dr. Jurist Levy. Passed unanimously.*

Mr. Omohundro moved to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Hunt. Passed unanimously.

The next regular meeting of the School Committee will be held on Monday September 14, 2026 at 7pm.

PUBLIC COMMENTS 8/24/26

Heather Lull

Good evening. My name is **Heather**, and I am speaking tonight both as a **parent in Amesbury Public Schools** and as the **Co-Chair of the Amesbury SEPAC**.

Over the past year, SEPAC has invested significant time educating families, staff, and administrators about the updated DESE regulations in **603 CMR 46.00**, which took effect on **August 17, 2026** and were formally **adopted by Amesbury on August 10, 2026**. We have worked hard to ensure that our district understands these changes because they directly impact student safety, trauma-informed practice, and legal compliance.

That is why it is **disheartening and frankly disappointing** to see that, despite this work, the **District Handbook still contains the outdated JKAA policy adopted in 2015**, and several school handbooks continue to link families to that outdated policy.

Only **Amesbury Middle School** and **Amesbury High School** have correctly updated their handbooks to include the new 2026 restraint and seclusion policy. However, **Shay**, **CES Upper Elementary**, and **AIHS** all direct families to the District Handbook, which still displays:

- **JKAA – Adopted August 2015**
- outdated definitions
- outdated prohibitions
- outdated reporting requirements
- and none of the mandatory 2026 DESE updates

This inconsistency means that families across Amesbury are receiving **different information depending on which school their child attends**, and in several cases, they are being directed to a policy that is **over a decade out of date** and **no longer compliant with state law**.

The outdated JKAA policy:

- incorrectly states that **seclusion is prohibited**, which is no longer accurate
- omits required definitions for **seclusion, time-out, consent, school working day, public education programs**

- omits mandatory **written parent notification within three school days**
- omits **weekly individual student reviews** and **monthly administrative reviews**
- omits **DESE reporting requirements**
- omits **trauma-informed and suicide-prevention training requirements**
- omits **physical-space and weekly inspection standards** for emergency seclusion
- omits the required statement that **restraint or seclusion may not appear in any IEP or behavior plan**

These are not small details. They are **core components of the updated regulation**, and they are essential for transparency, safety, and legal compliance.

As both a parent and SEPAC Co-Chair, I am asking the School Committee to take immediate action:

1. **Update the District Handbook JKAA policy** to reflect the August 10, 2026 amendment and the full DESE 603 CMR 46.00 requirements.
2. **Ensure every APS school handbook links to the updated policy**, not the outdated 2015 version.
3. **Publicly confirm that all APS restraint and seclusion procedures align with the 2026 DESE regulations**.

Families deserve accurate, consistent, and legally compliant information. SEPAC has invested considerable time supporting this transition, and it is discouraging to see that the district's own handbook has not been updated accordingly.

I urge the Committee to correct this immediately before the 2026–2027 handbooks are finalized.

Thank you

Amesbury SEPAC

Good evening, School Committee members, Mayor Gove, and Superintendent.

This public comment is submitted on behalf of Amesbury SEPAC regarding the proposed student handbooks.

We appreciate the work administrators have put into these documents. However, after reviewing the handbooks across schools, we have concerns about discipline, particularly as it relates to students with disabilities.

One concern is consistency. Some handbooks accurately explain that under Massachusetts law, alternative remedies generally must be employed and their use and results documented before suspension under Section 37H¾, subject to exceptions. Others contain older language suggesting alternatives merely need to be "considered," and in at least one handbook, both standards appear in different places. We believe this should be corrected and stated consistently across schools.

We are also increasingly concerned about suspensions occurring at the elementary level, particularly suspensions involving students with disabilities. These are very young children. We believe exclusion from school should be an extraordinary response, with appropriate alternatives, interventions, and supports used whenever possible and as required by law.

This is especially important because Massachusetts recently updated its special-education discipline regulations. DESE issued a July 30, 2026 memorandum advising districts to review and update their discipline policies and procedures, particularly regarding students with disabilities.

Under the new 603 CMR 28.11, Massachusetts defines a disciplinary change of placement for an eligible student as removal of more than 10 school days, cumulative or consecutive. Additional protections then apply, including the manifestation-determination process. The regulations also require eligible students to receive educational services during any disciplinary removal, regardless of length.

Families shouldn't have to understand special-education law or search through district policies that may not remain in the final handbooks to discover these protections.

We are asking that every handbook contain a brief, parent-friendly Students with Disabilities and Discipline section where suspension and discipline are discussed. It should explain these protections for students with IEPs, identify applicable Section 504 protections, and direct families to the district's complete procedures.

We've also noticed that some handbooks recognize disability accommodations in particular areas. AHS's and AIHS cellphone policy, for example, recognizes IEP and 504 accommodations and moves toward individualized problem-solving when violations become repetitive.

We would like to see that same consideration reflected throughout behavior, discipline, attendance, and other school policies for students with disabilities, including students

with IEPs and 504 Plans. Their accommodations, individual needs, and disability-related protections should be consistently recognized across all of these areas.

Our request is to make these protections current, consistent, visible, and understandable to families before approval.