

DRAFT
SCHOOL COMMITTEE
BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES
September 15, 2026

Meeting: School Committee

Date: September 15, 2026

Location: Manchester Essex Regional Middle High School Library and virtual via WebEx

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

Guests: Maggie Whitman, Student Representative; Julie Sgroi, High School Principal; Sally, Debate Coach

A. Call to Order

Ms. Koch-Sundquist called the School Committee Business Meeting to order at 6:18 p.m.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

1) Public Comment

None.

2) Student Report

Student Representative Maggie Whitman reported that students across the District were settling into the school year. Essex Elementary School was preparing for its Open House and the Happy as a Clam fun run. Memorial Elementary School was preparing for NEASC, welcoming 12 new staff members, and expanding the RISE program. At the High School, classes, athletics, clubs, and musical rehearsals were underway.

Ms. Whitman reported that High School students were discussing changes to cell phone expectations and new procedures for movement during U-Block. She noted that some students viewed the changes as restrictive.

Ms. Whitman explained that future reports will include feedback from all schools and from the Student Advisory Committee once its meetings begin.

3) Chairperson's Report

Ms. Koch-Sundquist thanked faculty and administrators for a smooth opening of school. Superintendent Beaudoin recognized the work of the principals and Directors in addressing several beginning-of-year challenges.

Consent Agenda

The Committee reviewed the September 1, 2026 meeting minutes and the vouchers included in the consent agenda.

Mr. Foster moved to approve the consent agenda. Ms. Wetzler seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

New Business

Out-of-State Travel Request - Debate Team

Debate Advisor Sally Berkowitz presented a request for seven students to attend an invitational debate tournament at Yale University in October. Six students will compete in public forum debate, and one student will compete in extemporaneous speaking. She and an additional chaperone will accompany the students and fulfill the tournament's judging requirements.

The trip will be supported by funds raised by the Debate Team. Students will travel in a District van and stay at lodging approximately 15 minutes from campus. The Committee discussed supervision, driver training, background checks, insurance and liability coverage, and the significant cost that would result from using a charter bus.

Ms. Banks moved to approve the Debate Team's out-of-state overnight travel to Yale University. Mr. Foster seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Banks moved to approve use of a District van for the overnight trip. Mr. Foster seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

The Committee also discussed the value of the District vans for small-group travel and asked whether future reporting could include information regarding vehicle use and cost savings.

Longevity Bench Proposal

Superintendent Beaudoin reported that the family that had proposed donating a longevity bench had withdrawn the request. No action was required.

Superintendent's Report

Opening of School and Preliminary Enrollment

Superintendent Beaudoin reported that the District was in the middle of its Open House schedule and that Essex School Building Committee materials would be available at upcoming school events to increase public awareness of the project and opportunities for community input.

A preliminary enrollment review showed approximately 50 fewer students than the prior year. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that enrollment and class sizes appeared to be within expected ranges and that the additional section at Memorial Elementary School was supporting an appropriate distribution of students. A more detailed enrollment report, including sections, specialized programs, school choice, and out-of-district placements, will be presented in October.

The Committee requested additional information regarding private-school transitions and the distribution of enrollment changes across schools. Superintendent Beaudoin agreed to include further detail in the next report.

Essex Elementary School Building Project

Superintendent Beaudoin reviewed the distinction between providing factual project information and advocating for passage of the project. District representatives may share information, distribute flyers, answer questions, and direct community members to project resources.

Subcommittee Reports

Finance Committee

The Finance Committee had not met and was scheduled to meet the following week.

Elementary Facilities and ESBC

Ms. Whitman reported that the Essex School Building Committee was working to finalize the building design and establish the project budget during Schematic Design. Discussion continued regarding two exterior treatments for the landing and main entrance. Updated renderings and comparisons with the Memorial Elementary School hub were helping the Committee and community better understand the scale of the proposed space.

The ESBC expected to consider cost and maintenance information before selecting an option at its September 22 meeting. Members emphasized that the interior program and square footage of the landing remain the same under either exterior treatment and that the space addresses circulation, security, and community-use needs.

The design team had begun discussions with the Essex Shipbuilding Museum regarding opportunities to reflect local shipbuilding and educational history in the building. The community survey had received approximately 130 responses, and additional engagement was planned, including a community meeting on October 8. Updated project slides and diagrams will be posted online.

Negotiation Team

The Negotiation Team had not met.

Policy Committee

The Policy Committee reviewed a policy required by the Massachusetts PROTECT Act concerning interactions with law enforcement officers engaged in civil immigration enforcement.

Superintendent Beaudoin explained that the policy establishes procedures for receiving documentation, consulting counsel, protecting student rights, and identifying the administrators responsible for responding. The policy does not limit appropriate cooperation with police, fire, emergency medical services, or other authorities acting within their lawful roles.

The Committee discussed the distinct role of the School Resource Officer, the District directory provision, website posting requirements, and administrative updates to staff names and assignments in policies and related memoranda. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that the legislation reached districts shortly before the September 1 implementation date and that state associations advised districts to adopt compliant policies as soon as practical. The proposed language had been reviewed by school counsel.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to waive the Committee's two-reading policy for this item. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Wetzler moved to adopt the PROTECT Act policy concerning interactions with law enforcement officers engaged in civil immigration enforcement as presented. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

The Policy Committee also began reviewing the District's background-check policy. No action was taken.

Continued Business

High School Bridge Plan Progress Report

High School Principal Julie Sgroi presented a summary of progress under the 2025-2026 bridge plan, which focused on deepening instructional innovation and student voice and advancing curriculum review and alignment.

Ms. Sgroi highlighted student input in the Program of Studies, including the addition of Marine Biology; continued development of the SCORE internship program; partnerships with community organizations such as 1623 Studios and Rockport Music; International Week; interdisciplinary work; and authentic learning experiences across the arts, mathematics, science, English, and social studies. She also described increased collaboration among department chairs, stronger vertical alignment, and curriculum review work focused on skills, assessment, gaps, and redundancies.

The Committee discussed how authentic and project-based learning can be expanded beyond electives and isolated examples into required and advanced courses. Administrators described professional development on performance-based assessment, department-level inventories of existing project-based learning, and work to identify opportunities for expansion. Members noted the importance of clear, directed deliverables and evaluation measures when implementation plans call for pilots or specific instructional practices.

The Committee also discussed the balance between skill development and application. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that direct practice remains necessary, but instruction can more consistently begin with a meaningful problem, build the required skills, and return to authentic application.

Administrators reported that teachers have received professional development and opportunities to explore artificial intelligence tools at an appropriate level of readiness. The administrative team is also developing common classroom observation language and focused 'look-fors.' Last year's work emphasized strategies for multilingual learners, and the team plans to narrow this year's shared observations to three focus areas.

Members discussed student reaction to changes in U-Block hall-pass procedures and cell phone expectations. Administrators explained that the hall-pass change replaced an online tracking system that was not working consistently and was intended to improve student location, supervision, and safety while preserving opportunities to meet with teachers, collaborate, and obtain breakfast. The Committee emphasized both the responsibility of administrators to establish necessary safety procedures and the importance of clearly communicating the rationale for changes and maintaining avenues for student feedback through the Student Advisory Committee, student government, School Council, and direct conversations with administrators.

In response to questions regarding curriculum review, Superintendent Beaudoin reported that findings and white papers were being developed and there will be a Curriculum Update at the October meeting. Ms. Sgroi also described a goal in the new School Improvement Plan to explore expanding SCORE into a four-year, scaffolded civic-action experience. The approach could deepen student learning and reduce the concentration of project work at the end of senior year.

For future reporting, the Committee requested clearer identification of authentic-learning expectations across departments, the professional development provided in inquiry- and project-based methods, and the courses or departments identified for expanded implementation.

FY26 OPEB Contribution Transfer

Ms. Cresta requested approval of a \$734,348 transfer from the FY26 operating budget to complete the District's FY26 Other Post-Employment Benefits contribution. She explained that the final amount was calculated after the close of the fiscal year in accordance with the existing formula. The flat contribution approach applies to FY27 and future budget planning, not to this final FY26 transfer.

The Committee discussed how the amount compared with the prior planning estimate and confirmed that a contribution below the calculated target would result in slower progress toward the long-term funding goal but would not create a penalty.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve a transfer of \$734,348 from the FY26 operating budget for the FY26 OPEB contribution. Mr. Foster seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

School Committee Goal Development

The Committee continued its discussion of goals for the 2026-2027 school year. Members agreed that the building project and exploration of additional revenue sources should remain the primary substantive goals. The Committee also discussed the value of establishing a more formal onboarding process for new members in anticipation of future turnover.

Members agreed to frame the onboarding goal as laying the foundation for future development rather than completing a full program during the current year. Potential work may include reviewing transition policies, gathering examples from other districts, developing a resource guide, and using Policy Subcommittee or summer workshop time to advance the work. Members also discussed identifying summer workshop dates earlier in the year.

Ms. Banks moved to adopt the following School Committee goals for 2026-2027:

- Advocate for and support the passage of the Essex Elementary School building votes.
- Explore and determine the scope of additional internal and external revenue sources, including student activity fees, fundraising policy, and the approach to school choice.
- Lay the foundation for the development of an onboarding process for new School Committee members.

Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

School Committee Comment

Ms. Whitman asked for clarification regarding the withdrawn longevity bench proposal. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that a Manchester resident had proposed a joint donation involving a family and the Class of 2027, but the family decided not to proceed after the materials had been distributed to the Committee.

The Committee received an update on the regional collaboration group. Representatives from the School Committee and the Manchester and Essex Select Boards and Finance Committees were expected to participate. The kickoff meeting was scheduled for September 23 at 8:30 a.m. and would focus on organizational goals, areas of alignment and collaboration, and shared understanding of budget drivers.

Members also asked that recent ESBC meeting recordings be organized and posted in the appropriate online playlist.

C. Adjourn

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

The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:33 p.m.