

SCHOOL COMMITTEE
BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES
October 6, 2026

Meeting: School Committee

Date: October 6, 2026

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

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

Absent: Nadia Wetzler.

Guests: Maggie Whitman, Student Representative; Kim Provost, Essex Elementary School Principal; John Willis, Memorial School Principal; Heather Leonard, Director of Curriculum & Instructional Technology.

A. Call to Order

Ms. Koch-Sundquist called the School Committee Business Meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. A quorum was present, and the meeting was also available via WebEx.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

1) Public Comment

None.

2) Student Report

Student Representative Maggie Whitman reported on completed class elections, the successful Debate Team trip to Yale University, fall athletics and theater activities, and the upcoming start of robotics. The Yale Whiffenpoofs visited the District for a workshop and performance, with participation and outreach involving the elementary schools, Middle School, and community partners. Spirit Week was planned for the end of October.

Ms. Whitman shared a student request for additional seating outside the High School commons. In response to a question about changes to student movement procedures and cell phone expectations, she reported that discussion had largely subsided, although student experiences varied. The Student Advisory Council was scheduled to meet the following Wednesday. She invited Committee participation and suggestions for discussion topics.

3) Chairperson's Report

Ms. Koch-Sundquist reported on the September 23 regional collaboration meeting, which included discussion of shared problem solving around resources and facilities and the Essex Elementary School building project. She noted that concerns raised centered on financing and public understanding of the process rather than the need for a new school. She also attended the School Building Committee's value management discussion.

Consent Agenda

The Committee considered vouchers and September 15, 2026, minutes separately.

Ms. Whitman moved to approve Voucher #1021. Mr. Foster seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Banks moved to approve September 15, 2026, minutes. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.

Mr. Foster expressed concern that the summary minutes captured presentations more fully than substantive Committee discussion and omitted important points about school culture. He requested a level of detail that preserves significant positions and discussion, including individual attribution where relevant. Ms. Banks supported concise summary minutes as an accessible reference and noted that recordings and transcripts provide the fuller dialogue. Ms. Whitman suggested testing different levels of detail and incorporating member edits into the review process.

The motion to approve the September 15 minutes passed, 3–2–1. Ms. Koch-Sundquist, Ms. Banks, and Ms. Stone voted in favor; Ms. Whitman and Mr. Foster voted against; Mr. Reed abstained. Members were asked to send substantive additions or proposed wording to Superintendent Beaudoin before the meeting so they could be considered during preparation of the minutes.

The Committee also discussed whether to continue using AI-assisted minutes or fill the reporting secretary position. Superintendent Beaudoin noted that a reporting secretary could be recruited if the Committee chose that approach. No decision on the position was made.

Out-of-State Travel Request — HS Social Studies 9/11 Memorial

Superintendent Beaudoin presented the annual High School day trip to New York related to September 11 studies. Members asked about accommodations for students unable to attend; accommodations would be provided.

Ms. Whitman moved to approve the High School out-of-state day trip to New York. Mr. Foster seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Subcommittee Reports

Elementary Facilities and Essex School Building Committee

The Committee received an update on the Essex Elementary School building project. Two independent estimates had been reconciled within one percent, with an initial total project estimate of \$98.9 million. Following review by the design subcommittee and full School Building Committee, accepted value management items included changes to building materials and landscaping and removal of the gym bump-out with a 50 percent reduction in bleachers.

The School Building Committee retained the selected mechanical, electrical, and plumbing system and the rounded roof design after considering alternatives and community feedback. A proposed playground reduction was deferred for future consideration. Approximately \$781,000 in other potential adjustments remained under consideration for later decisions.

The School Building Committee had approved a total project budget of \$95,351,985, reported as submitted to MSBA. Further refinements and cost reductions could continue as the project advanced. This was a report of School Building Committee action; the School Committee did not take a project funding vote at this meeting.

Members discussed the need to explain the project's cost, site requirements, educational program, reimbursement, and financing clearly. Ms. Banks emphasized the need for visible Committee participation at town board meetings, shared responsibility for outreach, and clear explanations of why the project is needed and what drives its cost. Members proposed coordinating attendance through a shared schedule and having representatives from both towns attend meetings in each community.

Ms. Whitman and Superintendent Beaudoin emphasized a deliberate communications schedule as financing details were finalized, with consistent information to avoid confusion. The project team's technical expertise would support questions about design, estimating, and feasibility decisions. Community meetings were scheduled for October 8 in Essex and October 13 in Manchester.

Superintendent Beaudoin reported that FAQs, talking points, updated renderings, handouts, and a project booklet were being prepared. Members were asked to forward community questions for inclusion in the FAQs and help distribute information at school and community events. Members also discussed volunteer capacity and coordination with the School Building Committee's communications group. The School Committee communications subcommittee had not yet begun its planned work.

Finance Committee

Project financing discussions with town advisors were scheduled for that week. Members emphasized the need to clarify the difference between the formula reimbursement rate and effective reimbursement of total project cost, the financing schedule, and annual costs to the towns and households. These details would support the warrant language and public information materials.

Policy Committee

The Committee reviewed updated background-check policies. Superintendent Beaudoin described the revisions as technical updates without additional local language. Mr. Foster moved to accept the policies for a first reading. Ms. Banks seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. Final consideration would follow at a subsequent meeting.

Negotiation Team

The Negotiation Team had not met.

Superintendent's Report

Operations and Facilities Update

Ms. Cresta reported that recruitment for a facilities manager was underway. The District planned to return to a dedicated management structure after finding that a combined hands-on and management role did not meet its needs.

Completed summer projects included replacement of 13 steam traps at Essex Elementary School, exhaust fan and motor replacements, plumbing repairs, reroofing of the storage barn, restoration of woodwork at the Middle High School entrance, and tennis court resurfacing, in addition to routine maintenance and school preparation.

The three-year asbestos inspection identified areas at Essex Elementary School requiring encapsulation or removal. Licensed contractors would complete the work, with separate monitoring and clearance testing. The estimated combined cost was approximately \$20,000. Memorial Elementary School and the Middle High School were reported as certified not to contain asbestos.

A state inspection identified pedestrian bridge panel and concrete repairs. Ms. Cresta described the findings as neither major nor alarming; scope and cost remained to be determined. Verizon's planned discontinuation of copper telephone service also required replacement communications for elevator and alarm monitoring. Quotes were being obtained, with a preliminary estimate of approximately \$20,000–\$30,000.

In response to a follow-up question, Ms. Cresta reported that disposal of stored fluorescent bulbs and other mercury-containing materials remained pending because a staff member needed the required certification. The work would be addressed through staff training or the incoming facilities manager.

Continued Business

Elementary School Improvement Plan Update & FY27 Outlook

Principals Kim Provost and John Willis presented progress on the elementary schools' prior plans and a shared improvement plan for the next two years. They described increased collaboration across the schools, shared literacy and mathematics coaches, and a consultation-based teacher assistance process. Coaching uses student data and grade-level goals, with approaches adjusted to the needs of each team.

Administrators described common indicators for authentic learning, including student understanding of purpose, application of skills, agency, discourse, and demonstrations of learning for audiences beyond the teacher. Other accomplishments included library teaching assistant coverage, peer observations within and beyond the District, family literacy and mathematics events, community partnerships, and the Essex Morning Movers before-school program beginning at 7:15 a.m.

Student support updates included schoolwide positive behavior practices, calm and sensory spaces, and stronger transition support for families entering district programs at Memorial. The RISE program had expanded to two classrooms with an additional teacher and five teaching assistants. Administrators also described reviewing school traditions for inclusivity and improving family engagement through existing school events.

Priorities included continued work on NEASC recommendations, curriculum mapping, shared beliefs about learning, and connecting the District's Vision of the Graduate to elementary practice. Grade 5 had completed its initial implementation of Investigating History, and grades 3 and 4 were beginning implementation with grant-supported professional development. Mathematics materials were under review for possible pilots, with adoption dependent on the review process, staff capacity, and resources.

The shared plan also called for more consistent social-emotional learning routines across elementary classrooms and into Middle School, integration of SEL into tiered supports, and identification of useful data sources. Administrators clarified that a universal SEL screener had not yet been selected.

Members recognized the progress toward elementary alignment and asked how curriculum review and coaching would address differences in mathematics outcomes between the schools. Mr. Foster emphasized the importance of showing how these efforts improve parity and making authentic-learning expectations observable in practice. Administrators described differentiated coaching and data review to identify and address specific instructional needs.

The Committee also discussed how the proposed Essex building could support instruction. Ms. Provost described current limitations on small-group work and collaboration and the value of flexible classrooms, project rooms, outdoor learning areas, and spaces for individual and small-group support. Members emphasized the importance of explaining these educational benefits alongside project costs.

Curriculum Update

Ms. Leonard reviewed summer curriculum work, new staff induction and mentoring, and cross-district professional collaboration. Summer projects included Marine Biology, Environmental Action, AI in robotics, grade 8 ELA and civics connections, elementary morning meeting activities, AP Statistics, Spanish IV/V, Middle School social skills, and the SMARTS executive-functioning curriculum in the

IRWL program. Professional learning included Investigating History and support for multilingual learners.

For 2026–2027, the curriculum review timeline identified comprehensive health, physical education, SEL, mathematics, and digital literacy and computer science in review and analysis; English in grades 6–12, the arts, science, technology and engineering, and English as a Second Language in application of recommendations or field testing; and world language and history and social sciences in implementation. Ms. Leonard explained that stages may overlap and vary by grade span. Elementary mathematics materials were moving toward evaluation and possible field testing. She shared the History and Social Science Curriculum Review Report dated July 2026 and the Science, Technology and Engineering Curriculum Review Report dated September 2026. Reports and presentations would be posted on the District website.

In response to questions about the relationship between curriculum review and the school improvement plans, administrators clarified the science work at each grade span. Kindergarten through grade 2 teachers were committing to consistent implementation of Mystery Science with common materials and hands-on learning. Grades 3–5 had redesigned and reordered units using existing resources to align with grade-level standards and anchoring phenomena. A full materials change was deferred while teachers implemented Investigating History.

Middle School teachers were preparing to pilot an OpenSciEd unit, with planning and training support under consideration. High School science teachers had begun revising units around anchoring phenomena and would continue that work with additional targeted professional learning. The Committee discussed the importance of distinguishing current implementation from the next steps emphasized in improvement plans.

Members asked how history and English language arts work would connect and how text selection would reflect diverse voices and perspectives through “windows and mirrors.” Administrators described this as an area for further intentional alignment rather than a completed systemwide process. They also clarified that elementary mathematics materials were being evaluated against District priorities, with a goal of selecting two to four options for classroom testing. Secondary mathematics review was at an earlier stage.

A member asked whether the SMARTS executive-functioning curriculum used in the IRWL program could be expanded. Administrators reported that broader use was a consideration within tiered supports, but no expansion plan had been adopted.

The technology update recognized staff training and support at the start of the year and reviewed the District’s phishing-reporting tool and embedded cybersecurity training. Members were encouraged to report suspicious messages through the tool.

School Committee Newsletter

The Committee reviewed the draft newsletter prepared by Ms. Banks. Ms. Whitman moved to approve the newsletter for distribution. Ms. Stone seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

School Committee Comment

Superintendent Beaudoin recognized the curriculum work and noted that personnel changes, new state requirements, limited professional learning time, and different levels of readiness across schools can affect implementation schedules.

Members shared positive feedback on the new bus service, including neighborhood stops that reduced the need for students to wait near a state highway. Administrators reported that service and communication were generally going well, with minor issues being addressed.

Members planning to attend the November MASC conference discussed coordinating workshop choices and sharing information about sessions of interest.

Mr. Foster requested consideration of a community conversation about school culture going forward. The Chair cautioned against wording that could lead to assumptions about personnel matters. The Committee agreed to consider possible formats and who should participate. No specific event or format was approved.

C. Adjourn

Ms. Whitman moved to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Banks seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:46 p.m.

Reports and Presentations

Materials can be found on the [SC Reports & Presentation page](#).

Essex Elementary School Building Project Materials available on [Essex School Building Project page](#)