SCHOOL COMMITTEE
BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES
October 20, 2026

Date: October 20, 2026

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

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

Absent: None.

Guests: Maggie Whitman, Student Representative; Middle School Principal; Middle School Assistant Principal; Frank Serreti, Independent Auditor; Tony Bartlett, Manchester-by-the-Sea Town Administrator; town Select Board and Finance Committee representatives.

A. Call to Order

Mr. Reed, presiding in place of the Chairperson, called the School Committee Business Meeting to order at 6:06 p.m. A quorum was present, and the meeting was also available via WebEx.

B. Business Meeting Open Session

1) Public Comment

None. Questions concerning the Essex Elementary School building project were reserved for the Elementary Facilities subcommittee report.

2) Student Report

Student Representative Maggie Whitman reported on the first Student Advisory Council meeting, including participation by new freshman delegates, adjustment to the cell phone policy, and positive feedback on course offerings such as Marine Biology. Spirit Week included athletic events, senior nights, hallway decorating, and a Friday pep rally. Juniors had completed the PSAT, and SoundWaves would participate in the ICHSA a cappella competition at the quarterfinal level.

Ms. Whitman clarified that the High School term would end on November 6, rather than October 30 as shown on some outdated calendars.

3) Chairperson's Report

No report.

Consent Agenda

Mr. Foster moved to approve Vouchers #1022, #1023, and #1024. Ms. Banks seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously by roll call.

Mr. Reed moved to approve October 6, 2026, meeting minutes. The motion was seconded by Ms. Banks and passed unanimously by roll call.

Subcommittee Reports

Elementary Facilities and Essex School Building Committee

Ms. Whitman reviewed the project's progression through configuration and location studies, selection and refinement of the design, receipt of cost estimates on September 22, value management, and establishment of the project budget on September 29. The School Building Committee approved the Schematic Design package on

October 13, and it was submitted to the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) on October 14. Community meetings had been held in Essex and Manchester since the prior School Committee meeting.

Ms. Whitman described a coordinated communications process using community questions to refine FAQs and populate the project website, handouts, a community booklet, and a video. She emphasized using a common set of official sources so that district, committee, town, and community communications present consistent information. Planned work included FAQ highlights, identification of priority messages and subject-area contacts, and an updated outreach spreadsheet following the next School Building Committee meeting.

Members discussed the roles of town representatives on the School Building Committee and participation in communications efforts. Ms. Whitman explained that subcommittees make recommendations to the full Building Committee and that members would discuss outreach interests and availability at the upcoming meeting. Members were encouraged to forward questions to the appropriate district or project team contact rather than attempt to answer every technical question themselves.

The Committee discussed the distinction between factual district communications and advocacy by individual members. Participants described individual advocacy using personal accounts and resources and publicly available information, with clarification when individuals are speaking for themselves. Questions about applicable restrictions could be directed to the state for guidance.

Town Questions on Funding and Reimbursement

Manchester Town Administrator Tony Bartlett reported that the Finance Committee had recommended the project article and the Select Board had voted to place it on the warrant, reserving its recommendation for Town Meeting. He summarized requests for greater specificity concerning the authorization, estimated local cost, and town apportionments, particularly because Town Meeting would occur before formal MSBA Board approval of the reimbursement rate.

Mr. Bartlett asked whether a not-to-exceed local share could be included in the Town Meeting motion or, alternatively, whether the School Committee would revisit the project with both towns' Select Boards and Finance Committees before proceeding if reimbursement were materially lower than anticipated. Participants also requested dollar illustrations using the base reimbursement rate to show the possible range of local costs.

Superintendent Beaudoin and Ms. Cresta explained that the article establishes a not-to-exceed total project authorization, with MSBA funds applied to reduce the local share. The anticipated reimbursement rate was 36.84 percent of eligible costs, rather than the full project budget. Superintendent Beaudoin reported that the 31 percent base rate was established during feasibility and could not decrease; additional points reflected maintenance, energy efficiency, and indoor air quality. Formal MSBA Board action was expected December 9.

Ms. Cresta explained that reimbursement occurs throughout construction as invoices are reviewed, with final amounts subject to eligibility determinations and audit. Town apportionments are calculated under the Regional Agreement at each borrowing stage. Administrators explained that a fixed town-specific cap could not be established through this project authorization. Initial short-term borrowing and later financing decisions would require continued planning with both towns and consideration of market conditions.

Participants distinguished the established MSBA process and warrant language from differences in this project's scale and vote timing. Members with prior building-project experience emphasized budget and schedule oversight. Town representatives stressed that their questions reflected the need to explain a substantial taxpayer commitment and uncertainty about final reimbursement, rather than a lack of confidence in the project team.

Members discussed explaining the school as a regional educational investment, including preschool and specialized programs serving students from both towns. They also requested clear dollar estimates, consistent town warrant explanations, and information about anticipated operating costs. Administrators referenced operating-cost analysis completed during feasibility. Any changes for Manchester's Finance Committee booklet were requested before its Thursday meeting and Friday printing deadline.

Continued collaboration after MSBA action was discussed. No reimbursement threshold, borrowing condition, or separate local cost cap was adopted.

Finance Committee

No separate subcommittee report was presented. Project financing was discussed with the building-project update.

Negotiation Team

No report of a meeting was presented.

Continued Business

Middle School Improvement Plan Update and Outlook

The Middle School Principal reviewed progress toward authentic learning, integration of social-emotional learning, and an inclusive school culture. Work included continued use of the RULER approach, curriculum review, and use of MCAS and reading assessment data to identify students for literacy and mathematics intervention. The Principal emphasized using data to assess instructional effectiveness as well as individual student needs.

The Principal shared entry-plan observations drawn from staff conversations, family outreach, and survey feedback. Families sought transparent, proactive communication, particularly about significant decisions. Priorities included a clear Middle School identity, consistent schoolwide expectations, visible leadership, and opportunities to celebrate student and staff accomplishments. The Principal recognized staff collaboration, support for colleagues and substitute coverage, strong student behavior, and positive eighth-grade leadership.

A central priority was developing a coherent, documented grades 6–8 curriculum and stronger collaboration across grades and departments so instruction remains consistent when staffing changes. The Principal recognized the strengths of individual teachers while describing the need for systems that support continuity and onboarding.

Members supported preserving a distinct Middle School identity and noted that the Committee had deliberately retained a separate principal position. They welcomed the focus on curriculum scope and sequence and asked about next steps in mathematics and science, including the planned OpenSciEd pilot. The Principal identified student engagement and purposeful academic discourse as instructional priorities, including students explaining strategies, questioning approaches, and reflecting on their thinking.

Members also discussed opportunities afforded by sharing a building with the High School and the importance of curriculum that exposes students to varied experiences and perspectives. The Principal described opportunities to deepen social-emotional learning beyond behavior expectations to empathy and understanding others. No vote on the plan was taken.

FY25 Audit Letter and Financial Review

Independent auditor Frank Serreti presented the required communications and financial highlights. He reported an unmodified, or clean, audit opinion; no identified internal control deficiencies or financial misstatements; no disagreements with management; and professional cooperation throughout the audit.

Mr. Serreti explained that implementation of GASB 101 changed the calculation of compensated absences, contributing to an approximately $600,000 increase in the reported liability. In response to a Committee question, he confirmed that this was an accounting and reporting change and did not change budget appropriations.

The General Fund balance was approximately $3.8 million, including capital stabilization, restricted and assigned amounts, and approximately $1.3 million in unassigned fund balance. Certified excess and deficiency was approximately $1.2 million, approximately $628,000 below the applicable five percent limit. Fund balance increased approximately $57,000; revenues exceeded budget by approximately $210,000, expenditures were approximately $94,000 below budget, and $350,000 of E&D had been used to balance the budget.

The District paid down approximately $2.5 million in long-term debt and ended the year with approximately $37 million in outstanding principal. Mr. Serreti also reviewed refinancing of the remaining short-term Memorial School borrowing. The OPEB trust held approximately $7.1 million and was approximately 22.4 percent funded, reflecting a $547,000 contribution and approximately $583,000 in investment income. He recognized the District's sustained progress in funding this obligation and noted that its discount rate was toward the higher end of those used by comparable plans.

Members appreciated the financial review and the continued strength of OPEB funding. The audit materials would be posted on the District website, and members suggested sharing them directly with town partners. No vote was taken.

Essex Elementary School Project Authorization

Superintendent Beaudoin reviewed the project authorization and anticipated MSBA funding. The Committee discussed the distinction between authorizing the total project budget and later decisions about the amount and timing of borrowing. Any MSBA reimbursement would reduce the taxpayer-funded share; exceeding the authorized project budget would require further town approval. The presented language also addressed applying benefits from future refinancing to offset project costs.

Ms. Whitman moved to approve the motion language as presented for the Essex Elementary School project, authorizing the $95,351,985 total project budget and borrowing, subject to the approvals specified in the written motion. Ms. Stone seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, 7–0, by roll call: Ms. Koch-Sundquist, Ms. Whitman, Ms. Wetzler, Ms. Banks, Mr. Foster, Ms. Stone, and Mr. Reed voted yes.

That the Manchester Essex Regional School District hereby appropriates the amount of $95,351,985 for the purpose of paying costs of the Essex Elementary School new school construction project, for replacement of the school at 12 Story Street in Essex, Massachusetts, and further described in two separate deeds recorded in a) Book 4203 on Page 399, and b) in Book 4216 on Page 501 and shown together on a plot plan in Plan Book 86, Plan 88 in the Essex South Registry of Deeds and depicted on Map 129, Lot 5 of the Town of Essex Assessors' maps, including the payment of all costs incidental or related thereto (the "Project"), which school facility shall have an anticipated useful life as an educational facility for the instruction of school children of at least 50 years, and for which the District may be eligible for a school construction grant from the Massachusetts School Building Authority ("MSBA"), said amount to be expended at the direction of the School Building Committee. To meet this appropriation the District is authorized to borrow said amount, under and pursuant to Chapter 71, Section 16(d), of the General Laws and the District Agreement, as amended, or pursuant to any other enabling authority. The District acknowledges that the MSBA's grant program is a non-entitlement, discretionary program based on need as determined by the MSBA, and any Project costs the District incurs in excess of any grant approved by and received from the MSBA shall be the sole responsibility of the District; provided further that any grant that the District may receive from the MSBA shall not exceed the lesser of (1) thirty-six and eighty-four one hundredths of a percent (36.84%) of eligible, approved Project costs, as determined by the MSBA, or (2) the total maximum grant amount determined by the MSBA, and that the amount of borrowing authorized pursuant to this vote shall be reduced by any grant amount set forth in the Project Funding Agreement that may be executed between the District and the MSBA. Any premium received upon the sale of any bonds or notes approved by this vote, less any such premium applied to the payment of the costs of issuance of such bonds or notes, may be applied to the payment of costs approved by this vote in accordance with Chapter 44, Section 20 of the General Laws, thereby reducing the amount authorized to be borrowed to pay such costs by a like amount.

The Committee then took a separate vote on the following provision:

FURTHER VOTED: That within seven (7) days from the date on which this vote is adopted the Secretary be and hereby is instructed to notify the Board of Selectmen of each of the member towns of this District as to the amount and general purposes of the debt herein authorized, as required by the District Agreement and by Chapter 71, Section 16(d), of the General Laws.

Ms. Stone moved to approve the motion language as presented. Ms. Whitman seconded. The provision passed unanimously, 7–0, by roll call: Ms. Koch-Sundquist, Ms. Whitman, Ms. Wetzler, Ms. Banks, Mr. Foster, Ms. Stone, and Mr. Reed voted yes.

Policy Committee

The Committee considered the background-check policy for a second reading and adoption. The changes were described as nonsubstantive. Ms. Wetzler moved to approve the policy as presented. Ms. Banks seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. Members clarified that acceptance at the second reading constituted policy adoption.

Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Beaudoin reported that principals were completing required safety and security drills and that the District continued quarterly coordination with public safety officials. The NEASC visiting team was on site, with a report to staff expected the following day. Initial feedback was positive, and the District anticipated both recognition of strengths and recommendations for continued work.

Late bus service was expected to resume November 2, Monday through Thursday, excluding early-release Wednesdays, with a scheduled 3:35 p.m. departure from the Middle High School. Principals would communicate details to families and students. Administrators would collect ridership data with the transportation provider to evaluate use and cost. Members discussed possible related needs, including extended Learning Commons hours and supervision for students awaiting the bus. Potential elementary service would require separate consideration.

Superintendent Beaudoin reviewed three common areas of focus for classroom observations and walkthroughs: student engagement, high-quality work, and support for individual learning differences. She would circulate the details. She also noted that Night of Stars was seeking participants.

School Committee Comment

Ms. Banks returned to the need for timely responses to Manchester Select Board concerns before Town Meeting. She asked for clear responsibility and follow-through so town officials could evaluate and explain the project. Ms. Koch-Sundquist emphasized communicating the project's benefits to the whole District and both communities and expressed concern that framing the school primarily by its location could weaken the regional partnership.

Members discussed addressing specific questions through individual briefings with project, finance, or MSBA experts while maintaining consistent public information. Superintendent Beaudoin reiterated that the Regional Agreement governs apportionment and that the District could not provide a fixed ceiling for one town's share. Members considered seeking assistance from experienced Building Committee representatives and the Owner's Project Manager and requested follow-up before Town Meeting.

The Committee agreed to develop a letter to local newspapers explaining the educational benefits of the full project to the District. Ms. Stone agreed to draft the letter. Superintendent Beaudoin would circulate individual Word copies for comments, consolidate feedback, and return revisions to the author. Members discussed targeting the following Tuesday's submission deadline and coordinating the topic with Building Committee communications. No final letter was approved at this meeting.

C. Adjourn

Mr. Reed moved to adjourn Ms. Whitman seconded, and the vote to adjourn was unanimous. The meeting concluded at approximately 8:59 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