



Date Approved/Released: 2/16/23

Date Approved/Held:

School Committee Chair: 

School Committee Meeting

January 5, 2023 - 6:00 pm

Town Hall, 2nd Floor Auditorium

Attendance:

Ryan Forsythe, Chair; Greg Vine, Vice Chair; Larry Murphy; Alica Jordan; Karen Kast-McBride; Angelina Dellasanta, Student Representative; Thad King, Superintendent; Amanda Babinski, Director of Finance & Operations

1. Call to order

2. Pledge of Allegiance

R. Forsythe reads audio visual disclosure.

3. Public Comment: None

4. Consent Agenda:

a. Minutes:

R. Forsythe introduces the Consent Agenda. G. Vine moves to approve the minutes as presented. Seconded by L. Murphy. K. Kast-McBride states that she sent a couple of corrections to Liz, though they were minor and nothing substantial enough to make the committee hold the minutes. R. Forsythe asks if the changes were incorporated in the current version. K. Kast-McBride does not believe so. R. Forsythe asks for an amendment to the original motion that the committee approves the minutes pending any typo-like corrections that were submitted to Liz by the members. G. Vine agrees. Seconded by K. Kast-McBride. Vote is unanimous.

b. MASC Student Council Trip:

T. King states this trip is not an out of state field trip, but it is an overnight trip. L. Murphy states that he believes overnight trips require School Committee approval. T. King states that it was not clear whether or not School Committee approval is required. L. Murphy moves to approve the field trip by student council to the MASC annual conference in Hyannis. Seconded by G. Vine. Vote is unanimous.

5. Student Representative Report:

A. Dellasanta presents updates on new electronic sign for Murdock Middle and High Schools, which was gifted in part by the classes of 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022. The Murdock Chapter of the NHS inducted 11 new members on December 12. NHS members attended a wreath laying ceremony at the Massachusetts State House to kick off Race Across America week. Three Murdock students sang the National Anthem to kick off the ceremony. The snow day on December 16 prevented students from

attending the wreath laying ceremony at the Veterans Cemetery in Winchendon. The wreath cleanup will take place January 13. Updates are given about events at the middle and high school for the months of November and December. Student Council members attended the regional conference at Western Technical High School on November 17. Student Council will host the central regional special olympics bocce tournament on January 27. Details are provided for the upcoming musical. Sports team updates are provided. L. Murphy asks that the video of the Murdock students singing the national anthem be posted on the district website.

6. Superintendent's Report:

T. King recognizes that K. Kast-McBride requested at the last meeting for the budget update to be presented in such a way that viewers at home can see it. He states that the typical format for the year to date budget report contains more than 40 pages of information and therefore is not viewable. He proposes a more viewer friendly version that will be available at the next meeting.

a. Budget Update:

A. Babinski gives budget update, stating that the district met with the recently retired town accountant, who has come back to keep things running until a replacement is hired. She was working on reclasses today, which need to happen to certain line items with overages. This should be reflected in the next budget update. Otherwise, the district is on track for where it should be at this point in the year. She has spent the last few weeks looking more into some of the salary line items so the committee will have a more clear picture in March of any balances that may be there to move forward with any projects for the spring. L. Murphy questions the para salary line item, which has \$1,000 left, wondering if there will be a deficit there. T. King explains that some salaries are being applied where they shouldn't be, and the turnover in staff at town hall limits the district's ability to correct it until there is someone there that can actually perform those moves. The retired town accountant is coming in a few hours a week, so we will chip away at the updates that need to be made. L. Murphy asks for further clarification. A. Babinski responds that she has been taking the accounts and shuffling them into her template, which will allow the district to see how they want to present it. She explains that some paras have been charged to the line item when they should not have been, so the district asked the town accountant to move those expenses to a different line item. What she is proposing is a template which summarizes that and also has the ability for her to explain that in the notes. The template will contain a summary rather than the 46 page printout. Discussion is had regarding the previous business office staff and how their actions now make the committee nervous when seeing extreme overages of thousands of dollars. A. Babinski states that after viewing the district's budget, we are in good shape and that the MUNIS report does not tell the story. T. King explains further about the necessity of reclassifications in keeping the budget balanced, and this maintenance has not been completed because there has been no one working in the town accountant's office who knew how to complete it. A. Babinski explains the plan that was made with the retired town accountant to catch up on the months' worth of work that has been left. K. Kast-McBride questions a specific line item, believing it to be an error in a salary. A. Babinski explains that the mentioned line item is a membership line, not a salary line and reiterates that the MUNIS report does not show the true story of what the expenses are and why it appears to be an overage.

b. Literacy Center Update:

T. King gives a quick presentation to address a couple of concerns that were raised at the last meeting, meant to be ongoing from what was discussed and not comprehensive. Stakeholder Forums have been scheduled for upcoming dates which have been published. He references the request made by K. Kast-McBride concerning information on low income and poverty levels. Budget impacts have been

itemized, and parent drop off and pick up at Memorial School will be addressed. Parent community forums have been organized for next week on Monday, January 9 at 9am and Tuesday, January 10 at 6:30pm in an effort to accommodate all schedules for working parents or those who have to pick up their children after school. Teacher forums will be facilitated by Mrs. Rondeau on Tuesday, January 10 at 3:30pm. A quick three or four page overview of the proposal will be presented, then there will be a facilitated conversation in which the district will be looking for who the stakeholders are, what their concerns are, not to be addressed in that forum but to hear what the concerns are so they can be addressed going forward. The district attempted to make events on days and times available to different groups. The district will also survey students. L. Murphy asks if there will be a basketball game or other event going on on January 10. T. King replied that the district did not really look, that these events are more focused on elementary parents, as they will be those most impacted. The focus here was on the elementary and families of younger students. A note taker will be present at each meeting to record concerns brought forward by the stakeholders at each event. Students who have been through our district will be surveyed to get their feedback and concerns or things they think should be addressed. This collective information will be presented at the next school committee meeting. K. Kast-McBride asks if middle school students can be surveyed as well. T. King states that the district can add some middle school students, but he would want to confer with Mrs. Vezina in terms of their availability. K. Kast-McBride suggests adding seventh grade to the survey. She states that she does not know how feasible a 9am meeting will be for some parents. T. King states the approach was to give two times, and the 9am was most specifically for those parents who do a drop off and then are available while their children are at school for the day. He states the district is trying to facilitate a time where parents who are at home and have some time while the children are at school can be there, and if not, they might be able to make it at night. K. Kast-McBride asks if a survey can be sent to parents. T. King states that the district can address that. He continues, discussing the details about low income and poverty levels and presenting data straight from the DESE website. DESE defines our low income, and they have a very specific way that is not specifically tied to the definition of Massachusetts low income, which for a four-person household, which is by state definition, around \$74,000. The DESE definition also includes anyone on SNAP, any students who might be considered in the DCF system. Going from PreK, 48.6% are considered low income by DESE. Memorial is our highest school with basically a 61% low income, with Toy Town and Murdock Middle at around 55%. He states that the interesting piece is that the number is actually much lower than DESE calculates because they only look at those students who take the MCAS, making those all come out over 60% low income. The reason to look at these rates is because of the relationship between poverty levels and academic achievement. For a family of four, the poverty level is at around \$35,000 in income. 40% of our children under five are in homes at or below the poverty level in Winchendon, which is from a Heywood Hospital report. As children get older, families are growing older and moving up, and the numbers actually decrease. But the district has had a 15% increase from pre-pandemic numbers, which is alarming not just from an academic perspective, but also from a community perspective. R. Forsythe questions the last point about the change since before COVID and whether the number of children under five who live under the poverty level was lower prior to COVID. T. King states those numbers are not the under five age but more specifically, Winchendon Public Schools overall. He believes in 2018, the number was at about 40% low income. K. Kast-McBride states that she wanted to look at where the district is for low income. She states that yes, we do need to address the early learning center piece; however, the fact is that 48% is actually the lowest number of our low income. She says that we always hope that we see families do better as children get older; however, in our case, we're not saying that in our schools.

T. King states that the interesting piece is the difference between what is considered low income and 40% are below the actual poverty level, which is a very different number. He cites state numbers from Heywood Hospital regarding the poverty line in our area. Looking at children under 18, that number

decreases because families are growing older, so looking at 5 year olds, 40% of families live below the poverty line, which is defined by an income of \$37,000 for a family. Additionally, 57% of Winchendon students are high needs compared to 46% in the state of Massachusetts. K. Kast-McBride states that she will reach out to CAC Director, Miranda, and see if she can give more information on the topic. She states that her concern is the kids that the district is serving are still the ones that are considered low income, and until she does a comparison by really digging into the DESE versus whoever came up with the report at Heywood and look at how they define high needs. She states that she will do the work for that, but until she can look at that and figure out how they correlate, her concern still stands.

T. King states the reason that poverty is brought into the discussion is because of how it applies to the achievement gap, and it starts at PreK and Kindergarten. The problem is the research also shows that we don't have a good ability to close that gap. When students begin Kindergarten with a gap behind those who are not impoverished, that gap does not get made up. He states that not all of the children in Winchendon are showing up, but if we were better able to serve those children and get them prepared, looking at about 50% of kindergarten students based on the data presented by Mrs. Jillson, those students are significantly behind. A driving factor in this proposal is to close the gap before students enter kindergarten so that we are not working on closing gaps in 6th, 7th and 8th grade. K. Kast-McBride states that her other concern, looking at the presented numbers, is that she thinks what can we do now or maybe next year or the year after to help the students in the other brackets, and then in high school because the high school numbers were not given. Poverty is an indication, not just of an achievement gap but of how they will do in college. She wants to see those students make it through, and if we are not preparing them here, a lot of them do not make it through. T. King reminds the committee that what the district has done in the upper levels is make great strides in keeping up with standards on the high end, but if we don't fix it at the low end, those kids come up with a gap and are always behind. K. Kast-McBride states that she has concern for all our students, not just the incoming ones.

L. Murphy states that no matter how the figures are juggled using these criteria, we are part of a community that is in poverty and in a poor part of the state. He agrees with K. Kast-McBride and asks what we will do about it. He recognizes that programs have been put in place at the middle and high schools that have shown promise, but we don't want to stop there; we want to focus on early childhood, which he believes is the best place to start.

T. King addresses the questions regarding the impact this proposal will have on the budget. The budget impact that is most important is the ongoing expense out of operational budgets. He refers to Chapter 70 net school spending, which would be a dedicated kindergarten busing. The number that comes from our current contract is approximately \$378 a day per bus for next year, so if we had three buses over 180 days, that would be roughly \$200,000, which we do through indirect costs with the town. The other expenses that might hit the general budget will likely become neutral because there will be a cost savings in places. A. Babinski offers discussion on the budget impact, suggesting that we may be able to consolidate one bus at one school and save a little on the cost. She does not believe that the district will feel the full impact of the \$200,000 because there will be some reworking of allocations, and there is quite a bit of funding now for early childhood needs, as well as lots of information regarding how to address workforce poverty levels, and the recommendations nationally are to focus on early childhood issues. She states that the reason we have some workforce issues nationally is because there is not reliable childcare, which forces some parents to exit the workforce to care for their children. She states that some structured learning needs to happen as well, and as the country tries to address that, we should see additional funding specific to those grade levels, which may help offset some of those costs.

T. King adds that this estimate is worst case scenario based on the 115 kindergarten students the district has this year and the fact that the buses carry about 50 students. The school choice account is a revolving account, and the estimated balance of our school choice account at the end of this year should be \$615,000. He states the Toy Town COVID move, when the district moved Toy Town in its entirety to the high school a number of years ago, had an actual cost of just under \$7,000 to move all Toy Town grade levels with professional movers. The district would not expect teachers to do that kind of work and has already had conversations from a union perspective to make sure there are no contract violations, including putting more work on the custodians in consideration of all the work they do over the summer. Teachers box up a lot of their classrooms for the summer for cleaning, so the district would ask a little more in terms of boxing and labeling so their classroom items make it to the correct locations. But movers would be used for the actual moving, and the district has estimated that cost would be about \$30,000, which would be charged to the school choice account.

R. Forsythe questions whether the district has the option to stipend teachers for extra time to allow them to pack up their rooms. T. King replies that those conversations have been had, and the district is certainly open to it but is attempting to make this as easy for teachers as possible. L. Murphy asks how many teachers would be impacted. T. King replies that we would be looking at about 28 Toy Town teachers, but that does not include paras, nurses and support staff. At Memorial, it would be fewer than 10 that would be moved to the Early Literacy Center. L. Murphy asks if 50 would be a good number. T. King states that 50 classrooms would be a good number. L. Murphy asks if each of those teachers was given a stipend for x amount of hours, then we would have a solid number to work with.

T. King states there are a couple of grant impacts, but they are already specifically designed for this. The ESSER III grant specifically was written to include a playground that would go to the Early Childhood Learning Center for the younger students at around \$300,000. The other piece is that while the district was doing some of this work, an HVAC grant came through, and the district was approved for that. Phase one is to conduct a feasibility study on the buildings, which will then be submitted to DESE, and once approved, we would go out to bid for the HVAC upgrades. There are also a number of early childhood and early literacy grants which the district will be pursuing. He reiterates that this decision is not about money or capacity; this is about our belief in what we feel is best for our community and our students.

T. King addresses drop off/pick up and the traffic flow issue at the Murdock Complex, which includes Memorial. There will be a similar number of students in the Memorial building, with approximately 18 additional students based on current student enrollment. There would be an increase in the number of bus riders, as PreK is 100% drop off and pick up by parents, with the exception of possible special education transportation. Grades 3 and 4 are much more likely to ride a bus or start walking, so he anticipates a shorter drop off/pick up line. Reduced numbers of programs for pick up and drop off is another issue. There is currently a PreK pickup/drop off, which is not the exact same time as regular pick up and drop off, but they all intersect at a particular time. So there would be a reduction in those programs. Additionally, the Headstart program has its own transportation and around our scheduling, which we would consider moving to the Early Literacy Center as well, reducing some of the pick up/drop off traffic. Additionally, the district will propose a different traffic flow with new traffic patterns, and this has been discussed with our SRO and the DPW. The police department feels strongly that this would increase safety and flow over at the Memorial building. The DPW suggests that the infrastructure will support that. T. King presents an aerial view of Memorial school and discusses the proposed traffic flow changes, which includes parent pick up/drop off going up North Central. The back entrance used to be a one way to town; during the Safe Routes to School Audit, which the district

is currently in the middle of, the town proposed to remove that as a one way. The proposed traffic flow would have parents coming in North Central and lining up coming in Brooks, coming around and lining up to a stop sign. Buses would come in the same way they currently do, and they would not be stationed at Toy Town anymore. As the buses are leaving, we would start directing traffic down through the parking lot and lining up and actually pick kids up in front of the school as opposed to the steps on the side. The flow would come right down as buses exit; parents would come from the school and students would exit to the parents' cars and out the front gate, leaving the road completely open to traffic. Previously, there were concerns about the weight of buses waiting over North central, but the DPW director has stated that he has no concerns about standard cars going through there in terms of transportation. The district would create videos about the new traffic flow. We would make sure that traffic doesn't impinge on the pick up/drop off, so parents would be able to start lining up at 2:15 or 2:30 so that traffic from Murdock is not blocked. Additional complaints have indicated that people coming down Foristall that are not picking up students are getting stuck in the backflow on Elmwood. This change would take that piece away from the community, and the police are in support of this change.

G. Vine asks if any thought has been given to having multiple drop off points in different areas of town for younger students, to get them on some sort of buses or vans, basically a shuttle system where parents do not have to sit in line in front of school and block the driveways. T. King responds that it is not something that has ever been considered, but it is an interesting concept. He agrees that the district can look at it and discuss with the bus company.

K. Kast-McBride states that if we're using the back way, one of the problems that she ran into in the past was that the buses double part, coming down beside the Middle High School, so as a parent that was trying to go out that way, the buses were there so early, which blocked the way. T. King states that the parking lots have been re-marked this year, and there is new signage, so at pick up time and bus time for the middle high school, it is marked that it is a one way and marks when buses are there. The other piece is that it is a one hour stagger for elementary, so at 2:15, there are no buses and very few students left at the middle high school. So the district plans to ask parents to wait until 2:15 to line up to pick up their elementary students.

R. Forsythe thanks the Superintendent for answering very specific questions about the Early Literacy Center. He states that input from the community, teachers and students is very important so he is glad that is happening. He requests that the Superintendent bring that information from those forums that are being hosted to help inform the committee on whether it should support the Early Literacy Center.

K. Kast-McBride states that the district has a policy that the organization of our school district for grade configurations is PreK through 5th grade, then middle school is 6th, 7th and 8th, then high school is 9th through 12th. She did verify that we would have to make a policy change in order to move fifth grade to the middle school level, and the committee would need to vote on anything that has a budget impact. R. Forsythe asks that she circulate that policy to the rest of the committee.

b. Facilities Director Update:

T. King reports that the current Facilities Director, Martin Johnson, has announced his retirement in August. T. King has discussed with the town manager about possible opportunities for a more efficient way that facilities are run across the town and schools. We have worked well with the DPW and director, Brian Croteau, who is very effective at his job and the possibility of sharing the director has

been discussed. L. Murphy asks for clarification that we will not be losing a position; that the district would still have another body to do the work. T. King replies that we will still be fully staffed and are just looking at creative approaches to the vacancy.

c. Cost/Revenue Sharing Committee Formation:

T. King discusses past meetings with other town boards in which revenue sharing was discussed. The school committee and the board of selectmen tasked the Superintendent and town manager with finding ways to memorialize some of that for consistency. A committee will be formed at the tri-board meeting with members from the board of selectmen, school committee and fin comm to talk about how best to do the cost/revenue sharing for the town. Two representatives from the school committee will be invited to join the new committee. The tri-board is currently scheduled for January 17. L. Murphy asks if there is a liaison as fin comm is not one of their subcommittees. R. Forsythe states that there is a finance subcommittee, which he and A. Jordan are on, but not necessarily a liaison to the fin comm. K. Kast-McBride states that she is on the charter bylaw committee, which is technically still in effect for the town. That is part of the purpose of the tri-board meeting, so they act as liaison. L. Murphy asks for clarification that this would be an ad hoc committee. T. King confirms. R. Forsythe states that on January 17, the tri-board will be meeting; the intention of the tri-board on this topic is to get agreement between the three committees about the construction of the new committee and what membership would be; after which each committee will assign its own members.

7. Subcommittee Reports:

K. Kast-McBride states that she and A. Jordan are going to consolidate their calendars for the communications committee.

R. Forsythe states that the policy subcommittee will be meeting Monday, January 23 at 6pm. The official announcement of that meeting will be coming in the coming weeks.

8. New Business:

a. Open Meeting Law Complaint:

Discussion is had regarding an open meeting law complaint which was filed against the Winchendon School Committee, dated December 22, 2022 from a resident of Winchendon. This complaint suggested that the town did not live stream a school committee meeting on December 20, and the attendee asked at the meeting if it was being live streamed. At that time, it was shared that the meeting was being broadcast via local cable television, but the live streaming was not currently possible for public meetings in Winchendon. Winchendon school committee meetings and other public meetings were held via Zoom during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, as allowed by Governor Baker's March 2020 executive order suspending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law. Since the pandemic has lessened the effects on our daily lives, the school committee has choices to follow the town in returning to in-person meetings with cable television broadcast and live streaming. However, in May 2022, the town's live streaming capabilities became inoperable when a piece of equipment failed. Since then, no public meetings in Winchendon have been live streamed by the town. The complaint refers to a board of selectmen meeting on December 19 as an example of a hybrid meeting that has occurred since the live streaming equipment went down. The December 19 meeting could not be live streamed due to the same equipment issues that the town is experiencing. Instead of live streaming, the board of selectmen meeting was held in person, broadcast on cable television, and included one external participant who connected via Zoom. The participant that was on Zoom experienced technical difficulties and was affected by the inability to view the whole meeting. This person was also not able

to be understood by those who watched the cable broadcast. The town of Winchendon has secured a consultant to rebuild our livestream equipment in a way that would allow for future live streaming. Additionally, the town's new contract with Comcast for cable television service includes funding to pay for the repairs. Because such funds can only be allocated to this project through town meeting, the repairs are expected to be made once the funding is made available by the town and Massachusetts. Live streaming of public meetings is not prohibited or required. It is the personal opinion of the Chair that our school committee should hold meetings in person and open to the public, continue to broadcast meetings via cable television and electively return to live streaming as soon as live streaming is possible in Winchendon. Massachusetts Open Meeting Laws require that an open meeting law complaint be addressed as follows. The complaint must be disseminated to the members of the public body, which occurred on December 28. The public body must meet to review the complaint within 14 business days or approximately 22 calendar days, which is occurring this evening. And the public body must respond to the complaint and the Massachusetts Attorney General in writing, which will occur after this evening's meeting.

K. Kast-McBride thanks the Chair for his work on this. She takes issue with the fact that the committee never actually voted to go back to just live, in-person meetings. Multiple conversations have been had about making these meetings hybrid. She understands that the one person who took part in the board of selectmen meeting via Zoom had problems. She would ask how they used Zoom to connect, via a personal account or the town. She was told that the town was working on getting the capability to hold hybrid meetings in the sense of having Zoom capabilities with the understanding that the committee would hopefully go back to that. She does not believe that they, as a board, had the consensus that they would have public and live stream. She states that if we can be more open about possibly, whether or not the governor decides to extend the hybrid meeting resolution, which is actually in effect until March of this year, that we can go forward with Zoom meetings as a public meeting possibility. She believes the committee should consider that since we are in a town that gets icy quickly, for the sake of safety.

G. Vine feels the committee needs to respond by declaring that it was not remiss in not live streaming and that due to the technical capabilities at its disposal, the committee provided as much access as possible to the public. K. Kast-McBride asks if they are saying that we can't go back to live streaming until the town meeting votes on the funds. R. Forsythe reiterates that the equipment that is used by the town for live streaming is broken, and the only way to return to live streaming is to have that equipment repaired. The equipment cannot be repaired without substantial funding, and the funding that appears to potentially be available if the town voted to allow it is coming from a certain source that requires town meeting approval. So we would not be able to make repairs to the necessary equipment until the funding is made available.

R. Forsythe will respond to the complainant and make sure the Attorney General's office is notified of the review tonight.

b. Mid-Year Review of Superintendent Discussion:

L. Murphy states that the committee could not find the right tool to offer feedback, so he believes the first step should be to find a tool that the committee agrees on that will provide the right kind of feedback. The first one is not evaluative; it's just feedback. The one at the end of the year is summative. G. Vine agrees and would like to be presented with some sort of tool at the next meeting. K. Kast-McBride states that at the MASC conferences, they had a bunch of workshops, and she will double check what she brought home from the Superintendent evaluation workshop. L. Murphy states that he thought Tracy sent a template, so if they can get their hands on it and approve it then they can

move forward. R. Forsythe states that the Chair and the Superintendent will work together to find an appropriate tool.

c. **MASC Conference Review:**

K. Kast-McBride asks to table this time to February so she can put together a presentation, which will involve a lot of copies. L. Murphy states that he received something in the mail that highlighted the six topics that would be voted on. K. Kast-McBride states that she wanted to give the committee members some copies of some of the forms and presentations that she received. G. Vine moves to table. Seconded by K. Kast-McBride. Vote is unanimous.

9. Old Business: None

10. Future Agenda Items:

- a. MASC Conference Review
- b. ELA Curriculum Update
- c. Early Learning Center Update

11. Closing Comments:

A. Jordan wishes everyone a happy new year.

K. Kast-McBride echoes, hoping everyone stays healthy, safe and warm.

L. Murphy wishes all a happy new year and states he was impressed with the Student Representative's report. He thanks Mrs. Rondeau for all she does.

G. Vine thanks Superintendent King for bringing the update on the Literacy Center. He states the concerns brought forward by K. Kast-McBride and L. Murphy are important but that the focus needs to be on the starting level. He appreciates the steps taken to get feedback from the community, but he does not want to see the district tie itself in knots to please everyone. The main issue is the kids' progress and doing something to overcome the problems related to that.

R. Forsythe asks for parents, community members, teachers and students to watch out for the open forums and the surveys that are coming out because these are the opportunities to have a part in the decision making process. The school committee is interested in feedback so it can make an informed decision. He also reminds all to get their tickets to Matilda to see our fantastic students in their play on February 3 or 4.

12. Adjournment:

Motion to adjourn by G. Vine. Seconded by K. Kast-McBride. Vote is unanimous. Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted: Liz Latoria

Liz Latoria, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent

Documents Attached: None