

Merrimack School District Budget Committee  
Minutes

January 28, 2025

Present: S. Bernier, M. Berry, D. Coakley, L. French, G. Groff, J. McCormack, C. Mower, M. Murphy, R. Paepke, S. Rand, A. Santoriello, B. Trant and School Board Liaison N. Halter

Also Present: Chief Educational Officer Bill Olsen, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Amy Doyle, Assistant Superintendent for Business Matt Shevenell and various department heads

J. McCormack called the meeting to order at 6:02 PM and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Public Participation**

There was none.

**Department Budget Reviews**

**Food Services**

Department Head: Dave Dziki

Committee Liaisons: D. Coakley, C. Mower, A. Santoriello

Dan Coakley reported that the Food Service department is unique in that it is self-funding, it produces revenue and is reimbursed by the Federal government. He explained that the Food Service program also provides free and reduced price lunches to students who qualify and the department has a new homeless liaison who is working to see that all students who qualify are served. He told the Committee that the weekly menus are designed by Mr. Dziki following strict Federal guidelines. The District uses the "My School Bucks" program on which parents can establish accounts to pay for their children's lunches. He said Food Services finds this program much easier than handling checks from parents or cash. Each school has a point-of-sale computer. There is a proposed increase in the budget for the costs associated with the annual service contract which covers parts, labor, travel, phone support and loaners for these computers as needed. Other increases proposed in the budget are for paper, rising food costs and some small kitchen wares for all six schools. He mentioned the program is part of an area food buying collaborative which results in better bid pricing and the program also receives Federal bulk commodities, some weekly and some monthly. D. Coakley said that Food Services keeps any surplus budget funds which can only be used for Food Service needs. He noted that in the near future, there may be a need to purchase a new van. He mentioned that the current van is having issues but the Food Service program has been able to borrow a van from Maintenance to deliver meals to the outlying schools. D. Coakley led a standing round of applause for Mr. Dziki who has been with the Merrimack program for 30 years.

The only issue discussed was that lunch monitors at the elementary and upper elementary schools are paid as part of each school's budget. The part-time monitors are hired by the schools to manage student behavior in the cafeterias. They are not part of the Food Service staff. In addition, they are not part of the MESSA contract. Teachers at the middle and high school still have lunch duty to manage student behavior in the cafeteria.

K. Bernier made a MOTION that presentations and Power Points by committee members must be included in the predetermined and equally distributed agenda. The presentation content should be provided two full days prior to the meeting, made clear it is the member's own thoughts when presented in public and limited to 3 – 5 minutes. Second: R. Paepke

K. Bernier spoke to her motion by saying that a Committee member had interrupted a presentation by the Administration on "Improvements to the District" to present a Power Point presentation to express his own thoughts and opinions on the proposed budget.

Discussion included the following:

- Power Points presentations can be helpful.
- Members wished they had been able to view the Power Point ahead of the meeting in order to be prepared to ask questions and discuss it.
- The Power Point presentation in question was sent to the members after the meeting.
- The Power Point presentation was personal opinion and not the official position of the Committee or the School Board but it contained the School District logo.
- Though prepared in advance, the Power Point presentation was not an agenda item.
- Have the numbers presented by the Committee member in his Power Point presentation been vetted?
- The Committee member could or should have included a header stating the presentation was his personal opinion and identifying the sources of the information presented.

D. Coakley called the question.

MOTION FAILED: 6 – 6 – 1.

In favor: C. Mower, R. Paepke, K. Bernier, M. Murphy, G. Groff, N. Halter

Opposed: B. Trant, J. McCormack, M. Berry, S. Rand, A. Santoriello, L. French,

Abstaining: D. Coakley

### **Technology Services**

Department Head: Jason Pelletier

Committee Liaisons: L. French, D. Coakley, J. McCormack, A. Santoriello

L. French told the Committee that his meeting with the Department Head was a work session as the meeting had not been publicized and a quorum of the liaison team was not available. He also explained that Library Services has been separated from the Technology Department. He said

that M. Shevenell is working to relocate the associated costs and expenditures in individual school budgets or the District-Wide budget as appropriate.

L. French reported that the average increase in computer licenses is 9%. He said Technology Services is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of a 6-year Technology Replacement Plan. He noted that while it is a 6-year plan, technology changes all the time and that some companies “end-date” supply parts or support for older computers.

J. Pelletier reported that his team is reviewing all the District’s technology to see what the District has that is not aligned with the District’s curriculum. He said the Department is making cuts based on what is needed and what is not needed. He indicated that the Department has a lot of devices and now has staff at each school to support these devices.

Discussion included the following:

- Software
  - The software purchased throughout the District is a mix of things.
  - The Technology Department is working to clean up and organize software throughout the District so that it has all the software under its control.
  - Curriculum and Assessment software are part of the District-Wide budget.
- Security
  - The District has a Fire Wall and is always trying to harden and improve it.
  - Some people may have been impacted by the Power School breach.
  - The District is working with the AG’s office in case there is a Power School class action.
  - The District needs Adobe to sign a data privacy agreement that meets the security requirements that New Hampshire has set.
- Recurring costs
  - The Department is trying to put together a District procedure so all schools are projecting recurring technology costs in the same way.
  - The annual cost to renew Microsoft licenses is huge. The department is working to reduce the number of Microsoft products and only keeping them where it is absolutely needed.
- The Department believes that the 1:1 device to student trend makes a lot of sense and will continue.

## **Maintenance**

Department Head: Tom Touseau

Committee Liaisons: L. French, C. Mower, B. Trant, S. Rand

L. French reported that there are a lot of things Maintenance would like to do but don’t have funds for at this time, for example repairing and finishing the sidewalk on O’Gara Drive. However, he explained that there are a few new items in the proposed budget that need immediate repair: sidewalk repairs at all schools, door replacement (some of which are security doors) and additional cameras. He said the District is now replacing old cameras as well as buying additional security cameras. The police can access the new cameras if needed. The District has spent a lot of the recent grant money on the camera back end infrastructure. He mentioned a big problem for the Department is that it doesn’t have the staff to fill the positions

needed. As a result, the District has contracted field maintenance and other daily maintenance jobs of the schools. He explained that the District has to keep the vacant positions available and funded because they are union jobs. However, the District uses unspent salary fund to offset the contracted service line. He also said the good news is that, since the new support contract passed, Maintenance has been able to hire some custodians and they feel they are making progress.

L. French told the Committee that other big expenditures in the budget are replacement of electrical switch gear boxes and windows that have mechanical parts that don't work. He mentioned that the District has funds to install some mini-split air conditioning units on the second floor of JMUES or MHS. This is part of an on-going plan. He said the budget also contains funds to replace or restore the base material at the school playgrounds. However, he noted that the initial drainage fix at the MMS sports field did not work and the field still floods. A more extensive and expensive fix is being developed and will be proposed soon.

Discussion included the following:

- Fields
  - The baseball and softball fields at the Mastricola complex cannot be prepared for their seasons until the fields dry out from winter snows.
  - Field preparation requires skilled, certified staff.
  - Mowing and striping the field is not a problem, preparing safe fields is the a concern.
  - The District does look for and use local contractors.

### **Student Services**

Department Head: Sarah Reinhardt

Committee Liaisons: G. Groff, K. Bernier, M. Berry, S. Rand

G. Groff reported that the District is mandated by Federal and State laws to provide a free and appropriate public education (F.A.P.E.) in the least restrictive environment to all children from birth until age 3 with early intervention services and then from age 3 to age 22 in school. She said this education includes academics and physical aspects of the day as well as social and emotional learning. She said that the District has 775 students who qualify for an I.E.P. which is about 20% of the student population.

G. Groff said that this Department is called Student Services because besides Special Education, the department also provides services for Tier 2 students who qualify for additional supports such as multi-tiered interventions and for Tier 1 (regular students) who have learning or behavioral gaps. These services sometimes include 504 plans. She said the cost of student supplies and needed materials has increased.

G. Groff stated that if an I.E.P. requires something, it must be provided. Anything offered to regular students as part of a regular school day must be offered to students with I.E.P.s. For example, since after school co-curriculars are offered to regular students, they must be offered to students with I.E.P.s which may require a para-professional or modifications be put in place. G. Groff said if a para-educator is required by an I.E.P. and the District does not have an employee

to fill the position, the position is filled by contract. That expenditure is assigned to a contract line and the District uses unspent salary fund to offset the contract line.

G. Groff told the Committee that there are also positions that are not in the budget which are contracted out such as school psychologists, physical therapists and speech therapists. In addition, she said that additional administrative staff is required to keep up with the paperwork. She indicated that the staff is always looking for grants and other ways to increase the funding available to the Department.

G. Groff explained that sometimes the I.E.P. team will decide that the best program for the child will be an Out of District Placement or she said the courts can order an Out of District Placement for a behavioral issue. Either way, the District pays the cost. The I.E.P. team chooses which school the student should attend but strict student privacy laws prevent releasing a list of what schools the District sends students to or what doctors or therapists the District contracts for testing or services. G. Groff said the District currently has 23 Out of District placements and had 20 last year.

G. Groff indicated that Covid had a major impact on the number of students who need services or additional supports. She said the numbers and needs change every year.

Discussion included the following:

- There is no cap on the number of students the District must serve. Federal and state laws mandate educating all children.
- Parents have to prove their child needs services by meeting very stringent criteria.
- Typically, students are re-evaluated every 3 years and they may test out. (They were asked to provide data on how many students typically test out and none has been received yet.)
- A one-on-one aid may be required for students with severe disabilities.
- There are 478 students who have a 504 plan.
- The District has an obligation to transport students to Out Of District (O.O.D.) placements. The discussion included paying parents themselves to provide this transportation.
- The District has an O.O.D. Co-Ordinator.
- The District does provide programs or education to help staff provide services for the children with special needs.
- If the District requires a medical test to help determine a student's needs, the District pays for the test since it is a school need. Parents pay for medical tests to answer medical questions.
- There are currently 131 English Language Learners (E.L.L.) The District believes this number will continue to increase. There were 95 students last year.
- The I.E.P team consists of the parent, the regular education teacher for the child, the special education teach for the child, a decision maker for the District (L.E.A.) and others as needed or requested.
- The I.E.P. is written in-house by Special Educators employed by the District.

**Approval of Prior Minutes**

J. McCormack asked if anyone had any additions or corrections to the January 7<sup>th</sup> minutes.

There were three corrections suggested to the list of meeting attendees.

B. Trant made a MOTION to approve the minutes of January 7, 2025 as corrected. Second: M. Murphy

MOTION PASSED 11 – 0 – 2. (Abstaining: R. Paepke and G. Groff)

J. McCormack asked if anyone had any additions or corrections to the January 14<sup>th</sup> minutes. There were none.

G. Groff made a MOTION to approve the minutes of January 14, 2025. Second: B. Trant.

MOTION passed: 9 – 0 - 3

(Abstaining: L. French, R. Paepke and N. Halter) (C. Mower voted “Present”)

**Next Meeting Date**

J. McCormack said the next meeting will be on February 4, 2025 at 7 PM.

R. Paepke asked if the motion to change the start time to 6 PM had been for all upcoming meetings. J. McCormack told her it had been only for the January 28<sup>th</sup> meeting.

M. Berry made a MOTION to change the starting time of the February 4<sup>th</sup> meeting to 6 PM. Second: B. Trant.

R. Paepke asked if the motion could be amended to include all future meetings. She was told that Notice of the Public Hearing must be published in the newspaper and to meet publication deadlines, J. McCormack decided to start the Public Hearing at 7 PM and the Committee meeting held before the Public Hearing will start at 6:30 PM. This notice has already been sent to the newspapers.

MOTION PASSED 12 – 0 – 0. (C. Mower voted “Present.”)

**Public Participation**

Lori Peters (School Board Chair) said that technology is a necessary tool in all of today’s classrooms. She said Merrimack is a data informed District and data drives all decision. She also said the Merrimack School System delivers quality services.

Shayne Albuquerque (Westcott Drive) said he was surprised to see the Committee spend an hour and a half talking about Special Education and to hear a member of the Committee talk about capping the number of children served by to be coded for special services. He said the goal of the District is to give every student a good quality education and provide equality of services for every student.

C. Mower asked for a Point of Order and said it is not appropriate for Committee members to engage with members of the public who are speaking during Public Participation.

S. Albuquerque continued his comments by saying that there was a lot of time spent talking about athletic fields and suggested the District should put some money in turf fields. He suggested the District should look into things that will advance the School District and not cut what we have.

### **Committee Comments**

B. Trant said the Committee is looking to give people a choice and that he is looking to see where the District can streamline. He said the children are important but so are the taxpayers.

C. Mower left at this time.

J. McCormack reminded members that the committee has not made any decisions and that during Committee Comments members were expressing their personal opinions.

K. Bernier said that, even if 50% of the student population has I.E.P.s, the District is legally required to educate all the students and pay for the services of those with I.E.P.s. She said public school is for everybody.

M. Berry said that her first year on the Committee has been eye-opening and she has not yet made any decisions. She said she felt the Committee's job was to thoroughly look at the proposed budget with an analytical eye and ask questions before making decisions.

A. Santoriello said everyone wants to do the right thing but we all have different ideas about what that looks like. He felt the most ethical thing the Committee could try to do was give the voters the opportunity to be the decision makers. He asked M. Shevenell how much money was given to the School District as gifts. M. Shevenell replied that the District received about \$700 in gifts last year. A. Santoriello said \$700 was a small amount and he'd love to see more charitable giving.

M. Murphy said she graduated from Merrimack High Schools and had received Special Education services as a student. She said she felt Special Education services are valuable and are working. She felt that, without them, she would not have accomplished all the things she has.

G. Groff said that everybody has their own opinion but she felt that the questions asked during the Special Ed presentation will help educate the public because many people don't understand that these services are legal obligations. She also said a good school system often drives up the town's property values.

N. Halter said that, over the last ten years, there were only two years when the difference between the proposed budget and the default budget was more than \$500,000 which she felt didn't really give the voters a choice. She said that in those years, the proposed operating budget really did not provide funds to improve the curriculum or adequately compensate the staff. She said the District is hovering at average. She would like to see improvement and she also does

not want the District to go backwards. She indicated that state test scores in Merrimack have started to improve. She said that the choice between the current proposed budget and the default budget is way more of a choice than voters have had in recent history.

R. Paepke said that everyone is always running fundraisers and the community has been very supportive of these endeavors. She said that the Committee had not yet made any decisions. She noted that there is a lot of information to gather and a big learning curve for new members. She felt the Committee's voice will be heard when it makes decisions at its work sessions.

S. Rand said she has learned a lot this year. She said that no question is a dumb question and there has been a wide range of diversified questions asked at both the liaison meetings and department presentations to the Committee. She said she was looking forward to the upcoming work sessions.

L. French said we really need to step things up at the state level. We are the worst in the country for state funding to schools. He said he gets that the School District budget is the largest of the "town" budgets but the school budget has been pretty much level funded for several years. He said he doesn't want to continue to be average. There are a lot of projects which need to be done and he felt we haven't funded this community adequately.

J. McCormack reminded the members that the Committee doesn't cut line items. It comes up with a bottom line number. She said analyzing line items to see where and why the budget has changed is part of the process to get to the bottom line.

G. Groff made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: S. Rand.

J. McCormack declared the meeting adjourned at 9:30 PM