

**Merrimack School Board Special Meeting  
Merrimack School District, SAU #26  
Merrimack Town Hall – Matthew Thornton Room  
December 11, 2024**

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**Present:** Ms. Lori Chair Peters, Chair; Ms. Jenna Hardy, Vice-Chair; Ms. Laurie Rothhaus, Board Member; Mr. Ken Martin, Board Member; and Ms. Naomi Halter, Board Member.

**Also Present:** Mr. Everett Olsen, Chief Educational Officer; Ms. Amy Doyle, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum; and Mr. Matt Shevenell, Assistant Superintendent for Business.

**Not Present:** Mr. Finnegan Haddad, Student Representative.

**1. CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

At 6:00 p.m., Chair Peters called the special meeting to order.

Chair Peters read aloud the Merrimack School District's mission statement into the record as follows:

The Merrimack School District will provide a high-quality, future-driven education to all students in the community. Students will engage in learning opportunities that reflect both rigor and relevance and meet their cognitive, social, and emotional needs. The district will prepare students to understand, adapt, and adjust to civic, economic, social, and technological changes in the world. Our overall goal is to inspire, create, and encourage students to be curious, connected, prepared, resilient, and dedicated individuals who are lifelong expert learners. Merrimack graduates exercise judgment; they are innovative and will become responsible contributors to society. We hope the discussions we have tonight will always align with that mission.

**2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was none.

**3. BUDGET QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

***a. Maintenance***

Mr. Tom Touseau, Director of Maintenance, was present to discuss and answer questions regarding his budget. Mr. Matt Shevenell, Assistant Superintendent for Business, was also present to provide financial context and answer questions.

**Question:** From the School Board. One of the questions was regarding the \$22,500 on sidewalk repairs.

**Answer:** Mr. Touseau replied that it was money to re-seal and power wash the sidewalks, which would prolong the length of the concrete sidewalks.

**Question:** From the School Board. Please explain the critical need to replace doors (security) and explain the need for additional cameras when many in the community may feel we have enough.

**Answer:** Mr. Touseau replied he was also requesting \$15,000 for door replacements that could not be repaired any longer, and it was important for safety reasons. Additionally, Mr. Touseau said his request for \$75,000 worth of new cameras was because they found they needed to place monies into the infrastructure of the cameras, such as the servers.

Board Member Rothhaus commented that she was in favor of supporting the \$75,000, and she said she felt it would be money well spent.

**Question:** From the School Board. Please explain the increase from 2023 – 2024 to 2024 – 2025 that is level-funded for 2025 – 2026. (Trash Disposal)

**Answer:** Mr. Touseau said the trash was not being picked up all of the time. He said they were still experiencing a lack of employees, and companies who had CDL drivers were few and far between.

**Question:** From the School Board. Please provide an overview of these expenditures and the need for the requested \$164,000 increase.

**Answer:** Mr. Touseau replied that the line item was a “catch-all” line item. He said some of the line items were consistently in the budget, and some were not. He further said that the items that comprised the \$164,000 were not items that were in the budget the previous year. (Sidewalk repair, door repairs, camera repairs, and money for a districtwide access system)

**Question:** From the School Board. Why did line item 100-4600-62-8451-08 decrease?

**Answer:** Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell replied that in the past, the roof program was part of the operating, and then it was taken out of the operating budget and put in a warrant article to decrease the operating budget and give people the choice as to whether or not they wanted to put a roof on a building. He added that the danger of doing that was that if the people voted no, then there was no roof, even if it were leaking. He said that the people had been very good about passing the roof articles, and when it passed, he put the money in that account number, which paid for the roof at the James Masticola Upper Elementary School roof in 2024 – 2025 in the amount of \$797,000.

**Question:** Board Member Halter asked how Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell calculated for how much money had to be set aside for utilities in the budget.

**Answer:** Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell replied he did multi-year contracts, which saved on utilities' prices, noting that the contract would be up in 2028. He added, however, that they could not control what the Public Utilities Commission did.

### ***b. Technology/Library***

Mr. Jason Pelletier, Director of Technology, was present to discuss and answer questions regarding his proposed budget.

Mr. Pelletier explained that the largest line item was that of the capital improvement program. He said that line included laptops, computer replacements, server replacements, the 1:1 Chromebook initiative, and other equipment, firewalls, and the VOIP (voice over IP) for the telephones. He added that they were able to streamline better to bring costs down and use their technology to the fullest.

Mr. Pelletier stated that while technology and library had always been together, they split them into two separate items. He said this affected the supply line the most, and he was careful to pay close attention to each school, as it depended in part on the population.

Mr. Pelletier noted that there was an increase in the software licensing line item. He also said the instructional equipment line item was bumped up to \$31,000, and they level-funded it within the current proposed budget.

### ***c. Student Services***

Ms. Sarah Reinhardt, Director of Student Services, was present to discuss and answer questions regarding her proposed budget.

Ms. Reinhardt stated that the proposed budget reflected the cost of providing the legally required Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students who were identified as in need of special education. She said a FAPE was considered sufficient when it enabled a student with a disability to make appropriate progress in light of their circumstances. She further stated that in Merrimack, approximately 775 were identified as in need of special education, or about 20% of the population.

Ms. Reinhardt said one of the notable items on the proposed budget was the cost of contracted services used for speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and BCBAs. She said prior to COVID-19, it was a fiscally responsible way to use the money as they could adjust the contracts based on the student's needs. She added that after COVID-19, there was a drain in professional staff.

Ms. Reinhardt stated that there were two requests for administrative assistants for the Student Services Department, and the current administrative assistants needed help as they were overwhelmed with the number of students who were utilizing special education.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle commented that there was also a request for a third administrative assistant to help with the 504 plans. She said it was the same type of circumstance in that the current administrative assistant was overwhelmed with the workload, with 478 students having a 504 plan.

**Question:** From the School Board. Please explain why such an increase is proposed for this year to carry into next year.

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied that the Director of School Counseling K-8, Ms. Sara Parrotto, oversaw the line items. She said it was level-funded because it included the YES Program, which supported at-risk students. She said currently, only high-risk students at the high school were supported. She said they saw approximately 20 students at any given point. She also said the Greater Nashua Mental Group provided self-regulation programming and training at the K through grade 8 levels. Ms. Reinhardt noted there was Adventurelore that provided experiential learning for at-risk students, and they had adjusted different items to keep the line level funded.

Ms. Reinhardt also explained that they had guest speakers for students regarding anti-bullying, etc., which was approximately \$2,000 per school, and the staff received suicide prevention training, which was a one-time fee of \$12,000. She said a part-time contracted counselor continued to be

needed at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School and the Merrimack Middle School to provide counseling, as outlined in students' IEPs.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle commented that the suicide prevention training was required on an annual basis.

**Question:** From the School Board. What is the increase of \$12,427 in line item 100-2122-41-8610-10?

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied that the increase included the cost of supplies for Tier 1, and it also included a three-year contract for Second Step. She said she did not anticipate the price of Second Step being in the following year's budget.

**Question:** Is there any room for decreases with the following line items, seeing how so little of it had been utilized? 100-2122-41-8114-10, 100-2122-41-8114-20, and 100-2122-41-8114-30

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied that the line items were used to support paraprofessionals to support students in co-curricular activities, and more students participated in the activities.

**Question:** Board Member Rothhaus asked how much the district had spent so far in the current year and how many students needed the extra support.

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied she would create a document and provide it to the School Board.

**Question:** Board Member Halter asked how many paraprofessionals the district currently had and how many unfilled paraprofessional positions there were.

**Answer:** Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell replied that the district was understaffed by 17 paraprofessionals, but some of those positions were filled with a contracted paraprofessional. He added that, by law, he could not remove the MESSA (Merrimack Educational Support Staff Association) Master Agreement FTE's (full-time employees) in the operating budget.

**Question:** From the School Board. What is the year-to-date expenditure, and what is encumbered with these items?

**Answer:** Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell replied they were salary lines, and each of the line items had approximately \$300,000 remaining. He added that they used some of the money to pay for the contracted services.

**Question:** From the School Board. Is there any room for decreases here, given that the previous year's expenditures never exceeded \$60,000? 100-1138-38-8122-30

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied that the line item was used for tutoring any student who had a documented medical condition that caused them to be removed from school for more than 10 consecutive days.

Ms. Reinhardt also replied that this line item pertained to the Extended School Year Summer Program and what they think it would cost to provide it at the high school. She added it was difficult

to get staff to work during the summer months, so they would have to hire contracted services to fill the positions.

**Question:** How do you calculate the increase? 100-2140-41-8323-06

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied that the line item pertaining to the cost of the contracted services for the current year for the speech occupational therapist-assisted technology consultant, orientation and mobility consultant, a teacher for deaf people, and a teacher for the visually impaired. She said it also included the Hear to Learn contract, which provided an educational audiologist for students who were hearing impaired, and DTS Therapy, which provided physical therapists.

**Question:** What accounts for the almost 108% increase in this line item? How many elementary referrals for 2024 – 2025 and how many elementary re-evaluations for 2024 – 2025 were used or are being used for the contracted services? Please bring concrete data to support this line item.

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied that the line item included the school psychologists at the elementary schools. She added that as of that day, the preschool had 28 referrals, James Mastricola Elementary School had 15 referrals, Reeds Ferry Elementary School had 16 referrals, James Mastricola Upper Elementary School had 5 referrals, Merrimack Middle School had 12 referrals, and the Merrimack High School had 3 referrals.

Ms. Reinhardt added that they were still trying to catch up with students who did not receive triennial or complete evaluations during Covid, which added to the amount of time that a school psychologist needed to be in the buildings. She said she felt once the referrals started to normalize, she projected that the cost would decrease.

Chair Peters stated that she would like to see what it would look like financially to hire in-house school psychologists rather than using contracted services. She said the salaries in Nashua ranged in wages from \$45,000 to \$90,000, excluding benefits.

Ms. Reinhardt stated that she felt it was important to mention that they were able to decrease some of the line items.

**Question:** Chair Peters asked Ms. Reinhardt to please explain the need for and number of out-of-district placements and the anticipated increase.

**Answer:** Ms. Reinhardt replied that the districts had students whose learning needs were so complex that they could not control the regular education environment enough to allow them to access their Free and Appropriate Public Education. She added when they had complex learners, those students typically had severe social and emotional needs where. They required a smaller setting with intensive therapeutic responses that public schools did not have. She said the IEP team had to exhaust all of the services that they could bring into a school to make the school accessible to a child, and once they saw that the student was not making any progress, they had to look at an alternative learning environment.

#### ***d. District***

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell stated that the district's budget was made up of contracted services, benefits, obligations per law, and other items from a curriculum standpoint. He

added that the district was obligated, per the teacher contract, to provide an early retirement incentive for at least seven MTA (Merrimack Teachers' Association) members and that money was in the district's budget. He said the health insurance went up by \$1.2 million, and the dental insurance went up by \$46,000. He also said the cost of transportation had gone up, among many other line items that were part of the proposed budget.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle stated that aimsWebPlus was an item in the proposed budget. She said there was also a request for a stipend for mentoring new teachers and a request to procure some curriculum development supplies.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Doyle and other Board Members expressed their extreme disappointment that the district had mandates put upon them without receiving any funding for those mandates.

#### **4. PUBLIC COMMENTS ON AGENDA ITEMS**

There were none.

#### **5. ADJOURNMENT**

**MOTION:** At approximately 8:02 p.m., Vice-Chair Hardy made a motion to adjourn. Board Member Martin seconded the motion.

**MOTION CARRIED: 5 – 0 – 0.**