

**Merrimack School Board Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Monday, December 7, 2020
Remote Meeting**

7:00 p.m. – Public Session

Present: Chair Guagliumi, Vice Chair Barnes, Board Members Schneider, Rothhaus, and Hardy. Also present were Superintendent McLaughlin, Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell, and Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio.

1. Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance

Chair Guagliumi called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Chair Guagliumi led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Public Comments

Chair Guagliumi stated public comments could be sent to publiccomment@sau26.org or by going to sau26.org where a meeting link was provided. She said all comments would be read and written into the record but noted the name and address of the speaker had to be provided.

Vice Chair Barnes read aloud from e-mails received from four constituents as summarized below:

Mr. Patrick McLaughlin, 2 Cranston Circle

As a parent of two Merrimack District school students I believe that while switching to a fully remote learning environment through January 18th, the District missed an opportunity to improve the level of education being delivered to the Town's school children. Under the hybrid plan implemented since the beginning of the school year, Merrimack Middle School and Merrimack High School students have had significantly less direct instruction time than they received in the normal, in-person, five days per week set-up. Merrimack Middle School students take only two to four core classes; math, science, language arts, and social studies per quarter, and in the hybrid model those classes receive direct instruction two days per week. Missing two days per week rather than five and meeting for only half of the school year rather than the full school year leaves these students significantly short-changed in the amount of instruction they receive in each subject over the course of the full school year. Merrimack High School student's schedules are structured differently but the net result is very similar. They also receive less than half of the instruction time they would receive in an in-person, five-day per week setting. The switch to fully remote learning provided an opportunity to begin to make up for the shortfall in direct instruction time. In a fully remote environment, each student could receive four days' worth of instruction by attending class on-line Monday through Thursday.

A virtual teaching/learning environment does not require that attendance be reduced by 50% as a hybrid model does for purposes of consistency and capacity control. As a parent, I was optimistically looking forward to my children having the opportunity to "catch-up" on learning that has been missed to this point in the school year. For the period of December 2nd through January 18th I believe that Merrimack Middle School and Merrimack High School students would have the opportunity to learn at something close to the normal pace that they had prior to the 2019 – 2020 school year.

Unfortunately, that won't be the case. Based on what I can tell Merrimack High School students will not receive any more instruction in the fully remote model than they had in the hybrid model. I applaud Principal Caragher's plan for the amount of instruction time that will be provided to Merrimack Middle School students in the core classes they are taking. Still, Merrimack Middle School students will remain without instruction in the other two core classes for the duration of the second quarter. The Merrimack School District teachers will have a much better estimate than I have on the following but based on what I observed and understand students in our District will receive far less than 50% of the amount of direct instruction this school year than they would have in a typical school year. It is logical to conclude that they will learn less than 50% of the material than that of a typical school year. We are well aware that everyone continues to face challenges unlike we have faced before.

What is the plan to provide students in the Merrimack School District with the opportunity to maximize their learning potential in the 2020 – 2021 school year? Is it your belief that the amount of learning achieved in the 2020 – 2021 school year would approximate, to the extent possible, the amount achieved in a typical academic year?

Mr. John Calabro, 16 Hutchinson Road

I have been asking about the school gym availability for MYA (Merrimack Youth Association) sports with good information received but no answer. MYA (Merrimack Youth Association) "winter sports" are basketball and wrestling. Both would have started in November but have been delayed due to gyms not being available.

Ms. Tina Mendell, 4 Tanglewood Way

I am writing this evening to voice my concern regarding the live instruction time that our children receive. As of right now, only two days of live instruction is happening and we are fully remote. Since the kids are remote why are they not receiving more live instruction time? I see other towns that are able to make live instruction four days per week happen so why are we not able to? For the parents who work outside of the home, it makes it very difficult on independent days to keep the kids on task while not being there in-person. Please consider more days for live instruction as these kids need it and deserve it.

Ms. Angelique Amadeo, 8 Owl's Court

My son attends the Reed's Ferry Elementary School and has been fully remote this entire year. He has one live special per week and it is about 15 to 20 minutes long. Meanwhile, the hybrid students have two live specials per week for 45 minutes each. This has been unequitable for four months and is inconsistent across the District. I am a remote teacher in another District and my students have a live 45-minute special five days per week, including the flex day. I was told the reason my child is not receiving at least two specials for the regular length of time is due to scheduling, however, I feel this is an unacceptable answer as other Districts and even other schools within the District are making it work so that fully remote students are getting the special time that they deserve. Please find a way to adjust the schedule to allow my child to receive more than one 15-minute live special per week that he deserves and to make it more equitable to the students who have children in the hybrid option.

Mr. Greg Hooven, 5 Crestview Circle

In reviewing the agenda for tonight's meeting, I along with many of the community would appreciate it if you could take a few minutes to explain the rationale behind going fully remote and still keeping students in the hybrid model when it comes to instructor-led education. I realize that some schools and classes are doing a couple of small group sessions on off days. With the conversion of all

students to full-time remote for the next several weeks there should no longer be staff shortage concerns as teachers would be able to double up class sizes if needed to provide all students with a minimum of four, preferably five days of teacher-led instruction. Please provide some details on what is currently being done to start prepping the school and staff for the return to in-school “hybrid” or “full in-person” after the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday in January. Likewise, with some of the funds that I presume will be saved over the next several weeks, via bus fuel, administrative staff, etc., you could repurpose those funds to not only hire some more teachers for the spring season but also update some of the technology in the classrooms to allow teachers to present to both in-person and remote students. This would eliminate the need to run duplicate classes and again provide all students with a minimum of four days of live teacher instruction.

Lastly, apparently, there is a new grading system that has been implemented at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School. Please put together some guidance for the parents on how this new grading system will affect class placement when the kids move over to the high school.

3. Request to Readdress the Wrestling Season

Ms. Tammy Dewar, a parent of a wrestler, and President of the Wrestling Boosters addressed the Board and stated as the District was currently in a fully remote status there was a very low risk of bringing COVID into the classrooms or the schools.

Ms. Dewar said the mats used for wrestling were very new and were sanitized before and after each use. She further said all of the gear was sanitized and athletes had to practice healthy hygiene and were used to taking showers after each practice or meet and if they were not able to shower they used anti-bacterial wipes because skin infections were common in the sport. She added if the athletes were sick they did not attend practice because the nature of sport could expose the entire team.

Ms. Dewar commented they would follow the protocols that were put in place including more frequent sanitization of the mats as well as using multiple mats. She said the Booster Club had offered to purchase defense wipes for each of the wrestlers to carry in their travel bags. In addition to that she said they would hold segregated practices, alternate conditioning and mat times, social distance, wear masks while not wrestling, coaches would be required to wear masks at all times, and take temperatures of the coaches as well as the athletes.

Ms. Dewar said wrestling was allowed in Pelham, Souhegan, Hollis, Timberlane, Concord, Bow, Salem, Alvirne, Windham, and Exeter. She said one of the senior's on the wrestling team was able to obtain 505 signatures on a petition with 153 coming from Merrimack alone.

Ms. Dewar commented there had been many gatherings and sporting events in other locations with no outbreaks of COVID-19. She further commented that she felt the decision as to whether or not to participate in the sport should be up to the parents and families.

Ms. Dewar shared a video to the School Board which included multiple athletes who were in favor of wrestling.

Vice Chair Barnes asked if there would be daily COVID testing. Ms. Dewar replied she believed they were going to administer daily COVID testing but added the school would not be responsible for it.

Vice Chair Barnes stated one of her concerns was the close proximity of the athletes. Ms. Dewar replied each wrestler would only have contact with one other athlete who would also receive a temperature check. She added each wrestling match lasted for six minutes at the most.

Board Member Hardy commented she learned a lot from Ms. Dewar's presentation and she said she was inclined to say yes but was concerned about how to mitigate the risks of actually coming into the building. She added if the Board was in agreement they would be putting a great deal of trust that the athletes, coaches, and parents would be extremely cautious because she would not want anything to happen that would cause the District to be remote any longer than they needed to be. Ms. Dewar said one of the proposed protocols included the parents and athletes being required to sign a contract agreeing to the safety protocols or agreeing to remain remote until the end of the season.

Board Member Rothhaus stated she was impressed with how the students advocated for their sport.

Board Member Schneider commented at the end of the day he felt it was up to the administration and the Athletic Director as to whether or not they felt they could manage it.

Mr. Mike Soucy, Director of Athletics, addressed the Board and said he would still not recommend wrestling, at least not competitively.

Board Member Schneider asked Mr. Soucy if there was a specific concern he had regarding allowing wrestling. Mr. Soucy replied the concerns were already out there about the transmission of COVID-19, but he did not feel that wrestling was much different than allowing football, although he said they were able to get through it with some sound protocols and luck. He said despite the fact that each wrestler would only have contact with one other wrestler if there was a transmission of COVID it would likely transmit throughout the team. He further said if they allowed it, "what would happen after Martin Luther King, Jr. Day when there was still half a season to go and the kids were back to a hybrid or fully in-school model?"

Chair Guagliumi commented she did not like being in the business of telling parents what to do but she did want to maintain safety for the entire community.

Mr. Soucy said the best protocol they could put in place was daily COVID-19 testing but he did not see how that could happen and questioned if they could even require it of their opponents.

Board Member Schneider commented that he was inclined to support the request to allow wrestling, especially given the support of the Booster Club.

Superintendent McLaughlin stated they had contact attorneys regarding the liability waiver and it was determined that it only had a certain degree of enforceability. He added the School Board would need to approve it prior to it being used.

Board Member Hardy made a motion (seconded by Board member Schneider) to allow wrestling to move forward.

Discussion:

Vice Chair Barnes commented that she did not feel good about the decision to move forward with wrestling either way. Vice Chair Barnes stated if the protocols were not being followed there needed to be fast, firm, and final consequences from leadership.

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0.

4. Update on Transition to Remote Learning

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio and administrators from each building provided information regarding the remote learning model. Those present who spoke included:

- Ms. Michelle Romein, Principal, James Mastricola Elementary School
- Ms. Alisha Hansen-Proulx, Assistant Principal, James Mastricola Elementary School
- Ms. Bonnie Painchaud, Assistant Principal, Reeds Ferry Elementary School
- Ms. Michaela Champlin, Assistant Principal, Thorntons Ferry Elementary School
- Ms. Marsha McGill, Principal, James Mastricola Upper Elementary School
- Mr. Adam Caragher, Principal, Merrimack Middle School
- Ms. Sharon Putney, Principal, Merrimack High School
- Mr. Bill Morris, REAL Coordinator (Remote Education Academy for Learning)
- Ms. Nancy Rose, Director of Technology and Library Media
- Ms. Heather Barker, Director of Student Services

Panelists explained that they met with their leadership teams and utilized the list of givens they had prepared regarding staff pivoting from hybrid instruction to a fully remote model. They also explained the detailed ways they planned on making learning remotely very meaningful.

5. Overview of Proposed 2021 – 2022 School District Budget

Superintendent McLaughlin read aloud from his budget message as summarized below:

The 2021 – 2022 proposed budget reflects the consideration of five priorities as broadly articulated by the Merrimack School Board in its collective budget message to District administration and the impacts both known, and unknown of the global pandemic. The five priorities are:

1. Technology
2. Safety
3. Maintenance
4. Personnel
5. Curriculum

The proposed budget also recognizes the need to strike a balance between meeting the needs of a large and complex system and acknowledging the financial insecurity felt by so many in our community as a result of the nearly year-long pandemic. As a result, the proposed budget was developed with a goal of level funding. While the process by which this budget was developed was founded on a consideration of the five priorities named above, the budget we present tonight does not request equal financial support for every priority. This is due to a number of factors unique both to the circumstances of this past year and as a result of the care taken in previous budgets to account for certain recurring priorities.

Technology

Over the past decade, the Merrimack School District has made significant investments in computer hardware, software, and infrastructure in an effort to support 21st Century learning goals. This

continued focus on technology has helped students and staff make significant gains in the use of instructional technology as a component of an evolving teaching and learning model. However, these planned, budgeted, and appropriately scaled technology enhancements did not anticipate a once in a lifetime global pandemic. The resulting technology needs to support full remote learning last spring and hybrid and remote learning this fall and next spring have been met by utilizing resources made available to our School District through its' aggressive use of the available federal funds. This budget reflects a need for supplemental support to meet the continued challenge posed by the pandemic and the likely permanent changes to teaching and learning that it has caused. In light of the previously described effort to balance school district needs and community challenges, this budget does not include a request for funds to support the goal of achieving 1:1 computers for all district students but instead, it is our recommendation to put this request as a Warrant Article for \$450,000.

Safety

Safety in the context of the pandemic's impact on this budget refers almost exclusively to materials and efforts related to virus prevention in our schools. Much of those efforts have allowed the District to be transmission free within the schools and have been paid for by using federal funds available for this and related purposes. This budget reflects the on-going maintenance of those efforts in the next fiscal year.

Maintenance

Our District has engaged in a consistent, well-planned, and long-term investment in the maintenance of district assets, specifically our schools. They are the pride of our District and serve the town in innumerable ways, well beyond their primary use as learning sites. This dedicated and planful attention to our school buildings' infrastructure provides an opportunity to temporarily shift priorities to other areas of the budget requiring more attention as a result of the pandemic. The proposed ten-year capital improvement plan, recently approved by the District's Planning & Building Committee, and currently under consideration by the Merrimack School Board, prioritizes a ten-year focus on ventilation improvements in classrooms throughout the District. As with 1:1 technology, this budget does not include a request for funds for ventilation in the upcoming fiscal year but instead, it is our recommendation to put this request as a Warrant Article for \$300,000.

Personnel

Last year we discussed the anticipated five-year trend in student enrollment to increase annually by between 30 and 50 students. Certainly, that trend was interrupted by the unanticipated effects of the pandemic. The resulting impact on student enrollment, no growth, minimal decline was offset by the challenges posed by effectively operating two concurrent systems; hybrid, and remote. Despite an essentially static enrollment this year personnel needs exceeded expectations in order to accommodate the variety of challenges posed by the staffing two systems in the pandemic. These challenges were met by the creative deployment of available staff in conjunction with the additional staff requested in last years' budget. The most recent enrollment report prepared for the District by NESDEC (New England School Development and Council) anticipates a return to enrollment trends expected in the current fiscal year, in other words, this budget anticipates an enrollment in 2021 – 2022 that more closely aligns with that planned for in the current 2020 – 2021 school year. As a consequence, we feel that the current staffing model will support a return to enrollment growth next year and, therefore, with two exceptions this budget does not request additional staff.

1. Remote Education Academy for Learning – The pandemic has required an extraordinary amount of coordination to ensure that the experience of remote learning is equal to those who elect the hybrid model. This coordination has included a minimum of support, and training of educators, guidance, and support for families and students and, coordination between remote and hybrid educators to ensure as much consistency between the models as possible. The pandemic has revealed an interesting option that some of our families have suggested they might want to take advantage of in coming years. Specifically, the possibility of maintaining remote learning either permanently or as needed. Other potential advantages of supporting on-going remote education include but are not limited to: supporting students with attention disabilities, students who would otherwise be suspended due to behavior infractions, and students absent due to illness or injury. In all cases, students could maintain an uninterrupted educational connection to their learning in cases and under circumstances that might never before have been available. In order to provide these options and to support an innovative approach to distance learning in the future, this budget includes a coordinator of the Remote Education Academy for Learning (REAL).
2. Technology Support – The growth of technology as a fundamental component of our learning model has been accompanied by the need for a team that can support its infrastructure and the maintenance of existing services as well as the necessary growth required to maintain currency with 21st Century learning goals. To achieve this goal this budget includes an additional position of technology support.

Finally, the District is currently in negotiations with the Merrimack Educational Support Staff Association (MESA) and anticipates presenting the resulting contract proposal as a Warrant Article.

Curriculum

Curriculum development initiatives over the past decade have included art and music, physical education, & science and math. Current initiatives include social studies, world language, English language arts, and health and an on-going investigation into online and print resources to support advances in technology and learning. All curriculum initiatives, past, and future, occur in planned and scheduled phases. This budget does not anticipate any new curriculum implementation for the 2021 – 2022 school year. In outlying years there will be requests for funds to support curriculum areas currently under development and the renewal of our recently adopted math program. As in the past, these requests will be staged over the course of multiple upcoming budgets to avoid any excessive single year budget impact.

COVID-Related Expenses

News of a potential vaccine raises significant hopes of a return to normal schooling next year. We cannot build a budget that does not allow for certain unanticipated needs that might arise as a result of the ongoing virus impacts or needs arising from the effects of the pandemic on our learners and learning. As a consequence, this budget proposes the establishment of a COVID-related expense line item be dedicated exclusively to needs arising from or related to the virus. The proposed

\$100,000 in this account comes directly from savings in our technology line realized by the use of available federal funds to defray technology costs that would otherwise be reflected in this budget. We anticipate that any requests to expend funds from this account would be shared with and approved by the Merrimack School Board prior to any expenditure.

Cost Drivers

Health Insurance – As with most school district budgets over the years, the cost of health insurance is a significant cost driver. This year the District's guaranteed maximum rate (GMR) is 9.5% which translates into a \$500,000 increase in our operating budget. As in previous budget years, if the actual rate is lower than the maximum the difference would be returned to the taxpayer, however, we must build this budget anticipating no reduction in this rate in order to have funds available to cover the rising cost of healthcare.

New Hampshire Retirement System – Another significant cost driver in recent budgets has been due to an increase in the District's contribution to the New Hampshire Retirement System. This contribution falls into two categories; professional staff, and classified staff. This year the District's retirement contribution has increased from 17.8% to 21.2% or 3.4% in the last year alone. The cost of the increase for professional staff is \$834,000, and the cost for the increase for classified staff is \$322,000. This increase in cost for classified staff is offset, however, by the savings realized after the last payment of bonded debt for the new addition at the high school in the amount of \$335,000.

Summary

The 2021 – 2022 proposed administrative budget is \$81,887,463. The 2020 – 2021 approved administrative budget was \$80,714,063. The proposed administrative budget is 1.45% more than the approved 2020 – 2021 operating budget.

The 2021 – 2022 default budget as required under RSA 40:13 is \$81,918,937. The proposed administrative budget is \$31,474 below the operating budget.

At approximately 10:00 p.m. Chair Guagliumi was excused from the meeting and Vice Chair Barnes was seated in her place as Chair.

6. Approval of Minutes

- November 16, 2020

Board Member Rothhaus made a motion (seconded by Board Member Schneider) to approve the minutes from the November 16, 2020 meeting, as presented.

The motion passed 4 – 0 – 0.

- November 19, 2020

Board Member Hardy made a motion (seconded by Board Member Schneider) to approve the minutes from the November 19, 2020 meeting, as presented.

The motion passed 4 – 0 – 0.

7. Other

- a. Correspondence

There was no correspondence.

- b. Comments

There were no comments.

8. New Business

There was no new business.

9. Committee Reports

Board Member Rothhaus commented that the Planning and Building Committee had recently met and discussed the Capital Improvement Plan.

Board Member Hardy commented that the CIT Committee met. They discussed updating the application process for new courses and a first look at the “snow day/swap day”, and also had a discussion regarding criteria for future software selection.

10. Public Comments on Agenda Items

Vice Chair Barnes read aloud from an email received earlier in the evening as summarized below:

Mr. Wolfram von Schoen, 4 Conservation Drive

Thank you for sharing the various impressive activities to ensure the remote learning experience is improving and standardized in the future. I love the ideas that some teachers applied during remote lessons in the lower grades, like teachers ensuring that parents have captured the assignments and expectations by actively engaging with them at the end of the lesson. Why are the very basics not better organized? Why isn't the District reaching out to specialists and organizing workshops with other districts and isn't listening to its own nearest and dearest “customers” and sources of feedback? So many times I have reached out over the last few years, and especially since remote learning, about grades and assignments not being updated timely in Power School which causes confusion and anxiety in students and parents alike.

I just spoke to a friend who is a teacher in Pennsylvania and he said all schools he ever worked at required that grades and assignments were updated at a minimum of bi-weekly and it is made part of the teacher's performance assessment. Why is this not so in Merrimack?

Wouldn't it make absolute sense to ask Merrimack's parents and students for feedback as to what works and what doesn't in this tumultuous time? Nothing could be easier, quicker, and more impactful in terms of learning how and where to improve. I heard a lot of comments about our District training its teachers as to how to standardize and present learning material in a coherent and predictable way. Why aren't teachers using this and being audited as to whether they are? A comment was just made that teachers are working closely with parents to ensure student success. How does this align with the experience I presented to the Board and administration in these recent weeks regarding Spanish

where emails to the teacher remained unanswered and no attention was given to the student's success. I hear so much self-praise but so little self-reflection in light that the basics don't work and it feels that comments from parents that care enough to speak up constructively are continuously being ignored. It's very difficult to understand.

At approximately 10:15 p.m. Board Member Rothhaus made a motion (seconded by Board Member Schneider) to return to the non-public session pursuant to RSA 91-A:3, II (a) (b) (c)

At 10:45 p.m. Board member Rothhaus moved (seconded by Board member Hardy) to adjourn the public meeting.

The motion passed 4 – 0 – 0.