

## Ipswich School Committee

Wednesday February 12, 2025

MS/HS Ensemble Room

134 High Street, Ipswich

7:00 PM

### MINUTES

#### 1. Call to Order

DF called the meeting to order at 7:08 PM

Present:           Mat Perry (MP)           Dianna Freehan (DF)  
                  Jenny Connolly (JC)   Kate Eliot (KE)  
                  Haley Rist (HR)       Sasha Sopic (SS)  
                  Jen Donahue (JD)

Also Present:   Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools (BB)  
                  Tom Markham, Director of Finance and Operations (TM)  
                  Edwin (Charlie) Quimby, HS Student Representative (CQ)

#### 2. Reading of the District Mission Statement

CQ read the mission statement.

#### 3. Announcements and Special Acknowledgements

- The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, February 27th at 7:00 PM in the MS/HS Ensemble Room.
- A public hearing on the proposed FY26 School District Budget will be held on February 27th at 7:00 PM in the MS/HS Ensemble Room. A copy of the FY26 proposed budget is located on the homepage on the district website. A hard copy is available to view at Central Office, 1 Lord Square.
- The Communications Subcommittee will meet remotely on Thursday, February 13th at 5:00 PM
- The Policy Subcommittee will meet remotely on Tuesday, February 25th at 7:00 PM.
- Schools will be closed Monday, February 17th through Friday, February 21st for school vacation week.
- District offices will be closed Monday, February 17th.
- Earlier this month, the district lost Howie Bowen, a former custodian and crossing guard.
- The Elementary School Building Working Group is meeting on February 26th.

#### 4. Public Comments<sup>1</sup>

DF read the statement on public comment. No public comments were made.

#### 5. Community Presentations

##### A. Overnight Field Trip: Model UN

CQ, a member of Model UN, presented information on the Model UN overnight to Boston from April 4 to April 6, 2025. The max number of students attending the field trip would be 50, however, it is anticipated that less students would attend. Departure from the school is planned for 11:30 AM on Friday, although students don't need to check into the hotel until 4:00 PM. There will be a walking tour of the Freedom Trail in Boston ahead of check-in at the hotel. The trip will be self-funded at \$250 per student, which includes the cost of chaperones' rooms. HR raised concerns about the need for an additional chaperone if the number of

---

<sup>1</sup> Public comment is not a discussion, debate, or dialogue between individuals and the School Committee. It is an individual's opportunity to express an opinion on issues within the School Committee's authority. While the Committee and/or administrators will not typically respond during Public Comment, the Chair, as presiding officer of the meeting, may choose to if s/he seems it expeditious. Further, should the Chair believe that an issue falls outside the purview of the School Committee, s/he may request that citizens direct it to the appropriate person or body so that the matter is given proper consideration. Public comment is limited to three (3) minutes per person and a total of 15 minutes, overall.

students increases, but CQ mentioned the trip has never had a 10:1 student-to-chaperone ratio. BB will address the chaperone ratio with Mr. Caulfield and administration. JC suggested considering scholarships for students, as some may not be able to afford the trip. SS requested that the trip include the correct number of chaperones for this year's trip.

It was determined that this discussion would be continued at the next School Committee meeting. No vote was taken.

### **B. Rain Garden Proposal**

CQ, a member of the Environmental Club, presented a proposal to create a rain garden between the Performing Arts Center, seeking permission to use the land for gardening. BB praised the idea as a great use of space that would improve the area, but expressed concerns about the potential impact of rock salt. CQ assured that the plants chosen would be hardy enough. CQ mentioned having some funding already and plans to apply for additional support from the Awesome Ipswich fund. DF asked whether a landscaper would be consulted and if there were any concerns about potential backflow; CQ responded that they are working with the Ipswich Gardening Club and Corliss for guidance. JC noted that while the project is a great idea, maintenance can sometimes lapse, encouraging CQ to have a set schedule for upkeep.

➤ *Motion to approve the rain garden out the Performing Arts Center was made by JC and seconded by HR. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

### **C. Competency Determination Policy Review and Possible Approval (Taken out of order)**

Tracy Wagner, Director of Teaching and Learning, shared that the state has passed a law eliminating the MCAS as a graduation requirement, but students in the class of 2025 still need to demonstrate competency in the areas that the MCAS previously covered. Districts must implement a new competency determination policy, which identifies the specific standards students must meet to graduate. The proposed policy outlines the classes that contain these standards, and passing them would demonstrate competency.

Jonathan Mitchell, High School Principal, explained that the process to create these new standards involved observing a DESE webinar for guidance and collaborating with Cape Ann League principals -using the best elements from various drafts, which were then brought to the school council and approved. The policy now needs School Committee approval. Mr. Mitchell clarified that the policy, if approved, would live in the student handbook and listed in the program of studies book. The policy would also live among School Committee policies.

It was clarified that students in the class of 2025 who have already earned competency determination will not be impacted. However, students who have not taken or passed the MCAS will need to meet the new requirements. It was also noted that DESE allows districts to use students' MCAS scores as part of the graduation requirement at their discretion, however it was discouraged to move in that direction as that would contradict what voters supported in the most recent MA election.

The School Committee will vote on this policy at the next meeting.

## **6. Superintendent's Administrative Report**

BB reported that he has been focused on the development of the FY26 budget. He has also

- Attended a CREST Collaborative Personnel and Policy Subcommittee meeting;
- Dealt with several personnel issues;
- Met with the Facilities Director;
- Reviewed a webinar on immigration law and protecting student rights;
- Participated in the Athletic Advisory Committee;
- Went to several subcommittee meetings;
- Participated in a CPR course;
- Met with the Ipswich Education Foundation;
- Participated in the Northshore Education Consortium Board of Directors meeting;
- Met with the DEI Team; and
- Met with Beacon Transportation regarding a new program.

BB also reviewed a list of facilities projects taking place over school vacation week. BB also gave an update on the girls junior varsity basketball team.

## **7. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports:**

*Strategic Planning Committee:* SPC member, Carl Nylen, would like to engage the School Committee in the planning of the Strategic Plan. KE proposed creating a one-off working group to meet with Mr. Nylen. The temporary working group would then report back to the full School Committee. It was suggested that the working group consist of DF, as Chair of the School Committee, KE as liaison to the SPC, and SS as Chair of the Budget Subcommittee.

## **8. High School Student Representative Report**

CQ raised concerns about the potential loss of an ELA teacher, which was included in the budget proposal. The importance of small classes for students with learning disabilities was emphasized, noting that if the position is cut, it could be seen as a reduction in English to accommodate a dance teacher. CQ also questioned the average class size for dance and expressed concern that higher-level English classes might become too small, while other classes could become overcrowded, making it difficult for teachers to meet students' needs. CQ stressed that core classes should be prioritized over electives like theater arts, especially given the recent MCAS scores. It was also noted that while English teachers are certified to teach history, there are fewer teachers who specialize strictly in English.

JD cautioned against generalizing class size averages, as the district's teacher-to-student ratios are comparable to those in private schools, and they have very low class sizes. KE confirmed that the class sizes are well within the established policy expectations.

## **9. Finance Report**

TM reviewed the Year-to-Date budget report. He then gave an overview of the status of the revolving, gift, and stabilization accounts. The FY25 budget is in good standing and the account balances remain healthy.

## **10. Presentations**

### **A. FY26 Budget Discussion (Taken out of order)**

The discussion began with Tracy Wager, Director of Teaching and Learning, reviewing answers to questions that were previously submitted to BB and the Administrative team with regard to the World Language position at the elementary school level and the comprehensive health standards/teacher that was being proposed.

Dr. Wagner first explained that the World Language program at the elementary level was designed as an enrichment program rather than a language acquisition program. The original budget proposal did not include the elimination of this program, however, when additional cuts were required, it was decided that eliminating the World Language program at the elementary level made sense. At the time of implementation, the middle school did not have a World Language program, however, now that middle school program is successful and thriving. Dr. Wagner also discussed time-on-learning requirements at the elementary level, making note the difficulties in scheduling additional programs throughout the day.

Members expressed their disappointment with this reduction and sought ideas for a compromise going forward to continue to explore languages and culture at the elementary level. Administrators were asked to reimagine what World Language could look like. The discussion touched on longer school days, integrating World Language/cultural awareness into other aspects of teaching and learning throughout the day, and bringing in special programs and events during the school year. Adam Mullen, Doyon Principal, shared that the logistics of scheduling World Language is problematic and that embedding it into other curriculum areas seems more palpable.

Dr. Wagner outlined the curriculum review process for the comprehensive health standards and how the health position came out of that review process. The new health standards cover far more categories than the current ones do. When looking at those new standards, the group reviewing them felt that it was beyond the current PE staff's ability and schedule to cover all the new material. Dr. Wagner and her comprehensive health PLC is currently reviewing curriculum to purchase.

KE asked how this health teacher would differ from a social worker or school adjustment counselor. Dr. Wagner clarified that counselors currently do not address these health standards, and the curriculum is not being used at the moment. Amy Sullivan, Winthrop Principal, explained how physical education (PE) incorporates health standards, while a true health and wellness curriculum would address more difficult topics. Ms. Sullivan noted that some of these topics come up organically in conversations, but a health teacher would introduce them in a more formal setting. Ms. Sullivan added that this would be a preventative approach versus a processing one.

Dr. Wagner explained that the new standards are challenging to implement with fidelity due to the existing PE standards/program. JD questioned whether certain topics, such as human growth and development, could be assigned to classroom teachers. Dr. Wagner agreed that some standards could be incorporated into other curricula, noting that the majority are standalone health standards. Dr. Wagner noted that the team recommends a 30-minute class once per week but does not have answers on the specifics yet, as scheduling is still in progress. BB emphasized the need to consider the limited teaching hours and contracted minutes available for teachers when planning to meet all requirements, stressing the importance of revisiting the schedule if new positions are included.

KE asked whether the cost of the HealthSmart curriculum was part of the budget, and Dr. Wagner confirmed that it is. DF inquired if most schools have health teachers, to which Dr. Wagner responded that many elementary schools are hiring health teachers for this role. HR raised concerns about tracking the standards if changes occur, asking how this aligns with the budget and overall plans. Dr. Wagner explained that there is a five-year curriculum review cycle and that while the state reviews content areas, no major reviews are expected for the next 8-10 years.

DF asked if the theater/dance teacher would be considered enrichment and enhancement.

CQ asked how cutting the ELA position would affect class sizes. Mr. Mitchell responded that, based on the spreadsheet and confirmation from the English Department Head, class sizes would increase by at least 1.5 students conservatively, or by 2.5 to 3 students depending on the scheduling. Mr. Mitchell explained that class sizes could vary depending on how the schedule falls, but emphasized that Ipswich typically has smaller classes, with 25 students being standard elsewhere.

JD inquired about the addition of a school adjustment counselor and a .5 school psychologist in the Winthrop budget, questioning whether the counselor could assist with the new health standards rather than an additional health teacher. Ms. Sullivan explained that the increase in student needs, particularly in behavior, mental health, and access to counseling, made the addition necessary. Ms. Sullivan emphasized that the roles of the school adjustment counselor and health curriculum teacher are distinct, with the former providing therapeutic and social skills-focused support, while the latter is more curriculum-oriented.

Student Services Director, Eric Oxford, highlighted the ongoing mental health crisis post-COVID, stating that the highest referral rates in public schools are related to mental health. This new two-person team will be expected to handle needs ranging from Tier 1 support to specialized care. This approach aligns with therapeutic positions at the middle and high school levels. JD sought clarification, asking whether the school adjustment counselor enters the classroom as a "feelings teacher," to which EO responded that while they are not technically in the classroom as such, there are some instances where they are involved in classroom settings but also have a key role in responding to immediate needs and triaging students.

HR raised a question about whether, in the absence of budgetary constraints, there would be a willingness to consider logistics for creating a health teacher position. Dr. Wagner confirmed that there is a strong commitment to providing these positions and that the team has been working through a two-year process to support the need. KE noted that pre-pandemic, school counselors may have had smaller caseloads, but the current needs of students are significantly higher.

BB informed the group that the insurance rate had been finalized at a full 20% increase, resulting in an additional \$180K that needs to be addressed, in addition to the previously discussed financial concerns.

SS talked about the Budget Subcommittees most recent meeting and their discussion around extending the override and other potential budgetary considerations. SS shared that if the goal was to reduce the frequency of the override, the School Committee could start immediately, but would need to present specific numbers to facilitate discussion. DF suggested that potential projections should be presented at the February 27th meeting. The intent would be to help clarify how this new approach could affect the budget this year.

BB asked for the School Committee's thoughts on the budget as presented, acknowledging that there has been pushback on certain positions and discussions about adding back previously reduced items, such as the World Language position. BB emphasized the need for clarity from the School Committee on whether to reinstate it, especially in light of the new \$185K insurance cost introduced that afternoon.

JD raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of the budget and proposed using guiding principles, such as maintaining class sizes and co-teaching, to help determine which areas to prioritize for cuts. JD also asked whether the public hearing should

be extended to accommodate the new \$185K cut. BB inquired if there were any items missing from the budget that the group wanted to see included.

KE stressed the importance of making these decisions collaboratively, balancing financial considerations with educational priorities. KE wanted to hear from the leadership team about what is most important to preserve and expressed discomfort with unilaterally deciding on cuts. SS highlighted the current model, which proposes a 4.9% increase, but noted it was not sustainable, suggesting a broader conversation on necessary cuts and how much needs to be reduced.

JC asked if the budget discussions could include insights from other superintendents on how neighboring towns are handling similar challenges, to which BB responded that many neighboring towns are also making reductions. KE proposed exploring potential cost savings from a new elementary building, particularly if it were electrified, and asked if there was a way to quantify these savings. TM indicated that more information about the building would be needed. KE also reiterated the importance of considering class sizes in the budget decisions.

BB said that the budget presented relies heavily on outside funding sources. KE expressed concerns about the sustainability of this approach and asked if there were reliable offsets they could depend on. TM explained that the sustainability of offsets depends on the types of accounts they rely on for revenue and pointed to page 6 of the budget book, which outlines the most reliable and commonly used outside funding sources like preschool.

SS asked if there would be an impact to curriculum if the theater/dance teacher was not hired, to which BB replied there would not be. SS also addressed the cuts to the World Language program at the elementary level, stating that in the context of the overall budget, the reduction seemed necessary. SS raised concerns about funding for the climate resilience manager, questioning the return on investment the school is receiving from this position. Additionally, SS inquired about the opportunities for shared assistant principal roles, and suggested exploring the possibility of minimizing coaching roles.

HR expressed concerns about eliminating the World Language program, particularly in a time when there is a lack of support for diversity in the country. HR emphasized the importance of ensuring that diversity and cultural respect are addressed in the school's improvement plans and asked for more clarity on how the goals related to diversity and culture are being implemented. HR also expressed difficulty in supporting the health teacher position without a clear understanding of how it would function in practice. HR emphasized the challenge of balancing and effectively implementing various programs and expressed a desire to move away from comparing the health and world language positions. Ultimately, HR shared that, at this point, she is not in support of the health teacher position and she remains torn on the World Language issue.

KE expressed general support for the budget as presented but recommended taking a closer look at smaller line items, particularly furniture requests. KE questioned investing in furniture that wouldn't be used in a new building, especially when considering the potential cut of a position. While not fully in favor of the World Language cut, KE understood the reasoning behind it and supported eliminating the position. KE acknowledged the school's positive culture and its success in fostering inclusivity. KE was torn on the health teacher position. KE wondered if many of the health standards could already be covered by existing programs and suggested exploring other ways to integrate the standards throughout the day. KE also raised concerns about how to meet the \$185K budget gap. Additionally, KE highlighted the importance of reviewing class sizes moving forward.

JD expressed a desire to maintain a World Language program in the elementary schools. JD believes World Language is valuable and should remain part of the curriculum, advocating for a more comprehensive approach aligned with the original intent. JD is not in favor of hiring a health teacher. JD emphasized that furniture is an educational tool and should be considered innovative, with potential funding from grants such as the TWIG grants. JD also expressed support for the high school theater position, wondering if it could extend to the middle school.

There was a brief discussion and clarification on stipends. Most stipends are part of the Ipswich Educators Association contract and tied to COLA.

DF agreed with the need to make difficult decisions in the budget, acknowledging that something has to give. She emphasized the importance of being creative and not simply approving everything from previous years. DF noted that the sub lines are higher this year. TM clarified that the sub lines were funded to meet the current needs. DF concluded by stating that any additional follow-up items should be sent directly to Brian.

JD expressed concern about the impact of the rising health insurance bill on the budget. She emphasized that she does not want to reduce the number of educators available to students in order to cover these healthcare costs. JD proposed developing a plan to ensure there is always a fund available to support healthcare increases. She suggested creating a strategy that outlines where the money for such bills will come from, and voiced specific concern about the choice budget. JD stressed the need to explore ways to increase revenue to cover these costs without sacrificing educational staffing.

KE reminded the committee that they vote on the dollar amount, not line items.

#### **A. School Choice Discussion**

BB shared the number of openings that were recommended by each building principal. It was noted that both the Middle and High School did not recommend opening any School Choice seats. DF asked how the School Committee could reconcile this recommendation with the decrease of School Choice revenue and the increased reliance of School Choice funds. Members asked for more clarity around the recommendations at the middle/high school level. JD suggested opening spots in grades 6 and 9 for families that may be looking for a fresh start.

- *Motion to approve participating in the School Choice program for the 2025-2026 school year was made by KE and seconded by JD. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

The School Committee will discuss the number of School Choice seats and at what grade levels at an upcoming meeting.

#### **B. Feoffees Policy Working Group Update**

KE reviewed the recent revisions made to the application itself and the application process. Information has been updated on the district website.

HR notified the committee that there are Paine Grant Committee members whose terms have expired. Those members have expressed interest in continuing on the Paine Grant Committee.

#### **C. Policy Update**

DF presented the policies most recently reviewed by the Policy Subcommittee. The following policies were recommended for approval: EEAA, GBGE, GCE, GCJ, GCIA, GCK, GCQF, GCRD, GDA, GDB, GDD, GDO, IB, IC/ICA, and ID. The following policies were recommended for deletion: GDQC and GDQG.

- *Motion to approve the policies as presented was made by KE and seconded by HR. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

#### **11. New Business\***

No new business was presented.

#### **12. Consent Agenda**

- *Motion to approve the consent agenda as presented was made by JC and seconded by KE. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

#### **13. Adjournment**

- *Motion to adjourn the meeting was made by JC and seconded by JD. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

**Meeting adjourned at 11:01 PM**