

Ipswich School Committee

Thursday, April 3, 2025

MS/HS Ensemble Room

134 High Street, Ipswich

7:00 PM

MINUTES

1. Call to Order

Present: Dianna Freehan (DF) Haley Rist (HR)
 Jenny Connolly (JC) Kate Eliot (KE)
 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 School Committee will participate in Bean Counting on Saturday, April 5th at 9:00 AM at Town Hall, Meeting Room A.
- The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, April 17th at 7:00 PM in the MS/HS Ensemble Room.
- The Communications Subcommittee will meet remotely on Wednesday, April 9th at 6:30 PM.
- The Policy Subcommittee will meet remotely on Wednesday, April 16th at 6:30 PM.

Acknowledgements included:

- Dr. Blake was nominated by the Fine Arts Director and selected as one of the 2025 Massachusetts Music Educators Association School Administrator Award recipients for his outstanding support of the arts in Ipswich.
- All-State Band and Orchestra, StringFest, and the Doyon Music Show were all acknowledged.
- String Fest: Congratulations to the entire strings department and students for a highly successful event last week.
- Doyon School Music Show: Special shout-out to Miss Palance, music teacher at Doyon, for an amazing performance.
- Winthrop Art Show: Shout-out to Miss Leigh, art teacher at Winthrop, for organizing a successful art show.
- The Small Ensemble Concert, held at the chapel of the Sisters of Notre Dame, featured the Chamber Singers and Chamber Orchestra, with special thanks to Mr. Coehlo and Ms. Frost for their support.
- Boys Tennis: Congratulations on their victory yesterday

4. Public Comments¹

DF read the statement on public comments. There were no comments from the public.

5. Superintendent's Administrative Report

BB's report included:

- Continued work on revising the Feoffee policy; updates discussed at the policy working group with more revisions and research underway.
- Participated in a Crest Collaborative Board meeting to review proposed bylaw amendments, which are being brought to school committees for a final vote.

¹ 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.

- Met with Town Planner Jared Contrada to discuss the Safe Routes to School program and a proposed study around the middle/high school area.
- A follow-up study at Winthrop is planned.
- Participation could open access to grants for the district and town.
- Attended a Budget Subcommittee meeting to review scenarios for the override calculator and discussed potential FY26 budget changes.
- Attended the North Shore Superintendents Roundtable Annual Meeting with legislators to discuss:
 - State and federal funding
 - Special education and transportation reimbursement
 - Rising healthcare costs (noting a 20% increase in Ipswich and up to 25% in other districts)
- Held meetings with parents regarding student behavior and participated in agenda planning and DEI team meetings.
- Announced the resignation of Brad Orme, the Facilities Director; working with administrators to ensure continuity of operations.
- Leadership team meeting covered:
 - End-of-year budgeting
 - Planning for end-of-year events
 - Staff participation in the upcoming Youth at Risk Conference (4–5 attendees per building)
 - Tentative last day of school: Monday, June 16
 - Tentative Crane Beach Day: June 12, with June 13 as the rain date (pending confirmation from the Trustees)
- A full schedule of senior, middle, and elementary school events will be shared soon.

6. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports

- *Budget Subcommittee*: The subcommittee met last week to review override scenarios for the Strategic Planning Committee. Provided updated projections: a \$2.9 million override in Spring 2027 and a \$3.5 million override in Spring 2032. Discussed long-term financial planning and modeling, including timing of tax impacts. Additional meetings will be needed to continue refining the long-term financial plan; follow-up to be scheduled by Chair Sasha.
- *Communications Subcommittee*: Haley and DF held the first community discussion prior to the meeting. One community member attended, and the conversation focused on wellness and nutrition in schools. Additional feedback will be shared with Dr. Blake. Another community discussion is planned for the next meeting.
- *Town Strategic Planning Committee*: The committee is preparing to present at Bean Counting this Saturday, with a 30-minute time slot. The presentation will include the latest financial model with updated override projections. The committee is also working to finalize its report for inclusion in the Finance Committee booklet for Town Meeting.
- *Feoffees Policy Working Group*: The group made significant progress on revising the policy and anticipates needing one more meeting to complete it before deciding whether to bring it to the full School Committee or hold a workshop. BB is gathering data on TWIG grant cycles, recurring grant requests (e.g., kinder swim, college boot camp, place-based learning), and their history. Discussions are underway with administrators regarding overnight field trips, with potential proposals around standardizing scheduling, frequency, and accessibility.
- *Town Climate Resiliency Committee*: The updated Noresco project, a streamlined version of the Fall Town Meeting proposal, will be presented at Spring Town Meeting. Changes include the removal of the solar carport and elementary LED lighting components. Approved by the Select Board, to be funded within the levy limit (no debt exclusion or property tax impact). If approved at Town Meeting, the project will also appear on the ballot for voter input. The Climate Resiliency Committee has requested school outreach, including a School Committee newsletter blurb, potential video/interview with the facilities director, and consideration of a joint letter to local news in support of the project.
- *Elementary School Building Project Working Group*: The group is working on finalizing two key documents: Talking points/key messages for communication and a Project timeline based on MSBA guidance. These materials aim to improve transparency and accessibility for the community. The group plans to meet and present the documents at the next meeting.

7. High School Student Representative Report

CQ report included:

- The Senior BRIDGE Program begins Monday with participation from over 48 students (about half the senior class).
- Seniors remaining in school have 26 days left in the year; Graduation is scheduled for June 1st.
- Model UN students are heading to Boston for a weekend conference, including a historic walking tour and committee sessions through Sunday.

8. Finance Report

- **Finance Report and Motion to Vote an Updated FY26 Budget Figure**

The monthly finance report indicates that the district's general fund is performing as expected and remains on track with spending plans as the fourth quarter begins. The district met with administrators to discuss end-of-year planning, and business office staff have been briefed on closing out FY25. Spending for FY25 will cease on April 30 to assess remaining balances, with necessary expenses such as salaries, benefits, and utilities already accounted for, along with an \$850,000 contribution to the stabilization fund. March's revolving and stabilization fund balances show no major changes, with notable shifts expected in May and June.

For FY26, an additional \$121,735 was allocated to the district by the town following updated revenue calculations. Two options were discussed: (1) increasing the FY26 budget by this amount and placing the funds in the salary reserve line for flexibility, or (2) keeping the current budget as-is and reducing the draw from the stabilization fund by \$121,735. After discussion on long-term planning and financial discipline, the committee voted in favor of the latter, maintaining the approved FY26 budget of \$40,949,059 and reducing the stabilization fund draw to \$1,600,455.

- *Motion to that the School Committee vote to approve the FY26 School Budget of \$40,949,059 and the withdrawal from the Education Stabilization Fund \$1,600,455 was made by SS and seconded by JC. **The motion passed with 5 in favor and 1 abstention.***

This vote will be reflected in the town meeting warrant.

9. Presentations

A. CREST Articles of Agreement Review/Potential Vote

BB presented the proposed amendments to the Crest Collaborative Articles of Agreement, which were outlined in a letter from Executive Director Robert Jokela. The primary change involves removing the cap on tuition that can be charged to non-member districts. This means that non-member districts can still send students to Crest, but they will now be subject to a premium rate, potentially more than 20% above the regular tuition. The update also ensures the language aligns with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) guidelines and requirements. The last update to these bylaws was in 2015.

The Crest Board, which is made up of superintendents, has met several times to review and discuss these changes, working closely with DESE to ensure compliance. Following their approval, the Crest Board voted to bring the amendments to each member school committee for final approval. BB emphasized that the vote was straightforward, and there would be no further changes or adjustments.

After some discussion and questions, including clarification about non-member districts and their tuition rates, the Ipswich School Committee unanimously approved the amendments to the Crest Articles of Agreement, as proposed.

- *Motion that the Ipswich Public School Committee hereby approves the Amendments to CREST's Article of Agreement as approved by CREST's Board of Directors on March 12 and 26, 2025 was made by JC and seconded by JD. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

B. Superintendent Evaluation Process/Timeline

The School Committee briefly reviewed the Superintendent Evaluation process and timeline. The goal is to present the summative evaluation at the May 15th School Committee meeting, which means members must submit their completed evaluation forms by May 5th. The process, while somewhat clunky, has been used in past years and will follow a similar structure. Laura Hillery will provide pre-populated forms containing BB's goals to make completion easier. The plan is to distribute the forms by April 18th, allowing members about two and a half weeks to complete them.

This timeline ensures the evaluation is finalized prior to Town Meeting (May 13) and local elections (May 20), which is important in case of any committee turnover. While the goal is to complete the evaluation before new members join, it was noted that in previous years, the evaluation was finalized while outgoing members were still on the committee, even if it wasn't formally presented until afterward. Everyone agreed this timeline is workable, and the committee will proceed accordingly.

C. Policy Update/Approval

DF reviewed updates and edits to the following policies: IGA/IGD (merged), IGB, IHAM, IHAM-R, IHAMB, IHB, IHBA, IHBAA, IHBEA, IKF, IGB, IHAMA, and IHBD.

- *Motion to approve the policies as reviewed on April 3, 2025 was made by SS and seconded by JD. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

D. Athletics Working Group Proposal

JD presented a proposal to form a School Committee working group focused on athletics. She provided historical context, noting that Ipswich previously had an Athletics Subcommittee, but it was dissolved. BB then created an Athletics Advisory Council, which included community members, booster parents, and local sports leaders. While the council initiated positive actions, such as postseason student surveys and budget transparency from the athletic director, it has since become inactive. JD emphasized the need for a more cohesive and district-wide approach to athletics, especially regarding policy, budget transparency, team offerings, and coordination across grade levels.

The proposed working group would be tasked with drafting a district-wide athletics policy. This policy would aim to clarify roles, budgeting, program continuity from elementary, middle to high school, and collaboration with community athletics. Members discussed the idea of inviting input from athletic staff, school principals, and possibly student-athletes or captains to inform the policy. Comparisons were drawn to the development of the district's music program and athletics policies in other districts like Hamilton-Wenham, highlighting how strategic support and vision can strengthen extracurricular programs.

There was general agreement on the need for this working group, and JD volunteered to participate. SS also expressed interest. Although not present at the meeting, it was noted the MP expressed interest. The group will begin meeting soon to develop goals, review other districts' policies, and determine what additional input is needed.

E. Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) Potential Workshop Discussion

The committee discussed the potential of holding another MASC workshop, similar to the one conducted in 2023, which had been well-received. Members reviewed a list of possible workshop topics and shared their individual preferences, identifying "School Finance" and "Special Education" as top priorities with the most interest. Other areas mentioned included roles and responsibilities, teamwork, superintendent evaluation, and elementary procedures like Robert's Rules. HR emphasized the importance of understanding roles and responsibilities, especially for newer members, and asked if that workshop might be available again. It was noted that past sessions and slide decks might be accessible via the drive or MASC representatives. Members were also reminded to explore MASC's "Lunch and Learn" sessions, which often cover relevant topics. The group discussed timing and agreed that early fall, before the budgeting season begins, is likely the best window for scheduling. No final dates were scheduled, but follow-up will occur closer to fall.

F. Town Meeting Warrant Review

The School Committee conducted a preliminary review of the upcoming Town Meeting warrant articles to determine which ones they plan to vote on at their next meeting. The goal was to clarify any questions and ensure members are prepared. The committee intends to take positions on Articles 1 through 8, 9 (opioid funding), 10, 11 (affecting school property), 12 (OPEB), 13 (Capital Plan), 14 (water treatment plant borrowing), 15 (fire truck), and 16 (NORESCO). They agreed not to take a position on Article 17 (floodplain zoning) and discussed the need for a consistent rubric to guide these decisions in the future. Article 18 (MBTA Communities/3A zoning) will require additional information, and the committee will explore bringing in a presenter to speak at the next meeting. For Articles 19 and 20 (citizen petitions), they will wait to see if other boards take positions on 19, while leaning toward voting on 20 due to its relevance to Ipswich Public Schools. Members emphasized the importance of transparency and being informed before voting, with some suggesting attending Select Board and Finance Committee hearings for additional information.

10. New Business*

Members discussed dates for the School Committee summer retreat.

11. Consent Agenda

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

12. Adjournment

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