

Ipswich School Committee

Thursday, September 4, 2025

MS/HS Ensemble Room

134 High Street, Ipswich

7:00 PM

MINUTES

1. Call to Order

DF called the meeting to order at 7:02 PM

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

Also Present: Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools (BB)
Tom Markham, Director of Finance and Operations (TM)
Jack Machiek, High School Student Representative (JM)

2. Reading of the District Mission Statement

JM read the district mission statement.

3. Announcements and Special Acknowledgements

The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, September 18th at 7:00 PM in the MS/HS Ensemble Room.

The following subcommittees are scheduled to meet:

- Policy Subcommittee- September 9th at 7:00 PM
- Communications Subcommittee- September 10th at 7:00 PM
- Budget Subcommittee- September 17th at 5:00 PM
- Operations Subcommittee- September 17th at 6:00 PM

4. Public Comments¹

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

5. Community Presentations

A. Interscholastic and Intramural fees at the Middle School (Taken out of order)

Middle School Principal Peter Ginolfi presented a proposal to address a \$5,000 deficit in the middle school's athletic revolving fund. He noted that the deficit has been building over several years due to rising costs for buses, stipends, and referees, while athletic fees have not been increased for over a decade.

The current fees are \$50 for intramural sports and \$75 for interscholastic sports. The proposed increase would not affect the initial fee but would introduce an additional \$25 charge for students who wish to play a second or subsequent sport in the same school year. This change would cap the total cost for intramural sports at \$75 per student per year, and for interscholastic sports at \$100 per student per year.

The proposal specifies that for the current school year, which has already begun, the standard fees will remain in place for fall sports. The additional \$25 charge would be implemented starting with the winter sports season. For example, a student who played a fall sport would pay the current fee, and then an additional \$25 if they signed up for a winter sport. Starting in the next school

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.

year, the new, higher fees would be the starting point.

The fees are used to cover the costs of stipends for staff, which are set by a union contract and have increased over time. The principal acknowledged that the \$25 increase might not be enough to fully eliminate the deficit but stated that the goal is to avoid overwhelming families while still making progress toward a balanced budget. The discussion also touched on the future of certain sports, specifically middle school basketball, which has seen a decline in league participation as many students opt for travel or club teams. However, the importance of maintaining the school-based program to provide opportunities for all students, including those new to the sport, was emphasized.

- *Motion to approve the increase to interscholastic and intramural athletic fees at the middle school as presented was made by JD and seconded by HR. **The motion passed with 5 in favor and 1 abstention.***

6. Superintendent's Administrative Report (Taken out of order)

BB reported that the past few weeks have been busy since the last meeting, which was held before the school opened. The staff returned on August 25th for their opening gathering and meetings, and on Tuesday, they worked in their buildings to prepare for students. On Wednesday, August 27th, students in grades 1 through 12 were welcomed back. BB was able to spend time in each building and noted that it was great to have them occupied by students again. The principals reported smooth openings, and new programs developed over the summer are running well. The new administrators have also received a lot of positive feedback from staff and parents for their communication and positive energy.

BB also reported significant busing issues at the elementary level during the first few days, including last-minute schedule changes, missed stops, and students being left at the wrong locations. The school has been working closely with Salter to remedy the issues and sent them a letter detailing their concerns. BB anticipates that transportation went well today, as there were no new reports of issues.

In other news, all schools have begun their mandatory safety and fire drills, and staff members are completing their refresher training modules for school security. This week, preschool and kindergarten students were welcomed back to school, and their return also went smoothly.

BB has been working with Tom Markham and Interim Town Manager Tom Younger to review and make changes to the draft warrant articles, ensuring the wording is correct and understanding the funding implications. At a recent select board meeting, Tom and BB were able to get the board to agree to present the feasibility study article along with the school committee.

BB attended an IEF meeting where there was a discussion about the need for booster groups to have 501c3 documentation. The IEF has formed a subcommittee to look at the issue and come up with potential solutions.

BB also mentioned attending a webinar on new regulations regarding admissions to the CTE program at both Whittier and EssexTech. BB will have more information when they meet with the policy subcommittee.

Regarding the recent school rankings published by U.S. News & World Report and Boston Magazine, BB has asked Tracy Wagner and Jon Mitchell to take a closer look at the rankings and develop a plan to address the significant drop the district saw this year. BB noted that they don't put a lot of stock in the rankings but that the drop is something that needs to be addressed. They have been asked to present a plan at the September 18th meeting.

Finally, the school building committee list was approved by MSBA. The first meeting is scheduled for September 24th from 7-9 p.m. in room A at town hall. BB has asked ICAM to record and broadcast it.

7. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports

• Strategic Planning Committee:

- **Draft Report:** The Strategic Planning Committee met last night to review the draft of their report, which is nearing completion. A significant discussion point was the inclusion of facility-related investment items proposed by former town and school staff. The committee believes it is crucial to ensure that the new facilities directors for both the town and the school, including Rob, are in agreement with these projects.
- **Introducing Rob to Other Boards:** To foster a collaborative working relationship and build trust, the committee recommends that Rob be formally introduced to other boards well in advance of the capital plan and budget development process. This is viewed as a strategic step to ensure the boards have confidence in his leadership and

the proposed projects.

- **Report Timeline and Next Steps:** The committee is currently discussing the next steps for implementation and how to best distribute the report to the board. Members of the Strategic Planning Committee plan to attend an upcoming board meeting, likely in late September or early October, to present and review the draft report. The final report is expected to be released sometime in October or November, after the next Town Meeting. The draft document will be shared with Rob as soon as it is ready for circulation.

8. High School Student Representative Report

JM's report included:

- **Positive Start to the School Year:** The school year has started smoothly, with a successful return for students. The fall sports season is underway. Several people have commented on the improved condition of the school facilities.
- **Club Meeting Logistics:** A concern was raised regarding the limited 30-minute meeting time for clubs during designated "R-Blocks." While this is intended to provide opportunities for all students, it may be an equity issue for those who can only participate in after-school clubs but lack transportation home. Students would like to avoid limiting student involvement and to encourage participation in as many activities as possible.
- **School Lunch:** There were several comments from students about a desire for better-quality school lunches, specifically fresher food, larger portions, and improved taste. It was noted that a lot of what's served has to meet certain requirements. In relation to food, a question was raised about the use of the school's gardens. The environmental club utilizes the gardens, and any food grown there is used in the kitchen.
- **Bathroom Use:** The practice of locking bathrooms between class periods to reduce vaping was discussed. The concern is that this is disruptive for students who need to use the restroom during class time. While the goal of reducing vaping is understood, there is a question about whether this is the most effective solution.

9. Finance Report

TM shared that the monthly year-to-date finance report covers the first two months of the fiscal year through the end of August. He said that the budget is performing as anticipated, with just under 19% of the budget expended. This figure includes the first pay period of the school year but does not include the most recent one.

TM noted that the monthly report for the revolving funds was not included because those accounts are currently being reviewed by auditors as part of the district's first audit. He said that the revolving funds have a different closing schedule than the appropriated budget. He acknowledged the interest in the middle school athletic fund and said he would provide the reconciled numbers for the revolving funds as soon as they become available.

10. Presentations

A. Building Inspection Review (Middle/High)

DF, HR, and JD conducted a building inspection of the middle and high school two weeks ago. Overall, the facilities looked great, with special mention of the improved condition of the floors.

A major concern addressed was the issue of vaping in the bathrooms. The school had previously attempted to curb vaping with increased staff presence in the hallways, but this proved ineffective. The district has since purchased vape detectors, and the installation is scheduled to happen within the next month, as funding has been secured. The installation will cost about \$26,000, and it is being funded through a split between the IT department's budget and anticipated unspent funds from the FY26 budget. It was noted that this is a significant step toward addressing a serious issue.

Other items discussed during the inspection included the potential repurposing of unused lockers at the high school. Since most students no longer use lockers, there is an opportunity to convert these areas into useful community spaces with benches. It was also noted that Rob, the new facilities director, has made significant progress in a short time, including a successful inspection of all storage closets. Finally, the recently installed gym bleachers were described as "beautiful," with a plan to apply a final coat in November to improve their finish.

B. Elementary School Building Project Update

The district has finalized and resubmitted a corrected version of the Initial Certification. The initial School Building Committee has been formed, and its members have been officially appointed by the town manager. Half of the members have already been

sworn in, and the remaining members will do so soon. Behind the scenes, the administration is working on the next required deliverable for the MSBA, which is an educational profile questionnaire due on September 29th. This document will provide detailed data on current school spaces and student enrollment. BB confirmed that the district staff will handle this data-gathering task. There was a discussion on the frequency of updates to the School Committee on the project as it moves forward.

C. STM Warrant Article Vote and Speaking Assignments

It was decided to delay voting on the town meeting warrant articles until the September 18th meeting to allow for anticipated changes. A draft of the special town meeting warrant was presented, but it was noted that the document is still in flux.

Warrant Article Discussion

The order of the warrant has been rearranged to address outstanding issues from the last town meeting first. Article 1 is a revote on the HERO Act, and Article 2 amends the school appropriation. This amendment is necessary because the town was unable to use \$115,000 in overlay money to support the school budget due to a lack of specific language in the original motion. To bridge this gap, the school department is being asked to use a portion of its increased Chapter 70 state aid. The budget subcommittee will keep this issue on its radar to ensure the funds are returned to the school district in the future, likely through capital funding.

School Building Project

Article 8 addresses the feasibility study for a new elementary school. The article will be submitted jointly by both the School Committee and the Select Board, a move seen as a positive sign of community-wide collaboration. The wording in the motion was also updated to align with the article, specifically by including the term "building project" in both sections.

The estimated cost of the feasibility study is up to \$2 million, which is a high-end estimate based on comparable projects. The town treasurer will only borrow the amount necessary. There are two main funding options:

- **Debt Exclusion:** This option requires a separate ballot vote and would allow the town to raise taxes specifically to pay for the study. This is the town treasurer's recommended approach because it secures a dedicated funding source upfront.
- **Short-Term Borrowing:** The town would borrow the money and repay it from the operating budget over a few years. However, if the final building project vote were to fail, the school would be responsible for these payments, potentially impacting future budgets. For a three-year loan of \$2 million, payments could be as high as \$750,000 per year starting in fiscal year 2029.

The School Committee discussed the town meeting warrant articles in detail, particularly the funding mechanism for the elementary school feasibility study (Article 8). The committee acknowledged the town's recommendation to use a debt exclusion for funding, which would require a two-thirds vote at town meeting and a subsequent majority vote at a special town election. The committee members expressed general support for the debt exclusion approach, citing concerns that short-term borrowing would place a significant financial burden on the school budget, especially if a future building project were to fail. The town clerk has penciled November 5th as a possible date for the special town election.

The committee also discussed the need for effective communication with the public, particularly in highlighting that the feasibility study is a joint town and school initiative. The School Building Committee will need to develop a strategy for communicating the importance of the project's first step.

The committee agreed that the articles related to the school budget should be presented together at the town meeting to avoid confusion, as they are all tightly linked. The chair of the committee will communicate the group's consensus in favor of the debt exclusion to the Select Board before their upcoming meeting.

11. New Business*

No new business was presented.

12. Consent Agenda

- *Motion to approve the consent agenda as presented was made by KE and seconded by JC. **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 8:56 PM