

**Ipswich School Committee**  
MS/HS Ensemble Room  
134 High Street, Ipswich  
Thursday, February 9, 2023  
7:00 PM

**MINUTES**

**1. Call to Order**

KE called the meeting to order at 7:02 PM.

Members Present:      G. Stevens (GS)              K. Eliot (KE)  
                                 J. Donahue (JD)              D. Freehan (DF)  
                                 P. Kneedler (PK)              E. Cannon (EC)

Also Present:              B. Blake, Superintendent of Schools (BB)  
                                 T. Markham, Director of Finance and Operations (TM)

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

EC read the district mission statement.

**3. Announcements**

- The next regularly scheduled School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, March 9th at 7:00pm in the MS/HS Ensemble Room.
- The School Committee will present the FY24 School Budget to the Finance Committee on March 7th and 8th.
- The Communications Subcommittee will meet remotely on Monday, February 13th at 4:00 PM.
- The Vision 2030 Working Group will meet remotely on Monday, February 13th at 5:00 PM.
- Schools will be closed from Monday, February 20- Friday, February 24th for school vacation.
- All district offices will be closed on Monday, February 20th.

**4. Special Acknowledgements**

BB recognized National School Counselors Week and the hard work of the district's school counselors.

**5. Citizens' Comments**

There were no comments from the public not related to the FY24 Budget Hearing.

**6. High School Student Representative Report**

JB was not present at the meeting to give a report.

**7. Presentations**

**A. Overnight Field Trip Request: Racing Challenge**

Bill Gallant, high school teacher, presented an overnight field trip request for the RC Car Racing Challenge in Miami, FL at the end of April 2023. Students participating in the field trip would leave on Friday, April 28th and return on Sunday, April 30th. The main competition day will be Saturday. The group has raised roughly \$25,000 through grant funding and local businesses to be used toward the trip. The cost per student will be roughly \$350, depending on airfare. A total of 30 students have expressed interest in attending, but Mr. Gallant believes that the number of participants may be closer to 25. Three chaperones will also attend and supervise the trip.

*B. Motion to support the Racing Challenge field trip as presented was made by GS and seconded by PK. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

### C. Public Hearing: FY24 Budget

Prior to opening the public hearing, KE asked that each person looking to speak introduces themselves and limits their comment to three minutes. All comments should remain on the FY24 budget. Given the large group in attendance, KE reviewed policy BDEH: Public Comment at School Committee Meetings.

- *Motion to open the public hearing on the FY24 budget was made by PK and seconded by GS. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

*Becky Slawson, IEA President:* Was not sure it was made clear that the proposed cut of the .5 theater arts position represents a cut to all theater arts elective courses. There would be no theater arts courses in Ipswich Public Schools. After teaching for almost 20 years, Becky has seen and heard a lot of students with concerns, input and thoughts about their school community, but not many have come to speak to the School Committee. Students speaking tonight are prepared to speak because of theater. Creativity, communication and civic engagement are qualities built through the theater program. We should be strengthening the program, not tearing it down.

*Sarah Latimer, IEA Member:* Here because the kids need their drama program. Theater arts is strongly correlated with positive mental health. This is a program that bolsters mental health for all students.

*Anna Maher, student:* Anyone who knows Ipswich, knows the arts program. Theater has helped Anna prepare for college. She learned to break out of her shell and learned to speak with confidence. She can see things from a different point of view because of theater. If the district loses theater, students will lose the opportunity to participate in theater. Not all students can participate in theater programs after school. Theater is also a safe space for so many students.

*Zeke Allman, student:* The elimination of these electives eliminates the theater department. Zeke has taken every class and is currently enrolled in the advanced course. His theater portfolio is an important part of his college portfolio. There is not a lack of interest in the courses, but there is a problem with scheduling. The under enrollment of these courses is an administrative problem. The theater budget line has a minimal impact on the budget.

*Kristina Brendel, parent:* Ipswich has a great volleyball program. Students know about volleyball because they took classes to help prepare them. By cutting theater and saying kids will still get to do shows is like cutting PE classes because students get to experience athletics after school. There are precious skills to be gained with theater. It is vital that we do not actively weaken opportunities for students to succeed.

*Mark Allman, parent:* It is curious that when the contract was negotiated, the IEA asked for a 1.0 FTE theater position and that request was declined. Then the theater teacher's office was going to be used for someone else. Now, the position is being removed entirely. It looks like an assault on the theater program. Mark's family moved to Ipswich for the theater program. Many people moved here for the arts. Please keep the theater program alive.

*Kathleen O'Sullivan-Fortin, parent:* The benefits of theater do not end on the stage. They inspire creative writing. These kids are public speakers and can sell themselves. Imagine what else they can do because of theater. Do not cut the district off from what can be done beyond the stage.

*Casey Williams, student:* As a younger student, Casey looked forward to participating in the theater program. Now, Casey is pursuing theater in college. It seems like there will only be enough money in the budget for a musical. Kids will only be able to audition for the musical and may not because they cannot sing. In a play, students can thrive.

*Seamus Kelley, student:* Talked about his experience with theater and the impact on student mental health. Theater has been an emotional support network. This type of opportunity is something the district cannot disregard.

*Nadine Kelly, student:* After experiencing chronic shyness as a child, Nadine could speak to the committee today because of the skills learned through the theater program. What is done in theater extends beyond the stage.

*Jane Mosco, parent:* Many community members come to the theater shows who don't currently have children in the schools. Not having theater classes could impact shows. A bigger concern is the students. Theater helps students with anxiety, depression, and shyness. Some students are only involved in theater. It would be a shame if they lost that.

*Warren Moskowitz, former IHS Parent:* The school productions are amazing and a wonderful experience for students. The connection to theater classes and after school theater is unclear. If the position is eliminated, is the teacher still expected to stick around and run the afterschool program? What is the likelihood that would happen?

➤ *Motion to close the public hearing on the FY24 budget was made by EC and seconded by PK. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

#### **D. Discussion and potential vote to approve the FY24 School Budget**

The proposed FY24 budget was presented on February 7, 2023. KE asked if there were additional questions that the committee had prior to voting.

TM started by reviewing the items covered under debt services. TM shared that there are currently four projects going back to 2005 which included two bonds issued for renovations at the elementary schools, the wind turbine in 2008, and the purchase and installment of the turf field in 2015.

TM also spoke to the question about what was considered a healthy balance for the Choice Fund and the Circuit Breaker Fund. After speaking with other districts, TM determined that the balances of those funds were really dependent on the priorities of different school districts. Some districts spend down the funds each year, while others like to keep a balance to address future needs. There is no specific number that is considered a “healthy balance”.

GS provided some clarity on his previous question about Chapter 70 funding and actual percentage increases in the budget. Percentages reported are current and correct.

BB spoke to the out of district tuition increase of 14%. That equates to roughly \$108,000 based on the current students in the district. The 14% is only representative of the out of district placements, not the entire Special Education budget.

GS then asked for a discussion about the reduction of the theater arts teacher. BB said that in working to prepare the budget, the administrative team looked at all positions and class sizes. BB shared that the drama courses have been substantially under-enrolled for a few years. This year there were a total of 6 students in two class blocks for the first semester. In the second semester, there are currently 14 students in two class blocks. During the 21-22 school year, there were 4 students in two drama classes during semester 1, and 17 students in semester 2. So over two years, only 41 students have taken drama classes during eight semester blocks. That's an average class size of 5.1. The average class size at the high school this year is 16.6. For this current school year, only 13 total students listed a drama course as a primary request. Fifteen students listed it as an alternative request. Of the 20 students who have either already taken first semester drama classes or are currently in a drama class, only 8 of them requested it. You could therefore conclude that the remaining 12 students are in the course only because it was an elective that fit into their schedule. BB also added that the drama program has not been eliminated. There is little overlap between the drama class and the students who participate in the extracurricular productions as cast or crew.

BB then spoke to the Performing Arts Director position in the budget. The position was filled in FY23 and remains in the budget for FY24. The position oversees the Performing Arts Center.

BB clarified that the theater arts position teaches two blocks per semester, or three courses. One block has two courses offered at the same time.

KE thanked the students present at the meeting and acknowledged that it may not have been easy to speak out. KE was impressed with the level of passion and dedication to the topic and respected their passion for fighting for what they believe in. KE said she valued the arts program and knows the town also values the program immensely.

BB echoed KE's sentiment and shared that he was impressed with the many students who came out and spoke in favor of the program.

EC added that she did not know where she would be without theater class in high school. That said, knowing the value Ipswich places on the arts, she could not imagine the decision was made lightly and was only made out of necessity. EC felt that based on the interactions she has had with Mr. Mitchell, he seems to see his students and works to set them up for success. EC also believed

that the skills that students are getting from these classes, as well as the attention to mental health, will be factored into programming for next year and into the future.

JD said that it was framed in an earlier discussion that this was an elimination of courses and not a department. It did not appear that was the same understanding the speakers had tonight. Mr. Mitchell clarified that it was not the elimination of a department. He added that he values the role theater plays in the lives of students and is confident that the quality of the product will live on in the after school productions. Mr. Mitchell said it was his obligation when creating a budget to look at enrollment of courses and overall, the enrollment for the theater courses was not great.

KE said that the School Committee has to look at the whole budget and all the needs of the district. The district is facing substantial needs, many mental health related. There are increases in costs and increases in needs especially in the earliest learners.

JD talked about the override and wondered if making a cut to a .4 position that the district knows, and have heard again tonight, supports the mental health of some students is the right decision. JD wondered if there was something else that could be done other than cutting a theater position in a town that strongly supports the arts. JD expressed concern that once something is cut, it is then often difficult to bring it back. KE added that programs have been added back to the budget over the years. At this time, the School Committee was looking at the larger picture, enrollment numbers, and trusting the administrators to make fiscally responsible decisions.

EC talked about the budget and how all is need driven. With ESSER funding going away soon, the district will be in a scary place budget-wise. The budget is forecasting some tough decisions for reasons out of the School Committee's control. KE added that unanticipated things like inflation and increased Special Education costs have come into play and affected the budget. The first year of an override also makes it appear the district has significant funds, but it is the School Committee's responsibility to make those funds last.

Mr. Mitchell addressed some of the concerns around cutting the theater position. He reiterated that the schedule is driven by student requests. If there is an increased interest in the theater courses at a later date, the high school could find a way to offer the course.

GS talked about the override projections and how the increases to the budget are not sustainable. A lot of the increases, however, are beyond the School Committee's control. While cutting the theater position is not ideal, the district will be facing more cuts in the years to come in an effort to keep the override in place for as long as possible.

PK talked about her experience as a parent with children who participated in the theater program. She recognized the love for the program and the importance of having a "home" within school. PK then recognized how difficult it will be in upcoming years financially for the district and that difficult decisions need to be made.

GS talked about the presentation that was made to the Select Board regarding the school roofs. The proposal is to ask the town to bond \$2 million for roof repairs. Both Doyon and Winthrop would get overlays with a 5-7 year warranty, while the middle/high school academic wings would get new roofs. This proposal will require a  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority vote at Town Meeting and a majority vote of approval at the ballot. BB added that as of now, the insurance company will only insure the current cash value of the roofs and not the contents of the buildings. This proposal will resolve the insurance issue. It was also noted that the MSBA is not currently taking applications for accelerated repair projects, so the district could not pursue that route at this time. The middle/high school building is also not old enough to qualify for an accelerated repair project should that option become available again.

- *Motion to support the overlays at Winthrop School and the Paul F. Doyon Memorial School, and the asphalt roof at the Middle/High School was made by GS and seconded by JD. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***
- *Motion to approve the proposed FY24 School Budget in the amount of \$37,580,266 was made by GS and seconded by EC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

#### **E. Attendance Policy Update**

The attendance policy was reviewed by the High School Council. The High School Council will spend time reviewing and researching information related to the attendance policy and present their findings at the next High School Council meeting.

## **F. Elementary Building Project Update: Ballot question discussion and potential vote to approve final ballot questions**

KE began the meeting by reviewing where the School Committee is in the process of creating ballot questions on the potential school building project(s). KE shared that she drafted questions and then shared them with Town Counsel for feedback. EC then spoke with the Town Clerk on the logistics of a ballot vote. They were cautioned to keep questions as clear and concise as possible. It was recommended that all options are listed out and voters identify the option they prefer. The draft questions do need to go before the Select Board. Once the questions have been finalized, the Town Clerk would work with their vendor to format the questions for the ballot, which may require slight edits. The Town Clerk cautioned against an informational booklet sent to voters ahead of time. The questions could be shared ahead of time, but the School Committee should steer clear of any commentary. Questions would also go before the Office of Campaign and Political Finance (OCFP) to ensure that all protocols are followed.

In terms of moving forward, KE said there are now two draft versions of the ballot questions. The draft version 2.7.23 will be reviewed first. KE recognized that it may be impossible for all members to agree on every element of the ballot questions, but the committee should work to try and find as much consensus as possible.

DF asked if the group should put a pause on the ballot questions until the committee receives more guidance on the document from the OCFP. EC felt there was no time to wait and that the questions were deemed appropriate by Town Counsel. It was clarified that the ballot questions would be advisory only and non-binding.

The committee worked on wordsmithing the Version 2.7.23 draft ballot questions and the document was updated live as the discussion continued.

The committee discussed having information about the potential cost of these proposed projects on the ballot. While there was a suggestion to try and provide cost estimates, KE was not convinced that was the right decision. The questions were simply to get the “pulse” of the community. Costs can be determined as the project(s) move forward. EC reminded the committee that this is a non-binding vote and that there will be several more votes and opportunities to provide additional and more detailed information to the community.

The discussion then centered around the fact that the School Committee will not be able to educate the community with the use of an informational pamphlet ahead of the ballot vote. That information came to light after discussions with Town Counsel and the Town Clerk. Concerns were raised about not being able to provide information to the voters. GS said that the discussions on the building project(s) and the ballot questions have to be done in a public setting, so information is already out in the community. GS felt comfortable moving forward with the exercise and reviewing the questions based on the feedback from Town Counsel and the Town Clerk. If the School Committee finds out later from the OCFP that the ballot questions cannot be used, then they won’t be used.

The conversation continued around the ballot questions, the use of the term “campus style” and how to depict a “small school feel” or intimate setting through the ballot questions. The committee continued with edits to the questions, formatting, and updating the questions. Throughout the discussion, School Committee members were reminded that these were non-binding questions. It was also acknowledged that there was some information that would be difficult to convey through the ballot questions like cost and specific timing of the project(s).

Once the School Committee concluded that they were mostly satisfied with the edits to the questions, the draft then became known as the February 9th version of the draft ballot questions. KE sought a motion to approve the updated version of questions. If this newest version of the ballot questions were approved, the questions would be presented to the Select Board and shared with the Town Clerk.

- *Motion to support the February 9th version of the ballot questions, including minor edits by the Town Clerk or Town Counsel prior to printing was made by GS and seconded by EC. **The motion passed with 5 in favor and 1 opposed.***

## **8. Superintendent’s Administrative Report**

BB reported on his schedule since the last meeting. His report included:

- A meeting to discuss grant funding opportunities
- A meeting with the North Shore Superintendents Roundtable
- Visit potential preschool spaces
- Attendance at a Select Board meeting to discuss the possible debt exclusion for new roofs

- Budget presentation preparation
- A meeting with the newly formed Athletic Advisory Council
- A Policy Subcommittee meeting

#### **9. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports**

- Policy Subcommittee: Continued to review section J of the policy manual.

#### **10. New Business\***

DF asked for a status update on the SOI submissions. BB shared that he was gathering the information needed to write them. He anticipates having them completed and ready to review by mid-March. KE added that she has been in contact with the Select Board Chairperson and they are aware that the SOI and ballot questions will need to be added to a future meeting agenda.

#### **11. Vouchers and Bills**

All were reviewed and signed.

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

- *Motion to accept the consent agenda as presented was made by GS and seconded by EC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

#### **13. Adjournment**

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

**Meeting adjourned at 9:50 PM**