

Ipswich School Committee

Thursday, August 21, 2025

MS/HS Ensemble Room

134 High Street, Ipswich

7:00 PM

AGENDA

1. Call to Order

Call to order at 7:03 PM

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

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

Members reviewed the announcements document located in the meeting folder.

4. Public Comments¹

No public comments were made.

5. Community Presentations

A. New School Administrator Introductions

At the High School, Jonathan Mitchell introduced himself and expressed excitement for the upcoming school year, noting that the team is strong and the building is in excellent condition, “firing on all cylinders.” At the Middle School, Peter Ginolfi and Sean Fitzgerald introduced themselves and highlighted the positive impact of the new facilities director and staffing, shared that locker night for 6th graders was successful, and reported strong attendance at the 6th grade parent orientation. At Doyon, Adam Mullen and Lori Benincasa introduced themselves, reflecting on a busy summer with significant improvements for both students and staff, strong teacher relationships, and commendations for Rob’s efforts in preparing the building. At Winthrop, Maureen Lueke and Aaron Clark were introduced, sharing their focus on fostering a nurturing and supportive environment with an emphasis on social-emotional learning. The custodial staff was praised for their hard work, and the building is nearly ready to welcome students’ smiling faces.

Staffing updates were provided by each school. The High School reported that positions are in good shape, while the Middle School confirmed they are fully staffed. Doyon shared that hiring is nearly complete and positions are just about wrapped up, and Winthrop reported that they are fully staffed.

B. Facilities/Building Update

BB commended the district’s new Facilities Director, Rob Fortado, for his accomplishments over the summer, noting the significant progress made in facilities work. Rob shared that this is his 20th year in facilities and highlighted his background in

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.

school building projects. He has spent time learning about the district and its building project, navigated staffing changes, and now has a fully staffed team. He looks forward to strengthening the department further.

Mr. Fortado drafted a comprehensive facilities report, included in the meeting folder, outlining completed work, balancing needs, budgeted projects, and capital funds. BB noted the district is in a good position overall.

Committee members thanked Mr. Fortado for the level of detail provided, with KE noting it was more thorough than previously received. BB confirmed that the majority of projects fall within planned budgets, capital funds, and insurance claims, though a few unanticipated needs arose. Ms. Fortado explained that while capital plans provided a starting point, exploration of buildings revealed additional issues and life cycle needs, which will inform future capital planning.

Discussion included updates on the modular building at Winthrop. Mr. Fortado reported that the goal is to have it ready for use by winter break. He noted challenges with electricity at the building, requiring added circuitry and plans to bring in separate power for the modular. Sewer, water, and site work are also being coordinated, with DPW and ELD providing support.

KE asked about the Noresco energy conservation project, noting the importance of coordination over the next 12 months. BB suggested scheduling a meeting with Rick Mitchell to discuss planning.

6. Superintendent's Administrative Report

BB provided a brief report noting that since the last update on July 21, he took vacation time and then focused on key administrative tasks, including hiring Maureen Lueke as interim principal of Winthrop School. The district is starting the year with a complete administrative team.

BB met with Tom Markham, Rob Fortado, and staff to review summer projects, personnel concerns, and preparations for the school opening. Discussions included the Safe Routes to School program, ELD electrical needs at Winthrop for the modular unit, and a temporary halt to PAC projection system updates while exploring alternative solutions.

The administrator retreat at Plum Island was held to finalize preparations for the year, and work is ongoing to produce booster group documents and student/parent behavior guidelines for events in collaboration with other Cape Ann League schools.

Professional development included a teacher book club focused on *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt, which will inform weekly newsletters on technology and student well-being.

The Phase 2 field house building committee met to discuss updated plans, hiring an estimator, and fundraising strategies. BB continues coordination with MSBA and the town ahead of the October town meeting and will submit School Building Committee nominations next week.

Additionally, he attended the Northshore Education Collaborative board meeting to ratify a bargaining unit contract, ensuring competitive wages for staff. Staff return on Monday, students in grades 1–12 on Wednesday, and PreK/K after the holiday weekend.

The committee discussed parent and student conduct, including enforcement of the code of conduct, with BB noting parents could be removed or banned if necessary. KE emphasized the importance of having clear expectations and policies. Members explored strategies to address student phone use, particularly Snapchat, and the potential for community initiatives, increased student activities, and coaching communication alternatives to reduce reliance on the app.

The School Building Committee process was reviewed, including member selection and the requirement for sworn-in representatives.

Regarding staffing, the posting process for sudden openings, such as the fourth kindergarten section at Doyon, was clarified.

7. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports

Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee: JC reported on efforts to prepare for grant applications for pedestrian and bike safety projects. A major obstacle is the Planning Board's delay in approving the submitted list of issues, which is required for grant eligibility. JC requested that the School Committee write a letter to the Planning Board urging approval. DF agreed to draft

the letter and discussed the possibility of JC, Chris Chapman, and Brian presenting at a Planning Board meeting, with SC support, to emphasize the importance of timely approval for children's safety.

Climate Resiliency Committee: KE shared that the town has signed on to the Noresco project and set a goal of drafting an annual climate report to capture the state of the town's climate and sustainability efforts. The report will establish baselines and identify which entities are engaged in various initiatives. KE noted that information on what is being done within the schools will also be needed, which may involve reaching out to people in the school district.

Strategic Planning Committee: The Strategic Planning Committee is working to finalize their report and plans to meet on September 3 to prepare an update for the fall town meeting. DF raised concerns about whether the report will include projected or placeholder numbers for the school building project, emphasizing the need to be sensitive in how the schools are represented. KE noted that average tax rate implications would be included and agreed with DF on the importance of careful presentation. KE also suggested including a context statement clarifying that the information reflects a snapshot in time.

STAC-2 Committee: JD reported that the committee is exploring fundraising options, including creating a banner with a QR code to encourage donations. The project remains approximately half a million dollars short of its funding goal.

8. High School Student Representative Report

JM noted that fall sports are starting and that parent conduct will be a major focus this year, as emphasized by the MIIA advisory committee. Facilities were reported to be in excellent condition, and while students may not always say so, they appreciate the well-maintained environment.

9. Finance Report

TM reviewed three documents and noted:

The district ended FY25 with a surplus of approximately \$55K, likely to settle in the low \$40K range once all bills are finalized. No unpaid bills remained at year-end, a notable improvement from prior years. The surplus will be applied to free cash. The report (dated 8/4) also shows \$850K transferred to the stabilization fund.

As of June 30, School Choice closed with \$1.4M, aligning with projections. However, balances are expected to decline in future years due to lower application numbers and graduating students. Stabilization fund balances were also reviewed.

The new fiscal year has opened as planned, with 17.8% of the budget expended, largely due to summer facilities work. While spending is occurring at a faster pace, all expenditures are budgeted or capital-related.

The Paine Grants opened on August 4 as expected. TWIG grants are rolling out more slowly but should be fully active within two weeks. TM noted improvements over last year but identified a need for stronger organization and communication.

KE asked whether Rob would sit on the School Building Committee; BB confirmed he would.

10. Presentations

A. Vote to Appoint School Committee Member to the Strategic Planning Committee

- *Motion to appoint KE to the Strategic Planning Committee for a one year term was made by JC and seconded by HR. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

B. Building Inspection Review (Taken out of order)

The committee discussed updates on the preschool modular and building conditions. JD asked about preschool placement, and BB confirmed no moves have occurred. TM explained that the project extended longer than anticipated, and Aaron Clark, Assistant Principal at Winthrop, noted staff were informed in July to expect a delayed timeline, with 10–11 students per preschool section remaining at Winthrop. HR asked about modular costs and contracts, and TM clarified that while funds have been anticipated, no payments have been made. JD and others complimented Winthrop's condition, with stressing the importance of pride in maintaining clean, welcoming spaces, even in older buildings. DF and RF highlighted strong leadership from Scott and Julien at the elementary schools, while RF detailed significant repair work at Doyon, including seven water-damaged classrooms that were

stripped, abated, repainted, and repaired. AM and HR commended the intentional planning and collaboration around classroom design, emphasizing least restrictive environments and the positive energy among staff and students.

The group then reviewed needed roof repairs. DF asked about budget impacts, with BB and TM noting estimates are pending but could be around \$300K. TM explained that the project must go to competitive bid, with the goal of covering costs within existing resources rather than seeking additional community funding. KE inquired about prior roof overlay work, and TM confirmed that earlier guidance suggested some sections did not require repairs at that time (these are the sections now experiencing problems). RF described ongoing issues with ice damming and wet insulation, stressing urgency before winter. HR noted the repair should last 10–15 years, and TM added work could begin in October. Discussion closed with recognition of RF's preventative maintenance planning for the Middle and High Schools, given many areas are at life expectancy. KE and HR underscored the need to balance recognition of the hard work being done with transparency about ongoing building challenges and costs, ensuring careful and honest communication.

C. Discussion on Special Town Meeting Warrant

The Committee discussed the scope of School Committee (SC) votes on warrant articles. JC suggested limiting votes to items that directly impact the schools, while HR noted that the SC has occasionally voted on broader initiatives for alignment with other boards. KE emphasized the Committee's responsibility, as elected officials, to consider wider issues affecting the schools and budget, such as water and safety, and not operate in isolation. BB reminded members that they may abstain from votes, and DF added that abstentions may allow the process to resolve itself naturally. The Committee also discussed RATM (Raise and Appropriate Town Meeting) articles, with JC cautioning against supporting them without full information. DF noted their purpose is to delay votes until details are available, while HR explained they are often used when language, amounts, or specifics are missing.

The discussion continued around identifying which warrant articles the committee would be voting on.

Article 1: Yes to vote.

Article 2: Yes to vote.

Article 3: Yes to vote. Discussion on Essex Tech tuition numbers; information often comes late from town finance. JD suggested reconsidering who presents, since the article is submitted by the Select Board.

Article 4: Mixed opinions. JC felt no need for SC vote; DF noted public works has implications for schools and includes sustainability. JD commented that if it were equipment like a plow truck, it would clearly apply to schools.

Article 5: Clerical correction; previously approved unanimously. DF noted it impacts taxes and has been voted on in the past.

Article 6: The Committee discussed Article 6 regarding submission and language for the feasibility study warrant. DF questioned whether the article should be submitted by the School Committee, Select Board, or School Building Committee, and BB explained that the current wording is boilerplate language provided by MSBA and reviewed by legal counsel. TM outlined possible funding options, noting the Town Manager would recommend the approach; procurement and expenditures would be directed by the School Building Committee. Members raised concerns about the wording of the article and motion, particularly the reference to "potential school consolidation" and "site." Discussion focused on clarifying the warrant language for the feasibility study. Concerns were raised that the current wording could be misinterpreted; suggested edits included removing leading verbiage and refining phrasing were discussed. The committee revised the language in the room, with the Committee agreeing that the motion and warrant language must match.

Language discussed: *To see if the Town of Ipswich will vote to appropriate, borrow or transfer from available funds, an amount of money to be expended under the direction of the School Building Committee for a feasibility study for a new elementary school on the Paul F. Doyon Memorial School site, including a potential school consolidation, for which the Town has been re-invited into the Massachusetts School Building Authority ("MSBA") grant program.*

Wording changed to: *To see if the Town of Ipswich will vote to appropriate, borrow or transfer from available funds, an amount of money to be expended under the direction of the School Building Committee for a feasibility study for an elementary school*

building project for the Paul F. Doyon Memorial School, including a potential consolidation, for which the Town has been re-invited into the Massachusetts School Building Authority (“MSBA”) grant program.

Motion changed to: *That the Town of Ipswich appropriate the amount of Two Million (\$2,000,000.) Dollars, for the purpose of paying costs of a feasibility study for an elementary school for the Paul F. Doyon Memorial School, including a possible school consolidation, including the payment of all costs incidental or related thereto, and for which Ipswich has been re-invited into the Massachusetts School Building Authority (“MSBA”) grant program, said amount to be expended under the direction of the School Building Committee.*

Article 7: Discussion noted that contracts exceeding three years require authorization, which applies to the district’s typical five-year bus contracts as well as other agreements.

Article 8: No School Committee vote required.

Additional notes at the end of the warrant addressed articles still pending. TM stated he was ready to provide the Town Manager with any needed information. Discussion also covered the Bitcoin Vending Machine Ban By-Law and the Temporary Town Manager Revision.

11. New Business*

DF: MASC is unavailable on September 18 but can attend on October 2. Training will be a three-hour workshop.

HR: Asked for an update regarding concerns with the letter signed for MSBA. BB downloaded, signed, and submitted the forms, which were accepted by MSBA. Reached out to MSBA for clarification; other required forms have been completed.

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 KE. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

Meeting adjourned at 10:02 PM