

**IPSWICH SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2021
7:00 PM**

MIDDLE/HIGH ENSEMBLE ROOM

(School Committee Members only, public participation through Zoom Video Conferencing)

Minutes

I. Open Session:

Mr. Whitten, Chair, called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM.

Present: Mr. Whitten, Mr. Nysten, Dr. O'Flynn, Ms. Kneeder, Ms. Eliot, Ms. Cannon, and Mr. Stevens

Also Present: Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools; Bill Frangiamore, Interim Director of Finance and Operations; and Caroline Jepsen, High School Student Representative

Ms. Jepsen read the District Mission Statement.

Citizens' Comments:

There were none at this time.

Special Acknowledgments:

Dr. Blake thanked parents for their work in minimizing COVID exposure and cases by having their students tested after vacationing outside of the state and keeping their kids home when feeling ill.

High School Student Representative Report:

Ms. Jepsen reported on events and activities happening throughout the high school which included:

- The theater group is putting together a spring performance of Mama Mia.
- Fall 2 sports began this week and students are excited to participate.
- The Class of 2022 is doing a March Madness fundraiser.
- The High School Running Club began with ten new members.
- The Green Team is continuing their work with the Hello Neighbor refrigerators.
- The Robotics Team is working on a new robot and preparing for their upcoming virtual competition.
- The Environmental Club is working on installing a new trash system at the High School.
- The Class of 2021 will be hosting a "100 Days to Graduation" event.

Ms. Jepsen then reported on a recent survey that went out to students. Some students are feeling less motivated as the year progresses. Overall, most students are feeling that the school year and scheduling has become easier and people are adapting to this new environment.

II. School Committee Presentations:

A. Discussion of Proposed FY22 Budget

Dr. Blake began by reviewing some residual questions left from his presentation of the FY22 budget at the last meeting. The following was discussed:

- The electricity costs at the elementary schools appear to be significantly higher than at the middle/high school in the new budget.
 - Historically, electricity costs at the elementary schools are offset by funding from the Extended Day Program (EDP). EDP did not run this year and it was decided that that

funding source would not be used. The increased costs in the budget are a reflection of the need to make up the difference from the lack of EDP funding.

- Dr. Blake addressed the need to include total fund balances of the outside funding sources in the budget presentation. He would later present new slides that include those totals.
- Dr. Blake discussed the confusion as to whether the concept of “right-sizing” and declining enrollment had been addressed at the previous meeting.
 - Sheila McAdams, principal at Winthrop School, had acknowledged that while schools are seeing a decline in enrollment, they are not looking to make any changes this coming year in an effort to focus on addressing any learning gaps or student needs stemming from the COVID closures and changes to learning models this current year.
 - There is a plan being developed to address the potential need to reduce sections going forward.

Mr. Nylen said that while he understands the sentiment that next year will be a challenge and the District is not looking to make changes then, he is concerned that if a plan is not established for future years, it won't happen. He shared his frustration in not having a direct answer as to whether the administration would like to reduce class sections or not. He is looking for someone to come forward with a plan, whether to reduce or not, and begin an open discussion.

Ms. McAdams, who was present on the call, explained that next year there will be no reduction in sections at the elementary school. Next year, the kindergarten roundup process is going to begin earlier with the hope that the administration will have more data earlier to determine if there is a need to reduce classes. Depending on the numbers, there is a plan in place should there be the need to move to five class sections in kindergarten, rather than six.

At this time, Ms. McAdams explained, student needs in the higher elementary grades don't allow for larger class sizes, which would be the result of a section being dropped. The first place for a possible reduction in sections would be kindergarten and then grades 1 and 2.

Mr. Nylen asked if the numbers in kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 2 were to hold steady, would there be a reduction in sections. If so, that would result in a class average of 21 students. Is that sufficient?

Ms. McAdams responded, saying that you need to be thoughtful about reducing sections. Kindergarten could be reduced to five sections, while reducing sections in higher grades would be difficult because you don't want to move students from one school to another. There is the potential to look at the baseline structure of core teaching at each grade level. Classes could be rearranged or reduced, allowing for a team approach to teaching with students moving and working in smaller groups. This way of restructuring wouldn't affect transportation and shifting students to other buildings. Ms. McAdams confirmed that this model would work in the current buildings as they are.

Ms. Cannon asked if dropping a section would change how curriculum is delivered. She went on to also ask how the administration would manage equity in learning if there is only one section dropped at one school.

Ms. McAdams explained that there are different needs at each grade level and they may differ at each school, so the plans at each school don't necessarily have to mirror each other. The administration at each school needed to identify their capacity to create movement throughout the day, while also addressing the skills of the students and their needs. It was best not to make a broad statement about class reduction, but rather evaluate the needs in each grade.

Mr. Nysten asked how much of a factor are school assignments.

Ms. McAdams said that starting the kindergarten roundup earlier would help identify where students are located and allow for the administration to make thoughtful decisions about placement.

Dr. Blake continued the discussion by presenting a newly revised total budget number of \$33,291,311. He explained that just prior to the last budget presentation, the District received word they would be allocated approximately \$500,000 in additional COVID funding from the ESSER II Grant. After having time to look at the grant, the District was able to reallocate \$296,000 of COVID related costs from the proposed FY22 budget to this ESSER II grant, resulting in the newly revised total budget number.

Dr. Blake then shared the original slide from last week's presentation that highlighted the Town contribution to the School District budget and the total withdrawal from the Stabilization Fund, both contributing to the total proposed FY22 School District budget of \$33,588,052. His next slide showed the new withdrawal amount from the Stabilization Fund, which is \$296,000 less than the original proposed amount.

In the updated budget, the District will withdraw \$1,342,296 from the Stabilization Fund, leaving a total of \$1,568,421 available in the account for FY23.

Dr. Blake then shared the list of proposed reallocations which included:

- Custodial overtime
- Maintenance supplies
- Technology
- Teaching Assistant for Tier 2 Interventions
- Air filter replacements for classrooms
- IT software and licensing

There will be a total of \$238,000 left in the ESSER II grant which will be available for the upcoming school year. At this time, the future is still uncertain and the District wants to be able to have the additional money available to provide support, programs and additional PPE where they see fit.

Mr. Frangiamore clarified that funds from this grant are to be expended on COVID-related expenses only.

Dr. Blake shared the total account balances of the outside funds used to support the budget. He explained that the District is not utilizing more of that available funding at this time because it could be used later should a request for an override fail. There are also some restrictions on how these funds can be spent.

Ms. Cannon asked Dr. Blake to speak to the relationship between enrollment and the budget.

Dr. Blake explained that decreased enrollment does not equate to a decreased budget. There are several budget drivers that influence the budget including staffing, student needs, insurance and benefit costs and class sizes. Oftentimes, when looking at the decreased enrollment, it is across various grade levels. One or two less students in a grade does not allow for a section reduction. When there is a consistent decrease across grade levels, like in the Middle School, adjustments need to be made.

Ms. Eliot also added that building out programming, like the addition of the World Language program to the elementary schools, adds to budget increases.

B. Public Hearing: Proposed FY22 School Budget

Mr. Whitten moved to open the Public Hearing on the proposed FY22 School District budget, seconded by Mr. Nylen. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote, 7- YES, 0-NO.

There was no public participation.

Mr. Whitten moved to close the Public Hearing on the proposed FY22 School District budget, seconded by Dr. O'Flynn. The motion passed unanimously in favor, 7-YES, 0-NO.

C. Vote on FY22 School District Budget

Dr. O'Flynn moved to support the FY22 School District Budget in the amount of \$33,291,311, seconded by Mr. Stevens. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote, 7-YES, 0-NO.

D. Capital Plan Discussion

Dr. Blake shared the most updated version of the Capital Plan. He said that at this time, a lot of the work taking place is from the prior year's plan. He did share what was included in the plan dated January 21, 2021 which included:

- Money set aside for the Wind Turbine gearbox
- Technology user equipment
- Exterior building lighting at Doyon
- Bathroom upgrade at Doyon
- Replacement of exhaust fans at Doyon
- Unit ventilator replacement at Winthrop
- Replacement of unit heater at Winthrop
- Replacement of flooring at the high school
- Drinking fountain replacement the the high school
- Performing Arts Center (PAC) curtain upgrade
- Update to the security alarm system at the high school

Dr. Blake clarified that the high school locker room upgrades included in the FY21 Capital Plan are in the process of being renovated now.

Mr. Whitten asked if any Green Communities grant money would go to fund any of these projects. While it covered a lot of projects this past year, there will not be any funding allocated to the schools for FY22.

Dr. Blake explained that the LED replacements were being installed throughout the district.

After some questions arose about the boiler feasibility study, Dr. Blake said he would get more information and present it at a later date.

Dr. Blake clarified that yes, the Green Team did replace a hydration station before. There are additional water fountains that need to be replaced with hydration stations.

Ms. Kneeder asked if the univent replacement at each elementary school will be done in unison. Work will be done at one school and then the other.

Mr. Nylen then asked if there was a need to replace the univents. He felt it was a lot of money to spend on a building that the District may not have in 10 years.

Both Dr. Blake and Ms. Kneedler felt that there was a need to replace them now. The univents have been a problem and as Ms. Kneedler said, while it seems expensive, this is a reasonable ask for the benefit of students and teachers.

Mr. Nysten said he didn't question the need, but felt it was a shame to spend that much money on something that wouldn't last. It was agreed that the Facilities Director should attend the next meeting to help explain the need or potential for alternative solutions.

Mr. Nysten asked if there had been any updates on the possibility of solar panels at the middle/high school. Mr. Whitten felt that the conversation about solar panels couldn't happen until the roof was replaced. Mr. Nysten suggested working with the electric department to consider a long term financing/partnership with them to help fund the project. Both agreed this should be a topic for a future meeting.

E. Finance Update

Mr. Frangiamore shared details from the most recent Transportation bid process. On February 3rd, the District sent out specifications to seventeen companies including five bus companies doing business in Massachusetts.

On February 9th, the District held a pre-bid meeting via Zoom. Seven vendors attended that meeting and discussed the specifications.

On February 17th, the District opened one qualified bid from Salter Transportation. The price increases include:

- FY21 to FY22: 3.61%
- FY22 to FY23: 3.31%
- FY23 to FY24: 3.0%

The base contract is for three years. The contract can then be extended one year in FY24 and one more year in FY25 when a new bid process would need to be done.

The three year price is \$2,071,792. This includes regular education, all athletic and field trips.

There was a brief discussion about the long term goal of moving to electric vehicles. At this time, it is very expensive compared to the buses the company is using now. It was agreed that the District needs to consider the budget for electric vehicles prior to the end of this transportation contract.

Dr. O'Flynn moved to support the regular education transportation bid to Salter Transportation, Inc., seconded by Mr. Stevens. The motion passed unanimously in favor, 7-YES, 0-NO.

Mr. Frangiamore then discussed the status of the Food Services program as of December 31, 2021. He shared that due to COVID, food costs have increased, while the number of meals being served has decreased. In an effort to reduce costs, staff have been cut and food choices have been reduced. Mr. Frangiamore is predicting the program will see a \$50,000 deficit for the full year. The deficit will need to be taken from the appropriated budget and not the Food Services Revolving Account.

Lastly, Mr. Frangiamore reported that the FY21 budget is in great shape and all grants are being monitored closely.

F. Superintendent Administrative Report

Dr. Blake shared his schedule in the weeks leading up to tonight's meeting. Events included:

- A tour of CREST Collaborative's new property
- A North Shore Superintendent's Round Table (NSSRT) drop-in meet to discuss how schools are managing their different learning models
- A Negotiations meeting with the Ipswich Educators' Association (IEA)
- A meeting with the Accord Food Pantry
- A Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) meeting regarding student learning time
- An Ipswich AWARE meeting
- A meeting with Mr. Frangiamore and Ms. Wagner to discuss the ESSER II grant
- A School Facilities Working Group meeting
- A residency hearing for an ongoing residency issue
- A meeting with Scott Ames and Alysha Elliard to discuss the PAC
- An English Language Learner (ELL) presentation with area Curriculum Directors
- A NSSRT meeting with State Legislatures to discuss a push to remove the MCAS requirement, transportation issues, Special Education, Chapter 70 funding, and enrollment numbers.
- A meeting to discuss a personnel issue
- A School Facilities Working Group meeting
- Attendance at the National Superintendent's Conference
- A meeting with the Athletic Director to discuss the Fall 2 season
- A meeting with the newly formed Extended Day Program (EDP) Working Group to discuss
- A meeting with the Leadership Team
- A monthly meeting with the Ipswich Educators' Association.
- Several subcommittee meetings

G. School COVID Oversight Update

Dr. Blake began by sharing the most recent COVID data from the Town. At this time, the Town and schools are seeing positivity rates decrease. Families who traveled over the vacation week were following guidelines and getting tested or remaining home. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) relaxed their guidelines for school transportation, allowing more students on buses so long as the windows are open. It will be up to individual districts to determine if they are going to relax the current guidelines. The DESE Commissioner has indicated that students should be going back full time, in-person with elementary schools returning first. At this time, he has not indicated a specific timeline, but has indicated it will be in March. DESE is suggesting students can return to school with 3ft of separation while masked and 6ft of distancing if no mask is worn in situations like lunch. The Commissioner also signaled that vaccinations would not be a requirement to return to school.

There was some concern from Ms. Kneedler that CDC guidelines still say that people should keep 6ft of distance between them and others. Dr. Blake explained that with the directive from the Commissioner was a letter signed by hundreds of area physicians stating that 3ft of distance is acceptable. There was also a lot of focus on masking and ventilation. At this point, Dr. Blake continued, schools are not seeing significant in-school transmission.

Dr. Blake felt there would be community support to bring the students back full time.

Mr. Nylén felt the district should not move forward with a plan of full time, in-person learning if the model Ipswich is currently using works. He felt the district could not move forward with anything that the teachers and staff did not feel comfortable with.

Ms. Kneedler shared that the IEA surveyed staff and the majority of staff are okay returning to school without Pool Testing if their opportunity to be vaccinated is forthcoming.

Ms. Cannon then asked if the District was going to require all teachers to be vaccinated and also, what is the District's responsibility to families who are opting for remote learning for health reasons. Ms. Cannon also expressed concern of the strain on teachers who are dealing with remote students and a full class in front of them. While she would like to see students back in schools, she admits that is asking a lot from teachers.

Mr. Nysten asked if the District would be using the tents again and if they could be used post-COVID. If possible, could the District use COVID-related funding to support longer leases or the purchase of tents?

Ms. Kneedler followed up by saying the high school plans to write a Paine Grant for an covered outdoor patio space.

H. School Committee Goals Mid-Year Report

This agenda item was deferred to the next meeting.

I. Strategic Plan Resolution Vote

Mr. Nysten began by sharing that the Strategic Planning working group has been before the Select Board and will present to the Finance Committee at their upcoming meeting. Mr. Nysten felt it was important that the School Committee take a position on the plan. He suggested the School Committee adopt the plan with an understanding that the work is not done.

Mr. Whitten shared that the School Committee had been presented with the Strategic Plan and had an opportunity to talk about the timeline in terms of where the school district fits, while being cognizant of the other needs in Town. While the Strategic Plan is underway, the document itself may change.

The plan, as Dr. Blake explained, is an opportunity to get all of the projects on the table. Mr. Nysten then added that the collaborative work was good and the Town needs to get back to that.

Mr. Nysten then talked about the need to look at the fiscal appetite of the Town to see what level of rate increases people can afford and work from there.

Ms. Cannon said people are looking for a commitment on the school building project. The Town has prioritized a school and she doesn't want to see the timeline shift. She asked where the School Committee can put a "stake in the ground" and lock into a timeframe for their own projects. She then asked if the wording of the motion could be changed to remove any "gray" area as it relates to school projects. She did not want to come back a year from now and see a change in the timeline for the schools.

Dr. O'Flynn added that the top priority for the Town are the schools whenever the School Committee is ready to move forward.

Mr. Nysten felt that the public is anxious about the financial implications of all this work. Until the Town settles on the plan, the community can at least see what it is the Town would like to work on.

Mr. Stevens clarified that the motion presented was to accept the Strategic Plan as a working document and to continue the work of the Strategic Planning Working Group.

Carl moved that the School Committee support the findings and report of the Strategic Planning Working Group and further that the School Committee acknowledge that the findings mark the beginning of a process the Working Group, Town Boards and Leadership, and the public should undertake together to vet the investments and endorse a specific, long term strategic investment plan and schedule, seconded by Dr. O'Flynn. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote, 7-YES, 0-NO.

J. Public Comment:

There were no public comments at this time.

III. School Committee Reports:

A. Vouchers and Bills: All were reviewed and signed.

B. Subcommittee Reports:

- a. Athletics:** This subcommittee has not met. Mr. Stevens voiced concern about the plowing of the turf football field and the ability to remove snow for practices and games.
- b. Budget:** This subcommittee was covered during an earlier portion of the meeting.
- c. Operations:** This subcommittee has not met.
- d. Policy:** This subcommittee met on February 23, 2021 to review the High School Open Campus permission slip.
- e. Communications:** This subcommittee discussed the framework for the March newsletter.
- f. Mutual Concerns:** This subcommittee has not met.
- g. Negotiations:** The next meeting is scheduled for March 10, 2021.

C. Working Group Reports:

a. School Facilities: The working group had a call with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to ask them a predetermined set of questions. Mainly, the group asked if the District came to the MSBA with two school building projects at the same time, could they both be funded. The answer was, no. The two projects could have the potential to be funded, however, they would need to be presented at different times.

The working group then asked if the District could use their previous feasibility studies for a new project. The answer from MSBA was, no. The group continued on with more mechanical questions about the repeat use of the architect firm or project manager. MSBA said that while it was possible to use the same for a new project, the likelihood of using them again is small.

The working group then asked for suggestions that Ipswich could do to improve their chances for success in being granted MSBA funding after a failed vote. MSBA responded that all decisions are based on need and then referred the group to look at the town of Amherst, another town that had experienced a failed project and got back into the MSBA pipeline.

The School Facilities Working Group scheduled a meeting with Amherst which included the former and present School Building Committee chairs, the superintendent, and Town Council members. They discussed Amherst's failed project and steps they took to garner support for a new project. Steps included listening sessions with the community, a discussion of the project on each School Committee agenda, and striking a balance with the community between community input and presenting a finalized proposal. Rather than present a list of ideas to the community, the School Committee was able to present an actual project.

The takeaways from the two calls was that Amherst was successful because they presented a site and an educational plan. Amherst presented those two items to the community and then applied for a

feasibility study. Most importantly, they brought the community together with a strong communication plan.

The School Facilities Working Group suggested having the building project as a standing agenda item going forward.

- b. Health and Safety:** The middle school put out a relationship mapping survey to identify students who struggle making connections to adults and peers in the building. The goal is to use this data to build stronger connections that allow for students to feel supported in school.
 - c. Race, Equity and Social Justice:** The working group is meeting on Tuesday, March 2, 2021. The meeting will be a listening session with a presentation from a local youth group in Town.
 - d. Vision 2030:** A meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 4, 2021.
- D. Liaison Reports:**
- a. Ipswich Education Foundation (IEF):** There have been ongoing conversations within the group regarding ways to help support the school district more and in what areas. Dr. Blake has begun to talk with the leadership team about this.
 - b. Climate Resiliency Committee (CRC):** Chief Nikas and Office Moore made a presentation on the no idling policies in town. There was also a conversation about the implementation plan for the Zero Carbon Resolution.
- E. New Business:** Ms. Kneedler explained the need to an additional person to sign vouchers and bills.

Ms. Kneedler moved to authorize Mr. Whitten to sign vouchers and bills in the event Ms. Kneedler is unavailable, seconded by Mr. Stevens. The motion passed unanimously in favor, 7-YES, 0-NO.

IV. Consent:

Mr. Whitten moved the Ipswich School Committee

- *to accept a check from Geskus Studios in the amount of \$602.00 for the Fall 2020 School Picture Day Commission, to be deposited into the Doyon Student Activities Account;*
- *to accept a check in the amount of \$711.00 from Geskus Studios on behalf of Winthrop School to be deposited into the Winthrop Student Activities Account;*
- *to accept a check in the amount of \$808.00 from Geskus Studios on behalf of the Middle School to be deposited into the Middle School Student Activities Account;*
- *to accept a check in the amount of \$890.00 from Geskus Studios on behalf of the High School to be deposited into the High School Student Activities Account;*
- *to accept a check in the amount of \$500.00 from Ascension Memorial Church to the Birth to Three Family Center to support and enhance the work done in the community; and*
- *to accept the Open Session Meeting Minutes from Wednesday, February 3, 2021,*

Seconded by Ms. Kneedler. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote, 7-YES, 0-NO.

V. Adjournment:

Mr. Nysten moved to adjourn the meeting at 10:20 PM, seconded by Mr. Stevens. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote, 7-YES, 0-NO.