

**IPSWICH SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING  
THURSDAY, MARCH 4, 2021  
7:00 PM**

**MIDDLE/HIGH ENSEMBLE ROOM**

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

**Minutes**

**I. Open Session**

**Call to Order:**

Mr. Whitten called the meeting to order at 7:10 PM.

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

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.

**Announcements:**

- The next regularly scheduled School Committee meeting will be held Thursday, March 18th at 7pm.
- The School Committee will present their FY22 budget to the Finance Committee on March 10th, 11th and 12th. Each meeting will be held remotely beginning at 7:30pm.
- There is a Negotiations Subcommittee meeting on Wednesday, March 10th at 3:30pm.

Mr. Nysten announced that he will not be seeking another term on the School Committee.

**Citizens' Comments:**

Jen Donahue, High Street, asked the Committee when a discussion would occur regarding the recent news of the two elementary school principal retirements. She wanted to know how the community could get this topic on the agenda for tonight's meeting.

Stacey Keane, East Street, asked the Committee why there was not a discussion on the agenda regarding the retirement of the two elementary school principals. Ms. Keane also wanted to know what the District was doing to retain Sheila McAdams, principal of Winthrop School.

Jen Donahue, High Street, said that she understands the School Committee is respectful of the retirement announcements. She wanted tonight's meeting to be productive. Other than the "Citizens' Queries" portion of the meeting, she asked if there was a way to have a conversation about the retirements and subsequent open positions so people can be heard.

Sara Johnson Allen, East Street, said she recognizes that the pandemic is causing a massive burnout rate on teachers and families. She said she felt that it is impossible to believe that a retirement announcement in the middle of the year was not just a "gentle retirement". Ms. Johnson Allen asked how will the Winthrop School continue to deal with the potential for burnout without Sheila McAdams, stating the ramifications of pandemic burnout will be long term. She felt that Sheila McAdams' retirement was not random and the implications of her leaving will be massive.

Ana Laguarda, Mt. Pleasant Avenue, started by sharing that she is well aware of the effects the pandemic is having on educators. She is frustrated that the School Committee is talking about the three District retirements in general terms when citizens are addressing concerns about one principal in particular. Ms. Laguarda said that she was aware that Sheila Halloran had been planning to retire at the end of the year. She added that she was not sure if Sheila McAdams was planning to retire this year or if she could be convinced to stay. The District should make a plan to better support the next leader of the Winthrop School.

Jen Donahue, High Street, said that her biggest concern was that we are still in the midst of a pandemic. It will be a race to hire two qualified elementary school principals. She proposed the District find a way to negotiate a transitional year for Sheila McAdams in an attempt to think creatively with children and families in mind. Ms. Donahue continued sharing that Sheila McAdams could lead both elementary schools. She shared that while she is happy for people to make a decision to change, the community is in a crisis and this past year has been a crisis. She continued to express frustration that there have been problems at the elementary school that were not taken care of and the District is now losing two principals. With Sheila McAdams remaining on in a transitional role, there will be less shock to Ipswich families this upcoming year.

Anne Carrol, Upper River Road, said that what the School Committee is seeing through the public participation tonight is a feeling of shock because the Winthrop School community adores Sheila McAdams. If Sheila did in fact retire partly because there was a lack of support for her, then Ms. Carrol would like that to be evaluated and improved for the next principal coming forward. If a lack of support was not a factor, then she wished Sheila McAdams the very best.

Maureen O'Connell, Washington Street, shared that she is also retiring after 30 years as an educator. She said a teacher gives their whole heart to their job and when they choose to leave, they take a sense of pride with them for their years of service. Though it is often difficult to say goodbye, change does happen. She said that she felt the School Committee will do their due diligence in finding the best leaders for this school system. There will be opportunities for stakeholders to meet the candidates. She asked for the community to give those retiring grace and let them go when they choose to go.

Steve Chargaris, Lafayette Road, said that he had heard that Sheila Halloran was planning on retiring after this year. It seems as if Sheila McAdams' retirement announcement came as a surprise and is alarming. He asked if more was going on than the community is aware of or was he making more out of this announcement. Was Sheila McAdams really just moving on?

Jeff Poirier, County Street, said it was important to look at this situation holistically from a district level. The District has an opportunity to look for creative solutions to help the schools during these unprecedented times. If there is an opportunity to delay the retirement or consult with them to help with the transition, Mr. Poirier hopes that Central Office would use those tools.

Jen Rita, Spring Street, asked why a discussion of the two elementary school principals' retirement could not be on tonight's agenda, sharing that this was a huge deal in the midst of an already difficult year. She said that it was obvious that Sheila McAdams goes above and beyond her job duties with little support. Before putting someone else in this same position with little support, there needs to be changes in upper management.

Lauren Gouzie, Fordham Road, wanted to reiterate what Maureen O'Connell had said. These are turning points in educator's lives. They should be able to leave with dignity, feeling loved and supported. Sheila McAdams is leaving behind teachers that have worked for her their whole careers and is leaving the school in good hands. Ms. Gouzie felt the School Committee will find suitable replacements. She wanted the community to know that the spirit of Winthrop School has been passed from Sheila McAdams to her staff and students. While this news is shocking and sad, turning the situation into a negative is not what Sheila McAdams would have wanted.

Stacey Keane, East Street, agreed with Lauren Gouzie that she did not want to turn this into a negative. She felt that the District needed to acknowledge the surprise and timing of the announcement. If we can keep Sheila McAdams and support her, the District and community needs to "fight like hell". She added that it would be well worth it to do anything possible to help the situation and learn from it.

Dr. Blake reiterated that the retirement announcements from both Sheila Halloran and Sheila McAdams came as a surprise. The District and School Committee have not had time to process the news, as it was just announced this week. He appreciates the community wanting to share their thoughts and will take them into consideration.

Dr. Blake then answered some questions from Ms. Eliot. He said parents will be on the search committee, along with school committee members and staff. While he has not discussed the details of this particular search committee, he anticipates that it will look similar to what was used for both the High School and Middle School principal searches. Dr. Blake then explained that the hiring process will include posting the open positions, a paper screening, interviews with the Search Committee, Meet and Greet opportunities with staff and the community, a site visit and an interview with the superintendent.

Dr. Blake confirmed that he would be speaking with the two principals and Ms. Cuff prior to them leaving and welcomed the School Committee to participate in their own exit interviews. Dr. O'Flynn also added that it was important for the Chair of the School Committee to speak with administrators before they leave.

Dr. Blake then clarified that the timeframe for the retirement announcements was within the guidelines outlined in their administrator contracts. While the announcements themselves were unexpected, the timing was not uncommon.

Mr. Whitten added that he anticipates there will be a greater amount of retirements across the state and therefore, the District should get the job postings out as soon as possible and get ahead of this situation.

**Special Acknowledgments:**

Dr. Blake recognized the three retirements announced this week- Sheila McAdams, Sheila Halloran and Joanne Cuff.

**High School Student Representative Report:**

Ms. Jepsen reported on events and activities taking place at the High School.

- The theater group is rehearsing for their spring play, to be performed outside in May.
- The Fall 2 sports season is off to a good start.
- The Class of 2021 is still participating in the "100 Days 'til Graduation" event.
- The Class of 2022 is continuing with their March Madness calendar fundraiser.
- The Interact Club is sponsoring a blood drive.

Ms. Cannon asked what the School Committee could do to better support the students and school. Ms. Jepsen felt that communication has improved since the start of the pandemic, which makes it easier for student and teacher relationships. There is a better understanding of expectations and students feel more comfortable talking about how they are feeling.

## **II. School Committee Presentations**

### **A. Public Safety Facility Discussion**

Robert Weatherall, Chair of the Public Safety Committee, asked to update the School Committee on the Public Safety Building project in hopes of maintaining a positive and open line of communication. He shared that the committee is bringing the project to the Special Town Meeting in the fall, asking the Town to support the funding for both the design and construction of the public safety building.

Mr. Weatherall wanted to reaffirm the Public Safety Committee's belief that both the public safety building and the school's need for a new elementary school(s) will benefit from each committee working cooperatively to help one another achieve their goals. He believes in the importance of both projects and how essential they are to the community. The Public Safety Committee strongly believes that the public safety building project will be underway relatively soon. The school building project is coming, but may take more time. In that context, Mr. Weatherall stated that the sooner the public safety building project can be supported and begin construction, the better position the school district will be in to gain support for their project. The cost of these projects will also be spread out over a greater amount of time.

Mr. Weatherall then clarified what will be different in their approach at the Special Town Meeting from when they originally presented last May. He said this time, the committee has more information to share with the community. They have a location. They know the infrastructure needs and how the cost of the project will affect people's taxes. This time around, the community is aware of the support from various boards in town, as well as the timeline for other proposed projects. Voters are now able to take a position with a greater amount of knowledge.

Mr. Donahue, member of the Public Safety Committee, said that having the Strategic Plan in place for Ipswich will help the community better understand what things are in the pipeline for the town.

### **B. Paine Grant Committee Member: New Member/Need for New Members**

Johann Knets submitted an application to be the elementary school parent representative on the Paine Grant Committee. He will be asked to attend the next meeting to introduce himself.

Mr. Whitten shared there were several vacancies on the Paine Grant Committee that needed to be filled. Heather Leonard, Chair of the Paine Grant Committee, shared the responsibilities and time commitment for members of the committee and encouraged anyone looking to get involved to reach out to her or the School Committee for more information.

Nat Pusiler, member of the Feoffees Trust, said he applauded the efforts of the schools. He clarified that a Feoffees Trust member will not serve on the Paine Grant Committee or any committee that determined the placement of a grant.

This agenda item will be discussed again at the next School Committee meeting.

### **C. Capital Plan Review:**

A five year Capital Plan was presented to the School Committee at their last meeting. Due to the amount of questions, it was decided that the Facilities Director, Chris Rais, would attend this meeting. Prior to asking questions, Dr. Blake shared a more updated version of the plan than what was presented at the last meeting. The newly presented plan directly corresponds with the draft warrant for Town Meeting.

Mr. Whitten first corrected an error from the last report. There had been a conversation around the cost of a \$180,000 feasibility study. There was a typo in the original report and the cost of the study is actually \$25,000. Mr. Rais explained that the feasibility study was to look at the electrification and replacement of the boiler at the combined middle/high school. This work coincides with the Climate Resiliency Committee goals.

Mr. Whitten said that he would like to see the installation of electric car charging stations moved up in the plan. He then asked if funding for things like car charging stations would be funded through Green Communities grants. Mr. Rais responded that yes, the charging stations are part of the proposed FY25 Green Communities grant funding.

Ms. Eliot asked if the Ipswich Sustainable Education group could help with the installation of the hydration stations at the high school. She believed they had donated them in the past. Mr. Rais clarified that there were a significant number of water fountains throughout the building that required replacement. The installation of these hydration stations came as a recommendation from the Dude Solutions report last year.

Mr. Nysten spoke about the discussion at the last meeting regarding the amount of money potentially being spent on the replacement of unit ventilators at the two elementary schools. While he does recognize a need for them, Mr. Nysten wondered if there was a less expensive alternative to address the problem.

Mr. Rais responded that the original unit ventilator replacement was a result of the Dude Solutions report from last year. His plan is to use the same system he used at the middle/high school at the elementary schools. If successful, the district would see a significant cost reduction.

Mr. Nysten then asked if the District could seek funding from the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) under their accelerated repair program for any projects. Mr. Rais said that Ipswich would be set back in the school building project pipeline if they were to receive funding for accelerated repairs.

#### **D. Ipswich Educators' Association (IEA) Statement:**

Becky Slawson, IEA President, addressed the School Committee on behalf of her colleagues to talk about Governor Baker's recent announcement that students will be transitioning back to in-person learning in April. She asked that the School Committee delay the implementation of a full return to school. The IEA would like to encourage a safe return to school and by doing so, need to work out safety protocols and balance the needs of those who wish to remain in a remote model with those who wish to fully return. The IEA is asking the School Committee to work with them to develop a timeline to get all teachers vaccinated prior to a full return. She finished by thanking the School Committee for keeping staff safe and asked for the Committee to continue to do so.

Mr. Whitten said he has never witnessed a group work so hard towards a common goal as the faculty, staff and administration did this year. He is appreciative of the Ipswich community and the incredible collective effort on their part.

Dr. Blake said that he believes everyone wants the same thing- for staff and faculty to be vaccinated. The Governor and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner announced they are looking for approval to make a proclamation that all students must return to in-person learning in April. It is believed they will establish a hard deadline for returning. If a directive is given, the District will need to comply.

Ms. Cannon asked what the rationale was for returning before all teachers were vaccinated.

Dr. Blake said that he wished he knew the intricacies of their decision. The DESE Commissioner and Governor have both stated that vaccinations should not preclude a return to school and have provided letters of support from numerous physicians and medical professionals. Dr. Blake felt that both the Commissioner and Governor were getting pressure from their constituents. At this time, there are still about 20% of school districts that have students who have not stepped into a classroom since last March. Ipswich is ahead of that and has had children in the building since the start of this school year. Kindergarten through grade two have been in full time. If the District follows this new directive, the focus would be getting grade three through five into the buildings. There are going to be a lot of logistics that need to be worked out to make that happen.

Dr. O'Flynn said there is significant data to support kids going back to school full time. If students and staff continue to stay masked, schools will continue to be a reasonably safe environment. He stressed that the District needs to work on a realistic plan for students to return by the week after April vacation and part of that plan should be working to get staff vaccinated.

Dr. Blake said if he could get someone in to vaccinate staff, he would. He is working all angles trying to find a way to vaccinate staff as quickly as possible. The problem lies in the supply chain.

Mr. Nysten said that the District should not be pushed into a position that we are not comfortable with just because the Governor releases guidelines. Dr. Blake responded that once the State Board of Education votes to implement a return to learn plan and sets deadlines, the District must comply.

Dr. Blake then shared that he is working with the administrative team to create surveys for families and staff to gauge their intentions going forward with regard to returning to school and under what conditions.

#### **E. Return to In-Person Learning Discussion**

This discussion took place during the agenda item prior to this.

#### **F. School Committee Goals Review:**

Mr. Whitten asked the School Committee to review the progress of their goals for the 2020-2021 school year. School Committee goals focused on three areas- Budget, Vision 2030 and Communication.

#### **Budget Goals:**

1. Develop strategy to manage COVID related spending and savings and its effect on the district's FY21 annual and long term budget. Complete by March 2021.
2. Monitor expenses to determine timing for next Override, presumed to be FY23, and develop strategy for override by May 2021
3. Prepare budget analysis for next contract negotiations and provide guidance to School Committee and contract negotiating committee by December 1, 2020

Mr. Stevens, Chair of the Budget Subcommittee reviewed the budget goals. He shared that the Committee is meeting the first two goals. Contract negotiations are ongoing, therefore the third goal is ongoing.

### **Vision 2030**

Complete Vision 2030 Plan by June 2021 including the following actions:

1. Complete secondary education plan by December 2020
2. Conduct assessment of lessons learned under COVID response which should inform
3. Vision 2030 and adjust plan accordingly, completing by February 2021
4. Integrate framework components and operationalize the plan by April 2021
5. Publish and distribute plan by June 2021

Mr. Nylén, Chair of the Vision 2030 Working Group reviewed the Vision 2030 goals. The first goal has been accomplished. The other four goals have been delayed due to COVID.

### **Communications**

1. **Short Term Goal:** To continue to provide access to timely information about Ipswich Public Schools for the community-at-large throughout the 2020-21 school year.
2. **Long Term Goal:** To continue to broaden and deepen our communication efforts in order to increase the school-community connection by fostering meaningful, consistent two-way communication with staff, parents, town leaders, businesses, and other stakeholders and supporters of Ipswich Public Schools.
3. **Newsletters:** To publish a bimonthly School Committee newsletter and distribute to our school community and the community-at-large. Target publish dates: September 30, November, January, March, May, June.
  - a. Create a "Subscribe to Newsletter" sign-up on our district website for community members not already on the email distribution list
4. **Community Engagement:** Foster increased community engagement throughout the school year, utilizing both remote and in-person connection opportunities.
  - a. Support and reinforce district unity during this fragmented environment - #IpswichEverywhere
  - b. Community outreach (Rotary Club - February, annual budget overview. Council on Aging if possible)
  - c. Plan for a community forum in the spring to discuss elementary school(s) building project
5. **Website:** To keep the School Committee information on the District website up-to-date and comprehensive so that information can be easily found.
  - a. Possibly allow Communication Subcommittee Chair admin access to SC website content
  - b. Review School Committee pages/links to ensure everything is up to date, including member bios and policy manual
  - c. Content for upkeep/expansion:
    - i. Update landing page - role & responsibilities, ethics, mission statement, vision, goals

- ii. Ensure agendas, minutes, and meeting packets are posted in a timely manner
  - iii. Consider adding some scrolling social media posts on the website
  - iv. Update Feoffees grant forms - annually
6. **Social Media:** To continue to broaden/increase communication outreach through social media channels.
- a. Establish Social Media Norms, using the existing town social media policy + MASC guidance
7. **Inter-Committee Communication:** To foster a clear, consistent level of communication amongst the School Committee.
- a. Create School Committee Calendar of Events
  - b. Determine procedure for disseminating information from MASC (proposed resolutions, etc)
  - c. Maintain and keep up-to-date existing documents such as the subcommittee/working group/liaison document

Mr. Stevens, Chair of the Communications Subcommittee, reviewed the communications goals for the year. He said that the group is on track to accomplish the short term goal. The subcommittee is working on publishing newsletters and increasing their social media presence. The long term goal has been hampered by the pandemic. The subcommittee is looking at ways to communicate issues to the community-at-large regarding the override and the school building project. Overall, Mr. Stevens felt they were doing well with what they had control over.

**G. Spring '21 MCAS Discussion:**

Dr. Blake shared that both the federal and state government have determined that standardized testing, like the MCAS must be administered this school year. While school administrators from across the Commonwealth have expressed their concern about testing at this time, the federal government has not changed their position this year. The MCAS test has been scaled back this year and is not as involved as in previous years. The test is scheduled for the month of May. School administrators are working out the logistics of testing.

Dr. Flynn felt that the data from MCAS testing would be helpful. In a time of uncertainty, it would be helpful to see what students have learned. Dr. Blake responded, saying that the District uses other assessments throughout the year that provide more immediate and supportive feedback. That information is used to identify needs and create plans for remedial support.

**H. School Facilities Discussion:**

Mr. Nylen said that after taking some time to heal wounds and “cool off”, the School Committee is ready to begin a new discussion around a school building project. The School Facilities Working Group has been taking a closer look at how to proceed. After speaking with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) and speaking with another town who experienced a failed vote, the working group believes they have ways to move forward. Priorities to focus on include:

- Working internally with the School Committee, administrative team and faculty to determine priorities and
- Narrowing the choices

Mr. Nylen said that there was criticism before about the School Committee not leading clearly and he hoped through internal work, they could position themselves to find a clear solution. He would like the School Committee to determine a direction and then go to the community for input and support.



The working group suggested the School Committee hold a public workshop to discuss priorities for the project and then schedule a series of listening sessions for the community to provide their perspectives.

To remain consistent with the timeline outlined in the Town Strategic Plan, Mr. Nylén said an SOI would need to be submitted to the MSBA by Spring 2023. It may be recommended to try and submit a year earlier so in the event the application is denied the first time around, the Committee would have another year to submit and still stay within the original timeframe.

Mr. Nylén shared that the working group also discussed working with an outside consultant to act as a facilitator at the community listening sessions.

Ms. Kneedler suggested it might be better to get community input prior to the School Committee workshop. There is a perception in town that the community was not heard in the first process. Mr. Nylén said that topic was debated at length at the last working group meeting. They agreed that community input was extremely important in the process. Ms. Eliot added that the working group ultimately felt that presenting unified leadership and structure to the community was important.

Ms. Cannon suggested sending out a poll to the Ipswich community asking some simple and basic questions- one school or two, etc. She thought that getting that information first would help guide the School Committee discussion. Mr. Nylén thought the survey was a good way to gather information.

Mr. Whitten highlighted the importance of maintaining a paper trail from the initial call to MSBA to talks with Amherst to workshops, listening sessions and future School Facilities Working Group meetings.

It was determined that the School Committee would look to hold a workshop during the month of April.

#### **I. Public Comment:**

Sara Johnson Allen, East Street, thanked the School Committee for their work.

Jen Donahue, High Street, asked if there was a decision to return to full time, in-person learning and if so, was a timeline determined.

Ana Laguarda, Mt. Pleasant Avenue, expressed her gratitude to the School Committee and Dr. Blake for working with the teachers in terms of COVID and returning to school safely.

Rachel L'Heureux, Rosewood Drive, asked if MCAS was going to take place and if there was a way to vote it down.

#### **III. School Committee Reports:**

**A. Vouchers and Bill:** All were reviewed and signed.

##### **B. Subcommittee Reports:**

- a. Athletics:** The subcommittee will meet on Wednesday, March 24th.
- b. Budget:** The subcommittee has not met.
- c. Operations:** This subcommittee has not met.
- d. Policy:** This subcommittee has not met.
- e. Communications:** The subcommittee is working on the March newsletter and will share it out to the School Committee at the next meeting.

- f. **Mutual Concerns:** This subcommittee has not met.
- g. **Negotiations:** The subcommittee will meet on Wednesday, March 10th.

**C. Working Group Reports:**

- a. **School Facilities:** This working group discussed their work during an earlier agenda item.
- b. **Race, Equity and Social Justice:** The working group hosted a listening session with a youth group in town. The meeting was well attended. Ms. Cannon shared that while it was a good conversation, she felt it was difficult to hear. Students felt that while they were ready to have conversations around these sensitive topics, teachers were neither ready nor prepared. Ms. Cannon said that her take away from the meeting was that these kids are stronger than the adults in the room. There will be conversations with the Director of Teaching and Learning about more extensive professional development in creating safe dialogue among teachers and students.

Ms. Cannon also shared that the conversations happening at these meetings are very two sided and constructive.

**D. Liaison Reports:**

- a. **HS School Council:** Ms. Kneedler attended the School Council meeting. The group discussed the DESE report card, MCAS, AP exams and school reopening plans. She reported that students are anxiously awaiting the start of the new open campus policy.

**E. New Business:**

Ms. Kneedler was thankful for all the work that the two principals have done for the district and wished them well in their retirement. She suggested that this would be a great opportunity for the School Committee to begin a discussion about the administrative structure of the elementary schools to ensure that students are having a cohesive and equitable experience at both schools.

**IV. Consent:**

There was no consent agenda presented tonight.

**V. Adjournment:**

*Mr. Nysten moved to adjourn the meeting at 10:17 PM, seconded by Mr. Stevens. The motion passed unanimously in favor by roll call vote, 7-YES, 0-NO.*