

Ipswich School Committee

MS/HS Ensemble Room
134 High Street, Ipswich
Thursday, March 17, 2022
7:00 PM

MINUTES

Call to Order

Mr. Stevens called the meeting to order at 7:02 PM.

Present: Mr. Stevens, Ms. Eliot, Dr. O’Flynn, Ms. Cannon, and Ms. Kneedler

Also Present: Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools and Cheryl Herrick-Stella, Director of Finance and Operations

Absent: Mr. Whitten and Mr. Poirier

Reading of the District Mission Statement

Ms. Eliot read the mission statement.

Announcements

- The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, April 7, 2022 at 7:00pm.
- Bean Counting will be held on Saturday, March 26th.
- The Policy Subcommittee will meet on Thursday, April 7th at 5:30pm.

Special Acknowledgements

Both Dr. Blake and Mr. Stevens acknowledged the generous donation of \$50,000 from Ipswich resident, Stephen King, for the purchase of high end orchestral instruments. Mr. King has been invited to an upcoming meeting for additional acknowledgements.

Ms. Cannon talked about the Choral Fest and ballroom dancing at Winthrop School. She said both programs were amazing.

Citizens’ Comments

There were none at this time.

High School Student Representative Report

Dr. Blake read Ms. Jepsen’s report in her absence. The report included the following:

- Many students are enjoying intramural volleyball at the moment as they transition from the winter to spring sport seasons.
- Spring sports are beginning to meet about the upcoming season and will begin practicing shortly.
- The Green Team is continuing to plan a community garden dinner in the garden in the front of the high school that is set for May 14th.
- 150 students responded to the poll Caroline sent to the HS students regarding masks
- About 75% of the students selected that they feel fine with not having masks. 17%-18% of the students said that they feel good about no longer having masks and 8% of the students said that they do not feel good about no longer having masks.
- Many students at first felt uncomfortable and overwhelmed with the idea of removing their masks right after vacation considering that there has usually been a spike in cases after school vacations. However, many students now feel comfortable and happy to no longer wear their masks and are delighted to be able to see their teachers’ and schoolmates’ faces again. At the same time, there are still some students (8%) who feel mildly to very unsafe coming to school where most students are not wearing masks (some because they are high risk or live with people who are high risk). Overall, it feels great to feel a sense of normalcy again.
- This poll was sent out on March 6th, 2022.

Presentations

A. Government Study Committee Bylaw Request

Sarah Player, Chair of the Ad Hoc Government Study Committee, discussed Town Meeting warrant article 18: Amend General Bylaws – Chapter 35 – Town Boards, Committees & Commissions. She presented the amended by-law, stating that if approved, the Government Study Committee would include five members and change their appointment from being solely a Select Board responsibility to multiple appointing authorities: the Select Board, the Finance Committee, the School Committee, and two at large

positions. The goal, she explained, would be to broaden community participation. She talked about the process of advertising committee openings to ensure that the board does not appear to be self-appointing.

Ms. Player then went on to review the responsibilities of the Government Study Committee. There would be a referral process for how a topic is studied. It was believed that the Select Board and Town Meeting would be the best avenues to streamline that process. The Government Study Committee would then make an annual report back to the Select Board on the topics they had been assigned to research. Lastly, a quorum of the Government Study Committee would be no less than three people.

Ms. Player said she was bringing this topic before the School Committee because if the article passes, the School Committee or its designee would be an appointing agent.

It was clarified that in the current proposal, the Select Board would be the “gatekeeper” for topics the Government Study Committee would review. The other avenue for topics to be reviewed would be through Town Meeting. Ms. Player said it was important that the Government Study Committee cover concerns of the collective community, not individuals.

Gary Champion, a five year member of the Government Study Committee, spoke as the single dissenting vote against this warrant article. He felt the current by-law was far superior to the one the Select Board is proposing. He felt the current Government Study Committee process was transparent, collaborative and collective. He said the Select Board shut down the committee by not appointing new members. He expressed concerns about the Select Board being the sole “gatekeeper” of topics to be studied and the term “gatekeeper” as a whole. He shared that over the past five years he has learned that the Select Board are not experts on governance and with their busy schedules, they are not able to give the time needed to really look at town government like the Government Study Committee can. Mr. Champion also shared concerns over the Select Board’s reliance on Town Counsel opinions.

Ms. Player went on to talk more about the referral process for topics to be studied by the Government Study Committee. She said the committee would act as a research body. She said the referral process was discussed at length by the Ad Hoc committee. Their overall feeling was that the Select Board would be able to streamline requests that apply to all citizens. If there was a topic that was debated at length at Town Meeting, it could also be referred to the Government Study Committee.

Mr. Champion said it was his recommendation that the Government Study Committee make an annual report at Town Meeting. Citizen’s queries from Town Meeting could go back to the Government Study Committee.

Dr. O’Flynn asked what the issue was with the current Government Study Committee. Ms. Player explained that the current by-law is one line. Currently, there is little discussion about the work done, the process and the committee has a hard time recruiting and retaining members. While the work they do is good, there is a need for more structure.

Ms. Cannon asked for clarification on the referral process. She asked that absent Town Meeting, would the Government Study Committee act as a subcommittee of the Select Board? Ms. Player explained that yes, that is the case. She also clarified that the Select Board could not block topics to be researched on that were decided at Town Meeting.

Ms. Player explained that in the event article 18 passed, article 19 would allow two members to be appointed to the Government Study Committee at Town Meeting. Vacancies for the other open positions on the committee would be posted. If article 18 does not pass, article 19 would not be on the table and the Government Study Committee would revert back to the current by-law.

B. Finance Committee Budget Presentation Debrief

Mr. Stevens began the presentation by sharing how impressed he was with the presentation from the two elementary principals. They were well prepared and did a nice job laying out the needs of their schools. Overall, he said, all administrators did a nice job presenting.

Dr. O’Flynn felt the night went as smoothly as it could go. He felt that the Finance Committee understood and supported the district’s plan. He said that most Finance Committee questions were about details and were not questioning the district’s philosophy. Dr. O’Flynn felt the most important thing was to get their support for the override. They seem to have a good understanding as to why the School Committee is approaching the community this year and that the School Committee is taking deliberate and well thought out steps to ensure success.

Ms. Eliot gave credit to past School Committee members for laying out a plan for the stabilization fund which allowed for the extension of the last override beyond the original five year plan.

Ms. Cannon said she was impressed with the presentations, but questioned how aware some Finance Committee members are that school may look very different from when they were there. She said that after listening to some of their questions, it appeared as though members were thinking about school ten years ago and did not understand the challenges schools are facing now. She suggested supporting the Tiger Tour more vocally ahead of these budget meetings. It could help as an advocacy piece going forward.

Mr. Stevens agreed that attendance at a Tiger Tour event would be beneficial to other committees. He also shared that it is the responsibility of the School Committee to manage the school budget and stay within the confines of the budget calculator.

Dr. O'Flynn felt the district was adding positions that were a standard for education and appropriate to meet the demands of the time.

C. School Committee Goals Review

The School Committee reviewed their goals for the 2021-22 school year and progress made towards them.

1. Support rebuilding and maintenance of academic and extracurricular programs that were put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Ms. Stevens felt the district was back to as normal as they could be. He said that even with masking requirements in place, extracurricular activities were happening without issue, as well as athletics. He felt the School Committee was on track with this goal.

Ms. Kneedler added that the Extended Day Program was also back and thriving.

2. Budget:

Mr. Stevens said the group was "knee deep" in work around the operational override. Members of the School Committee are working with the Override Steering Committee to ensure the override's success.

3. Communications:

Ms. Eliot talked about the meet and greets that took place throughout the fall and winter of this year. The Communications Subcommittee also attended FRIES and School Council meetings. The meet and greets were not well attended, so the subcommittee would like to regroup and think of alternative community outreach efforts. The bi-monthly newsletter continues to be issued.

Mr. Stevens added that the listening sessions will be a good forum to get the community involved.

Ms. Eliot added that the School Committee could do better with their social media outreach.

4. Vision 2030:

Ms. Kneedler admitted that not much work had been done regarding Vision 2030 and that a meeting should be scheduled soon.

5. MSBA process

Mr. Stevens said this goal is off to a slow start. While listening sessions have been discussed, they were put on hold due to an increase in COVID cases through town.

Ms. Cannon suggested working the listening sessions into the Vision 2030 timeline.

D. Addressing Space Needs at the Elementary Schools

Dr. Blake started the conversation by sharing that throughout the budget process this year, members heard about the increased enrollment at Winthrop School. The budget has accounted for additional staffing for these needs in preschool through grade 1. As of now, those additions to staffing are listed in the Winthrop budget; however, spacing is an issue. The district has spent time looking at various spaces throughout town and have found that most are not feasible for the need. There may be additional space at the Paul F. Doyon Memorial School. Administrators are still working through spacing needs and potential solutions.

There was a conversation about the potential use of church basements.

Dr. Blake wanted the community to be aware that the district is aware of and working to address the current spacing needs. Families should be notified of any changes by April 1st as final preparations are made for the fall.

There was a brief discussion around the addition of modular classrooms. It was decided that they are expensive, lack plumbing and their contracts are difficult to end.

E. Discussion and Vote on Transfer to Stabilization Fund

Ms. Herrick-Stella, the Director of Finance and Operations, said the Town was requesting the amount the district anticipated returning to the Stabilization Fund by April 1st. Based on projected remaining appropriations eligible for the Stabilization Fund, she was recommending transferring \$1.3 million.

Dr. Blake added that this significant return would not have been possible without the COVID funding. The district saw a cost savings when the schools were closed in the start of the pandemic and ESSER funding has allowed the district to shift some allocations.

A discussion took place about the possibility of lowering the override ask given the amount being returned to the Stabilization Fund this year. Ms. Cannon felt the School Committee needed to think about how community members have been financially impacted by the pandemic and if there was a way to alleviate any cost burden, it should be considered.

- *Motion to accept the proposed transfer of \$1.3 million to the Stabilization Fund was made by Dr. O'Flynn and seconded by Ms. Cannon. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

After the vote, Mr. Stevens said that he is in agreement with Ms. Cannon. People in the community are struggling and he suggested the School Committee not pass on an unnecessary tax increase. While he felt the override could not be put off, the ask could be lessened.

Dr. O'Flynn shared that based on the calculator and the significant transfer to the Stabilization Fund, the School Committee could reduce the impact to taxpayers from \$300 to \$270. Members agreed that it would demonstrate good faith and fiscal responsibility to lower the override ask from \$2 million to \$1.8 million.

- *Motion to decrease the override ask from \$2 million to \$1.8 million was made by Ms. Cannon and seconded by Ms. Kneedler. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

F. Override Discussion

Ms. Cannon began the conversation stating that she felt the community may be having difficulty separating the override and the school building project. She felt that people were coming together for the override, then fearing they would lose their voice in the building project. She hopes the override can act as a unifying issue for the community. Her hope is that the work with the override lays the foundation for openness for the next project.

Mr. Stevens felt the override and potential building project were on two separate paths, but agreed that some people think it has to be one or the other. He said the building project is several years out and the timing/sequencing should be made clear.

Ms. Eliot talked about the messaging to the community. While funding for these projects is separate, it still comes from the same taxpayer.

Mr. Stevens said it is important to emphasize what we know. The School Committee knows what will happen if the current schools are not funded through an override. He then asked what good would a new school be if the School Committee cannot then fund its budget.

The discussion continued about gaining support from the community before moving forward with any building project. It was the hope that listening sessions could be part of the healing process. Dr. O'Flynn felt that the override could be the "backdoor way" to build community support for a new building project.

It was then suggested that a subcommittee be developed to consider different models and build a transition plan that would be separate from the Statement of Interest (SOI) process and listening sessions. His vision for the subcommittee would be that it was administrator led evaluating different grade configurations and concepts with input from School Committee and parent participants. Members agreed this could be a positive direction to take and suggested different stakeholder groups that could be involved.

Superintendent's Administrative Report

Dr. Blake reported on his work throughout the district in weeks since that last School Committee meeting. His report included:

- Work on the FY23 budget and presentations
- Ongoing negotiations
- Attendance at the faculty and school council meetings across the district
- Meetings with the building principals
- Work on the document upload for the DESE District Review

Dr. Blake then reviewed the COVID positivity rate for the district.

Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports

- **Communications Subcommittee:** The group is working on the upcoming newsletter.
- **Budget Subcommittee:** The group met in preparation for the presentations to the Finance Committee.
- **Athletics Subcommittee:** The group discussed the need and process for 8th grade student-athlete waivers. There was also a discussion about participation levels and the need to build programs.
- **Policy Subcommittee:** Section I will be presented at the next scheduled School Committee meeting.
- **STEAM Team:** The group met for an all day meeting to plan for the STEAM Showcase happening on May 4th.

New Business*

There was not any new business presented.

Vouchers and Bills

All were reviewed and signed.

Consent Agenda

- *Motion to accept the Consent Agenda for Thursday, March 17, 2022 was made by Mr. Stevens and seconded by Ms. Cannon. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

Adjournment

- *Motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Ms. Kneedler and seconded by Ms. Cannon. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

Meeting adjourned at 8:50 PM