

# Essex Westford School District Board Meeting

December 19, 2023 at 6:30pm | EHS Library



## BOARD MEETING MINUTES

**Board Members:** Robert Carpenter (Chair), Scott Brown, Marlon Verasamy, Laura Taylor, Andre Roy, Erin Kennedy Knox, Diane Clemens, Jemima Talbot, Dawn Irwin, Scott Cooledge, Wade Winter (Student Representative), Samantha Donahey (Student Representative)

**Absent:** N/A

**Staff:** Beth Cobb (Superintendent), Brian Donahue (COO), Heather Bushey (Director of Finance), Deb Anderson (Director of Human Resources), Erin Maguire (Director of Equity/Co-Director of Student Support Services), Suzanne Gruendling (Director of Student Engagement and District System Services), and Dylan McNamara (Director of SEL/Co-Director of Student Support Services)

**Members of the Public in attendance:** Stacy Myers (Staff), Matt Gilbert, Laura Walker-Sewell (Staff), Kyle Blake, Carmon Verasamy, Shannon Yandow (Staff), Jessica Plimpton, Dan Plimpton (Staff), Hannah Prescott (Staff), Roark Thomas (Staff), Claudine Martin (Staff), Gretchen Bates, Len Bates, Nichole Guntulis (Staff), Carmel Osborne (Staff), Erin Schmitt (Staff), Alexis Koch (Staff), Julian Bradshaw (Staff), Hugh Bradshaw, Lynn Smith, Jessica Psaros (Staff), Gayle Botelho (Staff)

**Other:** Media Factory Tech

## AGENDA

Item	Topic	Action
I	<b>Call to Order</b> Robert Carpenter called the meeting to order at 6:35 PM.  Carpenter noted that the Independent Auditor's Report, previously included on the agenda, will be discussed at the January 2, 2024 Board meeting.	
II	<b>Comments from the public</b> Comments were made by: Laura Walker, Jessica Psaros, Gretchen Bates, Kyle Blake, Nicole Guntulis, Erin Schmitt, Matt Gilbert	
III	<b>Executive Session</b> <b>Negotiations Title 1 § 313. (1)</b> Contracts, labor relations agreements with employees, arbitration, mediation, grievances, civil actions, or prosecutions by the state, where premature general public knowledge would clearly place the state, municipality, other public body, or person involved at a substantial disadvantage;  Scott Brown made a motion to move into Executive Session, inviting Beth Cobb, Brian Donahue and Deb Anderson. The motion passed unanimously.  Beth Cobb, Brian Donahue and Deb Anderson exited Executive Session at 7:55 PM.  The meeting was called back to order at 8:11 PM by Robert Carpenter. Scott Brown made a motion that the Board will work with the Administration during the annual budget building process with the assistance gained through community engagement to create a budget focused on student learning while considerate of costs. EWSD will pause action of the policy D6. Class Size and its procedures pending review of administrative data.  The motion passed unanimously. Robert Carpenter noted that the Board will move through the important upcoming budget season; he encouraged ongoing engagement from the community through open dialogue. Robert noted appreciation for the teachers and administration in the District. He reiterated the appreciation of the Board for the involvement of the community in the meeting.	

IV	<p><b>Consent Agenda</b></p> <p>Items that the Board has previously delegated to the Superintendent but that an external authority requires the Board to “approve.” The entire Consent Agenda is adopted by one motion without discussion. However, any item can be removed from the Consent Agenda for discussion, following the Board’s policy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approve Regular School Board Meeting Minutes from December 5, 2023 and Special Board Meeting Minutes from December 11, 2023</li> <li>• Approve Resignations</li> <li>• Approve Warrants</li> </ul> <p>Andre Roy made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda in its existing form. The motion was passed unanimously.</p>	Action Required
V	<p><b>Financial Condition and Activities (Policy 2.3)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FY23 Independent Auditor’s Report - <a href="#">Presentation</a> <b>To be shared and discussed at the next Board meeting on January 2, 2024</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Financial Planning and Budgeting (Policy 2.4)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FY24 Planning and Budgeting Guidance &amp; Governance Investments (<a href="#">Policy 4.7</a>) - <a href="#">Presentation</a></li> </ul> <p>Brian Donahue shared Enrollment Data produced by the New England School Development Council with projections by grade through 2033-34. EWSD has contracted with the Council over the last four years to coordinate a demographic study.</p> <p>Marlon Verasamy asked for clarification around why the number of students within the enrollment data would appear to be increasing between 8th and 9th grade years. Brian Donahue explained that the EWSD receives students from throughout the state through our school choice opportunities - in part due to the existence of the technical center within our district. Some of our receiving districts (i.e. Grand Isle, Georgia) are experiencing steeper declines in overall enrollment numbers than other parts of the state.</p> <p>The class size data presented reflects information about classroom teachers who are with students at the K-8 levels. The state board establishes the minimum, optimum, and maximum class size numbers, which vary slightly by grade bracket (i.e. K-3, 4-8 and 9-12). EWSD administration (including principals) utilize their experience, common practices within comparable districts, and research to determine what class size bands (i.e. 16.0 min to 18.0 opt to 19.9 max) should be outlined for the district.</p> <p>The Board discussed the flexibility that principals have to shift teachers within schools based on “bubbles” where larger or smaller grade sizes may occur.</p> <p>Heather Bushey reverted to the start of the budget presentation. Bushey shared the budget timeline. She spoke to the work of the leadership team from early in the fall to identify priorities and discuss the budget landscape. This month the team has received most operating expense budgets and are working on the personnel budget. Final proposal to be presented to the Board in February. The budget is warned in March and a vote will be held in April.</p> <p>Key drivers of the budget were shared, including: facilities needs, personnel costs, legislation changes, and ESSER fund spend down.</p> <p>Heather Bushey broke down the components of the Tax Commissioners Letter that was released on December 1, 2023. It was noted that the Homestead Property Tax is not the only way in which education is funded in the state. The Homestead Tax rate makes up only 27% of revenue sources.</p> <p>Act 127 is designed to create equitable funding for districts across the state. Impacts of its implementation were discussed.</p> <p>A move to a universal collection process around free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligibility was noted by Brian Donahue as something that will be forthcoming. This issue was raised as weighted average increases for pupils in the FRL and English Learner categories were shared.</p> <p><b>ACTION ITEM:</b> It was requested that the “Long Term Weighted Average Daily Membership” slide be updated to reflect comparison numbers for FY24 and FY25 by grade level.</p>	

	<p>The desire of the district to keep net education spending per pupil for FY25 within a 10% increase in order to avoid having to be subject to a Tax Rate Review by a state-appointed panel and the Secretary was communicated.</p> <p>Varying budget and tax scenarios based on the impacts of Act 127 were explained by Heather Bushey and Brian Donahue, and Board Members posed questions around potential immediate and long term shifts.</p> <p>Act 173 (pertaining to Special Education Census Block Funding), and its impacts on budget model creation were shared by Heather Bushey. In FY23 funding from Act 173 moved to a census block grant model, meaning that a certain allotment of funds are provided to the district with no room for increases based on the number of students or their needs. This creates a gap between grant dollars provided and expenditures.</p> <p>Brian Donahue and Beth Cobb spoke to the notion that the census block funding in Special Education does allow for flexibility with individual student needs and in how experts are utilized in school buildings.</p> <p>Examples were provided to the Board that offered “what if” scenarios (i.e. level tax rate, level net education spending per pupil) and their impacts as the Board begins to consider FY25 budget options.</p> <p>Voters will authorize an expenditure total in April. The question was posed about how the District and Board can present the nuisances of the budget and any relevant changes to voters.</p> <p>The upcoming, state-mandated PCB testing and potential results that could lead to necessary facilities work were raised and considered within the budget landscape presented.</p> <p>Brian Donahue asked for the Board to provide their input (including questions, priorities, scenario preferences) prior to the next meeting on January 2, 2024. Robert Carpenter proposed collecting that input via email from the Board that could then be passed on to Brian Donahue.</p> <p>Marlon Verasamy and Dawn Irwin presented the notion of removing one to two scenarios from those shared in order to narrow efforts by Donahue and Bushey before the next meeting. Through an informal vote, it was determined by the majority of Board members that the first two scenarios outlined (level tax rate and level net education spending) will not be considered as guardrails.. The Board then voted on the use of the remaining three scenarios as guardrails for the next stage in the budget development process.</p> <p>Robert Carpenter encouraged Board members to share the scenarios in the community to seek input and questions. In addition, it was discussed that the Board could write individual and/or a joint letter to the Legislature, while also inviting Legislators to attend an upcoming meeting.</p> <p>Marlon Verasamy questioned what community engagement at a January Board meeting could look like.</p>	
VI	<p><b>Governance Process Policies (Policy 4.0)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Policy 4.3 Agenda Planning</li> <li>● Policy 4.1.6 Board self-monitoring of process and performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <a href="#">Meeting Evaluation</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
VII	<p><b>Adjourn</b></p> <p>Laura Taylor made a motion to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed unanimously.</p>	

**Next Regular School Board Meeting: Tuesday, January 2, 2023, 6:30 - 9:00 p.m., EHS Library**