

Essex Westford School District Board Meeting

January 2, 2024 at 6:30pm | EHS Library



BOARD MEETING MINUTES

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

Absent: Andre Roy

Staff: Beth Cobb (Superintendent), Brian Donahue (COO), Heather Bushey (Director of Finance), Jackie Tolman (Director of Learning & Instructional Impact), Don Van Nostrand (EHS Principal)

Members of the Public in attendance: Lynn Smith

Other: Media Factory Tech

AGENDA

Item	Topic	Action
I	Call to Order Robert Carpenter called the meeting to order at 6:32 PM.	
II	Comments from the public No comments were made.	
III	Consent Agenda 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. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Approve Regular School Board Meeting Minutes from December 19, 2023• Approve Professional Appointments• Approve Warrants Marlon Verasamy made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda in its existing form. The motion was passed unanimously.	Action Required
IV	Financial Condition and Activities (Policy 2.3) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• FY23 Independent Auditor’s Report Heather Bushey walked through the documents related to the audit that have been provided to the Board members, including the Statement of Auditing Standards (SAS) Letter, Management Letter, and Audited Financial Statements. Heather spoke, specifically, about the sections within the Audited Financial Statement Sections of the report. It was noted that an unmodified “clean” audit opinion was issued. Pages of significance within the report were outlined for the Board. Fund types as noted within the report were defined and broken down for the current fiscal year, including Government Funds, Proprietary Funds, and Fiduciary. An Unassigned dollar amount from the General Fund that will roll over into the FY25 budget was provided as well as Committed and Assigned fund balances for the current fiscal year. Bushey shared that for this audit the programs tested through the Federal Compliance Audit were IDEA-B and ESSER. Bushey noted no remarkable or unexpected items from within the report. Brian Donahue brought up the note in the report about some of the district’s leases; this note did not exist in the past. Questions were posed by Board members about the lease of the building at 58 Founders Road, where the ARC Center is located.	

Erin Kennedy Knox posed a question about the district's practice of self-insuring the dental fund. It was clarified that it is to the benefit of the district to follow this model.

Diane Clemens asked about notes 16 and 17 in the report which are related to the Vermont Teacher Retirement Program that is provided and held by the State Treasurer's office.

Financial Planning and Budgeting (Policy 2.4)

- FY24 Planning and Budgeting Guidance & Governance Investments ([Policy 4.7](#))

Robert Carpenter outlined the two primary goals for the evening related to the planning and budgeting portion of the agenda:

1. Giving administration a goal for an overall amount, i.e. the parameters within which the Board is looking to spend
2. What the governance investment will be

Brian Donahue provided the Board with a timeline for budget development leading up to the annual meeting and vote in April. The EWSD Finance Team will be looking to share the Superintendent's approved proposed budget with the Board at the meeting on January 23.

Heather Bushey reviewed some of the budget drivers that were shared at the December 19, 2023 Board meeting.

A summary of what the district received in ESSER funds over the last three years was provided to the Board with notes about investment areas, including summer programming, math intervention and professional development, ELL program, EWSD Reads, etc. Beth Cobb spoke of the importance of the EWSD Reads program in light of the pandemic, and noted its relevance to the RTI training and framework that is now in existence. Cobb also outlined the ongoing plan to sustain restorative practices at the middle school and high school levels.

Brian Donahue shared a slide with a breakdown of class size by school in the current year, the proposed class sizes for FY25, and a delineation of the change that will be incurred.

A video generated by the Chittenden County Superintendents' Association was shown that highlights the purpose of Act 127. Marlon Verasamy asked about what resources may be produced by the state (or the district during the budget process) to explain the complexities of Act 127 and educate community members.

Heather Bushey walked the Board through staff FTEs by position and the percent that each of those position groups occupy within the total FY24 budget.

Examples were provided to the Board that offered "what if" scenarios (i.e. level tax rate, level net education spending per pupil) for FY25 budget options given the latest information provided by the state.

Robert Carpenter asked Bushey and Donahue if the Board should consider a contingency plan in addition to selecting one of the proposed budget scenarios in case the state should make changes within the area of their control come April (or beyond). Bushey shared her thought that the legislature will prioritize this work once they are in session, but it is challenging to predict what guidance will come of that.

Diane Clemens asked if the CLA computation includes the fact that Essex Junction and Essex Town are entering reevaluation and appraisal now. Brian Donahue shared that it is his understanding that the reappraisal process will not be done in time to take effect for our FY25 budget.

The Board discussed the fact that there may be more likelihood of projecting future budgets in the next cycle (FY26), but that, given multiple factors, it will be easiest to look to a one year budget model for FY25.

The Board spoke generally about a number of layoffs that could be needed in order to keep the budget level with tax increases still in place. Marlon Verasamy asked that the FTE by position slide be revisited and reviewed by community members to understand the challenges at play in determining where positions may be cut. Beth Cobb clarified the contractual language that exists for temporary hires and probationary contracts which are the first three years working in EWSD.

	<p>Erin Kennedy Knox stated that it would be helpful to see the scenarios more clearly translated to reflect actual budget categories, with potential reductions incorporated, etc. Formatting the scenarios this way may help Board members to share the story of budget reasoning with the community. Scott Brown added that if two scenarios on either end of the spectrum were compared, it may be feasible to extrapolate what a middle option would entail.</p> <p>Brian Donahue emphasized that it is within the Board's authority to provide guidance to the administration of what is looking for in a budget. Robert Carpenter reminded the Board that their responsibility is to define what dollar amount we want the administration to work with before bringing a budget back to the group for deeper discussion and question asking.</p> <p>The Board continued to weigh which of the scenarios they wanted to see more fully developed by the administration. Scott Brown provided his thinking as to why it would be beneficial to see two scenarios conveyed for comparison purposes. Marlon Verasamy agreed with Brown in that it would allow for the Board to provide more direct guidance and stay at a higher level of discussion at the late January meeting. The comparison of two scenarios is also favorable for Dawn Irwin, who feels that it would be beneficial to have more talking points to provide to the community.</p> <p>Scott Brown offered that the administration could build out scenario three based on its education priorities that it feels are important to present to the Board. Marlon Verasamy stated understanding that the FTE and personnel positioning has been a large part of the Board's budget conversation thus far because these are issues that are on the minds of members and within the community.</p> <p>Heather Bushey raised the concern that there are outstanding questions regarding the impacts on income sensitive population within the district community. Marlon Verasamy reminded the Board that this population makes up 60% of the community.</p> <p>Brian Donahue proposed that the Board could add an Article on to its annual meeting that would be specific to raise tax dollars to go toward capital planning and work for the district.</p> <p>Erin Kennedy Knox made a motion to provide the administration with a budget of \$78,314 009. Marlon Verasamy made a friendly amendment to change the Board's guidance to have the administration provide a budget between \$78,314,009 (min) and \$82,473,691 (max) that would inform the Board of the administration's efforts to meet the educational needs of its students. Erin Kennedy Knox accepted the amendment. Scott Brown seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.</p> <p>The Board then moved into a review of their proposed budget. Questions were posed by Board members about the salary and employee benefit lines of the budget as well as the postage and printing and binding lines.</p> <p>Marlon Verasamy proposed that the student members of the Board receive a stipend for their involvement. The Board agreed to add this item to the budget with a future discussion to focus on the amount for each student representative. Wade Winter requested that a discussion take place at a later date about the schedule for the dispersal of stipends.</p> <p>Laura Taylor made a motion to adopt the Board's budget with the provision that the administration could adjust the line item for legal support (i.e. fees and service) and that an amount for student Board representative stipends be added. Scott Brown opposed the motion with all other Board members voting to approve.</p>	
V	<p>Governance Process Policies (Policy 4.0)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy 4.3 Agenda Planning <p>Robert Carpenter reminded the Board that they intend to have Community Engagement time at the start of the upcoming budget-focused meetings. This will allow for dialogue that cannot take place within a atypical public comment period.</p> <p>It was also noted that there will be an early February meeting that will begin at 5:30 PM, with the first hour being dedicated to time for interested parties to learn about Board positions, what it means to run for the Board, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy 4.1.6 Board self-monitoring of process and performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting Evaluation 	

VI	Adjourn Erin Kennedy Knox made a motion to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 8:59 PM..	
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Next Regular School Board Meeting: Tuesday, January 16, 2024, 6:30 - 9:00 p.m., EHS Library