



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

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www.abschools.org

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

November 16, 2023 Executive Session at 7:00 p.m./ Open Meeting at 7:30 p.m.

Administration Building Auditorium To view only: <https://www.youtube.com/actontv1>

APPROVED OPEN MINUTES

Members Present: Tori Campbell, Liz Fowlks (7:10), Lakshmi Kaja, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt, Andrew Schwartz, Rebecca Wilson

Members Absent: Ben Bloomenthal, Vikram Parikh

Others: Deborah Bookis (7:35), Peter Light, Sherri Matthews, Andrew Shen, Beth Petr

1. **CALL TO ORDER** (7:00)

The ABRSC was called to order at 7:00 p.m. by Chairperson Adam Klein.

EXECUTIVE SESSION (7:00)

Adam stated the need to meet in Executive Session pursuant to:

- MGL Ch 30A, sec.21(a) Purpose 3: to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining with the Acton-Boxborough Office Support Association (ABOSA) and American Federal of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and Acton-Boxborough Education Association (ABEA) because an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining position of the Committee. It was stated that the Committee would return to Open Meeting at approximately 7:30 p.m.

Ginny Kremer moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by Roll Call: to enter executive session for the reason given.

(YES: Campbell, Kaja, Klein, Kremer, Ramachandran, Schmidt, Schwartz, Wilson)

OPEN MEETING (approximately 7:30)

At 7:35 p.m, members returned to Open Meeting. Members of the public who wished to watch the meeting online were invited to use Acton tv's youtube channel (found at the top of the agenda). It was stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website.

2. **CHAIRPERSON'S WELCOME** - *Adam Klein*

a. Public Participation

Adam stated that per School Committee Policy, members of the public were invited to speak for up to 3 minutes. A maximum of 20 minutes would be dedicated to public participation. Speakers must be recognized by the Chair before speaking. The committee does not typically respond to comments during public participation.



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The public was reminded that this would be the only time the public would be invited to address the committee for items both on and off the agenda.

Gary Kushner (Boxborough Finance Committee) spoke against the change to public participation during meetings. He feels it is not workable for example during budget discussions. He asked if there are non-residents in Acton coming to the schools based on the enrollment information, and how many years it will take to cash out OPEB.

Two Resource Force speakers spoke in support of the climate change resolution. They are not asking for changes all at once, but to start taking steps. "Winning slowly is the same as losing." When will the SC take steps and action re climate change?

b. Superintendent's Update - *Peter Light*

Mr. Light spoke about: FY25 Budget Update, Veterans Day Celebrations, Senior Citizens' Visit to ABRHS, Migrant Shelter Update, School Happenings, Cartwheel Webinar- Five Keys to Parenting Children with ADHD and Proscenium Circus presents The Music Man!

3. **GUESTS & PRESENTATIONS (7:55)**

a. [October 1 Enrollment and Class Size Update](#) - *Andrew Shen*

Andrew presented the annual enrollment report. Overall, current enrollment projections indicate that the overall District population will not experience much volatility or change over the next five to seven years. This is also the case at the different grade levels (elementary, middle and high school). Two other data points should be noted:

- Predicting enrollment of Kindergarten students is a perpetual challenge, and there have been years with significant differences between projected and actual enrollment.
- One trend that projections indicate will continue is the shift in the enrollment split between Acton and Boxborough, with the percentage of A-B students from Boxborough increasing steadily each year. This shift will continue to affect the funding responsibilities that are assigned to each town.

It was suggested that it be clearer when a figure includes students through kindergarten only, and when a figure includes our preschool students. The nonresident students in our district are either staff's children or are tuition paying for our specialized programs. Adam noted that this year's difference between our enrolled and projected kindergarten students is four, which is the best we have ever done.

b. [High School Course Leveling Recommendation](#) (First Read) - *Peter Light*

- i. [High School Course Leveling Recommendation Memo](#)
- ii. [Year-by-Year Course Leveling Plan](#)

Mr. Light recommended that the School Committee approve the high school course leveling plan as presented, to be included in the schools' program of studies and implemented by the



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administration. As with all courses in the program of studies, the plan is subject to funding and may be adjusted by the administration based on a variety of factors, including the availability of appropriate funding to maintain class sizes needed to support student learning. Adam explained that additional input is welcomed and in order to consider all feedback, the Committee will be asked to vote on this plan at their meeting on January 4.

Mr. Light referred members and the public to his presentation with High School Principal Joanie Dean on October 19th. The High School has spent the last two years studying course levels and thinking broadly about how this change would affect the whole school. The administration has been looking at the topic for 10 years. The other piece is to look at which students are progressing and which are not and how to help all to progress. Extensive feedback has been collected from families, students and staff. We want students to see themselves as able to access whatever level they want to try. That said, the Administration never wants to position our faculty and students in a position that is not doable. The Administration will need to push and pull to find resources to make this happen. They are aware that they cannot charge ahead with all of this plan at once. They are trying to look at patterns of students over time as well as student surveys. A goal is to try to increase enrollment of underrepresented groups, not proportional enrollment, which is complicated.

Questions or comments should be emailed to Mr. Light (cc Adam Klein) so he can review with Principal Dean and share answers at the next meetings.

4. **NEW BUSINESS** (8:30)

a. Finance Update - *Sheri Matthews*

i. FY23 End-of-Year Report

This report is posted on the Finance Department audit section of the website. There were no findings in the Management Letter. A prior year's comment that the District should adopt a cash and investment policy with consideration to specific types of risk required for disclosure was highlighted. Our Treasurer has developed this document and it will be on a future agenda for adoption by the School Committee.

ii. [1st Quarter FY24 Report](#)

The July 1, 2023 certified E&D reserve balance is \$2,772,972. This is 2.61% of the total FY24 budget. This number is slightly lower than the FY22 certified number of \$2.98M. A conservative estimate projects E&D Certification of approximately \$1.7M for the end of the fiscal year although this is very fluid as it is only first quarter. There is a current freeze on spending as we come up with solutions regarding the health insurance trust deficit. Regarding Revolving Accounts, Food Services and Community Ed have healthy balances, as does Circuit Breaker. We budget to offset the general fund expenses by transferring some expenses to these three accounts.

iii. [FY25 Budget Discussion and Guidelines](#) (Second Read) - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*



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Mr. Light updated members stating that this year's FY24 budget's main concern is the Health Insurance Trust (HIT) deficit and the carry over it has to next year's FY25 budget. We are facing a 22.8% midyear rate increase for staff and will need to use some of the E&D funds. This is another concern. Starting with next year, Mr. Light recommends that E&D only be used for one time expenses, and not for FY25. FY25 is our third consecutive year of deficits and the underlying problems have not gone away. Special education cost increases are also a concern for FY25 with a 14% increase in our out of district tuitions and another 5% increase for next year by the State. Transportation costs are also increasing significantly with no end in sight.

Noting that the gap was around \$7M at the last meeting and now looks like \$8.5M or \$9M next year, the administration needs feedback. Everything is open for discussion.

Comments included:

- Should we close an elementary school such as Conant? This would be very challenging. Conant is a heavily requested school and they are using every space in the building. In recent years we've developed many special ed programs to keep kids in district and that saves money. Conant houses three autism programs and multilingual and learning centers. Classrooms are full. The Boardwalk campus has only two extra classrooms now. Because we have to have a balanced budget we will explore closing a school.
- What about staff that will be retiring? Yes, but there's a wide gap between the number of staff retiring and the budget problem.
- Should All Day Kindergarten tuition be increased? How would fully funding it affect the gap? That is a School Committee decision.
- How does ABRSD compare to other public districts? Tori Campbell did an extensive review and shared that while we have very high academic achievement, AB's costs are significantly lower than other high performing schools. She concluded, "My analysis suggests we are already finding efficiencies where we can, and that we risk becoming an outlier in statewide education trends in the wrong sort of way if we don't proceed with an override." Tori was thanked for her excellent report and data gathering. The last override in Acton was in 2006.
- What is the impact of this? It is not just about academics, but also the social -emotional importance of having kids connected. Teachers are also affected. A lot of work has been done on accessibility for all students, including smaller class sizes and programs. The broad range of student needs gets wider and wider. Jobs and careers continue to expand and that determines their needs. We will have to evaluate our different school programs given resources.
- We need to talk with our legislators regarding the funding model.



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Over the past two meetings, ALG has discussed an override. Acton Fincom supports moving forward with an override but for as small as possible for taxpayers. It was reported that the Acton Select Board appears to be moving in the same direction. Adam asked for guidance from the Committee to take to ALG on Monday. **It was the sense of the meeting that the School Committee supports an override.** It was noted that the Administration should continue to explore all options.

Budget Guidelines -

It is understood that “everything is on the table” for consideration. Mr. Light noted that while the guidelines say a level service budget, this might not be accurate. A budget is needed that will be supported with some flexibility. This will be a process. These guidelines are clear enough but if the community will be asked for an override, the Superintendent wants to address some of the structural problems for example the use of E&D. This is an opportunity to change that. He also wants to explore some of the other areas that could possibly minimize the impact on students. Several minor edits to the proposed guidelines were made.

Liz Fowlkes moved, Rebecca Wilson seconded and it was unanimously **VOTED**: to approve the amended guidelines.

5. ONGOING BUSINESS (8:45)

a. School Committee Communication Goal Update - *Adam Klein*

Six members attended the recent MASC conference and shared their experiences. All felt it was well worth the time spent and best to learn what other districts are doing.

b. [Health Insurance Trust \(HIT\)](#) - *Peter Light and Andrew Shen* - **Possible VOTE**

No vote was taken as motion language was still pending.

Individuals submitted claims in the past six months worth \$3.2M and the Trust does not have the cash to pay for it. HIT voted last Thursday to request \$2M from the Town and School District combined and they are implementing a 22.2% rate increase to district and town employees. Cost to the district is \$1,549,000. We have the ability to withdraw from our OPEB trust. HIT's \$2M is intended to be a loan to be repaid overtime so we assume the OPEB Trust would be paid back. The Administration is working through whether the district can pay for some of the employees' rate increase and it would come out starting with the next paycheck.

Adam stated that in the earlier executive session, the Committee agreed that the District will cover at least the first month of increases for employees and discussion will continue about the other months. Votes will be done at the next meeting to ensure proper language is used to approve the funding of the HIT deficit, use of an OPEB Trust withdrawal, and continue the discussion of continuing funding the employee health insurance. Adam stated that in the executive session, the Committee was very concerned about District employees and felt it



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would be completely unfair to make them pay this with such short notice. More time is needed to figure out how to best handle this.

- c. Subcommittee and Member Reports
 - i. Policy Subcommittee - *Liz Fowlks, Nov. 7*
An initial draft of the cell phone and personal electronics policy was discussed. A first read is anticipated at the December 7 school committee meeting.
 - ii. Budget Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson, Nov. 13*
Included above.
 - iii. School Resource Officer Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson, Nov. 14*
Members discussed best ways to move the program forward and possible recommendations. They also heard from Leon Smith, one of the architects of the State's MOU.

 - d. Consent Agenda/Action Items - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*
 - i. Approval of the Society for Science Regeneron Award \$2000 check for Science Department
Tori Campbell moved, Leela Ramachandran seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to approve the Society for Science Regeneron Award \$2000 check for the Science Department

 - e. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve [11/16/23](#) - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*
Liz Fowlkes moved, Rebecca Wilson seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to approve the warrants (see motion language in memo)
6. **ADJOURN** (9:00)
Tori Campbell moved, Yanxin Schmidt seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to adjourn the ABRSC meeting at 9:41 p.m.

FYI

- [Monthly Student Enrollment](#), 11/1/23
- Community Coffee (virtual), November 17, 2023 at 8:30 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: Agenda, Agenda Item Summary pages, Enrollment & Class Size Report for FY24 and Slides from A. Shen 11/1/23, High School Course Leveling Recommendation from P. Light 11/13/23, from J Dean 11/10/23, Year by Year Course Leveling Plan, Financial Report Q1 FY24 and slides from S Matthews 11/16/23, FY25 Draft Guidelines from A Klein, Health Insurance Trust Update memo from P. Light 11/13/23, Gift check for ABRHS Science Dept., Warrant memo from S. Matthews 11/13/23, Monthly Student Enrollment 11/1/23