



## Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

15 Charter Road Acton, MA 01720

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[www.abschools.org](http://www.abschools.org)

### Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

February 15, 2024 at 7:00 p.m./ Executive Session at 8:30 p.m.

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

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### APPROVED OPEN MINUTES

Members Present: Ben Bloomenthal (arrived 7:40pm), Tori Campbell, Liz Fowlks, Lakshmi Kaja, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer (arrived 7:45pm), Vikram Parikh, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt, Rebecca Wilson

Members Absent: Andrew Schwartz

Others: Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Sheri Matthews, Andrew Shen

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

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

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

a. Public Participation

Gary Kushner expressed frustration at not being able to ask questions as they come up during the meeting, particularly as a Boxborough Finance Committee member. He appreciated that Boxborough's assessment was lowered from a 15.69% increase to a 14.3% increase, although he wants to know what will happen next year and the next regarding savings. Boxborough is leaning toward an override next year because this puts the Town near their tax levy limit. He stressed that Boxborough supports the children and teachers but many residents cannot afford this large increase.

An AB reading specialist, a kindergarten teacher, a K-6 literacy coach, a library media teacher and the AB District Library Media Department Chairperson all spoke very strongly about the need to preserve elementary reading assistants, certified media specialists, elementary library resources and kindergarten class sizes. Two students spoke in support of the climate resolution urging the Committee to endorse it and reduce carbon emissions.

b. Superintendent's Update - Peter Light

Mr. Light's update included: Congratulations, FY25 Budget, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, School Visits, Acton Senior Center Visit with Acton Town Manager, AB Resource Center Welcome Dinner, Cartwheel Webinar- Breaking Generational Cycles: Rewriting Parenting Patterns and the next Community Coffee with Superintendent and School Committee Chairperson on March 15.

3. **ONGOING BUSINESS (7:30)**

- a. School Committee Communication Goal Update - *Adam Klein*  
School Committee office hours are posted on the budget website. They are Tuesday and Thursdays at Sargent Library and Wednesday and Fridays at Acton Town Hall. The public can always email the Committee at [abrsc@abschools.org](mailto:abrsc@abschools.org). When members are out in public, they can advocate to vote yes on April 30 for the override and on May 6 and 13 at the two Town Meetings. They can also direct people to the website for more information.
  
- b. General Funds and Long Term Funds [Investment Policy](#) (First Read) - *Sheri Matthews*  
Our auditors, Powers and Sullivan, recommend that the District have this policy. The previous Treasurer approved it in 2019 but the School Committee needs to make it official. The text was provided by our auditors and the policy subcommittee has reviewed it. It will be on for a vote at the next meeting.
  
- c. Subcommittee and Member Reports
  - i. Capital Subcommittee - *Liz Fowlks, Feb. 7*  
Progress was reviewed on the capital initiatives and priorities for FY25. There were a couple of new Blanchard items, including the Hagar well.
  - ii. Policy Subcommittee - *Liz Fowlks, Feb. 8*  
The investment policy was reviewed. Liz thanked the student resource force members who attended the meeting and they plan to reconvene at end of May to discuss the proposed resolution after the override is decided.
  - iii. Acton Leadership Group - *Tori Campbell, Rebeccah Wilson, Feb. 12*  
Finalizing agreement on \$6.6M target for the override. They hope to save some of the money in untaxed levy capacity to ensure a smooth process for a sustainable budget and bring the average tax increase down to a more comfortable level.
  - iv. Budget Subcommittee - *Rebeccah Wilson, Feb. 13*  
Discussed ALG and HIT updates as well as Budget Saturday and some of Boxborough fincom's comments. Mr. Light shared some changes to the A Budget (see below).
  
- d. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve [2/15/24](#) - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*  
Liz Fowlks moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED:** to approve the warrants (See memo language).
  
- e. Health Insurance Update - *Peter Light, Russell Dupere, Attorney*
  - i. [Health Insurance Recommendation](#)
  - ii. Acton Health Insurance [Trust Document](#)
  - iii. Possible **VOTE** to establish a PEC

Mr. Light described the District's Core Values as well as Budget Schedule & Important Dates:

- Preliminary Budget Vote** is February 15, 2024: 25 Days before final budget deadline
  - Vote is majority of members from each town
- Budget Hearing** is March 7, 2024.
- Final SC Budget Vote** is March 21, 2024.
  - 45 Days before earliest Town Meeting
  - Vote is  $\frac{2}{3}$  of weighted votes of full School Committee

### **Town Meetings:**

- Acton begins May 6, 2024
- Boxborough begins May 13, 2024

Two Superintendent's Preliminary Budgets were proposed (neither reflects level services).

- A Budget: ○ Preliminary proposal: \$2M reduction from level-services ○ Used if an override passes ○ Would require \$7.5M in additional funding for schools in FY25
- B Budget: ○ Preliminary proposal: \$9.5M reduction from level-services ○ Used if an override fails ○ No additional funding for schools

At the meeting on February 10th, the School Committee asked the Superintendent to reduce an additional \$1M from the budget based on feedback from Boxborough.

Regarding health insurance, leadership previously indicated GIC as a potential path forward, however new rates from MIIA benchmarked to GIC plans are more cost-effective. A two year cost analysis has been done for MIIA/GIC/HIT. Discussions continue with our unions.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

#### **→ Recommend moving to MIIA Benchmark 3 Plan effective July 1, 2024**

(will require vote at 2/29/24 meeting)

Notes: ● MIIA will save \$1.5M per year over Acton HIT ● 2 Year Savings with MIIA more likely than not to yield greater savings than GIC over same period ● MIIA plans are Fully Insured (July 1 Transition eliminates 6 months risk with HIT) ● MIIA plans can start July 1 - FY25 Savings for District and Employees ● Retirees to continue with Aetna from July 1-December 30, then transition to MIIA ● MIIA only offers BCBS Plans (more popular with employees by 2:1 margin) ● MIIA offers High Deductible HSA Plans/ GIC does not (popular with employees) ● MIIA Requires 2 Year Commitment (2nd Year Rate Guarantee not to exceed average of rate increases across MIIA) ● District consulting with Cook & Co./ Attorney Dupere around transition

#### **→ Recommend Withdrawal From/ Dissolution of Acton HIT**

(will require vote at an upcoming meeting TBD)

Notes: ● Attorney Dupere to provide legal analysis and considerations ● Need to determine how retiree Aetna plans funded (through district or HIT) ● Will need to consider runout claims period ○ Establishment of runout contingency fund in budget - \$700K ○ Need HIT cash flow analysis to determine correct amount ● If all or some of contingency unused, either returned to E&D or OPEB ○ (School Committee decision Spring 2025) ○ Contingency amount can then be applied as savings on FY26 Budget ● District consulting with Cook & Co./ Attorney Dupere around transition

Although there is a degree of uncertainty around all of this, Mr. Light feels this is the best decision for the District. Attorney Dupere described the process to withdraw from the Trust. The District would withdraw and that would essentially dissolve the Trust. An MOA would be drafted with the unions and has been started.

Questions from the Committee:

- How would runoff claims be paid off? Claims need to be paid out through the HIT, however if there is not enough cash on hand, the District has to provide money to the Trust. We gave HIT \$1.5M to improve the cash position and pay this year's claims. Mr. Light is waiting for a cash flow projections report and hopefully it has improved. Until that comes in, it is impossible to really know how much money we will get back.
- What does "the district is only taking credit for half" mean? We took the first \$700,000 of the \$1.5M savings and put it in a line item for contingencies.
- Why have MIIA costs come down? When we rebenchmarked to the GIC plan, numbers were revised..
- Many members thanked the leadership, staff and unions for all their very hard work.
- Have we begun to see stop loss reimbursements to the HIT? Yes, but there are still some outstanding.
- Adam Klein forcefully stressed Mr. Light's remark that we don't have a cash flow projection yet and it is essential to get that information from our consultants. Mr. Light added that that is why Atty Dupere and Cook and Company are involved now.
- Because we have this uncertainty about cash flow, how much risk should we accept tonight? Adam replied that we've projected \$1.6M in savings for FY25 and we've cashed in \$800K of that in the FY25 budget and we're setting aside \$700K just in case because of that risk. Mr. Light agreed. We are using this as a plan to help keep the budget in check for the next few years.
- Adam was thanked for his hard work and doing a great job chairing the Committee.

f. FY25 Superintendent's Recommended Budget - *Peter Light*

- [Recommended Budget Memo](#)
- Recommended Budget Summary by [Administrative Code](#) and [Character Code](#)
- Recommended Budget [Line Item Detail & Table 6](#)
- Public Comment & Questions (15 minute maximum)
- Preliminary Budget **VOTE** (A Budget) [Recommended Motion](#)- *Adam Klein*

The Superintendent's Recommended Budget for FY25 totals \$114,246,750 and represents assessments of \$78,959,916 (10.17%) to Acton and \$15,937,678 (14.30%) to Boxborough. Mr. Light reviewed the changes made since the Budget Saturday meeting. The net change from the Preliminary to the Recommended Budget is a reduction of \$1,065,334.

**Public Questions & Comments**

- The District is falling behind on OPEB and they should try to replace that as soon as possible. The District will make a payment to restore the \$250,000 next year but Mr. Light will not make promises for FY26.
- It's never just about the numbers, particularly regarding health insurance. AB provides good value and excellent education.

**Questions from the Committee**

- The Administration constantly makes adjustments to the budget based on how numbers evolve and staff changes. .
- Budget Saturday ended with a goal of reducing the budget by \$1M, not to cut staff by \$1M.

- It's a delicate balance between preserving education and finding the right budget number.
- The HIT runway of \$700,000 is very important and appreciated.
- The B budget would be catastrophic to our schools and our property values.
- Clear communication of the issues is essential. It is the Committee's job to get it passed now.
- The tension between what is best for our schools and what's politically palatable is very tough.
- The A Budget has a little bit of something for everyone and is not perfect for anyone. The hard work by the staff is appreciated.
- It is devastating that a level service budget is not being offered because these A Budget cuts are painful and will be felt for a very long time in our community.
- If we went to parents paying all of ADK tuition, would that save a job? Mr. Light replied that some people consider it "glorified childcare" and all of the educational research points to kindergarten as the most critical learning year in terms of skill acquisition. We are only one of 10 districts in the state that charge children to learn to read. If we charged the full value of kindergarten it would be a significant amount, but this is part of our core values.
- Reducing the 6 reading assistants is all of them. Could we save one or two of them and cut another special education assistant instead? Mr. Light does not think it makes sense to only have a couple of 19 hour/week reading assistants.
- There is no opportunity to change the budget numbers from Town Meeting floor. The assessment is either approved or not at the Meetings.
- Regarding kindergarten tuition, the Committee decided years ago to move toward tuition free, but if we charge more now, it will be very difficult to change it.
- Several members asked if the Committee should vote the original preliminary budget. The revised budget was a compromise (\$1M less and restored some positions), but the Preliminary budget was \$2M less than level service so that already was a compromise. Other members felt the revised budget shows that the Committee listened to the public and an override for that amount would be more likely to be approved.
- Recommended A Budget is a bit of an investment in the future. Both towns benefit from this option more than just this year. Some members feel like they are compromising their values but the override needs to pass. We should tell people that we are trying to address this for the long term, not just a one year solution. Adam stated that the difference between the preliminary and recommended budgets for a Boxborough homeowner is \$85 for a year.
- Although the increase in Boxborough's assessment is much higher than Acton's this year, the Acton tax rate is significantly above the Boxborough tax rate.
- A member asked town officials to prioritize the students and their education.

Vikram Parikh moved,

That the total budget of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District for the fiscal year July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025 be preliminarily set at \$114,246,750 (an increase of 7.55%) and that budget would be funded by member towns to be preliminarily assessed in accordance with the Education Reform Law and the terms of the Regional Agreement and amendments thereto as follows:

- Acton \$78,959,916 (an increase of 10.17%) and
- Boxborough \$15,937,678 (an increase of 14.30%);

Offset by use of E&D Reserve in the amount of \$0

With the remainder accounted for by other sources of revenues and reserves to be detailed in the final budget vote.

Tori Campbell seconded the motion.

Ginny Kremer offered an amendment to increase the funding by \$133,355 to include restoration of the Reading Assistants and Library Media Specialists. Yanxin Schmidt seconded Ginny's motion. A friendly amendment to the motion was accepted to include updated numbers.

Several members spoke in favor of the amended budget. For the small cost, an "incredible amount of good" can be done for children learning to read. Reading Assistants were described as a "core need". It was noted that the District has worked hard in recent years on improving the libraries and adding more certified staff to them.

Members unanimously **VOTED** in favor of accepting the amendment to the budget.

Members unanimously,

**VOTED**: that the total budget of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District for the fiscal year July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025 be preliminarily set at \$114,380,105 (an increase of 7.68%) and that budget would be funded by member towns to be preliminarily assessed in accordance with the Education Reform Law and the terms of the Regional Agreement and amendments thereto as follows:

- Acton \$79,070,675 (an increase of 10.33%) and
- Boxborough \$15,960,274 (an increase of 14.46%);

Offset by use of E&D Reserve in the amount of \$0

With the remainder accounted for by other sources of revenues and reserves to be detailed in the final budget vote.

## **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

Adam Klein stated the need for an executive session to be convened under MGL Ch 30A, sec. 21 (A) Purpose 3. To discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining with the Acton-Boxborough Education Association, the Acton-Boxborough Office Support Association, and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local#1703 if an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining or litigating position of the public body and the chair so declares. He stated that the Committee would not return to open session.

At 9:35 p.m., Tori Campbell moved, Yanxin Schmidt seconded, and it was unanimously,

**VOTED by roll call**: to enter into executive session for the reason given.

(YES: Bloomenthal, Campbell, Fowlks, Kaja, Klein, Kremer, Parikh, Ramachandran, Schmidt, Wilson)

## **4. ADJOURN**

**FYI -**

Enrollment report, [February 1, 2024](#)  
[Acton](#) and [Boxborough](#) Election Calendars

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: agenda, agenda item summary pages, Draft General Funds and Long Term Funds Investment Policy (new), Statement of Warrants 2/15/24, Health Insurance Recommendation Memo from P. Light 2/14/24, Acton Health Insurance Trust Document, FY25 Superintendent's Recommended Budget - Budget Memo, Recommended Budget Summary by Administrative Code and Character Code, Recommended Budget Line Item Detail & Table 6, Presentation slides, Enrollment Report 2/1/24, [Acton](#) and [Boxborough](#) Election Calendars

NEXT MEETING: February 29, 2024 at 7:00 p.m. in the Administration Building Auditorium  
Next Community Coffee with Superintendent ABRSC Chair via zoom: March 15, 2024 at 8:30 a.m.

