

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC)
APPROVED MINUTES

Auditorium
Administration Building
15 Charter Road, Acton

December 5, 2019
7:00 p.m.

Members Present: Diane Baum, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer , Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Paul Murphy, John Petersen, Nora Shine, Angie Tso
Members Absent: Michael Bo, Maya Minkin
Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino

1. The ABRSC was called to order at 7:01 p.m. by Tessa McKinley.
2. **OPEN MEETING - Welcome!**
 - 2.1. **Chairperson's Opening Remarks**
 - 2.2. **Public Participation** – A Boxborough resident who has Acton property thanked the Administration for the abutters' meeting but is concerned about the height of the proposed school building. He asked that more street level views of the building be included in the presentations at Town Meeting for the public to see.
 - 2.3. **High School Student Representatives Update** - Michael Cheng gave an update.
 - 2.4. **Superintendent's Update**

Mr. Light highlighted the process of deciding on school delays and cancellations, given this week's two snow days. Although he appreciates the students' insight and predictions, he does rely on a weather service. He thanked all of the members of the Building Committee for their dedication to the project. The Town of Acton Housing Survey link is included in the posted update.
3. **PRESENTATIONS**
 - 3.1. **Superintendent's Preliminary Budget** – *Peter Light*

The Superintendent presented his preliminary FY21 budget and invited School Committee members to share their thoughts and comments during this time while it is still the beginning of the process. The proposal represents an increase of 3.75% from FY20. This translates to an increase of 3.98% to Acton taxpayers and 2.12% to Boxborough taxpayers.

Comments included:

- There was an objection to using the word “average” because, for example, our Health Insurance Trust (HIT) costs were not typical so they should not be considered part of an average.
- In light of significant additional burdens put on the taxpayers, a 4% increase feels too high. Can we get it down to 3.4%? (slide 29)
- Looking at how the level services are structured, including some recurring services being funded by non-recurring items, like furniture, is not a good way to do it.
- The curve in slide 28 was discussed. Dave Verdolino stressed that it includes many variables and is for visual modeling only. Marie Altieri noted that the curve is beyond the implementation period for Kindergarten.
- The swing in health insurance last year was explained. Revenues of the trust grew too large and hit the bylaw restriction so assets needed to be returned over the past two

years. Rates were reduced to lower the balance, putting them below market levels and now we have to return to the market rates.

- Mr. Light will look into having older students mentor some of our ELL students, maybe with similar cultural backgrounds. Angie Tso liked this mingling of students helping each other. The State puts stringent rules around the licensure of who works with the students so this might be in addition to our ESL teachers, and not as a way to cut expenses.
- The descriptions of the new special education positions that were in the memo were very helpful. It was requested that they be expanded prior to Budget Saturday.
- The new Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) interactive website is an excellent resource.
- Referring to the memo on the use of reserves, Adam Klein noted that historically, use of E&D has been budgeted. He asked if members could see what some of those E&D funds expected to be used are being earmarked for. The budget subcommittee has discussed this and other school committee members should also be aware. The Superintendent agreed.
- CASE transportation costs are a concern. This is a complicated assessment to the participating communities and includes three zones of riders. Mr. Light is looking into the costs. Diane Baum asked if an audit should be done. This would be a longer term area to analyze and change.
- Debbie Dixon will come to Budget Saturday to present and answer questions on the adjustment counselors. Members asked about the wrap around services. Last year the CLASS program needed staff so an adjustment counselor was added. When these students move up to the High School next year, the REAL program at the High School will need a similar adjustment counselor. The added counselor at McCarthy - Towne is targeted to work with the social-emotional program there.
- The Student Opportunities Act will be discussed at the next School Committee meeting as part of the Kindergarten discussion, although the State has not put out guidance yet. The full day curriculum will be discussed as well as the Foundation Budget and why there is a gap and how it affects ADK.
- Regarding the 2 modeling slides, the budget subcommittee has discussed this at length and questioned if we adhere to all of the guidelines that have been created.
- When considering the different assessments to Acton and Boxborough, members were reminded that as a regional district, we are bound by the signed Regional Agreement.

Members discussed the concern about Acton getting close to hitting the tax levy limit and not having room to increase revenues beyond 2 ½%. They do not want to put the Town in a position where school items cannot be funded. An override would be a very consequential event. As usual, the Administration is in discussion and coordinating with both towns about their budgets and the Schools'. In Acton, there is an overall budget deficit that needs to be reconciled of about \$1M. They are working on strategies to close that gap. There is a 12/17/19 ballot question regarding Minuteman Tech High School to see if Acton will exclude that debt and if they don't they will have to absorb \$500,000 under the levy.

Ginny Kremer added that talking to our state delegation, any funding/grants available from the state for kindergarten programs are now gone. There are critical needs for some of our more vulnerable children right now. She advocated for looking at all state and federal funding possibilities.

3.2. District & Superintendent FY20 Goals – Second Read - VOTE – Peter Light

The proposed goals in the packet were unchanged from the previous meeting. Mr. Light appreciated the comments and feedback that the Committee provided.

Diane Baum stated that the professional practice goal and strategic initiatives are great, but the student learning goal regarding literacy outcomes was problematic. Although a “very aspirational thing to do”, she wanted to see it as part of something. The complete district strategy was described as a comprehensive rubric that we plug things into. Mr. Light explained that the district strategy is a long process with strategic initiatives that help get us there. The goal this year is a leadership team of evaluators who will refine the evaluation system so student learning and teacher impact are the center of the process. Rather than a series of annual goals, an overarching 3-5 year goal is the focus. The literacy and student learning goals are part of that. A cohesive vision is needed as a district, in the Superintendent’s opinion.

Paul Murphy offered that the concern may be because the proposed Superintendent’s Goals are a shift from SMART goals to something perceived as less vigorous. This member was fine with that shift because it gives the Superintendent some leeway to make adjustments as he sees fit.

John Petersen was happy with the proposed structure compared to SMART goals that “force things into a box”, although it would be helpful to know what the deliverables would be – perhaps an annual document, or several memos, or some measure of student outcome like stakeholder engagement.

Angie Tso was surprised that no changes were made given the feedback that took place at the last meeting. She asked that the goals be voted at the next meeting because there were no minutes available to review the previous discussion. She was looking for deliverables and evidence especially for evaluation because as is, she felt it was hard to decide whether a goal is achieved or not. She wanted to see an emphasis on what we are trying to achieve as an outcome.

Members discussed how evidence will be highlighted during the year and what “evidence based outcomes” means. Mr. Light explained that when we do research around curriculum or programs we want to bring in, they are often national programs so there are clearinghouses (such as MGH, Harvard, etc.) to do the research that we rely on. Angie clarified that she was talking about outcomes, not research - whether a student can improve from reading something in 5 minutes compared to 10 minutes prior to that.

Diane added that last time the Committee had a presentation on this, it was not well received in terms of all stakeholder groups buying in. She admitted to having trouble figuring out the proposed plan, and being uncomfortable due to things like there being competing interests in how literacy should be taught. She stated that the Superintendent is proposing a sea change that is needed and that it is an act of faith to support.

Mr. Light was not here for the last presentation, but is aware of the push for MTSS and a tiered system of support. It is a challenge because there is a tension about what should be cohesive and the right balance is key. MTSS started and stopped a couple of times, which he described as “more of a term than something that was happening”. The focus was on early literacy and now the discussion is more on social emotional outcomes for our students. We want to show effective progress on something that is an emerging skill. Deb Bookis has been working with the district literacy team since last year with the emphasis that it becomes a district wide practice.

Amy Krishnamurthy asked if the outcome of this goal is to study the research and come up with an evidence based program that will be implemented in all of the elementary schools, or if it is to just look at what kinds of programs are out there and might work. If the brain science is clear that this is what we should be doing, she asked why we wouldn't want to standardize that among all schools. The Superintendent said that this is what we want to do that. This would include things like standardizing screening tools, and determining training for our current and our incoming educators. In response to the comment that the timeline is critical because this all takes a lot of time and we have kids learning now, Deborah said that in March, the subcommittee for it will be identified.

Members discussed standardizing and that there are many ways to educate different children. Each of our schools has a reading program, and there is a lot of diversity. There are times when we know there are evidence based strategies that work for kids, and then times when we need different tools for different students, but we need to provide what we know works for most as a start, then add to it. There are several programs we need to be looking at, and then be sure we have the foundation in place, and then we can supplement based on student needs. Mr. Light said that ultimately the goals for this work are to figure out the gaps for students and then how we can fill them. Our data systems are not as robust as we'd like to have across all of our schools, especially in showing us the gaps. MCAS is just one piece. If we see a gap we need to be able to fix it in real time. This is something that has really changing over the past 30 years. There are key areas that we need to be sure we are providing for all students and it is not clear cut.

It was suggested that a preface to each goal, "This is why this is important....." could be helpful. This year is an anomaly because Mr. Light has only been here for one full year so far, but moving forward the background/justification for the objectives would be very beneficial.

Diane Baum moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,
VOTED: to approve the Superintendent's FY20 goals.

4. **ONGOING BUSINESS**

4.1. **Approval of Minutes of Meeting on 11/21/19 – VOTE** – *(next meeting)*

4.2. **School Building Committee Update** – *Peter Light, Adam Klein*

The public forums continue and Adam reminded everyone of the Special Town Meetings on Dec 10 in both towns. John Petersen and Mr. Light (who are presenting in Acton) went to Acton's Pre Town Meeting forum last night. They have 12 minutes for the presentation. Acton TV was thanked for making a 4 minute excerpt video for the 10th.

4.3. **Subcommittee Business**

4.3.1. Policy – *Amy Krishnamurthy – no meeting was held due to snow day*

4.3.1.1. Public Participation, File:BEDH, First Read *(next meeting)*

4.3.1.2. Tutoring for Pay, File: GCRD – Second Read *(to be voted 12/19/19)*

A change from the First Read deletes the posting of a list of tutors on the district website, per the subcommittee discussion on 11/19/19. Members did not want the district to possibly be liable for what was posted.

4.3.2. Budget – *Diane Baum*

The last meeting discussed the budget which was similar to tonight's discussion.

4.4. **School Committee Liaison Reports**

Health Insurance Trust – *John Petersen*

The trustees reported that we are on track to reduce the Trust balance by \$1- \$1.5 million. Acton FY20 rates were compared to similar groups, such as Minuteman Nashoba and Mayflower, and Acton rates are about 10-15% below these other groups. Cook and Company

presented a rate proposal looking at both an increase of 4% (Trustee guidance) and 16% (BCBS/HPHC projection). The Trustees voted a rate increase of 4% with the expectation that this will likely result in a further reduction of the Trust unrestricted reserve and likely leave the reserve in the desired range (10-30% of expenses). If this reserve position is realized, the Trust will be looking to set rates to equal expenses going forward. The Trustees agreed to provide guidance to the Town and the ABRSD in the Spring for the purpose of developing budgets for FY22. Meeting documents are available on DocuShare Town of Acton website.

Ginny Kremer reported that she is reaching out to Sen. Eldridge, Rep. Gouveia and Rep. Benson to ask them about any potential state funding that is available. She will keep the Committee informed.

4.5. Statement of Warrants - Tessa McKinley

The Chairperson read the warrant information into the record. Members signed the documents.

5. FYI

5.1. School Building Committee

5.1.1. Current Presentation Slides and Flyer

5.1.2. Acton & Boxborough Special Town Meetings on December 10, 2019 at 7:00 p.m.

5.1.2.1. Acton and Boxborough Town Warrants:

5.1.2.2. Town Meeting Babysitting in Acton and Boxborough

5.2. Thank you from the Friends of the Lower Fields (FOLF) – The Superintendent highlighted this impressive community achievement and thanked all involved.

5.3. FY21 School Calendar, voted 11/21/19

5.4. Community Coffees with the Superintendent and School Committee Chairperson

5.4.1. Tuesday, Jan 21 at 7:00 p.m. (*all in the Administration Building Auditorium*)

5.4.2. Friday, Feb 7 at 8:00 a.m.

5.4.3. Tuesday, Mar 10 at 7:00 p.m.

The ABRSC was adjourned at 9:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of documents used: See Agenda with List of Documents Used