

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC)
MEETING Approved Minutes

Virtual Public Meeting

April 15, 2021

To attend: <https://www.youtube.com/actontv1>

7:00 p.m.

7:30 p.m. FY22 School Choice Hearing

To preregister for Public Comment (required):

https://abschools.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_iLR9qFUYSwOCf8M_BBBrFcw

(pre-registration must be submitted 24 hours prior to the start of the meeting)

Members Present: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Diane Baum (at 8:08 p.m.), Kyra Cook (at 7:35 p.m.), Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, John Petersen, Yebin Wang
Members Absent: Nora Shine, Angie Tso
Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino

1. Call to Order

The ABRSC was called to order at 7:04 p.m. by Chairperson Tessa McKinley.

She stated that the meeting was being conducted remotely via Zoom per Remote Participation policy, BEDJA. The following members were in attendance in the auditorium: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Diane Baum (came later), Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, John Petersen, Yebin Wang and herself. Amy Krishnamurthy and Kyra Cook (came later) attended via zoom. Nora Shine and Angie Tso were absent.

In an ongoing effort to make meetings as secure as possible, members of the public were instructed to view the meeting using Acton tv's youtube channel (found at the top of the agenda). Those who wished to comment during the meeting, were asked to register 24 hours prior to the start of the meeting using the link also found at the top of the agenda. These procedures are now posted with our Public Participation policy BEDH. This meeting was recorded and posted on Acton TV's website at actontv.org. Per our remote policy, all votes were done by roll call.

a. Chairperson's Welcome - Tessa McKinley

Tessa thanked Kyra Cook for her excellent work on the Committee and stated that she has been an integral part this year's efforts. Amy Krishnamurthy also spoke in support and appreciation of Kyra's dedication. These comments were in response to a recent remark from the Acton SelectBoard Chairperson.

b. ABRHS Student Rep Update – Rhik Mazumder

Some teachers and students are concerned about returning to school full time in May. Social distancing will be difficult at 6 feet given that most classes were at

full capacity with no distancing. Hallway traffic flow has also always been tight, and the cafeteria and gyms are normally “packed”. The internet is another issue in that it is already slow with only half of the students on it. Kids are excited about seeing their peers but they do have some questions and concerns.

c. **Public Participation**

Steve Ballard added his support for Kyra’s work as a committee member. He noted that she went out of her way to help the recent fire victims, and is an amazing leader in our community.

d. **Superintendent’s Update – Peter Light**

Because most of this update was health and covid related, Dawn Bentley wrote much of it. Travel guidelines are going out to families. The Administration continues to encourage families to do the pool testing. We are only at 54% and would like it to be 80% to be most effective. High School testing will start as soon as students return, and the Junior High will be after that because there is more risk for the older kids. Next community coffee is May 5th.

2. **PRESENTATIONS**

a. **Jr High/High School Early Release Proposal - VOTE – A. Shen, L. Dorey**

The School Committee was asked to endorse the proposal to extend the early dismissals that were in place this year into next year. This would add 15 early release days and a shortened school day by 90 minutes. This would add professional learning time as well as increased teacher collaboration. Teacher collaboration has always been a priority at the High School and the Administration has wanted to do this for many years. Teachers need time to learn from each other and talk about the students, etc. and it is difficult during the school day. Department leaders hold monthly meetings but Larry Dorey explained that they would like new teachers to be paired with veterans, teachers of the same subject matter have a chance to meet together, and teachers have a chance to go to student services to discuss kids. A committee member noted that many teachers do so much on their own time that this would be great.

John Petersen moved: to approve the proposed early release schedule for R.J. Grey and the ABRHS for the 2021 – 2022 school year.

Ginny Kremer seconded the motion. Discussion continued.

Andrew Shen explained that Monday was chosen because due to the holidays, it would be only 15 Mondays as opposed to 18 or 19 days otherwise. Also, Mondays are the monthly department days and staff days and they could now be combined if more than 90 minutes were needed. Deb Bookis said that teachers have started to submit professional learning proposals for the summer and we do have funding for it. They are very supportive of the proposal and want to see things that can be implemented in the classrooms.

The Committee **VOTED by Roll Call** and the motion was approved unanimously.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Wang)

b. **7:30 - Public Hearing: FY22 ABRSD MA DESE School Choice Program – Marie Altieri**

At 7:35 p.m., the Chairperson called the FY22 School Choice Program Public Hearing to order. Marie Altieri reviewed the memo. This is the first time we have had no new siblings who were ready to enter kindergarten. The Committee has been working to end participation as students graduate and all siblings are accommodated because we are completely out of space in the district. At \$5,000 per student, this does not come near to covering our per pupil cost which is about \$15,000 per student. Marie stated that another vote is not needed next year unless the District wants to change the status.

Adam Klein moved, John Petersen seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to adjourn the School Choice Hearing at 7:40 p.m.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Wang)

c. **FY22 ABRSD MA DESE School Choice Program Participation – VOTE**

Adam Klein moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to withdraw from the School Choice Program due to class size and space limitations. Existing school choice students will remain through graduation.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Wang)

d. **Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) - Peter Light, Deborah Bookis, Dawn Bentley, Debbie Dixson, Marie Altieri**

i. Reading and other Materials

The Administration presented on the District's proposed plan to add instructional support to all K-6 elementary schools through the addition of 3 literacy coaches, 3 additional STEAM coaches and 3 Math Specialists. In order to fund the proposal in a budget neutral manner, they are considering a three-year gradual reduction of classroom assistants in grades 6, 5 and 4 respectively with the use of federal stimulus money to offset temporary costs incurred for this gradual transition. A vote by the Committee is not needed, but the Superintendent was looking for a "deep discussion" and feedback from staff, committee members and the public.

Questions and Comments from the Committee included:

- The MTSS approach regarding special education and border-line students was much appreciated but concern was expressed for reducing classroom assistant hours. In Acton, 6th grader teachers are expected to get students ready for the big change to move to the Junior High and assistants are very involved in all of that work. How can the Coach

perform all of those functions and support the teachers in this way? What will the coaches actually be doing to support teachers/students?

- The stimulus money could be used for Universal Kindergarten. We have been told we have to step away from that now due to the pandemic.
- MTSS sounds great but the intangibles are hard to measure. What are the benefits of assistants in the class for grades 4/5/6? What happens when assistants are removed?
- The experience is so different for the 6 elementary schools. Some schools have more assistants, because the PTOs fund them. This is especially true for Merriam families because it is written into their school charter.
- The administrators and team were thanked for presenting a long term plan for how the federal money will be used, but looking at \$510,000 over two years, why choose this plan over All Day Kindergarten (ADK) or another plan? Mr. Light responded that ADK would impact 400 students this year, but the proposed plan would impact 2500 students. Our incoming Kindergarten students have not been impacted by the pandemic the way existing students have been. ADK is a long term priority for us, but this plan will have a broader impact. If funding was spent on eliminating ADK tuition, it would cover one year, and then the cost would be in the budget base. This proposal gradually steps down so it doesn't have a "funding cliff".
- The District is at a pivotal point in education where we know of things we haven't been able to do because it's easier to go with the status quo. The pandemic has created some opportunities for change that we should take advantage of, like MTSS. Having trained professionals ready to reach out to students is money better spent.
- It would be helpful to understand the student contact and flexibility for each role being proposed. For example, a coach works with teachers and a reading specialist works with students? Members would like to see more student contact. We always want to know what is a child's potential and how can we get them to it.
- A member who is also an educator and works with students who need these supports said that the disproportionate outcomes for students and our efforts have not moved the needle because we are not doing the right thing. Providing specialists that can support the teachers with differentiated instruction for students would be so much better. This would be good for kids who are struggling as well as those who need to reach and get more support. She is fully in support of this plan. A better understanding of the actual roles and implementation would be helpful.
- A tiered system of support has been talked about since 2016. The quality of the interaction is key. We are late jumping on the bandwagon for MTSS. Regarding classroom assistants, especially at Merriam, they have a huge impact on classroom culture but having them at all grade levels cannot exist with the MTSS model. Teachers and specialists are highly trained to look at students and see what is needed, much more than an

assistant is. The District has to make hard choices, but should make this one.

- Often assistants were women of color, or spoke a different language, and really contributed to the culture of the classroom and the school. This representation was not mentioned in the presentation and is important. Will diversity will be part of this? Mr. Light replied that about 20% of assistants turn over every year so due to attrition, it should become a representative process. Deb Bookis added that the last two certified staff hires have been women of color.
- Communication seems to be missing although it sounds like there has been a lot of internal communication. Where do parents fit in in the 8-10 week cycle? What about teacher assistants in older grades? Executive function and the organization piece is so important for success in middle school. Having an extra person in the classroom for that is important. A highly trained teacher might not catch everything because they are looking at so many things. This member acknowledged “wanting it all”.
- When asked how the proposal was being communicated to staff who will be affected, Mr. Light said staff received information on Monday and were told about the School Committee meeting. Building leaders and principals have met. Families were invited to the School Committee meeting.
- How would a math specialist travel between two schools and effectively address that 50% of students are below grade level? There is concern about having enough direct contact with students. Deb Bookis replied that the specialist would work with small groups in the classroom, or in another arrangement with the teachers depending on what is needed.
- Would we expect to save on special education costs? Mr. Light replied that the district wants to improve referrals to special education, but reducing referrals is not an intentional outcome. It would be better to make more appropriate referrals. It could possibly save some money.
- Regarding expected outcomes, what is the exit strategy if MTSS doesn’t work? If data in 5 years does not show students moving forward, the District would look at a different strategy according to Mr. Light.
- We have great outcomes for those students who can access the content, but not all can. That needs to change.
- Dawn Bentley added that MTSS is not a program, it is a system of support. She was surprised that AB did not have it when she came here. Most districts have been doing this for many years and there is a lot of research to support it. It is critically important that we give the best resources to our teachers to deal with all the kinds of children that we have. It is also about building efficacy, having the coach there has the ability to really shift things. Although she understands the important culture and climate we have here, it is striking that the district has not changed the data over time.

Questions and Comments from the Public included:

- A parent/teacher stated that EL students are the least well served. In four of the AB elementary schools there is only one EL teacher for seven grade levels and there is not even an EL educator in this plan. How can we reach our most vulnerable students? We need more staff.
- This is about people. Hiring more teachers is a better way to spend this money. Our experienced assistants are an incredible value.
- A Merriam teacher is very concerned about students' social emotional health. Assistants act as a team. Counselors deal with 100 kids. We are prioritizing curriculum coaching over mental health.
- A statement signed by over 60 educators voiced strong support for maintaining the classroom assistants with an interest in learning more about MTSS.
- A 19 year teacher spoke about how important this issue and change would be to our schools. After the staff met the challenge of this difficult pandemic year, cutting assistants and initiating MTSS in the fall would be too much. She questioned the return on investment for hiring nine new coaches for six schools, and felt that each student will barely get any additional attention. Assistants know the students and help the staff.
- MTSS seems great but it is being rushed. The staff should learn about it and be trained first.
- A Merriam assistant applauded the Administration for bringing up MTSS but felt the process of this implementation was concerning. In exchange for nine specialists, we would give up 50 assistants. Who will cover all the lunches/recess/IEP meetings that assistants do? Who will sub? Eliminating assistants in grades 4-6 would be an issue because performance expectations increase greatly in the older grades. Assistants are another set of eyes and ears for students.
- Teacher input and voice is missing. They are with students every day and their perspective should be included. Teachers have not been surveyed or asked about the new math program yet.
- A parent and pediatric health care provider stressed the unprecedented mental health concerns due to the pandemic. She asked that the shift be deferred until at least 2022-23 so we can understand where our kids are now. This is not a time to take away support for our children and teachers. If it's that important, we should take our time.

Adam Klein read statements that had been sent to the Committee by various groups of AB teachers from several schools. All of them implored the Administration and the Committee to listen to their views and not rush the decision to cut assistants in favor of implementing MTSS right away. There was support for MTSS but not at this time.

Mr. Light thanked the Committee and members of the public for sharing their valuable feedback on such an important decision.

e. PTO Fundraising for Staff Discussion - Marie Altieri

Marie Altieri gave a history of donations and the funding of district staff. This began in the early 1990s when PTOs raised funds to supplement the school budget when Art, Music and PE were cut to part time. Due to covid and fundraising restrictions, the PTOs did not raise money this year. The Administration recommends that given this recent pause, it would be a good time to prohibit the funding of staff starting next year. The inequities that have started to form between elementary schools due to the current wide range of fundraising amounts (\$20,000 - \$100,000) have become a concern. The elementary PTO Co-Chairs' group had an initial discussion and members are in general agreement about this change. Due to the late hour, there was no public comment on this topic.

The policy subcommittee will discuss the Fundraising Policy DDA at their next meeting. It will be on as a First Read at the May 20th School Committee meeting.

3. NEW BUSINESS

a. Superintendent Evaluation Process Outline - *Tessa McKinley*

Tessa offered to discuss the evaluation process with the new members. She reviewed the important dates and offered to include the topic at the workshop on May 6th if members would like. Guidance from MASC was to look at the superintendent's evaluation in a slightly different light given the pandemic. Evaluations from members and input from the public are due to Tessa and CC to Beth Petr by June 4.

4. ONGOING BUSINESS

a. Consent Agenda - VOTE - *Tessa McKinley*

- i. Approval of Meeting Minutes of 4/1/21
- ii. Recommendation to Approve \$1,000. Donation from RPTSO for Jr High Programs

Adam Klein moved with gratitude, Ginny Kremer seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to approve the consent agenda.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Baum, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Wang)

b. Subcommittee and Member Reports

i. Building Committee - *Adam Klein*

1. FYI: Approved Meeting Minutes

The beams to be used at the "Topping Off" ceremony on May 18th are going to be at Gates, Douglas and the Administration Building for preschoolers and administrators to sign. Blasting is going on right now. Work on the new covered bridge between the two schools is slated to begin in mid-May through late August.

- ii. Acton Leadership Group (met 4/8) - Boxborough Leadership (4/20)
John reported that how to distribute the upcoming AARP funding between the Towns and the schools was discussed at ALG. Just like with the CARES funding, the split needs to be equitable between the municipal and school purposes. The money will not be received for awhile so there

is time to figure it out, but it will be a larger amount than the CARES funds so it must be done thoughtfully.

- iii. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve - **VOTE** - *Tessa McKinley*

Tessa McKinley moved, Adam Klein seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: see motion in packet

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Baum, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Wang)

- b. FYI

5. Adjourn

At 10:12 p.m. Ginny Kremer moved, Adam Klein seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to adjourn the ABRSC.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Baum, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Wang)

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: see agenda

FOR YOUR INFORMATION (FYI)

- a. **Acton Town Meeting is June 21. Boxborough Town Meeting is June 12.**
- b. **Boxborough 2021 Annual Election Calendar**
- c. **Monthly Student Enrollment, April 1, 2021**
- d. **ALG Materials, April 8, 2021**
- e. **Suicide Prevention Training** - Click here [QPR Training Flyer](#) for details and to sign up online. Next one: April 26 from 10 - 12.