

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC)
APPROVED MINUTES

Virtual Public Zoom Webinar Meeting

September 17, 2020

To attend the open meeting: <https://abschools.zoom.us/j/95248771505>

7:00 p.m.

To call in: 312 626 6799

Live streaming: <http://actontv.org/on-demand/livestream/government>

Members Present: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Diane Baum, Kyra Cook, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Amy Krishnamurthy, John Petersen, Nora Shine, Angie Tso (7:20 pm), Yebin Wang
Members Absent: Tessa McKinley
Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino

1. The ABRSC was called to order by Vice Chairperson Adam Klein at 7:04 p.m. He noted that the meeting was being conducted both in person and remotely via a Zoom webinar and that members Kyra Cook and Yebin Wang were participating via zoom. The following members were in the auditorium: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Diane Baum, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Amy Krishnamurthy, John Petersen, Nora Shine, and Angie Tso (came late). Tessa McKinley was absent. Per Remote Participation policy, BEDJA, all votes were done by roll call. The meeting was being taped by Acton TV.
2. **Chairperson's Welcome – Adam Klein**
Adam read a note he had sent to some of the staff thanking them for their efforts this first week of school. (School began for students on 9/14/20.)
3. **Public Participation – none**
4. **Superintendent's Update – Peter Light**
Mr. Light and JD Head have talked to kids as they came and went from the school buildings this week and they do seem happy to be back. Kirsten Nelson was praised again for her creativity and hard work with the Food Service staff throughout the pandemic. He also thanked the Transportation staff and bus drivers, as well as custodial staff for their extra efforts. The technology staff was also thanked for working "days, nights and weekends to help our students, families and educators connect". Marie Altieri and Dawn Bentley made an informative video about the steps that would be taken if there was a covid case in the schools. This will be shared and posted on the website. In response to a question, Mr. Light said that he is not sure if MASS (MA Association of School Superintendents) and MASC (MA Association of School Committees) have taken positions on virus testing.
5. **PRESENTATIONS**
 - 5.1 AB Students for Equity and Justice (ABSEJ) Presentation on ABRSD Mascot -
Ashley Dawn, Neha Saravanan, Olivia Bispham, Benjamin Langman, Kubi Issah

The ABSEJ sent a letter to School Committee earlier this summer requesting that the Colonial mascot be retired. They noted “a white-male-colonist mascot in no way reflects the ever-changing community of Acton-Boxborough. As the community grows and diversifies, our current mascot is not representative of who we are or what we stand for as a community.” The petition submitted with 1300 names last spring further noted, “Although mascots intend to bring fan bases together, the AB mascot gives a likeable face to a time period that set the stage for present day racial divisions. Changing the mascot is an ethical and educational action that will underscore the need to know real, and not sugar coated, representations of the past.” Mr. Light and Tessa McKinley met with the students and invited them to present to the Committee on 9/17/20.

ABSEJ was started by AB alums and has now been passed onto AB students with two advisors. Their request is to retire the Colonial, not to suggest a new replacement. They were very grateful for the chance to present.

Several School Committee members expressed their support. In response to a question, Mr. Light stated that the financial impact of changing the mascot had not been considered yet. It was noted that phasing could be done gradually.

5.1.2 Discussion of Process for Possible Mascot Change

A process of community engagement, is needed before a decision is made. A one month public comment period was suggested, followed by a discussion at the School Committee meeting that followed that period. Information will be sent out to students, families, alumni and community groups and The Beacon. Several other towns have done this recently (Walpole), and the process was that the School Committee first took a vote on whether or not to retire the old mascot, then if successful, an activity was undertaken to replace it. The replacement piece could possibly be turned over to the High School.

Comments from the Committee included:

- Thank you to the students for having the courage to present to the Committee.
- Being new to this country, two members asked for a little more detail regarding WHY the Colonial needs to be retired. “Colonial” means different things for people, especially those not born in the United States.
- It would be helpful to know what ABSEJ thinks would be a better replacement, even though that is not the intent of this discussion.
- A student responded that just like not all police are bad, not all colonials were bad, but it is what they stood for during what some consider a horrible part of history.
- Members agreed that retiring the mascot and renaming it should be two separate processes. Just as with the Washington football team’s recent decision, the urgency of the matter had them remove the mascot asap as a first step.
- When finding a new mascot, community events could be held, brainstorming with the students would be involved and all of that would generate school pride.
- Regarding the financial impact, fundraising for this will be difficult because of the pandemic and next year will probably not be better.

- Citing the European colonization of America which led to enlightenment, questioning of the church and crown, the war with England to allow individual liberties and freedom, and the birth of our nation, a member struggled because she knows that serious mistakes were made and continue to be, citing the Trail of Tears, police brutality, and redlining as examples. She doesn't associate all of that as part of colonialism. Instead of retiring the colonial, she suggested perhaps reclaiming him because he is our heritage and the outcome could be hope. She encouraged the students to move forward.
- Another member wanted to recognize the students' understanding of the dynamic nature of the towns. The member stated that by anchoring our mascot in this single historical figure that is wrapped in mythology and sometimes romanticized, we are anchoring ourselves in one time and one place. Acton however is not, and has not, been anchored in one time or group. Our community is forever changing. The member was deeply grateful that the students reflect this dynamic nature as they want to untether themselves from colonials.
- Students understood wanting to appreciate the Enlightenment, but stressed that their freedom should not come from stripping the freedom of others. One student said that the romanticism of the colonials is based on the racist structures of today, and it is a good example of how much history was erased in this genocide.
- When asked why some students want to keep the name, the students responded that some friends on sports teams don't want to change their logo. There is a fear that school spirit will be lost, but it is not related to a colonial.
- A member of the public felt the cost to replace things like band and sports uniforms should be known, as well as how long have we have had the Colonial and a bit of history around it.

The students of ABSEJ were thanked for the presentation. Community input will be solicited. A member expressed some concern about the timing of this activity given that school has just started and the covid challenges. She does not want this to take priority over education right now. Another member wanted to name the urgency that the students brought to the Committee's attention. As leaders in the community, members are being asked by the students to help with this. The member stated, "We need to do this work of equity that we have been talking about."

5.2 Educators Committed to Anti-Racism, Equity and Social Justice (ECARES) - High School Associate Principal Betty Baker, Spanish Teacher Jackie Gottesman and Counselor Lindsay Rosenman presented and acknowledged that they are the advisors for ABSEJ. The ECARES Steering Committee meets weekly and is in support of the calls to action proposed by ABSEJ regarding the removal of the Colonials mascot and return to recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day instead of Columbus Day.

Questions from the Committee included:

- To what extent is ECARES collaborating with other organizations to address the issue about why it is so hard to attract more candidates of color?
Betty responded that this is an area where the least work has been done so far, although it keeps coming up. She plans to reach out to Lexington because she was at a workshop this summer and Lexington's equity coordinator was great.

Betty added that it is not just what the group is going to do, but WHY things are happening as they are.

- What are we teaching kids about economic inequality?
Some High School programs are now in place to support families in need - a food pantry, gift card drive for students in need before the summer, free SAT prep for families that need it. They are working on leveling and looking at all different types of marginalized communities.
- Can you add cultural background to this discussion?
Yes, we are not just talking about anti-racism, we are talking about all the –isms, and what has gone on in this country for many years. In the World Language department we are celebrating all of the kids’ cultures.

Members really appreciated the group’s efforts. One said, “It feels like we are moving somewhere.” Referring to the mission on the superintendent’s update, “Developing engaged, well-balanced learners through collaborative, caring relationships”, Adam Klein concluded that it is very encouraging to see this work in progress.

5.3 Recommendation and possible **VOTE** to change “Columbus” Day to “Indigenous Peoples” Day on the District Calendar (October 12, 2020)

Mr. Light reviewed his memo in light of the District’s focus on improving efforts to incorporate anti-bias and anti-racism practices into all aspects of our operation. After considering the two petitions – one from the educators’ group and another from the students’ group, he and Tessa McKinley felt changing the mascot was something that the School Committee should ask the public about. A first step could be to change the name from Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples’ Day on the district calendar.

Noting that a previous School Committee had made this change for one year in the past, a member wanted to be sure that a current vote would “stick” and not be changed back again. If changed, it must be entrenched in the community. It was noted that a future School Committee can always change a previous committee’s decision.

Diane Baum moved ***that the ABRSD list the federal holiday “Columbus Day” as “Indigenous Peoples’ Day” on all school district calendars.***

John Petersen seconded the motion.

Diane Baum reviewed the School Committee’s actions in 2016 when the proposal was made by a member. It was reversed back to Columbus Day in 2017 because a majority of the members felt that the decision did not go through a full enough public process. An intense discussion had taken place about religious holidays on the calendar and this change became a secondary issue.

Members talked about how this change and the mascot change are things that currently “are the right things to do”. If some people in our community see this (the mascot or “Columbus Day”) as racially insensitive to them, then Committee members talked about the need to step up and understand that reaching out to the majority who have not had the same experiences, and may not feel offended by the mascot or Columbus Day, may

not be the right thing for the Committee to do. Some felt it was time to make decisions given the community's new awareness.

A member suggested that the School Committee send a letter to the state and federal representatives indicating that the ABRSC took this position and ask that they do the same.

The Committee **VOTED unanimously by roll call** in support of the motion.

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

6. ONGOING BUSINESS

6.1. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 8/27/20 & 9/3/20 – **VOTE** – A. Klein

Ginny Kremer moved, Diane Baum seconded it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to approve the meeting minutes of August 27th and September 3rd, 2020.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Baum, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, Petersen, Shine, Wang. ABSTAINED: Tso)

6.2. Subcommittee and Member Reports

6.2.1. Policy – Diane Baum (met on 9/11/20)

6.2.1.1 Recommendation to Revise **Prohibition of Harassment**, File: ACAB/JBA/GBA – Second Read - **VOTE**

6.2.1.2 New procedures ACAB/JBA/GBA-R included FYI

John Petersen moved, Ginny Kremer seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED by roll call:** to approve the revised policy.

A new policy on subcommittees will be considered at a future meeting.

6.2.2 Capital Improvement – Yebin Wang (met on 9/10/20)

JD provided updates on capital projects and grants & incentives. Members discussed how to improve the accountability of project schedules and expenses. CIP projects are largely proceeding to plan except for Charter Road. Although it was functional for the return of students, completion will be delayed to next spring, due to the pandemic, some unanticipated expenses – unplanned replacement of aged water main (\$250K variance plus delay) and retaining wall expenses. The project budget is \$2.5M, the projected variance is an unfavorable \$500K. There are 5 sub members and a quorum of 3.

6.2.3 Health Insurance Trust (HIT) - John Petersen (met on 9/17/20)

The projected loss for FY21 is about one million dollars. Considerable uncertainty remains about members' health care utilization during FY21 related to reductions in elective procedures and other COVID-related changes in behavior. The treasurer's report for FY20 showed an annual loss of \$832 thousand on income of \$17.2 million and expenses of 18.0 million leaving an undesignated fund balance of \$ 6.0 million. The fund balance is about 33% of projected FY21 expenses. The Trust incurred COVID expenses of \$155K during Apr-June. The Trustees will investigate Dave Verdolino's suggestion that the Trust might receive CARES reimbursement through the Towns for this expense.

6.2.4 Acton Board of Health (BOH) - *John Petersen presented on 9/15/20*

An overview of wastewater testing for COVID-19 was shared with the Board with the suggestion that a testing program begin at the Acton Wastewater Treatment Facility. Although the BOH has been interested in COVID wastewater testing and would be interested in seeing Acton data, they did not feel that the results would be clearly actionable and thus made no recommendation to the Town or Schools to fund this work.

6.2.5 Joint PTSO – *Tessa McKinley – skipped*

6.2.6 Building Committee Update - *Peter Light*

A lot of ledge was discovered at Gates so the septic, parking and bus loops had to be redesigned. The challenge now is the budget. Significant site work has been needed. The Acton BOH required more design work due to the septic modification amounting to \$1.4M - \$1.5M. Unsuitable soils were found with arsenic around 2 softball fields. This will be taken care of and costs will come out of the contingency fund. It was noted that for building on new sites, the large variances occur in the site prep phase with low expectation of significant variance in the building construction phase. The Building Committee will go through a value management process at their next meeting, looking to make decisions: 1. How much do you want to value manage to get to budget? 2. How much contingency money is comfortable to be left for the rest of the project? In response to a question, Mr. Light explained that it is now the Building Committee's purview to manage the costs, not the School Committee's. The exception to this would be if a significant change was being made to the educational program.

Naming the building is something that the School Committee should start discussing soon. This will be done according to the "Naming of Facilities" policy.

7. **Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve – VOTE – Adam Klein**

John Petersen moved, Diane Baum seconded, and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: (see motion on warrant memo)

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

8. **FYI - none**

9. John Petersen moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to adjourn the ABRSC at 9:13 p.m.

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

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: See agenda

NEXT MEETINGS: October 1 and 15 at 7:00 p.m. publicly via zoom