



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

15 Charter Road Acton, MA 01720

978-264-4700

www.abschools.org

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

December 7, 2023 7:00 p.m.

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

APPROVED MINUTES

Members Present: Ben Bloomenthal, Tori Campbell, Liz Fowlks, Lakshmi Kaja, Adam Klein,

Vikram Parikh, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt, Andrew Schwartz, Rebeccah Wilson

Members Absent: Ginny Kremer

Others: Deborah Bookis, 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.

2. **CHAIRPERSON'S WELCOME** -

Members of the public were invited to watch the meeting online using Acton tv's youtube. The Chairperson stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted at actontv.org.

- a. ABRHS Student Representative Update - Molly Norris '25, Julia Zhou '26, Diksha Mhatre '26, Nikhil Nomula '26, Jadon Yang '26

The Student Reps reported per policy JIB - Student Involvement In Decision-Making. Comments included frustration about rowdiness in the common area at lunchtime, fyi that cell phones not being allowed in class since the start of this school year, and the importance of community building activities for students. A group of incarcerated people did an informative presentation speaking about their experiences with the justice system.

- b. Public Participation

Per School Committee Policy, members of the public were invited to speak for up to 3 minutes. A maximum of 20 minutes was dedicated to public participation.

While a speaker was happy that cell phone use is being curtailed, she wants to see more "teeth" to the new policy and would like them banned at all schools. Concern was expressed regarding the decision to cover employees' share of the increased health care premium through June. This will impact an override and the taxpayers. A member of the High School Resource Force asked the School Committee to consider the resolution regarding the climate crisis sent to members last June. This proposal is a long term plan spanning the next two decades.

Acton Select Board member David Martin spoke regarding the First Read of the revised School Resource Officer (SRO) policy. Pre-pandemic, he met with ten black students at High School for a discussion about the police and it was felt that some things were unfair. The professionalism of our police department and programs they have offered was appreciated.

c. Superintendent's Update - *Peter Light*

Mr. Light spoke about: FY25 Budget Update, Computer Science Education Week, Crossing Guard Update, ABRSD Receives \$63K Teacher Diversification Grant, and the Dangers of Idling Vehicles from the Attorney General's Office. The AB Food Service social media account highlighted the latkes at the High School. Happy Hanukkah!

3. GUESTS & PRESENTATIONS (7:30)

a. [Social Emotional Learning Update](#) - *Heather Stouch*

Heather Stouch, Coordinator of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Behavioral Health, explained that after vetting various options, the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Competency Advisory Committee chose the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as the district's SEL framework. Supported by the Massachusetts Department of Education, CASEL provides resources such as an online library, instructional tools, and implementation guidance. The Advisory Committee's recommendation received the approval and support of the district's Mental Health and Senior Leadership Teams. She described how each school is working with this new program as well as the financial impact of this work. Goals for 2024-2025 include continuing professional development, initiating a K-12 SEL and bullying prevention curriculum rollout, and exploring a uniform SEL screening tool for all elementary schools.

c. School Resource Officer Program Recommendation - (First Read) - *Rebecca Wilson*

The new state MOU is thorough, seeking to address many of the concerns about the program. The process to develop it included many stakeholders, including juvenile justice experts who have deep knowledge about the impacts of policing on the student population. The subcommittee tried to recommend additions that would increase transparency and accountability, and ensure the SROs take a progressive approach to training and community building. They also wanted our policy to be detailed enough to ensure that everyone is aware of the requirements. While one SRO might be a stellar asset to the schools, another could be the opposite and sour the entire program. Members felt that ultimately it will be up to the police to prove their good intent, and take the necessary steps to rebuild community trust. The School Committee and District are committed to oversight, and protecting students, and "will not be moving forward with blinders on". Periodic reviews of the program will be done, as well as data around student interactions with the SROs.

Adam thanked the SRO Subcommittee who have met over the past year for their recommendation. The state requires districts to use their template, but the additional document is the recommendation that the subcommittee would like to require for reporting and accountability.

The School Committee will be asked to vote on this recommendation at their meeting on 1/18/24. The Committee and members of the public are invited to provide their feedback. Following the vote the Superintendent will begin negotiations with the police departments. He will bring a draft proposal back to the Committee before finalizing it. This needs to be completed in time to put into effect for the next school year. The SRO website has a lot of information and is found under the School Committee tab of abschools.org.

- i. Recommendation of the subcommittee to continue the School Resource Officer Program
- ii. Additional Recommendations for the SRO Memorandum of Understanding

4. NEW BUSINESS

a. Student Use of Electronic Communication Devices Policy - (First Read) - Andrew Shen

This new policy resulted from principals asking for a District Statement regarding more robust and specific expectations for cell phone use and access. Andrew described the draft language as somewhat nonspecific because the intent is to provide umbrella language that gives clear expectations about use and access, but also flexibility to allow individual schools to develop language appropriate to students' age and setting. A recent surgeon general report regarding health issues was a good resource. Policy sub chair, Liz Fowlks noted that different groups were asked for input within the schools and the community. In addition to asking about cell phones, other devices were included, such as smart watches and wearable devices, for a more encompassing policy. Mr. Light added that the increasing use of devices is having an impact and creating conflicts in the classrooms, hallways and common areas. Principals want a healthier balance regarding when cell phones are appropriate and when they are not.

Committee comments and questions included:

- The struggle and impact of this issue are real. Clear expectations are key and enforcing this is really hard. What other resources are needed?
- What about students that need a device for translation? and future devices?
- At elementary level writing the policy would be a joint effort for their handbooks. For the Junior High and High School, it would be dealt with by their own administrators.
- A member spoke against the prohibition of these technologies. As a parent, a device is an essential means of communication with a child who may be in danger. Managing this use via policies is key.
- Students need to understand why this discussion is happening, not just saying they cannot have a cell phone.
- Context is missing. What is the goal of this policy?

The policy subcommittee will edit and bring back to the Committee for a Second Read and vote.

5. ONGOING BUSINESS (8:45)

a. School Committee Communication Goal Update - Adam Klein

A rep from the Office of Campaign Finance will provide training at the Jan 4 meeting for School Committee members and any elected official. Elected officials have access to public funds and must be aware of the restrictions.

Andrew Schwarz offered to prepare a fact sheet regarding the budget situation. Talking points for School Committee members will be included using previous budget memos. Members are encouraged to share and correct facts as they are out in the community. Members discussed additional ways to engage the public including "office hours" in Acton and Boxborough (Yanxin, Ben, Rebeccah, Vikram, Tori) and arranging conversations with seniors in both towns (Lakshmi, Rebeccah). The goal is to provide information on the budget situation, not to advocate for an override. People need specifics. Any material used should have an "as of" date on it. Yanxin will ask Acton Town Hall about meeting space. Vikram will ask in Boxborough.

b. Withdrawal of funds from the OPEB Trust to pay FY24 Health Insurance Costs - ROLL CALL VOTE - Peter Light

The Committee began discussing the issues with the Health Investment Trust (HIT) about 6 weeks ago starting with a presentation by Steve Noone. A week later they learned of a significant expense. Because the HIT is a small self insured trust this had significant consequences. Net impact is that there is insufficient funds to settle the claims.

At the last executive session, the school committee authorized the district to cover the employee share of health insurance rate increases from January 1, 2024 until June 30, 2024 in exchange for employee unions agreeing to negotiate long term cost saving measures. Given the urgency of the fiscal situation, the school committee chair and Superintendent contacted the union to propose impact bargaining over this issue and a short term solution on the premiums. The union has agreed and the School Committee is now being asked to vote to pay those premiums and begin bargaining and to authorize the Treasurer to withdraw necessary funds from the OPEB Trust. This is the first in a series of votes. The Committee will be asked to vote on a line item transfer and a revised budget to include the use of additional Excess & Deficiency funds at a future meeting as part of this funding plan. That vote will trigger notification to the Acton and Boxborough Selectboards and they will decide if special Town Meetings need to be called.

Adam Klein added that regarding the timeline, it was stated at the last open meeting, that in the executive session at that meeting the Committee agreed to cover the employees' January increase and negotiate with the unions to pay the remaining FY24 increase. There was a vote inside ES to also cover the remaining 5 months of premiums for district employees. The balance of funds required outside of OPEB will have to come from E&D. The District has enough money to cover that for awhile and does not need to take it from E&D immediately.

Members discussed the details of the proposal. Sherri Matthews assured members that the Administration checked with the actuaries and other trust advisors and they have said that the District will not be penalized for withdrawing these funds. Mr. Light spoke with the actuary and advisors and there are other towns that do this on a regular basis. They strongly advise however that this not be a regular occurrence as eventually it could affect the bond rating. Using too much E&D could affect a bond rating. This is the only mechanism we have left. It is the Administration's full intention to pay back the OPEB Trust. We are taking the maximum reimbursement allowed.

Ben Bloomenthal moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED by roll call: to authorize the District Treasurer to withdraw \$2,053,241 from the OPEB trust account and to authorize the Superintendent to pay \$1,549,000 to the Health Insurance Trust and pay the district and employee share of the health insurance rate increase through June 30, 2024 as described in the Treasurer's memo.

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

b. Subcommittee and Member Reports

i. Health Insurance Trust (HIT), *Andrew Schwartz, Nov 30*

Members have met often lately. The consultants used are being replaced. Members are

looking at other possible options to provide health care for our employees, including whether to continue the Trust, considering other collaboratives, or adding new members. A report on all of this is expected in January. Mr. Light added that the District's interests are to reduce costs longer term and minimize this type of risk from coming up again. There is a risk to be associated with such a small group, like our HIT. Members are looking at some of the larger groups like GIC but Dec 1 was their deadline and the HIT issue came up too late. We are focusing on risk mitigation and improving on the 22% rate increase.

ii. Capital Subcommittee - *Ben Bloomenthal, Nov 22*

Priorities were discussed including a major leak in the Admin Building roof, heat upgrades in several buildings and the High School roof top units.

iii. Budget Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson, Dec 4*

ALG and updates to the current budget plans for FY25 were discussed including structural changes, revenue opportunities, and HIT. A priority was planning for ways to ensure fiscal responsibility. Two budgets are being planned to prepare for the possibility that an override doesn't pass this year. Having hard conversations, and creating a list of priorities and contingencies is in progress although so much is still fluid. The public is encouraged to reach out with any questions or ideas.

iv. Acton Leadership Group - *Tori Campbell, Rebecca Wilson, Dec 4*

The HIT update and override plans were discussed. There is group consensus around having an override, but the amount is still to be determined. No one wants to burden taxpayers but this budget deficit will not resolve itself. The public is encouraged to reach out with any questions. It is vital that the community participate in these conversations so all perspectives are heard and all ideas explored.

v. School Resource Officer Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson, Dec 5*

See above. December 5th was the subcommittee's last meeting.

c. Consent Agenda/Action Items - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*

i. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 11/2/23 and 11/16/23

ii. Approval of McCarthy-Towne School PTSO donations

iii. Approval of Carol Huebner Early Childhood Program Parent Teacher Association budget

Vikram Parikh moved, Liz Fowlkes seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to approve the consent agenda.

d. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve [12/7/23](#) - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*

Liz Fowlkes moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to approve the warrants as presented (see memo for language).

6. **FYI** - December [Enrollment Report](#) and [Elementary Sections Report](#)

7. **ADJOURN** (9:00)

Vikram Parikh moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to adjourn the ABRSC at 8:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: Agenda, Agenda Item Summary Pages, Social Emotional Learning Update memo from H. Stouch 12/1/23, Recommendation to continue the School Resource Officer Program with recommended changes memo from P. Light 12/1/23, Additional SRO MOU Recommendations List, Student Use of Electronic Communication Devices Policy - First Read from A. Shen, Withdrawal of Funds from OPEB Trust letter from Treasurer Melissa Andrew 12/1/23, ABRSC Draft 11/2/23 and 11/16/23 Meeting Minutes from B. Petr, McCarthy Towne Request for Approval of Donations Valued over \$1,000 from C. Nealon 12/3/23, Carol Huebner ECP PTA Budget, Warrant Memo from S. Matthews 12/1/23, December Enrollment Report, Elementary Class Size Report.